

Anomaly

Literary Journal

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CONTEMPORARY POETRY AND FICTION

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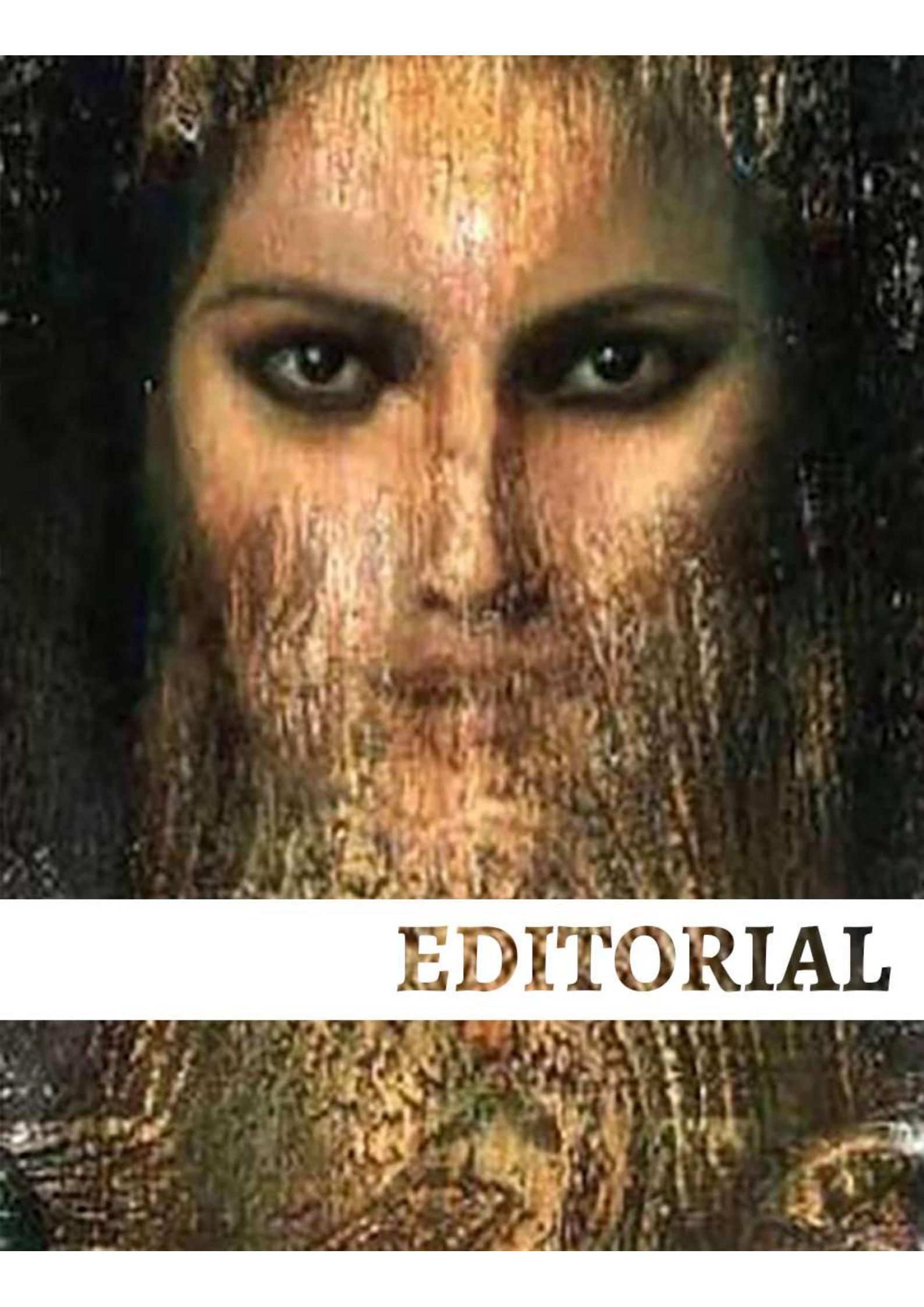
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EDITORIAL

Welcome to *Anomaly Literary Journal: Issue 3*

Anomaly Literary Journal: Issue 3 is stocked full of breath-taking artwork, delicately crafted poetry and some truly immersive fiction all from emerging and established poets and writers. We are packed to such an extent that to mention each and every one would almost take up an entire issue in itself- so forgive us, for we shall be as brief as we can!

Rhonda C. Poynter brings us two poems, 'On Emerging from a Coma, Certain that Mouth to Mouth Resuscitation Has Been Administered by Pablo Picasso' and 'Birthday'- the first a beautifully eloquent dream-like sequence which evokes the out-of-mind drift back to reality from anaesthesia- which for anyone who's ever experienced it or has seen various hilarious YouTube videos depicting it- will seem familiar, but never so vividly described as in Poynter's interpretation of the experience. 'Birthday' softly and effortlessly invokes the familiarity of routine in quiet celebration, finding structure in the everyday thing, in this instance, preparing a gift of baked treats for a birthday with just a hint of melancholia underlying a simple, reassuring domestic act.

With her poem 'Winter Body' Lana Bella grasps that ever-elusive 'tail wisp' of the aftermath of a break-up, a moment built over many moments we have all, at one time or another, experienced when for an instant, you just wish you could turn back the clock on a relationship and pin it still, look at it, feel it and experience it and failing that, being forced you to carry it with you- and she takes this will, this minuscule yearning and out of it spins a poem that is brief, evocative but affecting.

Kevin Higgins gives us two poems, 'False Prophet' and 'Mudslides of My Mind'. Higgins has been described by The Stinging Fly magazine as 'likely the most widely read living poet in Ireland'. His two contributions to this issue will leave you in little doubt as to the popularity of his, at times acerbic but often darkly comical political/social satire, which we are delighted to include.

We are also graced with some beautiful poetry from Nancy Anne Miller, Sayeeda Ahmad, Courtney Marie and Peleg Held- a group of poets whose work, whilst all very different, is nearly word perfect in what their poems get across. Nancy Anne Miller's use of imagery easily creates an entire landscape, while Ahmad's poem 'Black Text' easily glides from a work-place where two bright minds are bending in unison over an equation and with a deft, easy hand blends straight into an emotional complexity that in some ways seems to perfectly mirror the intellectual problem the speaker is trying to resolve. Courtney Marie's poem 'The Year You Changed Your Mind' delves into the ending of a relationship that never quite gets upright on its feet. Peleg Held's two contributions 'Mandelstam' and 'Hasbara' are poems of such uniform elegance they almost weave a spell in the reading of them.

From this, we slam right into a mass of engrossing fiction. Gordon Gibson starts us off with a tale told from two perspectives and how a child's innocent, naïve act can have far-reaching, tragic consequences for all involved in his short story, 'Novena'. Merran Jones joins us with 'Curls', presenting

an intriguing character in the form of Carla in a piece that is a snapshot of a character at a turning point in her life that feels true to life and quite touching. Kai Parmenter rounds off the first half of our fiction section with his piece, 'Technically, Missing'- a piece that opens with a wound of a first line and it only becomes more and more engrossing from that point on.

Because we had such dense fiction this time round, we decided it would be best to break it up into two parts, as we have done before but this time between the fiction sections, we have slipped in Poetry: Part II and with it come some more utterly beautiful pieces.

We are once again joined by Ace Boggess and his two poems 'It's a Great Day for What?' and 'Don't You Think We Should Be Silent, to Enjoy This Rather Sinister Moment?' Work that yet again contributes wonderfully to the journal. Blas Falconer brings us three searingly eloquent poems, 'Amor Fati', 'Leave-taking' and 'Heaven' from his up-coming third collection, *Forgive the Body This Failure*, coming out in 2018 from Four Way Books. With his first collection, *A Question of Gravity and Light* Falconer established himself straight off as a poet of immense feeling and depth, which his follow-up collection, *The Foundling Wheel*, only further established in its exploration of new-found parenthood, it's interaction with relationships, adoption for both the adoptee and the adopted and the complexities involved on all levels result in truly touching reading. We all eagerly await his third collection and we're sure readers will too.

With us once again is Jack Warren, with three short but nevertheless striking poems. 'Spindrift' contains within its sparse ten lines a quiet, biting yearning for elsewhere, followed by 'Misadventure' and 'Snowdon'. In three short poems, Warren's is a voice finding itself almost fully-formed and we are delighted to again have the opportunity to publish work by a poet who continuously turns out a well-formed phrase in poems that never over-reach or underplay their hand.

Following Jack Warren, we have a poem by one of Ireland's leading poets writing at the moment. The much acclaimed poet Vona Groarke brings us 'Achill', a poem at once affecting and stark in its depiction of isolation and loneliness. The poem itself leaves you feeling a sense of- if not quite passive desperation- then perhaps it is a sense of resignation bitten through with the kind of intense loneliness that only results from isolation.

Groarke is a poet who produces work of strength, clarity and poise time and time again and whose collections are received one after the other with the kind of critiques most poets dream of. We are humbled to include her work among our pages.

Liz Dolan's 'After I Was Raised' and 'Acceptance' show a dexterity in terms of her use of imagery and an ability to move between voices easily. The two poems could not be more different, yet the underlying feeling involved in both show a capacity to move between modes freely and easily and both pieces are just as intriguing as the other.

Karuna Chandrashekhar presents 'Bone of Water/Bone of Home' and 'Translation/Delhi: a love

story', two poems that are, in a way, somewhat reminiscent of Yehuda Amichai's ability to draw the reader into the speaker's physical and emotional landscape, and the feelings steeped within the speaker encased within the work. Christos Kalli brings us a brief but evocative piece ruminating on the reassurance lent by a room of shut blinds, in a tightly written poem that evokes the soft, quiet security of the shuttered-off room.

We round up our poetry with two poems from emerging poet Vincent Hao, 'Manifest & Mobilize, Grow & Revitalize' and 'Sedentary Fever'- some more of his work is forthcoming in *The Adroit Journal* next year and we are sure this is one young poet to watch.

Fiction: Part II opens with Stephen May's 'Not in London Now, Mrs. C', a short story in which a middle-aged woman re-evaluates her life in a new place and context that is both comic and touching at the same time.

Paul Anthony Corbett delivers a startling concept of the future in his short story, 'Of Love & Automation', a piece which is not far beyond the realm of possibilities in the future and in some respects, the bones of which have already arrived (personalised advertising, anyone?). Intriguing, beautiful and somewhat terrifying all at once, though short and sweet, it's certainly a piece that makes you wonder whether technological advances are always entirely a good thing and in this story it drives toward a sanitised, algorithm-driven society where relative social isolation is not necessarily strange to the inhabitants but leaves the mark of something being missing but seems, ultimately, to be largely unchangeable. Horrific and oddly sweet at the same time, this is a short story that will leave a mark long after you're done reading.

And so we come to the final fiction selection with Sergey Rodin's 'The Well' translated from the original Russian into English by Art Tait. We're not sure whether to call this Kafka-esque or Murakami-esque but either way, it's unique. The world within this tale is a well and the inhabitants of that well are a strange, vaguely amphibious society, unquestioning of their surroundings- their world, such as it is- and yet, once one or two individuals question their society's superstructure- well, you'll just have to read it. There are so many comparisons to this fable that it would be exhausting to go into them and compare them all, suffice it to say, this odd little tale is arresting and utterly engrossing and we hope you enjoy reading it as much as we have.

The artwork in *Anomaly Literary Journal: Issue 3* has been graciously provided by non-other than the acclaimed American artist and sculptor Alyam Moser, a descendent of the American painter, James McNeill Whistler. He attended the Tyler School of Fine Art in Philadelphia and the Croydon College of Art in London, where both institutions told him, simply, 'Go paint' as there was nothing more they could teach him. In 1984, his first solo New York exhibition sold out before its official opening, establishing an immediate waiting list for all future works. His work has been compared to that of Goya and Francis Bacon

and the masters of the Renaissance. As we are in no doubt all readers will agree, these pieces are breathtakingly moving in their detail and mastery and we are beyond honoured to host Moser's astounding work in this issue of *Anomaly*.

Thank you so much to all of our wonderful contributors and readers for their kind words of encouragement, your excitement and enthusiasm is what drives us to be the best we can be. Thanks again to the usual roster of people (in real life and online) who continue to support us by spreading the word through all the various forms of social media- you know who you are and we love you for it!

With that, we will leave it there. Go, sit, read and peruse at your leisure!

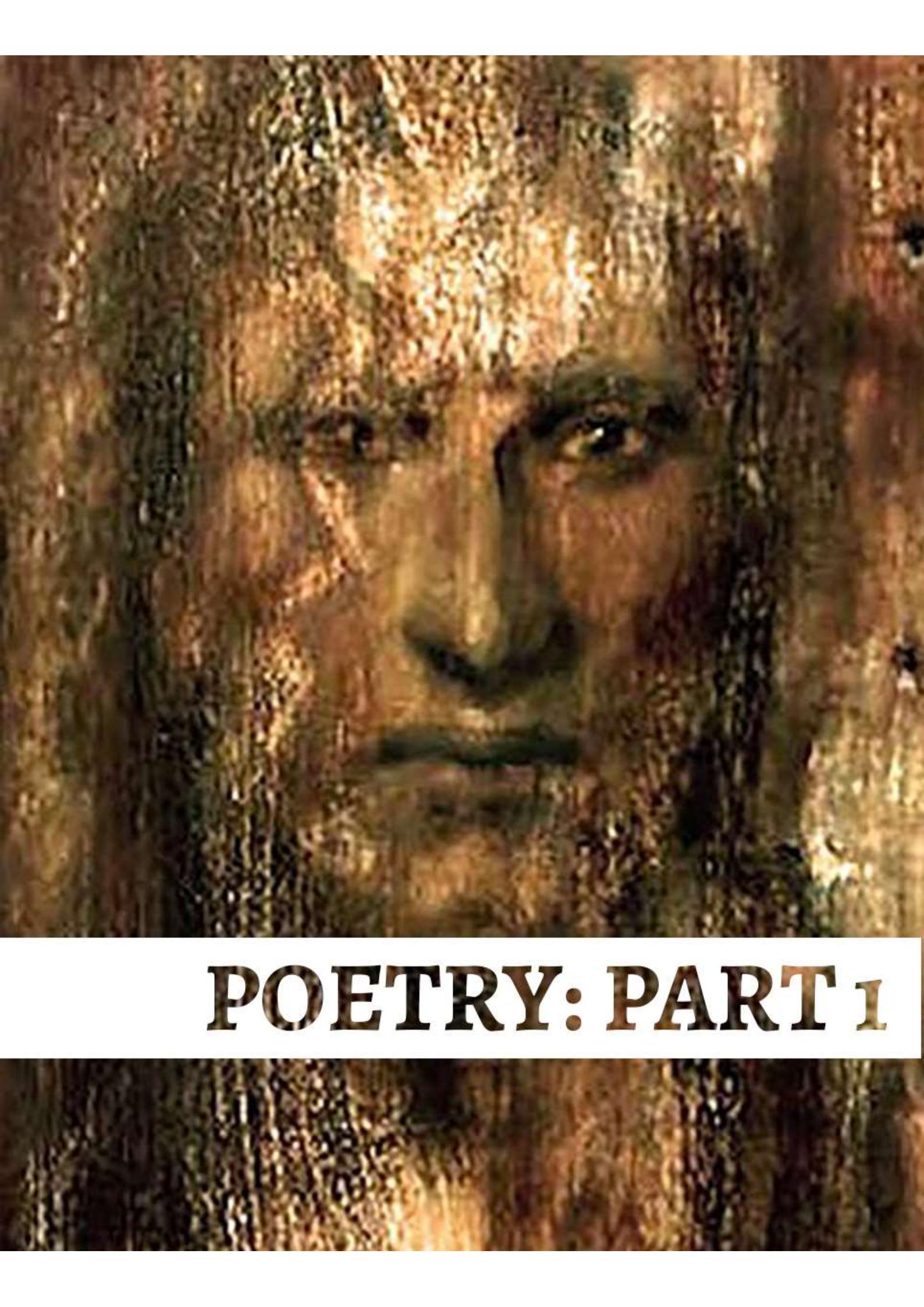


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POETRY: PART 1

RHONDA C. POYNTER

On Emerging from a Coma, Certain that Mouth to Mouth Resuscitation Has Been Administered by Pablo Picasso

First published in Red Fezz.

The taste of matchboxes and
Crumpled cigarette
Packets brought me back:

He blew color into my
Lungs as I pulled blue bullfights
From his tongue.

He brought me back from
Guernica: back from black and
White, and gray;

He tasted like music and
Crushed wineglasses.
He tasted like Christ, and
Twisted wire.

Birthday Poem

For my mother.

I have baked the sweets for too many
Years now, and am not about to
Change my pattern -

This kitchen would be a stranger's brick and
Braided rugs without
Nutmeg and salt, and flour.

The walls would have nothing to care about
Without a full table and chairs
Turned toward the garden,

The skies the color of buttermilk,
Berries fat and awaiting an ancient
Hand painted bowl.

LANA BELLA

Winter Body

the wilderness of thoughts
you left upon my skin
pratfall all around
like pale kissed snow;
catching the tail wisps of
your fingertips
mossy with home and
moon and the faraway gulf
of the sea, I folded it into
my winter body and
all its hollows flooded with
dark, from which I will
wear like an old petticoat,
wearing it until every-
thing keeps reversing to
the very moment just before
you left me-

NANCY ANNE MILLER

Recorded

She preferred the days the light
shimmered off the snow like
on a South Shore beach, Bermuda.

Watched the Tompkins men
shovel the path, the blur of
ice over their shoulder a wave,

one bobbed in as a child for hours.
Or like a towel thrown on one's back
while walking out from the water.

The white, white sleet, billows
around the 1814 saltbox house,
a mast pulling it into the deep.

The non-negotiable horizon, driven
away like the bright sun made it so
as her sea captain ancestor recorded.

SAYEEDA AHMAD

Black Text

Slung on the board in the corner
by your hand look like streaks of ash
on the steam-covered window in the mist.

I stand two feet away, try to decipher
three letters that stare back at me
like cuneiform to a layperson.

I lock eyes with the sole I. Roman numeral one
am I in your little black book? I wonder
what your mystery hides when I spy an L

to the right, like the curve of the El train
turning toward the next stop, bending at the
under-curve of a sole U. Who are you to leave

me shaking my head when you never spoke
of love, of you and I, and yet you write
with hearts in mind, and stand by my side?



KEVIN HIGGINS

False Prophet

After Kate Tempest.

See him, the old fool, his eyebrows plucked out.
Alone in the launderette with his bag of parsnips.
Witness to every terrible idea that rose up in anger
and fell prey to its opposite. *This is communism.*
I think he said. Or was it maybe
Fucking abominable? He's the sort who gets up slowly
from the toilet seat, gripping his zipper
when he discovers it's the Ladies.

Friendless, a bit cross eyed, at night tap dancing
the national anthem. He empties little
bottles of whiskey, has conversations
with the crows. *Every bastard with half an arse*
is busy talking up the apocalypse,
while I'm in the bathtub just dreaming
of beating the Queen Mum's head in
with a shovel. Afternoons he leaves his flat
still with a semi and stains down his front.

He stops to rip down political posters
and sometimes brings home
dogs that belong to other people.
Ice Cream for breakfast. Afternoon tea
in a cup with a beetle floating in it.
Each time celebrating
going to the toilet.
Some days he wakes up thinking
he's Philip Schofield.

Other times imagines he's
Jack 'The Hat' McVitie.
These are the days when
he can be who he wants.

Romanians upstairs.

Farage on the telly. In bed he picks
his toenails with a plastic fork
he got from the kebab shop
the day it shut. He taps his good foot
to anything by Doris Stokes. Says he once had a date
with the widow of Kelvin McKenzie.

*All my life I've paid
to watch black women wrestle.
Watching them sweat makes me feel special.*

He keeps the finger he lost
in an industrial accident
during Harold Wilson
hidden away under
the kitchen sink
in a box that came
with a Chinese takeaway,
alongside the ring he bought
for a woman whose name
he mostly forgets.

The Mudslides of My Mind

After Alan and Marilyn Bergman.

Round and round, like a glass eye rolling madly
across the floor during an argument gone too far
My thoughts are a planet with nothing left to orbit
screaming through space, like a bride driven
around and around the church but never actually
going inside, all the imperfect circles
in the mudslides of my mind

Like a streaker being pursued around a tennis court
by the local League of Decency in what looks like Tuam
never ending or beginning, just a looping
YouTube video you can never turn off
Like a snowball tossed up a mountain by a man full of helium
moving wildly down the sky, like a plane forever circling
an airport no longer there in the mudslides
of my mind

Like a heretic slowly roasting on an ever turning spit
Like the wheels of the car that so exquisitely
flattened you up against a streetlight driving swiftly on
Like a blonde in a pub somewhere near Waterford
busy being orbited by a ring of semi-professional
masturbators, all gratefully making small talk
and mental notes for later
Like Penny Farthing bicycles
struggling through the mudslides
of my mind, their spinning wheels
tossing muck in the eyes of the cyclists,
and all their eyes are mine
Like a skill-saw powered on and fanatically
revolving in the right hand of the man
who just tied me to the table
in the mudslides of my mind.

COURTNEY MARIE

The Year You Changed Your Mind

We cut the film into pieces-
cut the pieces until they were small bits of paper-
cut the bits of paper into a forest of trees
that is burning to the ground in slow motion.

We stopped hearing music.
changed our names to numbers,
days of the year.

Chained ourselves to radiators
in separate, windowless rooms.
we've done a lot of things together
but never this.

If I could make up my mind
I would be dangerous.

I write about the places I used to live.
Grow accustomed to loneliness
like a dead arm.
You relearn your first language
while I try to forget it.

Things aren't better
they're just
different.

It was the year of the inevitable.
The year of feeling like a soap bubble.

I write about building a small, safe world
inside a terrifying larger one.

It was the year you changed your mind-
and I wrote about all the times I visited caves.

PELEG HELD

Mandelstam

I will yoke ten oxen to my voice
And sweep the dark with the plow of my hand; OM

A train horn tekiah rises
to the center of the room,
a word outstretched and circling
before the bone budded from the ram.

Breath of a lean-to father, blow!
While the steel rattles and the teeth
of mountaineers grind,
blow across the bottle mouth
from your seat in the Archangel's
circle wrapped in the yellow leather coat.

Tekiah rise. Not in the West
or the East, but below
where the second river rumbles
beneath the foot of the bed.

Here, your lips still move. Here, she still inscribes each sound
as you put a record under the needle
and from the terrible penetrating point,
sing us back to foam.

Hasbara

"Sag, daß Jerusalem ist" — Paul Celan

Beneath an all but empty sky, words
walk into the sea. Silt and foam
eddying around standing forms,
sonant circling surd, parting
in the push back of so many
wading things.

Men stab their dreams into the open
places between stones. Speech settles
the land like a thousand ships.

Equilibrist, walk the wire's thin stretched blue;
each footfall, a white bird risen from the fray.
A gold dome glistens, the notes in the wall
grow still. Through the gates and the groves,
an answer: Without you, *Rafīqa*, Jerusalem isn't.



FICTION: PART 1

GORDON GIBSON

Novena

Four of Miss Fulton's pupils were in the corridor painting, and dribbling water on the freshly polished floor. It was only twenty minutes past nine. Mrs Greene approached them, remembering to soften her voice and smile.

'Good morning, children. You are very busy this morning. What are you up to?'

The children paused, paint brushes held, brightly tipped, towards their easels. Their expressions seemed uncertain, but a blonde girl in a yellow polythene smock spoke.

'We're painting, Miss.'

'Yes, Susan, I can see that. What are you painting?'

Thomas, a pale boy, explained: 'Miss Fulton says we have to use our imaginations, Miss.'

'And what exactly are you supposed to be imagining, I wonder?' She was aware of a pulse in her neck.

'We have to paint something beautiful,' said a plump girl, sounding as if she was suffering from nasal congestion. Mrs Greene could not remember her name.

'Well, that certainly leaves plenty of choice.' She laughed, then added, 'Has your class said morning prayers yet?'

The children mumbled in unison, 'No, Miss,' gloomily stretching the vowels.

Mrs Greene could hear Miss Fulton's voice, rising and falling within the classroom. Children laughed. Mrs Greene considered what she wished to say, then turned the gleaming brass handle of the classroom door, and entered.

'Good morning, children,' she said.

The pupils stood, with a clatter of chairs and desk-lids, and chanted, 'Good morning, Mrs Greene.' Miss Fulton crossed the open area at the front of the room, towards her.

'Good morning,' she said. 'What can I do for you?'

'Just passing. I thought I would look in. It's always a pleasure to visit primary four.'

Mrs Greene turned to the children, who had begun to chatter amongst themselves, and called out, 'Now boys and girls, go on with whatever you have been doing, while I have a word with Miss Fulton.'

Miss Fulton said, 'If you have finished your writing about a beautiful thing, you can continue reading fiction.'

Mrs Greene feigned surprise.

'A beautiful thing? My goodness, Miss Fulton, you are brave.'

'Is there something in particular, Mrs Greene?' Miss Fulton asked.

Mrs Greene adopted her authoritative tone.

'I just wondered about the group painting in the corridor. It's a bit early in the day to have unsupervised children engaged in creative activities, is it not?'

'That group didn't get to paint yesterday afternoon. They had extra tuition in maths while the rest of the class were painting. It's their turn this morning.'

'Very laudable Miss Fulton,' said Mrs Greene, 'but in this school it has always been routine to open the day with prayers, and then to spend the morning on core subjects. I think you'll find that fripperies are best left until after lunch.'

'I don't know that my M.Ed. tutor would agree with you about that. He insists that aesthetic subjects are given their place . . .'

'Yes, we all know about college lecturers,' said Mrs Greene. 'Fortunately your tutor is not Head Teacher here. I would appreciate if you would conform to the practice used throughout the rest of the school.'

Miss Fulton opened her mouth, but Mrs Greene, sensing she was about to argue, turned briskly and left the room.

*

Every morning Thomas left his grandmother's house early, to be at school in time to see Miss Fulton arrive, and walk from the teachers' car park, across the playground and up the steps to the main door. Every morning he walked beside her, and asked her questions he had thought up, so that he could talk to her without anyone else stealing away her attention.

'Good morning, Miss. How is your car running this morning?'

'Miss, will we be getting gym this afternoon?'

'Miss, did you watch Coronation Street last night?'

It did not seem to matter that his questions were silly, the kind of questions that made his grandmother tell him to stop his daft chatter. Miss Fulton would always smile, and put on her thinking face before answering him, in her wonderful voice, as if he had asked about something really important. When she disappeared through the swing doors, into the school, he always needed to run wildly round the playground, happiness rushing through his arms and legs.

When she had asked his group to paint something beautiful, he could think only of painting a picture of her. But when he tried, he knew he would never be able to do it properly.

Even worse, in his first rush of excitement, he had made the mistake of telling Susan Mackay, 'I'm going to paint Miss Fulton.'

Susan gave him a strange look and said, 'Oh Thomas, I think you love Miss Fulton,' and he had felt his cheeks turning red.

'No I don't. Anyway, I've changed my mind. I'm going to paint a burning bush.'

Miss Fulton had told them a story about God speaking to Moses from a magical bush that was in flames without being consumed. He loved how she said the word, 'consumed', and he loved flames.

When Miss Fulton told the story, it was as if he could see the flames rising and dancing, red and blue and yellow; and she had made her wonderful voice sound loud and deep, like a man's voice, when she spoke God's words.

He would paint the burning bush, and as he painted he would think of Miss Fulton telling the story, so that secretly, she would be there in his painting; and when he looked at it he would be able to remember how beautiful she was, and how God's voice had come from her mouth; and how it had made him feel strange all over.

While they were painting in the corridor, Mrs Greene had come. She smiled a lot, but that was only with her mouth. Her black hair looked as if it would feel jaggy if you touched it, and she always wore special clothes, as if she was going out somewhere. He couldn't imagine her joining in a gym lesson, wearing tracksuit trousers and red trainers, like Miss Fulton did. He didn't like it when she came into the class to speak to Miss Fulton.

*

At the end of the day, once the pupils and teachers had gone, Mrs Greene locked her office and, leaving the building in the care of the janitor, took the paved path across the school field to St Barbara's Church.

Inside it was brightly painted. The statues were in a modern style, almost childish in their simplicity. Mrs Greene preferred the air of sanctity to be found in older churches, but St Barbara's was adequate for her purpose.

She harboured a nagging irritation about many of the Church's teachings. She had always been mystified by The Doctrine of The Trinity. The idea of Father, Son and Holy Ghost as a single being was unfathomable; but her faith in God overcame any uncertainties. Since her childhood, God had always been The Father – kind, loving, protecting, forgiving. She no longer thought of Him as an old man in the sky, but she still felt His presence in a close and personal way. She could speak to Him. He listened.

When her marriage had become insufferable, she had prayed every day for it to end. When her

husband left, to move in with a hairdresser twenty years his junior, she knew that God had answered her prayers, and she was overcome with gratitude and wonder.

She lit a candle and sat at the rear of the church, head bowed, hands clasped around her rosary. For the ninth consecutive day, she asked God to remove Miss Fulton from the staff of St Barbara's School.

*

Thomas was delighted with his painting. He had used liquid paint from the plastic bottles, and when spread on the sugar paper it gleamed and reflected the light. Reds and yellows ran together, making unexpected patches of bright orange, and he added dabs of pale blue until he had achieved far more than he had thought possible. It was like a real fire. It was better, because it made him think of Miss Fulton's voice, and the voice of God, all at the same time.

Carefully, he released the bulldog clips and took the painting from the easel. He carried it with outstretched arms into the classroom.

'Gosh, Thomas, what have you painted?' said Miss Fulton.

'The burning bush, Miss,' he said.

'Well, hang it on the line. You can tell me about it later.'

Using clothes pegs, Thomas attached the damp paper to the string stretched across the corner of the classroom. He noticed that where the paint was thinnest, it was starting to run, like raindrops running down a window. The perfect flames were becoming smudged.

At morning interval, he returned to this picture, only to find that, now it was dry, the gleam was gone, and the paint was dusty. Where it had been thick, it had cracked. It was no longer anything like a burning bush.

*

The day she had been appointed Head Teacher of St Barbara's Primary had been one of the happiest of Mrs Greene's life, but her first visit to the school had filled her with dismay. The building was grimy and poorly maintained. The children lacked discipline, and showed a disrespect for adults. National Test results lagged behind those of other schools in the area. Textbooks were a decade out of date, and National Curricular Guidelines seemed not to be in use. Most worrying of all, the staff seemed unaware of these dreadful indicators, and believed that they were providing a good education for their pupils.

Mrs Greene's confidence was shaken. She sought the advice of her Education Officer, and with his support constructed a development plan, in order, as he put it, 'To bring the school into the present

century.'

'But remember,' he had warned her, 'proceed slowly. You mustn't alienate the teachers.'

She introduced new routines and policies. Religious observance was held daily. She required teachers to prepare forward plans, and to carry out regular assessment of pupils' progress. Adopting a managerial persona, she held herself remote, avoiding first-name familiarity. Little by little, she won reluctant compliance with her wishes. But what could she do about the unimaginative teaching?

Miss Fulton's arrival had delighted Mrs Greene. Here was a keen and newly trained member of staff. When she saw Miss Fulton teach, she recognised her flair. Children hung on the young teacher's every word. Her ideas were original and inspiring. She motivated pupils. Their test results improved. Mrs Greene set about using this new, bright spark to ignite enthusiasm in the others. She encouraged Miss Fulton to talk about her teaching. At staff meetings she asked her to share her ideas with colleagues. She was sure that skills would spread, like some benign infection, through the school.

But the others treated Miss Fulton with amused condescension. In Mrs Greene's hearing, they mocked the young teacher's inexperience.

'Oh, we've tried all these new-fangled approaches,' they said, ' and they're not worth a damn.'

Miss Fulton did not seem disheartened, but her accounts of her own teaching were increasingly peppered with references to 'outmoded methods'. She enrolled on the M.Ed. program at University. At staff meetings, when she spoke, the others lowered their eyes, or exchanged knowing smiles across the room. Mrs Greene could see her development plan crumbling.

The last straw was when Miss Fulton took to voicing criticism of improvements that Mrs Greene had already brought about.

'Mrs Greene, can I discuss how you want us to do our forward plans?' she said, at the first meeting of the new session. 'It's so repetitive. It ends up just being a list of what we are covering from textbooks. Couldn't we simply list the page numbers? That would give us time to plan more imaginative things.'

Mrs Greene, taken unawares, did not reply. She was pained that her protégé should seek to undo what had been so difficult to establish. Yet she could see that the others had suddenly become interested.

'Yes,' said the primary seven teacher, 'most of what we write in our forward plans is already in the teachers' handbooks. Can't we skip all that?'

A mumble of approval came from the others.

'I'll think about it,' said Mrs Greene.

Miss Fulton began to make repeated suggestions aimed at improving the running of the school. Sometimes she brought these up at staff meetings; at other times she accosted Mrs Greene in the corridor, or in her office. The Head felt challenged. The others, encouraged by what they saw, proposed even more changes. These always seemed to involve less work, and a return to their previous practices.

Mrs Greene feared her school was slipping back to how it had been when she had first arrived. She lay awake at nights, puzzling over how this had happened. It dawned on her that Miss Fulton, despite her talents, was the malign influence. She would have to go.

*

Miss Fulton's classroom cupboard held a disgraceful clutter. Her predecessor had left suddenly – something to do with a falling-out with the parish priest – and Miss Fulton had not found time to clear out the rubbish or organise space for storage. Now, it had become a priority. Exercise books, pencils, paper, paint, glue, scissors, textbooks – the paraphernalia of teaching – had been dumped in the cupboard, making it impossible for her to find what she needed. In addition, her supplies for the coming session would soon arrive. She needed to make room.

When she mentioned this in the staff room, the others suggested a variety of solutions.

'Get the janitor to throw everything out,' said one, 'and tell Greene that you need a complete new stock of materials.'

'Make the kids to do the tidying,' said another. 'There's no point exhausting yourself and getting filthy in the process. The little monsters will be only too delighted to clear out your cupboard for you. You can reward them with a pencil each.'

'I really don't feel it's right to use pupils as slave labour,' said Miss Fulton.

'Suit yourself,' said her colleague, and returned her attention to the copy of *Good Housekeeping* on her knee.

Miss Fulton decided that the only way to deal with the task was to stay on after school and tidy the chaotic cupboard herself. She obtained black plastic bags from the cleaners, and checked with the janitor how long she could remain in the school after hours. He explained that he took a break between six and seven, but that she could work as late as nine if she let him know in advance.

*

Thomas liked living with his grandmother. She was kind and a good cook. She never smacked him, and didn't shout very often. The only thing that worried him was her smoking.

'Granny, if you don't stop that, you'll die,' he told her.

'I'll die anyway,' she would say, which upset Thomas at first, but he got used to it after a while. She was only kidding.

In fact, Thomas liked the smell of the smoke, especially when it mixed with fresh air from an open

window, or when she lit a new cigarette. He liked her cigarette lighter even more. It was a thin, red, plastic bottle, with a little wheel at one end for making sparks. He could see through the plastic to the petrol inside, and when his grandmother flicked the wheel with her thumb, a tall, yellow, flame leapt up. When she touched it to the end of her cigarette, it made a tiny crackling sound.

Thomas was so interested in this operation that he often forgot to warn her about the risk of dying. As a treat, his grandmother sometimes let him make the flame and light her cigarette. He loved this, and would beg to be allowed to do it whenever he saw her take another cigarette from the packet.

*

Despite her belief in the power of prayer, Mrs Greene became impatient as days passed without any sign of an intervention from God. She wondered if she had overstepped the mark. From childhood she remembered her mother's words: 'No use praying for a bicycle! God doesn't listen to selfish prayers.' But her novena had not been for herself. It was for the good of the teachers, the good of the pupils, the good of the school. Miss Fulton was undermining any possibility of building a collegiate atmosphere in St Barbara's. Mrs Greene, in her secret heart, trusted God to come to her aid.

*

Thomas's painting had hung on the line for days, with the other pictures from his group. Then Miss Fulton took them, and mounted them in a neat line along the classroom wall with a sign beside them:

'We painted beautiful things.' There was a puppy, a flower that was meant to be a rose, a Glasgow Celtic football jersey and the burning bush. But no one seemed to recognise what Thomas had painted. Other pupils asked him what it was, and he had to explain, time and again.

Once, Susan Mackay was standing nearby, and butted in, 'Thomas says it's a picture of Miss Fulton.' She laughed in a squeaky voice. Others joined her, and Thomas had to ask to go to the toilet.

Miss Fulton didn't ask about his painting. Thomas did not know whether or not he was upset. It would have given him a chance to explain what it was, but it might have started the laughter again.

He couldn't keep his eyes off it. The colours were no longer bright. The brushstrokes, which had made such perfect flames while he was painting, now looked like the marks babies make when they paint for the first time. His picture gave him a sad feeling inside his chest, and he longed for it to look as he had wanted it to be. He thought about how fire really looks, and imagined the long, yellow flame on his grandmother's lighter.

*

The janitor opened the door of Miss Fulton's classroom, and called, 'I'm off now.'

Miss Fulton, clapping her hands together to remove the dust, said, 'Do you need to lock up?'

'No, it's all right, Miss. Everything's locked except the main door. I'll leave you the key. You can lock it after I go. As long as you let me in again when I come back.'

'That's great,' said Miss Fulton. 'I really want to get this finished tonight.'

'I'll be back about quarter past seven,' the janitor said. 'I'll give a good bang on the door and you can let me in. Be careful. Anything happens to you while you're here alone, I'll get the sack.'

He smiled, and placed a key on her desk.

Miss Fulton went back into the cupboard to finish putting old textbooks into a black bag. In the pile were some poetry anthologies, and she began to flick through the brightly illustrated pages. They were quite modern, and she put them on the top shelf with her own stock of books.

Reams of sugar paper lay in a heap on a broad shelf at one end of the cupboard. The sheets were of different colours, but were mixed up, some folded, many turned over at the corners. She felt a need to sort them by colour and to flatten each sheet. This took a long time, but she found the process deeply satisfying.

*

The playground was empty. There was no sign of the janitor, but lights were on inside the building. Staying close to the wall, like a soldier in a film, Thomas crept to the main door and pushed it gently. It opened with a soft moan. The janitor's room, next to the office, was closed. Thomas could hear no sound, and made his way along the corridor to Miss Fulton's classroom. Light shone through the glass at the top of the door.

He went in. Miss Fulton's bag and coat lay on her desk. The big cupboard, where she kept her things, was open, and the light was on inside. He listened but could hear no sound except a grumbling from the heating pipes.

He crossed to his painting. From his pocket he took the lighter, and made the beautiful yellow flame. He held it to the bottom of the painting, and felt a rush of pleasure as the flame caught, and spread upwards and outwards, turning the pretend fire of his burning bush into something real. Flames jumped to the pictures on either side, and flakes of burning paper drifted from the wall and floated across the classroom.

Thomas wondered where Miss Fulton was – not far away, for her coat and bag were there. He wanted her to see the flames. Perhaps she was in the staff room. He would fetch her and show her the

burning bush. He would tell her how he had meant his picture to be, with flames that looked real. But some of the burning flakes had fallen on to a pile of work-books on a desk, and flames were starting there too. Everything was going wrong.

He would have to find the janitor. Fear bubbling inside him, he rushed back into the corridor and along to the janitor's room. But the door was closed, and there was nothing else to do but run, out of the main doors, out of the playground and away from the school, as fast and as far as he could.

*

They sent a car for Mrs Greene, and she stood with a young police constable outside the church, watching the fire-fighters struggling to bring the blaze under control.

'Seems that no one noticed until the janitor came back from his break,' the constable said, 'and by that time the whole place had gone up.'

Mrs Greene could hardly grasp what he was saying. She watched the leaping sheet of flame rise from the roof of the school, and the billowing cloud of black smoke ascending vertically into the sky. From time to time there was the crash of a disintegrating window, or a deeper thump as something inside the building exploded. Blue lights flashed from the fire engines in the playground, and the men in yellow waterproofs wrestled with hoses, sending arcs of spray back and forth, back and forth over the wreckage.

A crowd was gathered around the church, kept back from the school by the police. Shocked adults stood in clusters, and pupils that she recognised watched, open-mouthed, clutching their parents' hands.

When the janitor found her, he stood at her side.

All that he seemed able to say was, 'Oh, Mrs Greene,' over and over again.

She placed her hand on his arm. He became silent for a time, and then turned from the fire to look into her eyes, the orange glow illuminating his face.

He said, 'That lassie's still in there.'

She knew instantly of whom he spoke.

'Dear God,' she said.

*

Thomas was hiding in his bedroom when the woman from next door came to tell his grandmother. He could hear her voice in the room below, so quiet that he could not make out the words, but she spoke quickly, without her usual laughter. Then his grandmother's voice, clearly:

'No! Surely not!'

It was the voice she used when something bad came on the TV news, or when she was pretending to be angry with Thomas. He lay on his bed, waiting for something to happen. He felt as if his stomach was quivering inside him, and he wanted to cry, but could not.

He heard his grandmother close the outside door when the neighbour left. He heard her footsteps on the stairs, and he knew she was coming to see him. He heard the door of his room open. He did not look up, but kept his face pressed into the pillow. He did not move, while his grandmother sat on the bed beside him, her hand on his shoulder, and told him the terrible news. Thomas cried, so hard that his chest hurt, and he feared he would not be able to breathe, while his grandmother, patting him gently, explained:

'God takes those He loves the best to be with Him in Heaven.'

*

Mrs Greene could not tear her thoughts away from the fate of Miss Fulton, and how she had brought it about. She attended each day of the fatal accident inquiry sitting alone in the public gallery, hearing little of what was said, speaking to no one.

No conclusion was reached. How could there be? One expert even speculated that perhaps Miss Fulton had been smoking a cigarette in her classroom. There was no evidence of vandalism or accelerant. Mrs Greene bowed her head and swallowed her bitter, secret knowledge.

A letter from her Education Officer informed her that the remaining shell of St Barbara's was to be demolished. Teachers and pupils would be dispersed to other schools within the authority. Unfortunately no Head Teacher post was currently available for Mrs Greene, and she would be transferred, on a conserved salary, to a village school ten miles from her home. She would be deployed as a class teacher.

Mrs Greene could no longer concentrate on teaching. On a December morning, driving to school, she was stopped by police and breathalysed as part of a pre-Christmas campaign. Found to be over the legal alcohol limit, she lost her driving licence. After a series of meetings with her employers, she accepted early retirement, on grounds of ill-health.

She took to spending her days working for the Church, trying to conduct herself as befitting a God-fearing woman, although her attempts to pray were like ashes in her mouth. In the evenings she drank red wine until she was able to sleep.

MERRAN JONES

Curls

“Great hair!”

“Thanks.”

The standard exchange between Carla and any health shop girl. Girls with names like Jasmine or Skye or Willow. Girls who munched chickpeas and trotted around the globe in an absent-minded way.

“You do anything to get it like that?”

Carla shrugged. She pushed the candle forward. “Just this, please.” *Ocean Breeze*. She needed more aroma—more top notes of apple, melon, and bergamot (whatever that was)—in her life.

Leaving ‘Essential Living’, Carla trudged through the post-work crowd. On the subway, people stared at each other’s shoulders, sharing the drag of a Tuesday.

At home, the candle went on the coffee table for optimal relaxation. Also to cover a stain.

Carla inspected the kitchen for food. Some potatoes in the cupboard were growing a perm. A tin of creamed corn kept them company. The fridge contained swampy lettuce and a smell no nose should have to endure. (*Perhaps the candle should go in there.*)

Things to do:

Buy groceries.

Carla pulled the note off the door. She’d underlined it four times the previous night, but the need for poncy candlelight had taken precedence.

She sighed and glanced up. The streetlight gave the room a jaundiced look. November bristled outside. Her legs had already given up. Grocery shopping was not going to happen. Neither was the eight a.m. meeting with finance.

Carla checked her reflection. Her face was the colour of a spleen. She scrunched her nose. She pinched her cheeks. When did she get so old? So burned-out? Lately, even ten hours sleep wasn’t enough. What’d happened to the girl who’d left home five years before, striding toward the east coast, defiance squaring her twenty-year-old shoulders...?

Carla stuck the note back on the fridge and considered her options for dinner:

1. The tin of creamed corn that’d expired a year ago,
2. Pizza (again).

There was no question. Carla ordered dinner then showered off the day, sieving water through her fusilli hair. Hair she didn't like to tamper with. Once when little, she'd tried to comb it. Two days later, her mom found the comb and cut it out with pruning shears.

She'd always felt like a plus-one, an accessory to herself—Carla's hair, plus Carla.

Afro head! The other kids had jeered. *Go back to Africa and marry an elephant!* The cruel and usual punishment of the schoolyard.

She hated the invitation her hair gave strangers.

Exhibit A:

Great hair!

Thanks.

Exhibit B:

Oh my! You must have Puerto Rican or maybe Nigerian blood? (Everyone's a geneticist.)

No, just my own.

But where are you from?

Des Moines.

Oh, sorry.

Me too.

Carla towelled herself dry. Mark's deodorant still sat by the sink, as it had for the last three months. She picked it up and shook her head.

Ahh, young Mark—hazelnut voice, vaseline-smoothness, a pair of neat, well-groomed balls. A suit with a face, thinking confidence equalled intelligence. A tall glass of water who hadn't been as refreshing as she'd hoped.

Like many before, he'd taken her to the ballet and the Met. They'd ridden horse-drawn carriages around Central Park. They'd listened to Gershwin and Schubert and other composers who sounded like head-colds. They'd eaten beef yakiniku in restaurants without TVs.

After three-point-five dates, they'd introduced the concept of sex. (It always seemed an appropriate amount of time.) With his bold lips and her underwear peeled down one leg like a shackle, they'd both closed their eyes, they'd both been loud, they'd both been fast, really forcing the passion. Forcing it hard.

Later, Mark's snores had broken through the night, his wedding band mocking in the dark. Carla had read Wednesday was the most popular day to cheat—hump day.

We're going in different directions, he'd said when it ended.

Yes. You're walking out the door while I watch.

I can't leave Karen.

Didn't you care about me at all? Ugh, so clichéd. At least the silence had been honest.

After that, she'd rebounded with someone very different—Corey. A man four-fifths beard with a mountainous voice. He hadn't owned a suit. At most, he'd a shirt with a clip-on tie. And ironically, the only baggage he'd brought to the relationship had been a shaving kit.

What's that for?

My shoulders.

(Good grief.)

Instead of museums, Corey had shared his devotion to ice hockey. They'd eaten burritos from Slovakian vendors. They'd drunk beer in pubs called: 'Jimmy's Hole', surrounded by blokes with misspelled tattoos.

Carla had loved Corey's transparency—so full of dumb, St. Bernard eagerness. He'd pronounced 'très' like 'trays'. He'd thought 'cous cous' was just the sound a pigeon made. He'd believed February 29 wasn't a real day, but was invented by Wall Street 'for extra trading or some shit'.

He'd been more refreshing than Mark. And made a change from her normal breakup routine—power ballads and Hershey's Kisses.

Singing:

R-E-S-P-E-C-T!

and

I Am Woman.

Sucking down vodka and recycling emotions. Firstly:

'I can't believe it's over'.

Then:

'I hate you',

'Please come back',

'There's not enough vodka in this bottle',

and finally,

'I'm hungry'.

But a rebound had been different. A rebound had allowed her to bounce back. Or bounce forward, or whatever. Dating someone like Corey had been plain brilliant. Or maybe just plain. Which had become more apparent every time he burped the alphabet.

Naturally, it hadn't lasted. And after dumping him, Carla had returned to dating her apartment; keeping her pillow warm, night after night. She'd felt lost and grey like an old gym towel.

I'm not Woman. I am Miss-Laid.

Once, she'd called Mark, but hung up when Karen answered.

Now, staring into the bathroom mirror, Carla pinched her doughy middle.

I must stop eating pizza.

She thought of the creamed corn.

After tonight.

She ran a hand through her curls and donned her pyjamas.

A pointy-haired boy delivered the food.

“Just for one?” He handed Carla the party-size pizza, peering over her shoulder.

She slammed the door on any chance of a tip, retiring to the couch with an episode of Ready Set Cook and the calming scent of *Ocean Breeze*.

*

“You look different.” Pat handed her a fax.

All receptionists were called Pat. They wore Pandora bracelets and blouses blooming with ruffles. This one had eaten too many cookies when her husband left and had taken on the shape of regret. She'd often rest her boobs on the desk. Carla vowed she'd cut hers off if they ever got that big.

“Different how?” Carla said.

“You’ve a gleam in your eye.”

“That’s just my contacts.”

Carla felt nothing but gleaming. She'd arrived at the office, stiff as a Monday, after a breakfast of cold pizza.

“Mmhm.” Pat winked, face like a cherry pie. She stapled a form and popped it in a tray, then said: “Something on your mind, dear? You seem a little troubled.”

“Just thinking about my grocery list. Gotta start buying stuff like: *green* salad and rice cakes and *low-fat* cottage cheese.” Carla gagged on the words.

“Why?”

“I need to lose weight.”

“Oh, nonsense!” Pat rubbished her words as though batting a fly. “Girls are far too skinny these days. You’re a good, healthy size.”

Healthy: the word reserved for women that'd put on a few.

Pat tilted her head. “How ‘bout I get you a coffee?”

“No thanks. I’ve gone off it.”

“Oh yes?” Pat gave Carla the once-over. A smile nestled in the corner of her mouth.

By four o’clock, Carla had had enough of work. The hormonal weather reflected her mood.

She left the office, sidestepping placental bags of garbage, and bought bananas and doughnuts at the store.

At home, she ate two slices of pizza, three bananas, four doughnuts, then cocooned herself under the sheets.

*

“So what do you think?” Carla asked.

“Hmm.” The doctor poked her memory-foam feet with a pen. “I’d call them squidgy, not swollen. What do you do for work? On your feet a lot?”

“I work in sales at Macy’s.”

“Hmm. And what other symptoms have you had?”

“Aching, tiredness. Perhaps it’s chronic fatigue?”

The doctor leaned back. “Are you sexually active?”

“Pardon me? You think it’s an STD?”

“Or pregnancy?” He slipped it into the discussion like a bookmark.

Inconceivable.

“Please hop up.” He patted the bed, then proceeded to feel Carla’s stomach.

Her pulse quickened. She lay, throat in a fist, daring not admit what had already crossed her mind, once or twice or thrice.

“So?”

“I’d say you’re about twenty-four to twenty-six weeks along.”

“What?”

“Judging by the fundal height. We can do bloods to confirm. Or you could just take a pregnancy test. It’ll definitely be positive by now.”

Silence.

“Congratulations.”

Carla sifted through her thoughts. “But I haven’t been vomiting or anything.”

“Not all women experience morning sickness. Some have very few symptoms.”

“But I’ve still had periods.”

“Have you?”

“Yes!”

The doctor tented his fingers. “What might seem like periods can be irregular bleeding. Up to a quarter of women have it due to the egg attaching to the uterus, or more blood flow to the area. It’s not a menstrual cycle.”

Carla blinked.

“You’re not the first person this has happened to.” The doctor offered a smile. “Quite a few women reach this stage or further before they realise. Either they’re rushing around, too busy with work—like yourself—or they’re overweight and it doesn’t show. I had one woman who complained of appendicitis. She swore it wasn’t a baby. We raced her to hospital. Soon after, she was joined by her child.”

“Brilliant. So what’s next?”

“An ultrasound.”

*

A week, two weeks passed.

As though it’d waited for confirmation, the baby began to show.

“I knew it!” Pat said.

“You’re what?” Carla’s boss said.

“See? No good can come from moving to New York,” her mom said, likely gripping the phone, pinched with worry, wishing Carla would just come home and marry a corn-fed boy called Ethan. “Didn’t you feel it kicking?” she continued.

“I mistook it for gas,” Carla mumbled. She sat on the toilet, holding her mound of stomach. The mound nudged her. She poked it back. “What does it even want with me? I’ve nothing to offer it.”

“You have more to give than you think.”

Carla didn’t respond. She thought of her scattered life, her need for shoes above electricity.

“You will rise to the occasion.” Her mother’s menopausal tone echoed in the bathroom.

*

The symptoms of pregnancy grew. Carla still hated coffee, but acquired a taste for ice-cream with olives. Her legs morphed into a sea of cellulite; thighs shaped by mint chocolate.

She endured the chronic paradox of heartburn and hunger. And shared a goose-bottomed walk with ladies who strolled through the park, pretending to out-exercise bad diets.

As her stomach grew, she lost sight of her pubes, then her legs, then the ability to bend unlike a

giraffe.

“Try this pregnancy belt,” someone suggested.

Carla wore the belt for two hours. Upon removing it, her hips spilled like Jenga over the floor.

“How’re you feeling?” a colleague asked.

Carla shrugged. “Pregnancy is weighing me down.”

“Is it a boy or a girl?”

“At the moment it’s a lump of Cherry Garcia.”

“But don’t you want to know the sex?”

“No. I don’t want to think about it at all.”

*

“Who’s the father?” Pat asked.

“Who’s the father?” her friends asked.

“So who exactly is the father, Carla?” her mom asked.

Corey? Mark? The one before Mark had been Brad: another suit, but with ash-blonde hair and Full-Windsor ties.

“I’ve been wondering that myself,” Carla said.

“Carla Renee, are you telling me you do not know who the father of your child is?” Her mother aged ten years.

“It’s probably Mark.”

“Mark? Mark who?”

“Mark—” Carla stalled. *Shit. It was something beige like Jones or Smith.* “Johnson,” she settled on.

“And what does this ‘Mark Johnson’ do?”

“He’s an operations manager.”

“And what’s that?”

“It involves wearing nice shoes. Talking up Oscar Peterson. Getting married. *Staying* married.”

Bitterness soured her voice.

“You had an affair with a *married* man?”

“I’d call it a liaison.”

*

“Great hair!”

“Thanks.”

Back at ‘Essential Living’, Carla sniffed the candles. *Ocean Breeze* wasn’t working. She rubbed her bump, carrying a great burden.

“Try this one: *Lemongrass*.” Jasmine or Rain suggested. She eyed Carla’s stomach. “When are you due?”

“In a month.”

“Oooh, exciting!”

Carla shrugged. “Just this, please.” *Déjà vu*.

“Any cravings? Or heartburn? My sister had terrible heartburn.”

“Yeah, I’ve had some.”

“Means you’re gonna have a hairy baby.”

Corey?

Carla pictured giving birth to a child with a giant beard, who then high-fived everyone in the delivery room.

*

A week, two weeks passed.

Carla finished work with flowers and gifts. The breast pump scared her. As did the smallness of the baby clothes.

“So three months maternity leave, then childcare?”

“That’s the plan.”

“Don’t you feel guilty about putting your baby in care so early?”

“Oh yes. But I shove it deep down and let it fester.” Carla smiled.

The colleague sidled away.

“I’ll miss you, dear.” Pat bundled her up in a hug. Her eyes marbled with tears.

So elderly. Carla felt sorry for her. And for herself. Her bump juddered. She too had taken on the shape of regret.

*

Carla’s mom arrived.

Just for the first month. To help with the baby. It’s a big responsibility you know.

Carla found her at Penn Station, baggage around her feet and eyes.

She tutted at the broken lock on Carla's apartment building, and at the empty kitchen.

"Where are your multivitamins?" She banged the cupboards. "And what've you been eating? You need to keep your strength up. Good nutrition is imperative."

"I'm not too hungry these days, given my stomach is jammed up by my shoulder."

"I'll have to start cooking for you." Carla's mom slammed a drawer. "Have you told the father yet?"

Later that night—after casserole and broccoli—Carla paced the kitchen. She tapped the phone against her chin. It had to be Mark. The dates confirmed it. She pictured him at home, sipping wine as Karen stacked the dishwasher, Liszt playing in the background.

She closed her eyes and dialled.

"It can't be me," Mark said.

"What?"

He dropped his voice. "Karen didn't want kids. I had a vasectomy two years ago."

Carla hung up.

"I can't do this," she confided to her mom before bed. "I've had three months to adjust to a life-changing event. I can't be a mother. I've nothing to offer this baby except a credit card bill."

Perhaps it was the hormones, or the home-cooked meal, or Mark's outright rejection of fatherhood, but she'd never felt more vulnerable.

"Every new mom feels this way. You will rise to the occasion. And you have more to give than you think."

"So you've said."

*

A week, two weeks passed. No baby.

Carla stood in the shower, pregnant from her forehead to her toes.

This body ain't big enough for the two of us, kid.

She spent long nights listing in bed—prep for the surgical removal of sleep. And during the day she beached herself on the couch, staring at Oprah reruns. Thanks to infomercials, she decided to buy a KitchenAid Mixer, sue someone, and get her erectile dysfunction fixed.

"Looks like you're about ready to pop," the midwife said.

Carla hated that term: *pop*. It made her sound like a large, unpredictable blister.

“We’ll have to induce within the week.” The doctor felt her stomach.

*

The day of Carla’s inducement, she ate twelve hot cross buns. Then her contractions started. She hopped in the shower.
“What’re you doing?”
“Shaving my legs.”

After ten hours of searing pain and the biggest urge to poo she’d ever felt, Carla gave birth to a frizz of hair.

“How’re you feeling, Carla?”

“Inside out.”

They placed the baby, slippery and raw, on her chest.

Carla gasped. Its heart thrummed against hers. She touched its budding fingers. It stopped crying and stared at her, eyes like two soft stars.

“Congratulations, it’s a girl.”

“A girl,” she whispered. “And there’s not a beard or Windsor tie in sight.”

*

Carla stumbled into motherhood. The structure of her days collapsed into tears and diapers and strings of questions that stretched through the apartment. No longer alone, a small pair of feet followed hers. A small hand crept under the door as she sat on the toilet.

Despite the scribbles on the walls (and the White Out on the laptop), despite the public humiliation (like the time her daughter removed her fully-loaded diaper and dumped it at the mall entrance), and despite her all-too-literal take on the world (*Drink up, sweetie. Up where?*), Carla fell in love with her. This little girl with alabaster skin and immensely dark curls. Wrapped up in Carla’s face, every bit of her was Carla.

“See? I knew you’d be fine,” Carla’s mom said. “And look,” she pulled a lock of hair, “you’ve given her more than you thought.

KAI PARMENTER

Technically, Missing

Four weeks to the day since my daughter was taken, they stuck me with Lenny. I remember it was a Tuesday, usually one of the slower nights at the hospital. Most people saved their big emergency room visits for the weekend, but not Lenny.

Lenny was nothing like my daughter. He was a gangly sixteen-year-old with a shaved head and a metal bar through his septum. There was a tattoo on his left arm that said SNATCH, with an ill-proportioned naked woman above. She looked like a fat cherub.

I stood next to Lenny's bed, leaned over. He stared up at the ceiling, occasionally blinking. His eyes were unfocused. I made a show of scribbling a few notes on my clipboard, as though Lenny might sit up at any moment and congratulate me for my hard work. A thin line of drool crept down the side of his mouth, pooling on the starched white sheets. Close enough.

Lenny had been admitted that day by his mother, who said she'd found him in the garage passed out by his father's truck, the scent of gasoline lingering in the air. The mother said she'd pounded his chest, and he'd thrown up, spewing bright orange all over. That's when she called the ambulance.

I set my clipboard down on the side of the bed, turned away to check his IV. His fluids bag was still half-full. Damn. I turned back towards Lenny, nearly jumped. The skinny bastard was looking right at me.

"Fuck," I said. "I mean, hi."

For a long moment he didn't speak. Then, "Why are you on the ceiling?"

"I'm not on the ceiling," I said.

"Oh." He paused, worked his tongue around as if tasting the air.

"How're you feeling?" I asked, slowly moving towards his bed.

He squinted, cupping a hand over one eye. "Well, I'd really like to get off now. Can you stop it?"

"You're in the hospital," I said. "You inhaled gasoline fumes."

"Oh," he said again, as though he wasn't sure he believed me. "Well..."

"I need to fix your IV," I said, once more leaning over him. I busied myself with the plastic tubes emerging from his arm.

"I'd like to worship. I would," he said, bowing his head forward in a sad little motion.

"Uh huh," I said, replacing the needle on the IV. "You're going to feel a little sting."

"Sting," he echoed, flinching when I put the IV back in the crook of his arm.

"How're you feeling?" I asked again. "Any aches, pains, or nausea?"

"Well..." He tried to sit up. I put a hand on his chest to stop him. He lay back down, screwed up his face. "I can't move my left arm," he said. He sounded more disappointed than anything.

"Does it hurt?" I asked.

"Not really," he said, began coughing, gasping for air with these big wet sucking sounds. "Why are you on the ceiling again? Jesus. Wow, I need a drink." He wiped at his mouth with the back of his hand, came away with a streak of red.

"I guess I'd better get the doctor," I said.

"There you go," he said.

This was my first night on the job.

A couple days passed. I was tending to another patient when Doctor Brant, in charge of PICU—that's Pediatric Intensive Care Unit—called me to his office, a big hollow space with faux mahogany shelving and too many diplomas on the walls. I rapped on the door, already open. He motioned me forward without looking up from his paperwork.

I made for the frail little wooden chair opposite his desk, which creaked in protest as I eased into it. The doc kept writing, paused, began drumming his pen against the hard surface of his desk—*taptaptaptaptaptap*—then he looked up, adjusted his large glasses, the lenses of which made his eyes appear easily twice their normal size. He stared in my direction as though interested by something in the empty space behind me, his eyes glazing over. I felt hollow, transparent, like I might look up and realize I was somewhere else entirely. Or nowhere at all. The doctor cleared his throat. Finally:

"Jennifer," he said, as though commanding me to exist once more. "That kid's damn lucky," he shook his head. "Damn lucky." He was of course referring to Lenny, who'd now been in our care for three days. When he first came in, the docs couldn't figure why he was so unresponsive. Doctor Brant had spent two days postulating and theorizing before the kid's mother returned, mentioned in an offhand manner that the truck had in fact been running when she found Lenny in the garage. Doctor Brant had responded by making a series of notes on his clipboard, frantic scrawls keeping time with the quivering of his upper lip. He'd rushed away in a huff, little shoes squeaking on the polished linoleum. Lenny's mother and I had stood together alone, staring at the receding figure of the doc. She'd looked at me, shrugged, as if none of this was a surprise for her. There was a fresh bruise orbiting her left eye, like a halo.

Taptaptaptaptaptap.

I realized the doc had been saying something, probably about how he'd single-handedly saved the kid's life, despite the apparent idiocy of his family or some such. Ever the dutiful nurse, I nodded.

"Yes, damn lucky," he said again, shaking his head. He set his pen down and leaned forward over

his desk, hands clasped together as if in supplication. "Which brings us to the other matter I'd like to discuss..." He let his words hang in the empty space between us.

I knew what was coming. I shifted in my chair, which emitted another sigh of protest. Breathing in, I noticed the air had a certain tinge to it, like bleach and stale food mixed together. I felt the sudden urge to vomit, instead bit down on my lower lip until it hurt.

"I'm concerned for you," said the doc. "Very concerned." He paused, working his jaw around. "You see, given the, well, extremely *unfortunate* circumstances during which you came to join our good staff, I thought...well, perhaps you'd want to take some time, and, yes..." His face contorted in what I assumed to be a crude approximation of sadness. He looked like a pouting insect.

I didn't answer.

"When I heard what had happened before you transferred here, I couldn't believe it. Just couldn't believe it." He shook his head. "As you know, we'd be more than happy to provide for a leave of absence. Paid in full, of course." The doc leaned back in his chair, exhaled audibly. He'd said his piece.

For a long moment I didn't answer, just stared at the wall behind his desk. Something caught my eye—one of the diplomas had a large, metallic insignia on it, which reflected the light from the window. From where the doc sat, it appeared to be floating just above his head, this tiny, shimmering star. A pious insect, then.

Finally: "No." I looked at the doc, met his gaze for the first time. Silence.

"But Jennifer," he said, once more leaning forward. "It's been nearly a month. She's *gone*. You need time to gr—"

"No," I said. "*Missing*." Barely a whisper, yet it sounded much louder in that hollow space. The doc looked up at me, opened his mouth, closed it. I guess I'd stood up, as I was now looming menacingly over the desk. I turned to leave, started walking, kept walking until I'd left the unit, the wing, the whole hospital behind. I stumbled across the parking lot, my face wet.

I stopped, turned in a slow circle. There was nowhere to go. I sat down on the curb, wiped at my nose with the sleeve of my jacket. It was then I realized I'd been clutching the doc's pen this whole time.

One of the day walkers came in early, told me to go home after seeing me check Lenny's chart four times in fifteen minutes. The way she spoke with this fake singsong voice, I couldn't tell if she was trying to be nice or just wanted the new girl out of her way, finally decided on the latter.

Once in the staff locker room I undressed slowly, peeling off wrinkled blue scrubs that reeked of antiseptic. It never really went away. I felt a tightness in my chest like a foreign object steadily growing inside me, and I realized I wanted to be away from the hospital as quickly as possible. I crumpled up the dirty scrubs, tossed them in the bottom of my locker before sliding on a shirt and a pair of running shorts.

There was a park just up the street.

Stepping outside, I blinked against harsh daylight. The midmorning sun hung precipitously in the air, threatening to crash back down against the earth. For the second time in twelve hours I stumbled across the parking lot, this time towards my crappy pickup.

Ten minutes later I was hurtling down the path that encircled the park. I sidestepped a plump mother blocking the route with a double stroller. Twins. One emitted a piercing screech as I passed. The mother didn't look up from her phone.

I kept going, no longer on the path. My feet slammed against the pavement, an arrhythmic cadence of hollow nothings. Little rivulets of sweat trickled down the sides of my face, falling away with each stride. Sucking down air, now joined with the tinge of saline. Through the soles of my shoes I could feel the asphalt burning. It would destroy my joints if I let it. I didn't care. I imagined my knees giving way, shattering outward in a nucleus of organic shrapnel. Me, falling to the ground, tumbling around in a heap of blood and apathy. People would cover their mouths in horror; still others would rush to my aid, folding me up in their strange embrace. And there I'd be, lying in my circle of benefactors. And I would be loved.

Turning a corner, I saw two figures ahead, a middle-aged man with a child holding his hand. A little girl. They were facing away from me. The girl bobbed along beside the man, her golden hair swaying back and forth. She looked like...no.

My heart crawled up inside my throat, hung there. I tried to swallow it down, choked on air. I wanted to scream her name, take her up and smother her in my loving embrace. Never let her go. I ran faster, faster still. Lungs burning, can't see straight. Again that smell, like rotting food mixed with industrial cleaner. I gagged. Don't stop. Almost th—

"Watch out!"

I jerked to the side to avoid a collision with an overweight woman coming from the opposite direction. Glancing back towards the path, I saw no one. No man, no little girl with wavy, incandescent hair. Nothing. I stared ahead, as if by looking a certain way I might be able to glimpse them again, if only for a moment. The empty air shimmered before me, taunting me with what had only just been, or had never been at all.

From beside me I heard a gentle wheezing noise. I turned to face the woman I'd almost hit, saw her doubled over on the grass with fat fingers clasped on her knees.

"Jesus," she said, in such a way that the word seemed to encompass at least four syllables. Her cheeks were bulbous and red.

"Sorry," I said, not really looking at her so much as the space between her and the path.

"Why don't you...wait, I know you," she said, squinted at me like I was a thousand yards off instead of standing right next to her. "I remember your picture in the news, something about...oh my gosh." She

covered her mouth behind a large, gelatinous hand. "You're the lady whose child...oh my gosh."

"It's okay," I said, not knowing what else to say. Shouldn't it have been the other way around, her reassuring me? That's what people did in situations of grief, they comforted each other. Or at least they tried to.

The woman moved in, put a hand on my shoulder. Ah, here was the reassuring bit. I looked down at the foreign object as if considering its merit, then shrugged it off, turning away.

"Wait," she said, arm still outstretched. I looked back. "We'll be praying for you, my family and I." She bowed her head slightly in demonstration.

Pause. "No problem," I said. She stood there a moment, blinking stupidly, then turned away. I watched her slowly waddle down the path, big arms swinging at her sides. Finally, I turned back the way I'd been going. I began walking, slowly at first, now gaining speed. Just put one foot in front of the other. Easy.

I needed to go faster. Focus on the running, not the thinking. I couldn't stop. Stopping led to thinking. Thinking was bad, it led to the truth. I didn't want the truth.

Running.

I had an hour to kill before my shift at the hospital, decided on a shower. I stood in the tub until water pooled around my ankles, yet when I stepped out I felt no cleaner than before. Drying off, I stared at my pasty self in the mirror. There was a piece missing, like an insect slowly eating away the details in my mind. I could feel it. What had once been sharp was now dulled and empty. For a second I thought I saw a figure behind me in the mirror, yet when I spun around there was no one. I filled the sink, stuck my face in cold water until I could no longer hold my breath, then leaned against the counter gasping for air.

Lenny was awake when I started my shift. Upon entering his room I found him sitting up in bed watching Spanish soap operas, a half-eaten cup of Jello on the tray before him. I pretended to busy myself with his charts, watching him from the corner of my eye. He didn't look at me. On the screen were a man and woman with reflective skin and horrible fashion sense. They smiled frequently, displaying rows of too-white teeth.

"*Mi luz*," said the woman.

"*Mi vida*," said the man.

I looked away from the TV, nearly jumped when I saw Lenny staring up at me.

"Dammit," I said. "You really need to stop doing that."

"How else am I supposed to have fun in this place?" he said. "It's been over a week and still you guys won't let me outta here!" He crossed his arms over his chest in mock-pout.

"That's really up to Doctor Brant," I said, immediately wishing I hadn't opened my mouth. I sounded so passive, so compliant.

"Yeah, sure," said Lenny, waving a hand in my direction. He resumed staring at the screen, where the perfectly tanned couple locked in a torrid embrace that somehow appeared devoid of any passion whatsoever.

"So you're looking forward to going home then?" I felt obligated to keep him talking, for what reason I couldn't say.

He looked over at me, exhaled through clenched teeth. "Yeah," he said, "Why wouldn't I be?" It sounded like a challenge.

"Well, your mom seemed pretty upset," I lied. "Has she been by? She said she'd come back sometime this week." Why the deception on my part? What good was hope if it was untrue?

"Well..." he said, screwing up his face. The doc had said Lenny's memory was affected by the incident, something about the mixture of carbon monoxide and gas fumes. I guess that's why they hadn't discharged him yet. Some days Lenny seemed perfectly normal. Others, he looked at me with wide eyes, afraid of something though he could never say what.

"Don't worry about it," I said, resting a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sure she'll come by soon."

"Yeah," he said again. "Sure."

I turned to go, my work finished for the moment. Then:

"I'm sorry about your daughter."

I paused with my hand on the door. A moment passed, and I wondered if I'd only imagined hearing the words. Slowly turning, I locked eyes with Lenny. No, it wasn't just me.

"How did you...?"

"I heard some of the staff talking," he said. "They leave my door open and sometimes I can hear them at the main desk. I guess you were off that night." He raised his hands, palms upturned.

"Well..." I said, staring off at nothing in particular.

"Here, come sit." He motioned me over. My body complied, moving of its own accord towards the empty seat beside him. I glanced over and there he was, big as life. Somehow he looked different than when he'd first come in. There was this vibrancy in his face, a subtle radiance that flew out of him to crash around the room, silent and unending. I was afraid he might smile then, and if he did I thought I'd smile back.

"Can I ask what happened?" He looked at me.

I pursed my lips, tried to appear as though gathering my thoughts but really just wanting to hold off saying the words. As though speaking them aloud was the thing that would make it all real.

"Someone took her," I said finally, staring at the floor.

Lenny's brow furrowed. "Oh," he said. "I, uh..."

"It's okay," I said. Why did I keep telling everyone that?

Silence followed, both of us looking anywhere but at each other.

"What then?" asked Lenny, shifting in his bed. The sheets crinkled loudly.

"I went for a run," I said, cleared my throat. "I figured she'd be fine alone—she's much smarter than any other nine-year-old I've met, more mature. When I left she was doing homework. We were supposed to go out when I got back..." I hesitated, surprised at how easily the words came. Maybe it was different with Lenny. Maybe I could tell him.

He leaned forward. "You don't have to," he said.

"No, it's fine," I said. Breathe. Just inhale, then exhale. Easy. "When I got back, the front door was open, not broken or forced, just open. Like someone had walked right in. And Kate was gone." This time I didn't look away.

More silence. The TV continued to play in the background.

"*Me encanta estar contigo*," said the woman.

"*¿Por qué no vamos a un sitio más tranquilo?*" said the man.

"Fuck," said Lenny. He leaned back, exhaled loudly.

"Yeah," I said, unconsciously wringing my hands in my lap, then: "I was only gone an hour," as if this were the missing piece that somehow explained everything, made it all okay.

"But," said Lenny, "How do you, like, know someone took her?" He winced. "Sorry, I didn't mean it to sound like that."

Silence. "Because I just do," I said, standing to leave. "I have to go."

"Wait," he said, and I turned to face him. He rummaged around behind his pillow, and when his hand emerged there was an unopened cup of Jello in it, which he held out to me.

This time I couldn't help but smile. I reached out, took the Jello. It was bright red.

"Did you steal this?" I asked, trying and failing to sound reproachful.

"Maybe," he said, grinning. He gestured towards the seat again, and I sat. He handed me his spoon.

"Do you know any Spanish?" I asked.

"Nope," he said.

"Me neither," I said.

We sat there slurping our Jello for the remainder of the episode, rolling it around on our tongues as though it were a fine wine. It felt good. It felt right.

Lenny and I talked more after that. He never asked about Kate again, but I could see him thinking about it, it was there in his eyes. I continued to inquire after his mother in what I hoped was a tacit

manner, though he must've caught on. Each time I brought it up he'd cross his scrawny arms and stare out the room's lone window, like he was expecting something from the darkness outside to swoop in and carry him off. Days passed, and his mother didn't come back. Then one morning he sat me down, all somber-like, looked over like it was he who was saving me. He told me about his family.

"You wanna ask about the bruises," he said, not a question. "Funny thing is, my dad never hit my mom, not once," he shook his head as if to emphasize this point. "She hurts herself because she wants attention, or sympathy I guess." He shrugged.

"That's horrible," I said. He just nodded.

We often talked of useless things, stuff no one would mind forgetting. One day he told me how his father had tried to help him pull a loose tooth by tying an end of string to a doorknob, only when his father slammed the door it sent six-year-old Lenny right after it. He'd lost the tooth in question, plus two more ("Hilarious," he called it). I told him how when I was a child we'd had a dog named Stinky, a big dumb Labrador that ran into the street and got hit by a car. We talked about our childhoods, the terrible food in the cafeteria downstairs, how we both generally disliked hospitals. And each time I left I'd go home and stare at myself in the mirror, wondering if there might be something I'd done wrong, or that I had forgotten something important. I'd throw water on my face, collapse on the couch in my work clothes and sleep until it was time for my next shift, shunning the harsh daylight outside.

Then something happened. During Lenny's third week the doc called me into his office again, not for the same reason as before. He said Lenny was getting worse, and couldn't understand why. It was true, I'd seen it for myself. During the first two weeks, he'd improved markedly. He was energetic, hungry, and anxious to leave the hospital, if not return home. Yet his memory was still an issue, and one day he simply couldn't get out of bed. The brief moments of confusion turned to hours, days of wandering the haze of his addled synapses.

One evening I came in to check on him. He'd grown alarmingly thin, his skin pale like melting wax. I introduced myself again, sat down beside him in my usual spot. He didn't look at me, but stared off absently. The TV wasn't on.

"How're you feeling today?" I asked, partially because I didn't know what else to say.

He grunted, continued to stare ahead as if watching something only he could see, like it might disappear if he looked away.

We sat in silence, me listening to the racking sound of air entering and exiting his frail chest. The feeling of helplessness crept in again, threatening to swallow me whole. I imagined a lake carved from the purest darkness, its surface perfectly still before me. I only hesitated a moment, then jumped in. The distinct sensation of falling, then I realized I'd been falling this whole time.

A hand closed over my arm, startling me back to the present. I looked up and there was Lenny,

leaning in towards me.

"Mom?" He squinted at me, eyes searching. "Can you stop it?"

I didn't answer, but thought of the bruise encircling the eye of Lenny's mother, wondered if she felt better after doing that to herself. I reached over, put my hand over his, held it there until he pulled away, sinking into his bed with an audible sigh.

I stood up to leave.

"Wait," he said. I stopped, looked back. "I'm sorry."

"Why?" I asked, frowning.

He didn't answer right away, but shifted in bed, appeared to sink further still into the cheap mattress, as though the hospital intended to swallow him whole. Finally he looked at me.

"I couldn't save you," he said, as though it pained him greatly to admit this.

"But," I said, "I don't understand. Save me from what?" I leaned in closer, placing a hand on the side of his face. He just smiled at me.

"I think I'd like to sleep now," he said.

"Of course," I said, lingering a moment. I made sure to close the door softly when I left. What had he meant? I wandered the main hall in a daze as white coats and scrubs hustled around me, doing the things I should have been doing. I paid them no mind.

We had a staff lounge in our wing that included a table and a couple hard plastic chairs next to a tired, old refrigerator. I realized my body was leading me there. I let it. I felt a weariness seeping into my bones; I could hardly keep my eyes open. Upon entering the small lounge I sat, resting my head on the table, once more feeling the strange sensation I'd lost something important.

I must've fallen asleep, as I woke up to find the doc leaning over me, a hand on my shoulder. I thought he'd berate me then for leaving my patients, maybe even fire me, but he just waited with this sad little smile on his face, like he understood. Everything was foggy around the edges, and the ground kept swaying back and forth underneath me. The feeling of loss returned, hanging in the air like vapors, and then I understood too.

We entered a room, stopped, and I realized I was standing over Lenny. Only it was different now, because he was dead. His eyes were open, staring up at nothing, or maybe he was searching for that thing only he'd seen, but it had left him alone and now he was gone too. Maybe he'd found what he was looking for, and was trying to tell me something. Maybe he was just saying goodbye.

The doc leaned over and closed Lenny's eyes. I wanted to reach out and touch him, see if he was real, but the doc was in front of me again, grasping my hands and saying things like "It's okay" and "I know you two were close." For a moment I saw the dark lake in my mind, imagined clawing my way to the

surface, gasping for air. I had to do something.

I sat down on the floor, cradling my head in my hands. I pounded my fists on the cold linoleum as the phrase *she's gone* ran through my mind on endless loop. I mouthed the words over and over, until tears streaked my face and spittle ran down the sides of my mouth.

She's gone.

The doc kept on with his hollow niceties, his hand on my shoulder again, then I realized there were others in the room with us. I looked up and saw a man cover not-Lenny with a sheet before engaging the bed's wheels and slowly pushing the body out the door and down the hallway. If this were a movie I would've reached out and cried his name before collapsing into the doctor's waiting arms. I felt like laughing at the absurdity of it all. Strong hands lifted me off the ground, tenderly pulling me from the darkness of Lenny's room into the bright light of the main hallway. I was leaving the doctor, the hospital, all the blood and shit of my old life behind. The light pierced down to my very core, burning everything away. I felt reborn. Goodbye, Lenny. Goodbye, Kate.

I'm not running anymore.

POETRY: PART 2



ACE BOGESS

“It’s a Great Day for What?”

[Question asked by Jeff Carter]

We played Ping-Pong to steal an hour
from counsellors prattling 12-step jargon,
thumping their Big Book, red book,
the book of names, the book of lies,
through our six months of misplaced wonder.
We passed time launching missiles in the dayroom:
the double-tap: one low, one a hollow high,
gears winding on a clock. His ape-
like arms sent me racing side to side
on short legs—the afternoon erased,
then a day. Gone, morning’s dark revelations —
the *what-did-you?* & the *how-will-you?*—
while we swallowed our steaming coffee.
How many cups must a man drink before he knows
he has survived attacks from what homunculus
he made? The points added up,
yet no winner was declared,
no tin chip awarded like a silver trophy
for the mantelpiece.

“Don’t You Think We Should Be Silent,
to Enjoy This Rather Sinister Moment?”

—*Camus*, The Fall.

Not yet, but soon: the anniversary of mayhem.
Recall knife’s plunge & overdose,
animals feasted on by crows.
It’s the anniversary of dead men lining streets,
their wives beside them, mourning;
an anniversary of falling:
the one spire in this castle of cards,
the other, glossy confetti glittering
in the wind & the newsman’s dirty lens.
Come, come to this cadaver festival
like a med student timidly poking between two ribs.
Just a date, a pause in time,
a figment in the firmament—
it’s the anniversary of my misfortune,
yours. A wedding cake collapses,
plastic couple dropping through the rutted muck.
This is our anniversary of what-
was-sacred-now-profaned,
a great, gleaming bacchanal of sighs.

BLAS FALCONER

Amor Fati

First published in Bloom.

We wrestled in the basement, drunk,

my head pressed
hard into the coarse,

blue rug, windows dark.

Upstairs,

my mother stood
at the stove. *Soon*,

my body seemed
to say, turning

under you. It was
1986: the fire

at Dupont Plaza, the
Human

Immunodeficiency
Virus, the

Challenger falling in
pieces over

the Atlantic. You

pinned me

there, bent
so close, I thought

we might
kiss, your shirt

stretched by
my long pull,

and I held on
with both fists.

Leave-taking

First published in Entropy.

The way someone folds
a shirt into a suitcase
and lifts it from the bed.

The way someone
exits a room and takes
everything with him.

Shutting the door on
a pocket of stillness.
If the curtain or

the pillow sighs, no one
knows. All week under the mind's prattle.

If we have nothing to give
each other, we have
nothing to give each other.

Heaven

First published in Redivider.

How will

I get

there? How

will I ever know how

to get

there, my son

asks, sobbing

suddenly, months

after, if

you don't let

me see

them die.

JACK WARREN

Spindrift

Before dawn you strike out.
leaving what you can no longer bare
the weight of. Asphalt, glassware,
tremors of self-awareness that disappear like Orion
over city skies. Maybe travelling is another form
of yearning, succulent as the fawn sky
announcing itself in the east. Maybe the snowdrops
whimpering in the bludgeoned mud are nothing more
than victims. *'This time'* you whisper-
-*'you're never coming back'*

Misadventure

It was a brutal initiation. I washed dishes thirteen hours a day and slept shivering in a fire damaged chalet, listening to the Albanian sous-chef beat his mistress into the ceramic tiles above. On the third day I lit out, slept on the beach and rolled cigarettes in the pages of *Don Juan* as the Mediterranean washed the sweat from my feet and I gorged myself on stolen cherry tomatoes and strong feta cheese. Often, I thought of my mother as the church bells tolled beyond the valley; waking each morning to a lemon-yellow sun and a breeze like a ballad drifting down from the olive groves. Later, in the viper heat of midday I could sense the smallness of my own knowledge, my own heart, unwilling to accept that this fear would be useful to me in time.

Snowdon

i

The rain that falls, horizontal
on the flint and shale and scree
runs, in violent rivulets
to the patch of scrub brush soil
nourishing marsh hellebore.

ii

A hunk of copper oxide,
tangerine, aquamarine
lichen scarred, drenched with
deep cloud, blasted by gale.

iii

The bones of rooks, the maddening hail
the rind of day softening on the descent.
In the valley, a bird takes the chance to remember
old songs. I wear my breath as a veil.

VONA GROARKE

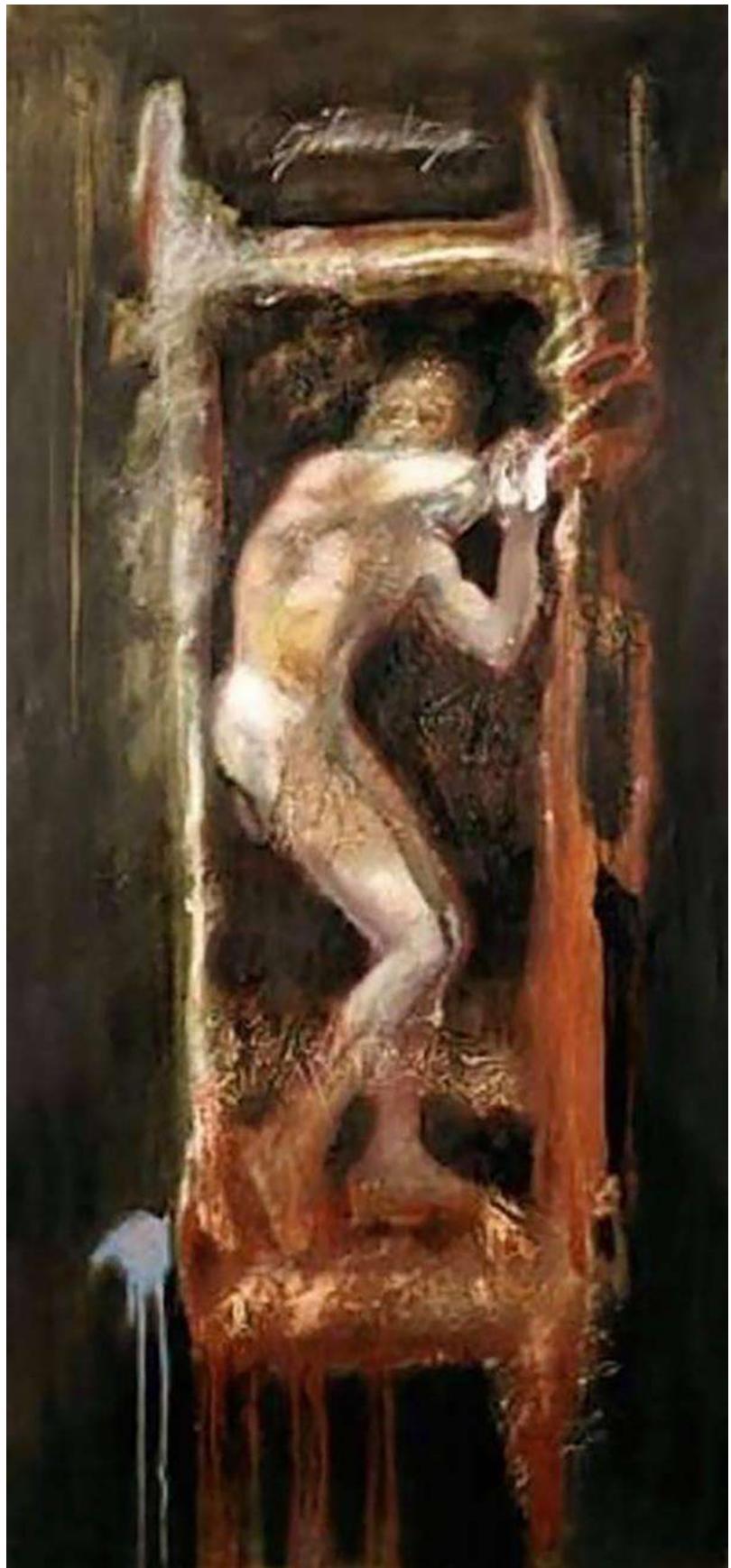
Achill

I'm sure I'm not supposed to sit here
in my hutch of heat and tea all day
and music, like a circus act,
to remind me of clear skies.

I'm sure I'm not supposed to sit here
coaxing the wind to throw off
its harness of fury and scold
to sit a while, nicely, with me.

I'm sure I'm not supposed to sit here
with the grey gate closed
and the slates packed tight
and a sheep's head minding the door.

I'm sure I'm not supposed to sit here
letting the fire in on secrets
that, by rights, should belong to the sea
but no one comes to stop me.





LIZ DOLAN

After I Was Raised

—*John 11*

Sweaty fingers touch my garments
as I scoop water from the well. No one understands
the voluptuousness of the sun, the scent
of breeding women, copper-colored, the chickens
pecking at my toes, the cacophony of chatter
the busybodies, the visitors
with their mitzvahs and challah.

Still Martha clucks about me like a brood hen
oiling my skin, clipping my nails.
And her endless braying
about Jesus, Jesus...kneeling I speak
of the unredeemed souls I have seen.
Tiny cymbals din in my ear.
Another's voice cackles in my throat.

Acceptance

I do not know if you love me
as I love you. No matter.

When I ride
the curves and edges of your body

I feel I have fallen off a cliff.
But if early on a summer evening

under a eucalyptus you wish
to whisper sweet syllables into my ear

and wind a vine about my heart
I will lie

silent and listen to the sound
of rain falling on the lime green leaves.

KARUNA CHANDRASHEKAR

Bone of Water/Bone of Home

Inheritance

is a mother's silence
calcified in her daughter's bones,
the past is a distinct sound.

Where the sea
meets the sky
where each border lies,
suicide is that vanishing point.

Disappearance
is the washed up *saree*
returned
bled of all colour.

Each day
the sun is lit by this
wanting.

So when I look up
see the trees
move gently
in their quiet alchemy of green
it is easy to believe
that my grief

had birthed
all that colour.

Saree: a garment worn in Indian subcontinent

Translation/Delhi: a love story

like a boat trapped on land / I see the sea / a mirage at the end of every gully / this city is a pit of fire / and I am an ant crossing a wire / over its flames / I think I might love or die over here / I learn to do both and neither

*

sitting cross-legged in a *gurdwara* / you say, “close your eyes and hear god speak”/ a pool reflects the night / stars meet our bare feet / fish dart across the sky / waiting / but nothing / on a rickshaw ride home / your knee touches mine / ‘god’s whisper’.

*

dust haunts all my belongings / the sky is the back end of an oven / my back baking like bread / this city only hungers for itself / so rename each heart / ‘thirst’ / and be done with it / if I am the arrow / then my target has left / the heat is bitter / but I am still more

*

dance as if possessed / in the crush of bodies / in the unceasing music of wind / in a song as foreign as a lover’s tongue / 7 believers take flight into *peshi* / 7 *pagodas* rise within me / fingers of light trace the lattice / I am still learning live with myself / to dance and possess.

*

these days / I happen somewhere / where I am not / the distance between home and here / is 2168 kilometers / but I have forgotten / the smell of salt / I have forgotten / I was marooned once / I have learned to respond to the word ‘*mehfil*’ / like I do to a bird call / riding the waves, / my body becomes the sound

Gurdwara: the place of worship and prayer for Sikhs.

Peshi: loosely translated as trance.

Legend of the seven pagodas: the legend of the seven temples submerged in the Bay of Bengal the coast of Southern India.

Mehfil: in Urdu, a gathering of people, often where poetry, art and dance are combined and enjoyed.

CHRISTOS KALLI

Letter

Turn your lights off.
Pull down the shutters of your prison, your room,
And wonder
How is it that you find no serenity
In a lit room, with its shutters open.
Why aren't the shades of no faces in the darkness:
Shades of faces in the light.

VINCENT HAO

Manifest & Mobilize, Grow & Revitalize

yesterday/
deep within a recess of monkey paws/

I saw two girls tasting each other
behind the old exxon/
saw when

/jesus— flat-footed
formed from airwaves/

daddy said times were different/
when he kissed my cheek
with his sodom lips
/I thought it was something I could swallow

thought that when
noah was abusing his ark
/stealing his animals/
he had time

to stop by the exxon/
lube up the trailer/ fill those animals up
with the 93 premium gas/

/walk to the store with
smokes in hand/

& laugh with the clerk
/a 15 year old deadwood boy/
about how white lies used to be

/yesterday daddy was noah/
more or less
two strokes of malt liquor & one hammer wrench away

from glory/ but machines break
& instead that night
we watched the stars/

& his ruffled collar/ begged me
for warmth/ the spit off a throat of wine

long ago/ when it was
more thunderstorm than crop/
more vinyl/ less sheepskin/

boys like me were worth just
the straw on their knuckle/
the lead in their blood
but never more than a dowry/

never more than three knuckle hairs
bloodied from fistfight

/bloodied from when
the days were too long
& lapped against each other/

& under us the ground was shifting/
earthquaking

& the house split in half/
a mouth opening into
jagged teeth/
it was laughing about how silently

the earth swallows children/
spits them out with middle-part hair/
master's degrees

& all around us gospel music
keeps melting/
acid against refried skin

/& all around us the men smell of
cigarette holsters/ wear black
blue suits/ ties undone

daddy
talks about america/

lips tainted scarlet/
and sometimes

deep at night I wander out of the house/
no cars/ no music/
only a patch of ripping sky

/daddy is sewing it up with monkey oil

Sedentary Fever

since the last time we watered the hycenthias,
the sky has tripled in color—

the muted autumn flourish, veins of spotted leaves
replaced with jets of cyan ink.

I still have the taste of bird on my lip
from last winter, when we lashed too many

scars on the clouds, squeezed sparrows
and pigeon hearts into zero sum descent.

half the world has watered since then, the other
half a triumph of cerebellum, proof that

what separated foot and lung was just a lack
of breathing space. daylight and the nurse rises

with one foot arched against the sky, dusts
the ashes off our urns. by now we have

degraded into piranha pitchers, toothless venus flytraps.
she waters me by the stem, and all I can think

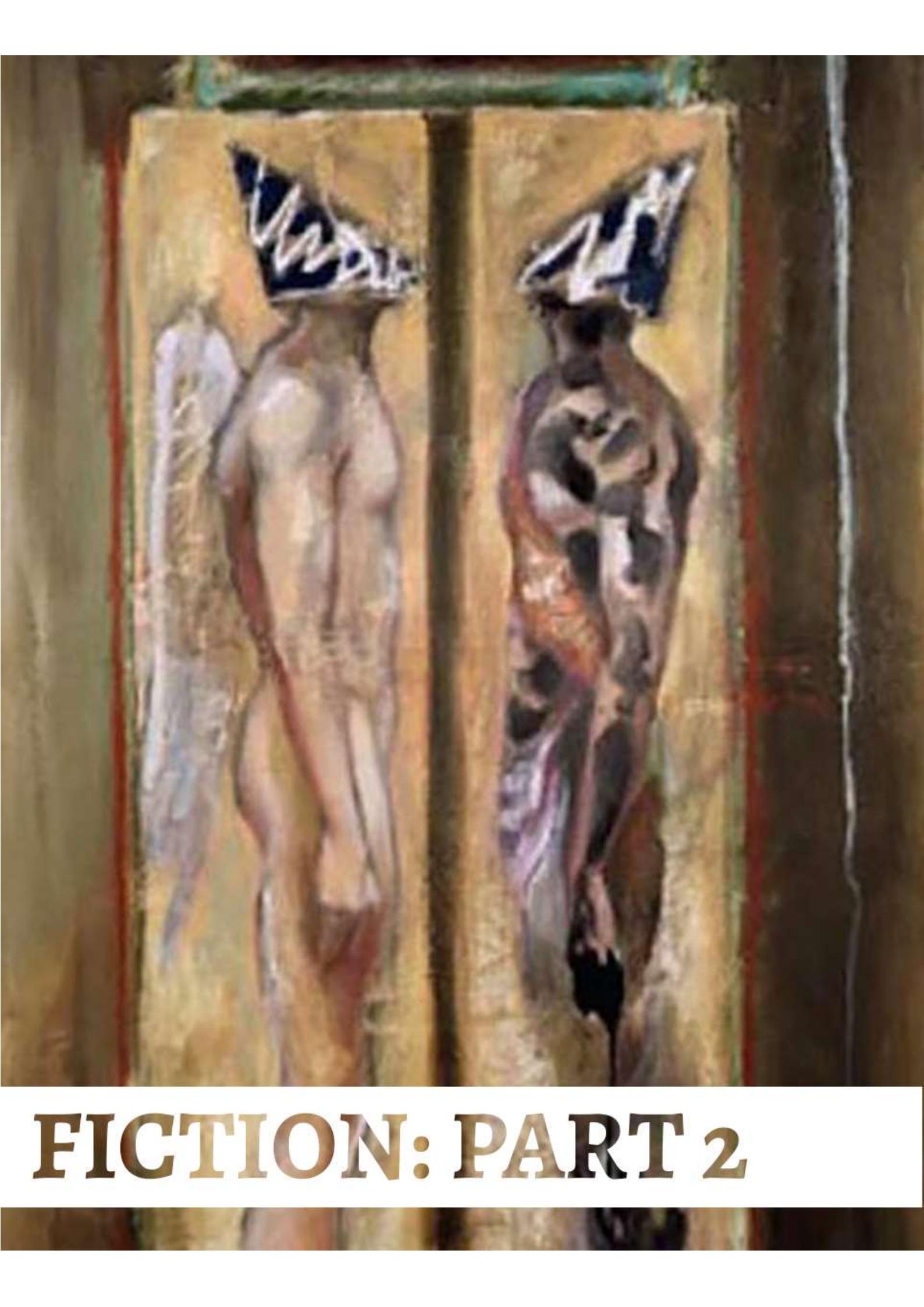
is to jaw her tight— as if to loosen is to forget,
to conquer, to reconstruct an odyssey of brick.

so for the last few years I've been stuck between
plant and man, sum and boy— and the difference

is in the way a beam of light will shatter
against skin, how deeply water will pool

in a circle of root. much later I have left my body
and held it by the foot, and as the sky ends

I am walking past what we used to call a garden,
now just a tangle of cells and misplaced aches of skin.



FICTION: PART 2

Not in London Now, Mrs. C

‘Do you want me to nip out for a fish supper?’

Sugar pushes a hand through the glistening porcupine spikes of his hair. He has pop star hair. All Lily’s boyfriends have pop star hair. Pop star hair and pop star names. Sugar indeed. Quite often they have hair and names instead of personality. They never seem to last anyway. Like pop stars they arrive, they make a splash and then they vanish.

This one works hard at least. But he looks tired, I think. I should let him go home. Only, now, suddenly, it’s exactly what I fancy. Fish and chips, very salty and dripping in vinegar. The batter crisp and curling at the edges. Small golden waves magicked solid in the act of surging and breaking. The taste of long forgotten Fridays. When did I last have fish and chips? Years and years ago. Way before Alan moved out, before the girls left school even.

‘It’s traditional isn’t it?’ he says. ‘Eating fish and chips out of the paper when you move into a new house? No one feels like cooking on moving day and it means you don’t have to go hunting for which box you’ve put the plates in.’

Sugar should really have spotted that all my boxes are carefully labelled. I know exactly where the plates are. I know where everything is. Maybe he’s not that bright. That wouldn’t be a first. The other thing about Lily’s blokes is that they often have hair instead of brains.

I hand him a ten pound note and realise that I don’t know how much a fish supper costs now. ‘Is that enough?’

He smiles good-naturedly. He has a good smile. Broad and optimistic. A pop star smile.

‘I reckon it should be. You’re not in London now, Mrs C.’

‘No. No, I’m not. I’m also not Mrs C.’

His confusion is sweet to see. He blushes becomingly. I help him out. ‘Just call me Penny.’

My eye falls his jacket. A leather biker’s jacket. Distressed in a way that’s very Marlon Brando. Very James Dean. He doesn’t have a bike though. At least not today. Today he followed me up the A1 in a hired Renault Twingo. A ridiculous name for a car, but then I remember Alan telling me once about how you name cars in a global market. They have to be pronounceable in most of the world’s major languages but at the same time not mean anything too specific in any of them. The perfect name for a modern car is something vaguely uplifting, vaguely onomatopoeic. We had some fun coming up with our own. The Citroen Whizz. The Honda Flip. The Suzuki Pep. The Zip. The Buzz. The Whoosh. The Ford Bizkit.

That would have been what, five years ago? I think some of them are actually real names for real cars now. I'm almost certain we passed a metallic green Pep on the way down. I wonder for a moment about how Alan feels about my moving. The financial recklessness will disturb him of course, but will he actually feel anything?

'I'll be back as soon as.' says Sugar.

The chips are pale and cold, the batter is soggy and the fish is tasteless. Salt and vinegar might have invigorated the food but Sugar forgot to ask for it. 'I didn't think I'd need to ask.'

My breath catches in my throat. Have I made a terrible mistake? Should I have stayed in London? It's what my daughters think. It's what most of my friends think. You'll never get back, they say. Once you're gone, you're gone. The city will speed away from you in a haze of spiralling house prices leaving you becalmed in... where was it again?

Sugar feels responsible for my first meal here being a disappointing one, compensating by keeping up a string of cheerful inanities as we eat. 'Nice place this actually Mrs C. Very contemporary. And a blank canvas kind of.'

He means sterile. And that's what I wanted when I bought it. Antiseptic, white, fresh. A wipe clean house. No sticky memories contaminating this home. And no character to trip over either. No original features at all. No bloody wood-burning stoves or ancient black-leaded fireplaces. I just wanted to box myself up in a few small rooms with as few belongings as possible, and I have managed that.

'I have too much stuff,' he says. 'Too much clutter.'

Sugar stands up. Bends again to pick up his jacket from the floor in one fluid movement. So tall, I think. And so supple. And shoulders so wide, waist so small. He has a dancer's body to go with all that hair. I look at him closely. He is actually the complete package: a model's cheekbones, strong white teeth, lazy eyes, honeyed skin.

'It's a pity Lily is so flighty.' I say

'Flighty?' He seems to puzzle over the word.

'You shouldn't let her push you around.'

He shrugs. 'I know, but she is who she is I am who I am.'

'Well, maybe she'll calm down as she gets older.' I say. He seems okay, but I'm worried that I've upset him. That I've been spiteful maybe. Worried that needling him is what I meant to do.

'I hope not.' he says. 'I hope she stays exactly the same.'

And now he changes the subject, telling me that he feels bad leaving me here among the unpacked boxes, without even a bed. Without wi-fi, without a TV even. I say it's fine, they're bringing a bed tomorrow and I have a mattress for tonight. I have a kettle and teabags. I have a carton of milk. I have a radio. He

should get off, take the Twingo back. I give him seventy-five pounds and he makes a decent show of not wanting to take the money.

‘Go on.’ I say. ‘Take Lily out. Show my girl a good time. Cheer her up.’ And he gives in at that, shoving the notes into the back pocket of his jeans and I worry that they’ll fall out, but stop myself telling him to put the money somewhere more sensible. He’s a grown up, what he does with his cash is up to him.

‘Bye, Mrs C.’ he says. And suddenly, unexpectedly, he scoops me into an embrace. I can feel the strength of him, the steel in his muscles. The heat of him and the smell of sweat beneath the aftershave. It’s not unpleasant.

‘Penny,’ I say. ‘As in farthing.’ He just looks worried.

‘See you soon, yeah?’ he says.

‘Yeah.’ I say.

I make a cup of tea, stronger than I usually have it. I’m trying blast away the fishy patina that coats my mouth. I try to listen to the radio for a while. There’s a play on radio four. It must be twenty minutes into a dramatisation of a major French novel and I try to guess which one. I can’t help feeling that I ought to know, that maybe it’s a book that I read for my degree, that it’s probably Flaubert or Zola or Victor Hugo.

It’s not Therese Racquin, though it seems to feature a beautiful young working class girl who works in a down at heel back street shop, who shines like a diamond in a Parisienne dung heap. It’s not Madame Bovary though it’s not many minutes before an upper class lady is committing panting adultery amid the straw of a stable. It’s not Nana or Les Liaison Dangereuse, though plainly hypocrisy of the upper classes is one of the themes. Classic radio four.

Bored with the machinations of 19th century French society, I fiddle with the dial and get a blast of the riff to Shiny Happy People and I don’t need that thank you very much. I turn it off.

I could make a start on unpacking, but the will to do it vanishes almost as soon as I’ve had the thought. What I should do is go walking, start exploring my new home town. It should have been me that went to get the chips really. I need to boost my step count. I have a pedometer app on my phone recording every step I take. Emma suggested I get it when I was moaning about having put on a few pounds and now I’m mildly obsessed with it. A walk, even if it is just to the toilet, feels wasted now if I’m not carrying my phone. My target for each day is 10,000 steps. My record so far – set just last week - is 17,068 and today it seems I have done a rather feeble 7,211, disappointing considering the number of trips we made from the old house to the Twingo, and then from the Twingo to my new apartment.

There’s no getting away from it, there’s not much to Lynthorpe. It’ll take quite a few circuits if I want to beat my steps record. Two main shopping streets. High Street and Market Street. Small.

Nevertheless, somehow this two street town has managed to hang on to things that other places have lost. There's a bookshop and a dinky cinema. A couple of surprisingly upmarket clothes shops where the prices easily compete with London. And if you can't be bothered to cook there's places besides the chippie. There's a Chinese, a curry house, an Italian and half a dozen pubs.

It's even got places that are unique to Lynthorpe. The Old Surgery for example, which announces itself as a space for the purveying of collectibles, antiques and cream teas. I hope there's a New Surgery somewhere too - a place for the diagnosis of actual illnesses - that's something I didn't check out. It's definitely got a railway station, it's definitely less than two hours from London and I definitely don't know anyone who lives here. Or anyone who has come from here. Or anyone who has ever visited here. That's something I did check out.

Perfect for me, even if my daughters do think I've gone mad.

It's not that I didn't like living in London. There were days, even quite recently, even after forty years, when I would be walking down Tottenham Court Road, or ducking through the Bloomsbury squares, when I would get a surge of excitement just as I did when I first arrived. I live here, I would think, right here, right at the heart of everything. And I never lost the habit of pausing by the blue plagues. This is where the pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was founded, this is where the first anaesthetic was administered, this is where the first University college for women was founded. To live right among all these firsts, among all these ghosts of actors, writers and architects. Among all these pioneers of everything from chemistry to family planning.

So, yes, I had doubts about leaving. But we all need change. It is, as someone said, the only evidence we have that we are alive. Plus my share of the house goes a lot - a lot - further in Lynthorpe than it would in our old neighbourhood. I've been able to stop work, buy my brand new two bedroom box. My very contemporary blank canvas kind of, as Sugar put it. And I've been able to give some cash to Emma and Lily.

As I wander through the almost empty streets, marvelling at the very unLondon absence of dog dirt and litter, I find I'm nodding and smiling at the other evening strollers. It seems expected here.

When I glance at the phone and see that, almost without noticing I've soared past 13,000 steps, I reward myself by stepping into a pub. The Ram couldn't be any more Olde Worlde if it had been specially built as part of a museum of traditional English country life. Thick lopsided walls rendered in pale pink plaster. A doorway which you have to stoop through to get to a small dark room that seems to be all heavy oak tables and chairs. Pewter tankards hanging on hooks from the low beams. One solitary drinker at the bar. A fat middle-aged man in muddy work boots and highlighted hair who turns to appraise me as I make my way towards the bar. Despite over ten years of the no-smoking ban, a spectral haze seems to linger in the thick air.

I put my shoulders back and try to make myself a bit taller. I want to ask the fat bloke what he thinks he's looking at but just smile instead, a big full wattage beam, I put my heart into it, give it real feeling. He drops his gaze, looks at his mucky feet.

Men are such cowards.

'What'll it be love?' The barman is fifty-ish with a pinky-grey face and the look of a man trying to forget how much money he owes.

I am breezy. 'What's good?'

'I beg your pardon?' The poor man seems confused.

'You're advertising fine local ales. And I was wondering which is the finest, which you'd recommend?'

'Oh. Right. Well. Um.' He looks me searchingly as if trying to match me to exactly the right beer for my blood type. 'The Bishops Finger is nice. Strong mind.'

'I'll have that then please.'

'Right you are.' And he turns and reaches for the lower shelf where the half-pint glasses are.

'Oh sorry.' I say. 'I'll have a pint.'

He straightens up, slowly, here's a man in need of some serious yoga, he's going to be walking like the tin man by the time he's my age if he doesn't watch out.

'You want a pint of Bishop's?'

'Please.'

There's a pause and I wonder what I'll do if he refuses to serve me. I'll have to kick off and that won't be a great way to start my Lynthorpe life. Small place like this word must get around. But he turns and reaches for a pint glass. He takes his time. 'And a packet of salt and vinegar crisps too please.' I say.

The fat man sniggers. I look at him and he turns his unpleasant little laugh into an unconvincing cough. Yes, men. Cowards.

Sitting on a bench seat by the window with my soupy beer and my crisps I wonder slightly what came over me. I rarely drink beer. I'm more your Prosecco girl. And a pint too. I never drink pints. It was just that the half-pint glass looked so mimsy in the barman's hand, but the pint seems dauntingly massive by contrast. Some London pubs have started serving beers in schooners, an old-fashioned measure that's about two thirds of a pint and that seems a sensible sort of amount to me. I wish that had been an option. And I can't remember when I last had crisps. But I can be anything I want now. Here I might become the woman who drinks Bishops by the pint, who scoffs crisps by the ton and who takes no shit from condescending men in bars.

There are worse things to be.

'So how is it out in bandit country?' Emma's voice is crackly and faint and I hope there's not going to be problems with the signal up here. It's another thing I didn't check. 'Are you all more or less sorted out now?'

I think of the unpacked boxes waiting for me back at the flat.

'Yes, dear.' I say. 'All sorted.'

'I'm sorry I couldn't be there. They're really piling on the pressure at work. But Lily was a help right? She pulled her weight?'

I tell her that Lily couldn't make it, that she was ill, that it was just Sugar that came up with me and how that was probably best, that there might well have been too many cooks otherwise. 'He seems like a lovely boy.' I say. 'Very polite.'

Emma snorts. 'Well, he won't last long then the poor sod. Lily doesn't really do polite does she? What's the matter with her anyway?'

'He didn't really say. The usual I expect.'

Emma sighs now. 'When do you think we start getting really concerned about her Mum?'

I want to tell her that I've done my time being concerned. That she and Lily are both adults now, that they have to make their own way. That I can't worry about either of them anymore. That if they fall down they'll have to get up all by themselves, dry their own eyes, bandage their own wounds. But I don't. Of course I don't. You don't do you?

A group of young women stumble in bringing with them a swirl of cool air and laughter. They must be freezing, they're all in short skirts or thin dresses and none of them has a coat. I see the barman straighten up. Run a hand through his sparse grey hair. The noisy fizz of these girls sparks him into an approximation of life. I bet he doesn't question their drink choices.

'Mum? Are you still there?'

'Yes, sorry, the signal's not great.'

'That's what you get for moving into the back of beyond. Are you in the flat now?'

'No. I'm in a pub. I'm eating crisps.'

'Living the dream, Mum. Living the dream.'

I wonder what my kids will do with the money I've given them. If it's true that past behaviour is the best clue to future behaviour then Emma will put it towards her own deposit fund, while Lily will go partying in Ibiza or Thailand or Azerbaijan or wherever is the happening place this year, and she'll come back broke with a new tattoo, a new boyfriend and a new idea about how she's going to spend her days.

As I leave the pub I call her. She picks up sleepily, yawning into the phone.

'Mummy dearest. How's the first day of the rest of your life?'

'It's ok. Good that Sugar was with me. He's been a star.'

'Yes, he's a thoroughly decent chap no question. Husband material I'd say.'

There's a smile in her voice and I think she might be laughing at me but I don't mind.

'How are you anyway?'

'Oh, much better now. I've been doing all the right things. Lucozade. Toast. Paracetamol. Lots of kip. Hangovers are very demanding you know, they need a lot of looking after.'

'Yes they do.' I say and I think: not yet. We don't get concerned about Lily just yet. The time to worry is when she starts to pretend her hangovers are something else, that they're colds or flu or stress. When she stops being upfront about them.

'I would still have come you know, but Sugar wouldn't let me. Said I should rest. Said I'd just get in the way. He was right wasn't he?'

'He was.'

'I do want to see the new place though and see what's so amazing about Lynthorpe that it could lure you away from London.'

'Any time.' I say and we chat for a bit but she's distracted and I gradually begin to get a very clear sense what's going on here. 'Lily, are you checking your emails?'

She laughs, unembarrassed. 'Texts actually. But nothing gets past you does it Mummy? No flies on you.'

Walking back the town seems changed, threatening, the air charged somehow. I imagine men behind me tip-toeing behind me, men who wrestle me down alleyways, men who produce knives, chisels, screwdrivers. *Take your clothes off bitch. On your knees bitch. Who do you think you are bitch?*

43 years in London and I never had thoughts like these. Or not often.

It's the quiet, I decide. It's become unnatural to me. I'm used to the reassuring soundtrack of cars and sirens. The chamber music of random shouting. So I try to think of Lynthorpe as just another recently gentrified bit of the capital, somewhere the hipsters haven't properly discovered yet, the kind of secret that gets finally exploded by the spoilsport property pages of the Sunday papers. I try to remind myself that London is just lots of places like this. Lots of small towns joined together by chains of noise, and that meaningless noise is what I've come here to escape among other things.

And I concentrate on the number of steps I must be doing. I pause to check. 19,101. The record is comprehensively smashed, so that's good.

It's only ten o'clock when I get back to Albion Street, back to the place I guess I'll have to begin to think of as home, and I wonder about phoning friends. Scrolling through my contacts I realise that I can't call any of them. I've left it too long with most people. And I'm depressed by the sudden certainty that they're not my friends any more, they're his friends, that in our supposedly amicable divorce we each got

half an expensive house but that Alan somehow got custody of most of the friends.

Tears sting against my closed eye lids. I should be over this. Useless to think like this, but I can see it so clearly, Alan who never liked to see people when we were together, now happily hobnobbing. Doing Sunday lunch for ten. Rustling up spontaneous suppers. Alan wielding a spatula. Alan in a comedy apron. I imagine an Alan who is the absolute life and bloody soul. A thinner, fitter, better-looking, just-bloody-nicer Alan. An Alan who is a bloody riot.

Well, this can't go on. What's the use of it? So I start on the unpacking, on the finding homes for things. And it doesn't even take that long. It helps that I ignore the two boxes that might really hold me up. The one with the photo albums and the one with the records.

I don't want to look at pictures of my younger self. The tough looking girl with the frank gaze who doesn't know how good-looking she is, who doesn't get that she could have the world if she only has the nous to demand it. And I don't want to see the youngish mum glamorous in designer jeans. And neither do I want to look at the more recent snaps. If I do that I'll just focus on the vandalism time has done. And yes, I know that in ten years I'll probably look back on photos taken this year with pleased surprise, gosh I was in pretty good nick then wasn't I? Not bad for a bird in her sixties.

The records I ignore because they'll send me off down memory lane too. I just kept the ones that really meant something to me. The ones I played to death, I let Alan have all the others but I have kept the Marvin Gaye, Kate Bush, Sandy Denny, Carole King. Maybe a dozen others that were essentially mine, though that didn't stop Alan getting a bit whiny about it.

'But you never play records these days.' he'd said. 'You always listen to the wireless.' That's how out of touch he is, when he says wireless he means the radio. And he has no idea how I spend my time these days. I think I will get a record player. God knows the flat needs some personal touches.

Packed into two cars my clothes and books, my pots and pans, my bedding and make up, my files and papers – had taken up every inch. It had all seemed over-whelming, and I had imagined having a post-move cull the moment I got here. But once I start finding places for things I can see just how ruthless I've been over the last weeks. When everything is unpacked the flat still seems impersonal and empty. Like a safe house for someone on their way to witness protection. I need prints on the wall, ornaments on the mantelpiece, rugs on the floor. I need furniture. What I need in fact are all the things I've been busy disposing of on Ebay, donating to charity or persuading my children to take.

I need stuff. I need to re-clutter. I need to see what's in the Old Surgery.

And I think of Sugar and his hair, closing in on the M25 and London. Of Lily who might just be up by now and getting ready to go out. Of Emma, who'll be in bed half-reading a few pages of a modern novel but thinking about work. And it's the weirdest thing, but suddenly I feel free the contentment you usually get after a bowl of hot thick soup on a cold day. Not in London now. And not Mrs C either.

PAUL ANTHONY CORBETT

Of Love & Automation

Each weekday morning, before I reach my cubicle, I have exactly nine conversations, and not one of them is with the woman I love more than anything in the universe.

First up is Alarm.

‘Wakey, wakey,’ Julia Roberts says.

‘Just ten more minutes, Julia, please.’

‘Sorry, Jack. Time to rise and shine.’

Next it’s Fridge.

‘Coffee is brewed, Jack,’ says Jennifer Anniston. ‘You’re running low on milk. Also out of cheese, and I know Jacky loves his cheese.’

‘Fridge, place an order for one litre of milk and a pack of sliced Edam.’

‘You’re the boss.’

Mirror fills me in on the day ahead.

‘Bring an umbrella,’ Winona warns, ‘there’s a 90% chance of precipitation this afternoon. It’ll get up to 23 degrees so no need for a jacket.’

I stare at my reflection, at my sun-starved skin and the give-away dark circles of the chronically exhausted. And yet, there’s a sparkle in my eyes, and Sophia’s dimpled smile peaks through the fog of my early morning mind.

‘23 in April,’ I say.

‘Yes, unseasonably warm, Jack,’ Winona agrees.

I sip my morning coffee, served in dulcet tones by Monica Bellucci, and look out my window to catch my morning flirtation. High above the huddled homeless in the alley below, the doe-eyed blonde winks across at me and I raise my mug in greeting. She gulps back her Breakfast-in-a-Bottle, wipes her mouth ever-so-slowly with the back of her hand and blows me a kiss before pixelating into a trailer for the latest Spiderman reboot.

Alicia Silverstone wishes me well on my way out.

‘Have an awesome day, Jack!’

‘You too, Door.’

Next up is Lift. Lift sounds like an Oxbridge-educated Lady of the Manor: moneyed, stern and, yet, oddly sexy. I picture Lift as a leather-clad dominatrix, cracking her whip over a sweating bald man tied up to the bed posts.

‘Have you remembered to bring your Smart-Strap, Jack?’

‘Yes, I’ve everything I need, Lift.’

Lift isn’t a 1990s actress, because I share Lift with the other people in the building. Only the devices in my flat have been programmed to sound like actresses who hit their peak decades before I was born. Sophia is fascinated by the fact that I’ve adorned my boxy flat with Leading Ladies of a decade largely

defined by cheesy rom-coms and even cheesier action movies. Her theory, which I suspect may hold a kernel of truth, is that I'm nostalgic for a simpler time. A time before every event, every encounter, every single utterance was captured in binary code for all eternity, ready to be analysed and dissected by the world if deemed worthy enough for attention.

'That's good, Jack,' Lift says. 'Have a safe and pleasant day.'

'Thank you, Lift. I intend to.'

That's the first six. Six conversations before I've even left the building. Six conversations, but my thoughts, as ever, are with Sophia.

I lift my arm to swipe my Smart-Strap on a ticket pole as I enter the station.

'Thanks, Jack!' Ticket Pole says.

I step forward below a drone which scans me up and down before flashing a green light and bellowing an 'All Clear' for the benefit of the single human station worker, a triple-chinned man sinking into a leather chair behind the tinted glass of his sealed control room.

I shuffle my arm so my Strap falls below my sleeve. It's fashionable these days to wear your Strap like a dog collar around the neck. I guess people like the convenience of not having to raise a limb to make a transaction or confirm their identity. Sophia's theory, one of her endless theories, is that I keep mine on my wrist in memory of an age when people actually needed to wear a watch, when the exact time of day in all major time zones wasn't constantly popping up on the buildings and vehicles you pass as you traverse the concrete veins of the city.

The driverless metro is half empty, emptier by the day it seems, but, rather than taking a seat, I stand and stare out the window at the black-nothing of the tunnel wall. It's the only position where my eyes can escape the assault of targeted marketing. Where whatever products are running low at home, or which I happened to have recently glanced at in a shop window, will be offered to me in that old reliable package of hot skinny model and catchy jingle. The models in my ads are always blonde, like the girl that appears on the wall across from my flat when I sip my morning coffee. They're blonde because they think that's what I'm into. They've monitored by preferences, gauged by reactions, and tasked their algorithms to find Jack's dream girl. Only Sophia, with hair as black as a starless sky, knows that this is a minor act of misdirection on my part. For all it takes are a few not-so-honest searches on some not-so-respectable adult portals to skew the data and throw them off the trail.

I stare into the darkness of the tunnel wall and my eyes lose their focus until all I see are Sophia's ocean-green eyes half-hidden behind swirling black tangles. We are laying side-by-side on a bumpy mattress upstairs in the Speak-Free. The room is tiny and the four candles in each corner offer just enough illumination to make out the blotches and peels on the walls and ceilings. For the first time, Sophia and I have made love. We have not had sex, because sex is something to be sold, something to be viewed. Sophia and I have made love, because that's what you call it when no-one else knows. The purest private moment.

'Jack, I'm not sure if I can do this anymore,' she says.

I say nothing, but pitch up on one elbow to get a better view of her face.

'Not this, not now,' she says, perhaps noticing the anxiety in my eyes. 'I mean, I'm not sure if I can pull it off again tomorrow.'

‘Of course you can. We always do.’
‘Yes, but tomorrow will be different.’
‘Tomorrow will be like every other day.’

‘No, tomorrow will be different. That’s the thing about this,’ she says, nodding down to our entangled naked bodies, ‘there’s always a consequence, always a change.’

I have no answer, so I wrap myself even tighter around her.

A shoeless woman with sad grey hair sits in a sleeping bag a few feet in front of the entrance of my company.

I slip past her and whisper, ‘25 E-Coins,’ into my wrist.

‘God bless you,’ the beggar says as her Strap pings in her hand, but I ignore her as I pass through the building entrance.

‘Good morning, Jack,’ Guard says.

‘Good morning, Guard,’ I reply.

Guard flashes green and its glass panels fly apart leaving just enough space for me to step into the foyer.

‘Have an awesome day, Jack!’

Lift escorts me to the seventh floor, one of three floors owned by my company. I pause to scan the rows of cubicles, each partitioned by five feet of clear glass on both sides, before pacing forward towards my work space. I pass her. Four cubicles before mine, from the corner of my eye, my heart pounces as I glimpse a blur of streaming black hair. It’s all over in a second, this morning torture. I often wonder would it be less painful to not pass her at all, than the torment of being so close and yet so impossibly far.

My working day begins with logging in through a set combination of password, retina-scan and Strap-scan and then begins hours of trawling through reams of data-feeds, putting marketable patterns on the terabytes of information which flood my multiple screens. Each cubicle worker is assigned a zone, an urban neighbourhood or town, and it’s our responsibility to analyse each and every consumer in our zone, to know them better than they know themselves. What are their hopes, their weaknesses, their perversions? Our company operates on the premise that the human mind is still best equipped to sieve out all the redundant data on an individual and form a marketable, profitable profile which can be auctioned off to the highest bidder. Although we would never dare utter it by the water-cooler, it’s a premise built on a brooding fault line. For each day automation seeps ever more into our lives. You can see it in the downcast faces of the ageing homeless who huddle in the doorways and in the eyes of the workers riding the increasingly empty metros through the city, fearful eyes hidden in passive faces. We all know it won’t be long. We all see the future, and the future is not human.

A message pop-ups on one of my screens and my heart leaps. It’s Sophia, a cross-ref request. Cubicle workers can message each other for data from other catchment areas, usually when one of their targets has close family or friends in another zone. I reply to Sophia with the data she needs and wait for her thank-you message. We’ve devised a secret code, a way of arranging to meet. It’s a simple method, but it serves its purpose and, as far as we can tell, it hasn’t raised any suspicions. Sophia replies with a ‘Thanks!’ followed by three standard emoji’s. Three simple images, each one with a unique meaning that only we

know. The place, day and time of where we will next meet.

The Speak-Free is tucked away down the end of a dead-end alleyway in a part of town the authorities have long abandoned. Door is the only tech at the Speak-Free, and its metallic surface is camouflaged behind a retro coat of red paint. I drop my Strap in a container which shoots out from a brick in the wall, and Door scans me for hidden devices before letting me through.

Inside is dark, darker than any bar on the outside would be permitted to be. Most of the light emanates from a line of candles which sit on top of a bar against the back wall. I approach the barman, the same one as always, a man I suspect rarely if ever leaves the confines of this rare slice of the offline world. The barman is bald and densely bearded, as if his underground lifestyle has banished all hair to the lower half of his head. He leans forward over the bar as I approach, as if being hauled downwards by the weight of his beard.

‘Whisky, straight?’ he asks.

‘Please. Is she here yet?’

The barman nods over to a table in a dark corner, one of a dozen or so such nooks, where I can just about make out a human shape.

‘What’s the damage?’ I ask, as the barman places my drink on the bar. Speak-Frees don’t take electronic payments, but people who work in my field have other ways of covering the tab.

‘For a friend,’ he says, and hands me a Data-Strap. ‘Wipe whatever you can.’

I nod at the barman and make my way over towards the corner table.

‘Jack,’ she says, and I’m pulled into her lips. I’m wrapped in her embrace, her scent, her everything, but something is different. There’s an urgency to her kiss, a desperation.

‘Is something wrong?’ I ask.

Sophia stares into her lap, where our hands are bound together.

‘My zone,’ she says, without looking up, ‘it’s going fully automated.’

‘What?’ I say, and fall on my knees before her. ‘This is too... they can’t just.’

‘They can, Jack.’ Sophia looks up to me now with tear-filled eyes. ‘They can do whatever they want.’

‘When? When do you finish?’

‘Tomorrow, Jack. I leave tomorrow.’

I collapse into her lap, gripping her sides as if holding fast against the impact of an onrushing tsunami.

I wake, as always, to the gentle rousing of Julia Roberts, but today I have no words for Alarm or any of the devices in my flat.

‘Are you feeling alright?’ says Jennifer.

‘Is anything the matter, Jack?’ asks Winona.

My silence will have been noted.

On the metro I sit next to a plain-suited man of about my age and ask him how his morning is going. Without a word, he stands up and gets off at the next stop. The metro pulls off and I notice he’s not on the platform. He must have moved to the next carriage, where he can avoid the intrusion of human

conversation. Anthrophobia, the Social-Media calls it, the latest epidemic, and just like obesity before it, there will be endless discussion and analysis and zero meaningful action.

I pass by the same shoeless beggar who has recently made a home of the concrete path in front of my company. I stop to examine her face. The raggedy grey hair, the sun-scarred skin of those with nowhere to escape the sun. Piercing green eyes. Eyes of equal measure wisdom and pain, eyes not too unlike Sophia's. I transfer half a month's salary to her Strap and pass through Guard without returning its greeting.

Work, today more than ever, is a torturous slog and I lack the energy to get through half the volume I can usually manage. It will cost me in my weekly performance review, a reduction in salary or perhaps even a formal warning delivered via Strap-Call by some suit who never has and never will visit our floor in person. But right now I couldn't care less. Right now, all I can do is watch the clock on my centre screen and will it to start counting backwards.

A message arrives. It's her. A cross-ref request, one last time.

The clock nears 8 pm, end of shift, when I reply. I don't send on the data she has requested. I don't use the secret emoji code we have devised. Without thinking, without breathing, I type three words which I've never spoken or written beyond the haven of the Speak-Free.

'I love you.'

Sophia does not reply. Within seconds I sense a change of atmosphere in the room. A quickening of click-clacking fingers on keys, a snigger from across the aisle. My Strap vibrates. Status Update: In a Relationship with Sophia Harrison. Messages begin to flood in, mostly emoji's, thumbs-up and love hearts. The clock hits 8 and I shoot up from my desk and make my way over towards where Sophia is packing away a small number of personal items. A photograph of her parents and brother, her favourite mug. I stand before her and offer a cautious smile. Sophia returns my smile and my racing heart steadies. Colleagues, most of whom I've barely said more than two words to in five years of working together, begin to gather round us. There are pats on the back, friendly punches on the shoulder.

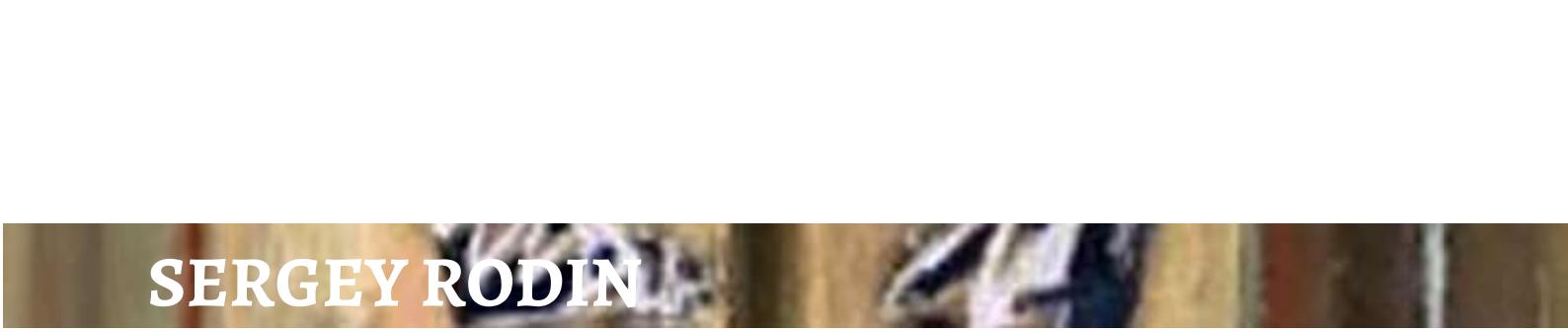
'Way to go, Jack.'

'You old romantic.'

'You guys make the cutest couple.'

I take Sophia's hands in mine. Perhaps I've done the right thing. Love, after-all, is not a crime. There is neither prosecution nor persecution for those who declare their union in the eyes of the world. In the eyes of the world...

I look up at the cameras in the ceiling, rotating ever so slowly to cover every inch of the room. I look behind me to see my colleagues holding up their Straps to capture this romantic moment for the entire world to enjoy, to share, to judge. I look up, finally, from Sophia's unmovable smile and into her eyes, her eyes fearful of an uncertain future, and in her eyes I see the truth. She knows it, and I see it now. With three simple words, words that should only ever be whispered in darkened rooms, I have destroyed the only pure thing of beauty that either of us has ever known.



SERGEY RODIN

The Well

Translated by Arch Tait.

I liked floating on the dark surface of the water, in the silence, away from the hubbub of people. I would lie there, barely moving my arms and legs. Sometimes clouds of bubbles rising from the depths would burst as mounds of effervescence, then subside, and immediately it would be quiet again. Occasionally somebody would poke me in the back from below or accidentally catch my legs.

I was used to that and no longer worried about it. When it did happen, even if my head was dragged under the water, I would try to maintain my balance and equanimity and that would bring me back to the surface. I would lie there, arms and legs outstretched, and look upwards to where, immeasurably high above, the clear Light shone steadily down.

I first saw it quite by chance. I prefer not to remember those days. I had been thrown up to the surface and was facing downwards, but turned over and was stunned by the blinding brilliance of the Light. My eyes were dazzled. I instinctively closed them and sank back down to the safety of the depths. A throbbing pain seemed to be corroding my eyes. I had never seen anything like that burst of Light. It can only have lasted an instant and yet I will remember it for the rest of my life. Over the next few days I pondered what I had seen. I had never known such Light could exist; what I had taken for Light was a poor imitation, a mere shadow of what reigned above the surface. Simple curiosity told me I needed another glimpse of it. I ascended slowly, beset by doubt, but nobody stopped me, nobody seized my legs to pull me back down.

At first I viewed the Light through a thin film of water, which refracted and softened it. I wanted to give my eyes time to adjust, but after a while stuck my head up to see it without distortion. That was a difficult moment, but I was so curious by then that there could be no going back.

My eyes did get used to it, and I could tell that was perfectly natural. I spent more and more time on the surface, savouring the Light, slowly paddling with my hands in order not to sink. I stayed on the surface like a float, learning to ignore people who bumped against me and might have pulled me back down to the depths.

I began a new life and became strangely unused to life in the depths. Floating on the surface I could see how black and impenetrable the darkness was which deepened metre by metre. I was delighted by the way the Light filtered through the water and was dispersed by it. I rejoiced in its beauty.

My eyes became so accustomed to the Light that whenever I sank back into the water I was like a blind person. Everything was reversed. I found the underwater darkness impenetrable and could barely

discern the people swimming in it. Some whom I had known now appeared in an unfamiliar guise. The depths were filled with spectral figures and I began to feel ill at ease, even afraid, to be down there. Blows, kicks and accidental collisions became frequent occurrences because my sight was so bad, and I could no longer take part in the graceful underwater dancing and circling. The realisation dawned that I no longer needed it.

Quite naturally, I yielded my place in the roundelay and rose to the surface. The Light came to be the only source of meaning in my life, the source of my inspiration, my dreams and fantasies. I became a reclusive figure, prostrate on the surface, gazing up towards the Light, my arms barely moving. I thought of myself as a white bird, a poet extolling a beauty unknown to others.

I was to discover that the beauty I hymned was known not only to me but to quite a few others. One of these I met by chance and our conversation made a deep impression. He was an old man and told me his name, but it was long and strange and I have now only a vague recollection of it. He surfaced next to me one day and was about to dive back down when he saw me and stayed. We floated next to each other for a time, looking up at the Light and talking.

I found that something I held sacred was of no value to the old man. Indeed, he despised it. He had spent part of his life like me, floating on the surface and gazing up at the Light, but something had caused him to return to the depths. Try as I might to learn what had happened, the old man would only smile. I could imagine nothing that might make one who had found such a treasure want to sink back down into watery obscurity.

“Tell me what made you do that,” I begged.

He looked at me mysteriously, his smile full of irony.

“It seems that history is repeating itself,” he said.

I had to talk him round before he would tell me something he had learned a long time ago, from a person who had in turn learned it from someone else, and so on.

“It is very simple,” the old man explained. “We are in a Well.”

I listened avidly as we slowly rotated opposite each other. The water was cold. Below us in the murky depths other people were circling. They went far down, tier by tier, in complex, intertwined constructs. I used to be one of their number, a link in a chain, an integral part of their society. Through me one construct connected with another. Down there each person believes he is indispensable, the critical link without whom the whole system would collapse. Yet, oddly enough, the system continues after they have left and died. It seems to rely on each one believing he is essential. And does it really matter whether that is so? Pointing upwards, the old man whispered,

“What do you think that is?”

“Light.”

“Yes, it is Light, but I also know that it is a means of escape.”

“Of escape?”

“They say the Light is a way out, a portal through which a person may pass.”

I was taken aback. The old man's words had turned my world upside down.

"How could it be a portal?"

"I believe only in what I have myself experienced," he said. "I am telling you, this world is a Well and I have touched its walls with my own hands. That person, though, claimed you could climb the walls and enter the Light, but that is where my faith runs out."

"Why would you not believe him?" I whispered.

"Because I have tried! I tried to do what he said but it is impossible. Nobody will ever climb up there."

I held my tongue.

"Now you know my big secret. Do you understand why I went back?" He pointed down into the water.

The next moment we said goodbye and he dived down. I watched him disappear into the teeming darkness and never saw him again.

When I had taken in all I had heard, I began searching for the walls of the Well. I felt sure they must exist. The Light from up above was, after all, a small, bright disk, and the old man had said that was where the walls ended. I discovered them several days later but, although I had been readying myself, I was shocked by my find.

They were vast, built of dark stone, extended as far as the eye could see and disappeared into darkness. I looked upward and was struck by the thought that, if the walls rose vertically, their diameter here at water level must be the same as that of the circle I could see far above. It was an awe-inspiring thought. If from here that circle of Light seemed no bigger than a person's head, how far away must it be?

The stones were slippery, covered with slime and moss and unpleasant to touch. They were fearsomely cold, much colder than the water, and I felt they must be hundreds of thousands of years old. I began searching for a handhold. It was several days before I found what I was looking for, a section where the wall was less smooth and where some of the stones jutted out. I got a firm grip on one and tried to pull myself up. At this first attempt I managed to lift myself clear of the water to waist height, but my strength failed and I fell back. It occurred to me that this was a matter of training. I just needed to build up my muscles.

The whole of the following day I tried to pull myself out completely. This section of the wall proved unscalable. I could not reach the next stone, which was literally just two hands too far away.

My fingers were skinned and bleeding and my arms ached terribly and seemed to weigh half a ton.

The next day I could not move my hands but managed somehow to swim to the wall and press myself to it. Its iciness ran through me like an electric current. My head was reverberating like a bell. When the pain subsided, and after some hesitation, I heaved myself up again. When I was half out of the water, I looked down at my reflection to see a thin, pale-skinned, feverishly trembling man clinging to a rock face. My head looked enormous and my appearance was that of a hapless, hairless baby. Then I

looked up towards the Light and the sheer, daunting scale of the journey upon which I was presuming to embark came home to me. I was suffering from cramp and clung there motionless, expecting at any moment to fall.

“Is this not beyond human strength?” I agonised. Slowly scanning the Wall which stretched away to infinity, I felt its identically sized stones were fitted so closely together that no crevice could be found, no crack or ledge, nothing that could give me a toehold. I became increasingly certain that my project was doomed. Any moment my grip might fail and I would fall. Why torment myself with futile efforts?

Only one thing stayed me: I saw that old man in my mind’s eye; I saw the wry, grown-up smile on his face as he contemplated my foolish child’s play.

I shook off my torpor, reached out to the right, and something totally unexpected happened: my hand located and closed round a well-placed stone. I pulled myself clear of the water, even my feet.

My whole body was feeling terribly cold and, as I drew myself up, I was thinking that water was heaven compared with air: so warm, so comforting as it envelops and rocks you, up and down, up and down. There is no need to strain your muscles because the water bears you up. Out here in the air I seemed to weigh twice as much. My feeble arms could not support such a burden and, a moment later as I tried to reach a small ledge, I fell back in.

After a few months I was able to climb the wall to the stature of three men. I felt very proud when I looked down, but my confidence ebbed when I looked up. The height I had attained was nothing. I was assailed by doubt. Why was I doing this? How long it had taken me to get this far, and how much more remained! At this rate I would not reach the top in ten lifetimes, and the higher I went the harder it would be. In fact, it would probably soon be beyond my strength, so would it not be better to give up now? What if the old man was right? Perhaps the Light up there was not a portal and the Well was infinite. I would have wasted my time, frittering my life away on an insane project while down in the warm depths people had been living a real life.

I peered at my reflection and saw an exhausted, battered man whose hands were bleeding. His chest was lacerated and inflamed and sores were suppurating where the moss and microscopic plant life which covered the walls had got into them. I was just killing myself. Deep down below, everybody else was living happy, tranquil lives integrated into wonderful patterns and swirling dances. The water was dark and warm.

I stared up at the Light, my head thrown back, my neck straining, my chin pressed against the stones. How I had enjoyed contemplating it as I floated on the surface!

I let go and fell off, deciding that it was time to think things through. The fall stunned me; the water felt hard and unyielding. I stretched out on its surface and relaxed.

I rested for a week while my wounds healed and the pain subsided. Half submerged in the black water, I gazed at the shining disk above, closing my eyes only to sleep. When I woke, I again saw the Light far above. One day followed another and I came to discern lighter areas, curving lines within the disk, like a whirlpool whose waters were spinning in some unfathomable rhythm. I wondered what would

happen if I were to reach the portal and pass through it.

It was a week before I again swam to the Wall, no sooner touching its icy stones than my old wounds started aching again and some started to bleed. I gritted my teeth and pulled myself up. My whole body protested. That week in the water had softened my muscles, which had lost their tone and become flaccid again.

I climbed, clinging on with my fingertips and struggling to find a toehold. I pressed myself to the Wall and crawled upwards at a snail's pace. In a day I put behind me the stature of three men. I glanced down, remembering my fall, and my fingers clutched all the more convulsively at the crevices between the stones. I really did not want to fall again.

After a day and a half I had climbed another four statures but my muscles felt as if they would burst and were barely obeying me. I rested for some hours to overcome the weakness before continuing. If my body was in great pain, my mind was clear. I was as stolid as the Wall itself, my goal now just to keep going, to seek out handholds, to make the effort to raise my body a few hands' breadths, and then to seek again.

But my luck ran out. I clutched at a slippery stone and fell. There was just time to turn my fall into a dive and enter the water fairly painlessly, but I was gutted. A devastating sense of emptiness came over me. Why had this happened? Why, when I had achieved the impossible, when I had surpassed myself, why had I been cast back down into the darkness? Why had the Light done that to me? Who of all those swimming around in the darkness had climbed higher? The old man? He had surrendered, I had not. I had persisted, but the Light had heedlessly tossed me back down into the dark!

I sank listlessly to the bottom, dragged down by some undercurrent, not moving a finger or trying to rise back up. I closed my eyes and sank, most upset at having fallen not through some failure of willpower or physical strength but because of a ridiculous accident.

When finally I did open my eyes the gloom was impenetrable, pressing in from every side, treacly. This was not the darkness I was used to a short way beneath the surface but the darkness of the abyss. I had allowed myself to sink too deep. All the human constructs were far above; down here there was no glimmer of the Light. I felt something brush against my leg. Somebody touched me.

I rushed upwards, frantically working my arms and legs, trying not to panic. What had I done? Was I doomed? The water was so dense that swimming upwards was desperately difficult. I strained every fibre to escape as it held me back. Only too slowly I struggled upwards, finally seeing dappled Light many hours later.

Pushing through the people whirling in the dance, I reached the surface and realised that my exertions as I climbed the Wall had made my body sturdy enough to escape. Without that I would have been destined to languish in the abyss forever.

A few days later I again swam to the Wall, took a close look at the familiar section and had an idea. The Wall was vast. That meant that, if I could not climb it here, I might be able to find a less forbidding section. I swam along it, stopping periodically to try pulling myself up. Each time, however, I slipped back

or failed to find a handhold. Instead I found a human being.

He had already climbed the stature of a man and, strong and confident, was moving on up. I stopped in astonishment and for a time just watched, marvelling at his physique and the unerring way he picked out the optimal route. From where I was looking he was impressive.

I was not bold enough to call out to him. Instead I swam over to the Wall and climbed up after him. We had reached a fair height before he noticed me. Recovering from his surprise, he indicated how I could reach him and after that we climbed together.

We talked little, only occasional muttered words breaking an intense silence. He pointed out trustworthy crevices in the stones and, to the best of my ability, I kept an eye on his situation too, blurting a warning when I felt he needed one. He would look at me in surprise then, and with a curious intensity. His face was covered with sweat and the muscles on his arms and legs bulged under the demands made of them, but his gaze was untroubled.

When we had climbed twice as high as I had ever been before, I failed to get a grip on a stone and found myself dangling by my right hand. The man darted over, got himself into a position where he could take my weight, and caught my hand just as it was slipping from the stone.

For an agonizing ten seconds his face was contorted with pain as he held on to the wall with one hand and me with the other. As I tried to find a foothold I noticed blood trickling down over the stones. When finally I was safe and could let go of him his face again became inscrutable and slowly, with eyes closed, he leaned his head against the Wall. He gave a strangled laugh, and when he looked over there seemed something deranged in the way the shining disk of Light reflected in his eyes.

After catching our breath we resumed our ascent, climbing in parallel, keeping level with each other. Sometimes he moved a little ahead if he found a good ledge, sometimes I was ahead of him, but we were never out of arm's reach of each other.

We climbed together for two days, until I no longer had any feeling left in my body. Breathing became difficult and, looking down at the distance we had covered, I could not tell how high we were. Very high, that was for sure. My mind was confused and stress seemed to be causing me to hallucinate.

I saw people flying in the air. Several times bright lights flashed past on my right. Down below, the water, which had looked like a huge black mirror, seemed to become more transparent the higher we climbed.

An anxiety was gnawing at me and, no matter how I tried to banish it, obstinately returned, its irrefutable logic undermining my resolve. How much longer could we carry on climbing the Wall without sleep? Would I not use up the last of my strength and then tumble down like a lifeless doll? Sleep was essential, but how were we to sleep on the Wall? If I slipped now the fall would surely kill me.

I could not bring myself to share this fear with my companion, to look him in the eye and raise my concern. I decided just to slog on until my strength was exhausted, and then die. That gave me a sense of serenity. I focused on the climb.

Towards the end of the third day my companion slipped. It happened in an instant, but I managed

to catch hold of him and thanked the Light that at that particular moment I was in a secure position. I clung to the wall, and even the monstrous jolt as I stopped his fall did not dislodge me. I clasped his hand firmly as he sought a foothold, and when I heard him mutter something was able to release it. Some small wounds on my chest re-opened and started bleeding. Much more serious, however, was the loss of all sensation in my right arm.

This must have resulted from the jolt. My arm was now hanging down, dead and motionless. I could feel nothing from my shoulder to my fingertips.

A great sense of apathy descended on me. I knew I could not go on, and finally turned to my companion to utter a few sentences.

His face was grey with fatigue. When I told him of my plight his eyes widened slightly and he pursed his lips. He made no movement, pondering the situation. I told him he would need to go on alone but he seemed not to be listening.

The simple reality was that I could no longer climb and he could not give me a new arm. He could do nothing to help and he knew it. We stood like that for some hours, clinging to the Wall, unspeaking. Then I saw tears in his eyes and he said quietly,

“What use would I have for the Light if I abandoned you?”

I made no reply.

We stayed there together, waiting for our strength to drain away, waiting to fall to our deaths.

A few hours later I began hallucinating. I saw bright figures floating by, circling, pulsating, their shape and colour changing.

One flew close to me and assumed human form. He stood horizontally on the Wall, as if it were a floor, and smiled.

I gazed at his face, his austere features and unforgiving eyes, but thought I saw goodwill there.

“Is that not the case?” I asked him in my mind.

The figure shook his head and said, “You have just begun.”

It was odd that he could walk so freely on the wall, as if gravity pulled him in a different direction. He came closer and touched my brow and a wave of what felt like electrically charged, effervescent water passed through me, washing away my weariness. The figure moved across and touched my friend.

“Prepare yourselves to hear me,” he said, sitting cross-legged on the wall between us.

I listened and gradually forgot my pain in the presence of a stranger with such willpower and eyes which saw straight through me. Several times I experienced a heightened sense of reality and was surprised to find this figure cross-legged on the Wall still there. He had not dissolved into thin air, and was continuing to speak.

We resumed our climbing. The Wall-Walker stayed with us, pointing the way, upwards.

The figure was paradoxical. Sometimes he taught us weighty matters, at other times what he

touched on seemed trivial, but his counsel invariably helped us in a practical way to ascend. He instructed me on how to get a firm grip on the stones and how to balance perfectly on the Wall. I started feeling in my element, serene and detached even though at a height of many hundreds of human statures. He seemed to know all there was to know about the Wall, and to be familiar with every niche and ledge. He was very professional in his knowledge of mountaineering technique. The higher we climbed, the more advanced the wisdom he imparted.

It struck me that he himself had not the slightest need of this knowledge, since he could neither slip from the wall nor die when he hit the water. He could not be sucked down into the abyss. He could walk on air.

“Did you once climb the Wall as we are doing now?” my friend asked.

The Wall-Walker smiled.

“To conquer the Wall you must first climb it.”

I was looking at a man who had attained the Light.

“What is the Light above like?” I asked.

“The same as the Light below.”

“Then why are we climbing?” I asked in surprise.

“Because, unlike the Light, you below and you above are not the same.”

When our strength failed and we needed sleep, we would choose a safe place and the Wall-Walker would sit between us. He held our hands firmly while we slept, enabling us to climb higher for days and weeks on end. Without him it would have been impossible. I thought of those ordinary mortals below who were trying to climb the Wall.

“You need feel no concern for them,” the Wall-Walker told us. “When they attain a certain threshold they will be met.”

A few days later he pointed into the distance and asked what we could see. Shivering as we pressed ourselves to the Wall (at this great height the air too was very cold), we peered in the direction he indicated and soon noticed two human figures. They were like ants, one crawling slowly, moving methodically upwards; the other moving rapidly and unconstrained, rising much higher than the first before going down for a time and then climbing up again. I understood that I was looking at another Wall-Walker and his pupil.

“How many more are there like you?” I asked.

“Fewer than those swimming below, but enough to help those minded to climb,” he replied.

“Can our paths ever cross?” I asked.

“There are many groups striving upwards. Sometimes they meet on the Wall, sometimes not. The Wall decides.”

We carried on climbing. By now the water far down below no longer existed for us, but had dissolved in impenetrable gloom and the rays of light streaming down on us. With every passing day the shining disk grew larger and the Light became more intense.

Something disturbing, however, was happening to my friend. At first nothing was noticeable (to me at least), but then, like a shadow which brilliant Light only makes darker and denser, he began to display hitherto hidden traits.

I saw him becoming irritable and arrogant. He began to question all the Wall-Walker's instructions, not complying with them before he had quizzed him and thought them over at length, as if to make clear that the final decision lay with him, not our teacher. I had very mixed feelings about this behaviour and was puzzled by the change coming over him. Day by day some inner conflict seemed only to intensify. The Wall-Walker saw it all but did not intervene.

One day, when our teacher had left us on some business of his own, I asked my friend what was troubling him and he delivered himself of an impassioned speech.

"Look at the Light. It is so close. With just a little more dedication we shall enter it. All my life I have longed to reach these heights, but I want to do it on my own, without the help of anyone else. On my own, don't you see?"

It pained me to look at him.

"Don't worry, you are going to reach the top yourself. Can you not feel that?"

He shook his head.

"You don't understand. I don't want to carry out other people's instructions."

There was a crazy look in his eyes. The huge, bright disk of the Light was reflected in them. I looked upwards. We had climbed very high, but now every movement called for increased effort. Gentle heat from the Light warmed our skin but was dissipated by gusts of the bitter wind which prevailed in this part of the Well. I really did not want to look down. My friend's words made my heart ache and, when I nevertheless did look down, I saw two vast shadows pressed against the wall. They had real substance and were made of darkness, and they reached up and crawled after us.

"Get a grip on yourself. There is not much further to go. We need to save our strength. Cast these thoughts aside. Does any of that matter in comparison with the Light?"

He thought a moment before agreeing.

When the Wall-Walker returned we had already moved far higher than the point at which he had left us.

"Do not be in too much of a hurry," he warned. "Haste often destroys all that has been achieved."

We began our conquest of the next section of our ascent. I was so tense that I was obsessing about safe crevices between stones, and cracks I could not get a hold on. The Wall took all my strength and concentration.

When it was again time for us to sleep and the Wall-Walker resumed his usual place between us, my friend and I held out our hands to him. Like lightning a thought flashed through my mind. How could my friend hold out his hand to our teacher if he doubted his instructions? The idea was there for only an instant before I drove it away, but the Wall-Walker gave me a stern look. He said nothing, but when I tried to take his hand, mine passed through his as if through mist.

My friend's hand also passed straight through our teacher's body. We were dumbstruck. At this moment he looked more forbidding than ever.

"You cannot take my hand because you have allowed changes within yourselves which relate to your minds."

"But what has happened?" my friend demanded. "Are you no longer able to hold us?"

"No. It is you who cannot hold on to me. The changes are incompatible with my nature and that is why we are passing through each other."

"What must we do?" I asked.

"You must be compatible with me before I can help you," the Wall-Walker said. He looked so sad. I thought he must have foreseen this turn of events but that it was nevertheless causing him great pain.

He gave us essential instructions and remained close by. We, for our part, stood clinging to the wall, trying to bring order to our minds. Within a few hours I was beginning to succumb to sleep. My fingers, clutching the wall, were trembling. For all that, we held on for half a day more.

I noticed my friend staring intently at the Wall-Walker.

"I cannot see him. He was here a moment ago but now he has disappeared," he said.

"No," I said. "He is still here."

My friend nodded weakly:

"Whatever. Perhaps it is better this way."

I asked him what he was going to do.

He looked upwards.

"I cannot wait any longer. I am going to move on."

I knew instinctively that the rift between him and our teacher had grown even wider, but when my friend started to reach upwards, I stopped him.

"Wait. We shall go on together."

We began climbing, pushing ourselves to the limit, striving to climb up as close as we could to the Light. My body felt like stone, my eyes were closing, and cloud-like colours were exploding in my head. At times a black veil descended before me, but each time I miraculously stayed clinging to the wall.

A moment came, however, when I knew that if I made one single further move I would come unstuck and fall to my doom. I lacked the strength to utter any word, even to blink. I was just hanging on the wall, pinned to it by a mighty wind. My eyes watched blankly as my friend slowly climbed higher and gradually disappeared from sight.

Then something happened. I saw the Wall-Walker flying at great speed, like a drop of molten silver. He reached my friend and grasped him. The next moment my companion became detached from the Wall and hung suspended in the air. His hands, smeared with dried blood, dangled lifelessly; his head was thrown back and I could see its vast dark shadow. Our teacher tried desperately to support my friend's body, but it passed through him as though he did not exist and plunged into the darkness.

I closed my eyes and entered a state of perfect resignation.

I woke up in pain. Everything was hurting. The pain throbbed, broke over me in waves, spread everywhere. My eyes slowly opened. Oh, Light! What had happened?

I had fallen from the Wall. That was my first thought. I was surrounded by dark, calm, cold water. I lay groaning in its bosom, having presumably floated up from the depths to the surface.

As time passed and I came to my senses I was eventually able to look around me. I was lying on the black surface in which the bright disk of the Light was reflected. My pain was passing. When I tried moving my arms and legs I found I could.

My eyes locked on the Light blazing high above, and then I relapsed into darkness.

When I came to again, I could think and move normally. I must have lain on my back for three hours or so, looking up, and then I turned away from the surface and began my descent into the deep.

Being under water again felt strange. It was so dark I could hardly see anything. It struck me that the first thing to do was look for my friend.

I soon came upon the people swirling in the dance. Climbing the Wall had made my body exceptionally strong and resilient, so that even the pain of the fall did not prevent me from being able to move at astonishing speed.

Thousands of people, their arms linked, were circling round in constructs which rose up like towers. Inside these were other towers, slender and etiolated. From where I was watching I could see a gigantic roundelay which disappeared into darkness. Some lone wanderers were not joining in, but they were few. Some very deliberately headed away from the crowds into even greater depths, while others observed their swirling bodies from afar.

I looked and saw that these countless human beings were integrated into an overall system. I looked and gradually understood more of the nature of its curious beauty. It was not futile and meaningless as I had supposed, but harmonious. It had its place here, in a progress from the depths – to the dance – to the surface – to the Wall – to the Light.

I felt strong as never before and suddenly aware of how the climbing had changed me. I was moving like lightning compared with their slow dance.

I sped forward and at incredible speed raced the length of the round dance. People's faces flashed past as if in a kaleidoscope.

In a single day I encompassed the whole exterior of the roundelay, but failed to find my friend. The next day I moved inside the cluster of human beings and sought him there. My heart was in turmoil. I was horrified by the thought that my friend might be dead, but even as I searched among the constructs I could not imagine him being a part of them. Indeed, I could not imagine myself as a component of their system.

Although I put five days and all my strength into the search, my friend was nowhere to be found within the human cluster. Eight days later I called a halt. I never for a moment believed my friend had perished; my sixth sense told me he was alive. In all this time I did not once rise to the surface or look at

the Light. A growing sense of melancholy disabled me. My heart missed a beat whenever I looked up.

What should I do now? Climb the Wall again on my own? Alone, without my friend?

For days I shunned the company of people, but then a sense of emptiness brought me to them. Watching their whirling, I pondered my dilemma. What should I do? Their ceaseless, senseless dancing only added to my restlessness. Looking at them was strange and painful.

A stream of thoughts was gradually filling me until it led to what seemed the right, logical decision.

I broke into the human cluster.

Most of them simply would not believe that above the surface there was a shining Light, but in the course of the week I spent within their dance I managed to take seven people there. They were shocked and dazzled. Two went straight back down to the depths, but the others stayed. I explained it would take time for their eyes to become accustomed and they agreed to wait. They had faith in me. Two girls closely followed my every move. There was admiration in their eyes for the strength and agility of my body; I really was immensely stronger than any of those who only swam in water. I had the power to develop these people's dances. There were things I could do which were beyond the imagining of any of them.

"How did you achieve this?" one of the girls asked me.

"I have achieved nothing."

"But somehow you have attained a high level."

"There is no level."

"What do you mean?"

"What you believe to be a great level of strength and power seems so only here, in the water. It is an illusion."

"I don't understand," she said.

I wondered how to tell her that no one feels strong on the Wall, but decided it was too soon to speak of that. Let them rather come to love the beauty of the Light with all their hearts, and I would tell them later that it was possible to climb to the Light.

"Will you teach us how to become like you?" the girl asked.

I pointed to the bright disk in the sky and said,

"You must direct all of yourself to that."

She was disappointed, but nevertheless stretched out on the surface of the water. She began looking at the Light, and I found myself wondering whether what I was doing was good. Did I have any right to teach these people?

A week later my wards brought several more people to the surface. They included both the very young and the very old.

"Teacher, we beg you to teach these people as you teach us," the girl said.

"Firstly, do not call me teacher. Secondly, what makes you think they want me to teach them anything?" I demanded.

An old man spoke, one of those who had just come to the surface.

“You are a perfect person. It is a great joy for us to be in your presence.”

“You are mistaken. I am not perfect.”

“In all my life I have seen no man to equal you, teacher,” the old man said, bowing his head. The others followed his lead.

A vivid image arose in my mind of a great circle of people dancing around a single centre, a single person. I pointed to the Light so far above us.

“You have to understand and feel the Light, not bow down before me. I am no different from you. What you so respect in me is nothing. It is not that you should aspire to.”

I left them bewildered and felt I was wasting my energy. The more I thought about it, the more I felt the need to do something different, something with much greater impact. Should I really be trying to raise to the surface or above it a few dozen people, when below thousands and thousands were swirling about in the darkness? I pondered these things as I approached the stone surface of the Wall.

I pressed myself against it and its coldness ran through me like electricity. My head was reeling.

I needed to hurry. Every day my strength was waning, dissolving in the unresisting water. My muscles were losing their tone, my body forgetting the skills and dexterity it had gained, and soon I would no longer be capable of climbing the Wall.

My brain was working feverishly. On the one hand, I was aware that I needed to start climbing while it was still easy, while I was fit enough; on the other hand, however, I wanted to help those circling in the water.

The next day made the decision for me. One of the girls came in a state of great excitement.

“Teacher, only you have the ability to take the Centre!” she exclaimed.

“What has happened?” I asked.

“The One in the Centre died last night and no one has yet taken his place. Come with me!” she said.

I followed her. We reached and entered the human cluster together. A multitude of people ceased their whirling, and others were dancing oddly because the space at the centre was empty. We moved in deeper until we were near the axial tower around which the dance would spin. I glanced up at the top of the tower. There was nobody there.

“The candidates will shortly compete and whoever dances best will be The One in the Centre. Teacher, I beg you, enter the contest! You will be victorious and all the people will circle round you! You will be The Centre!” she said, her eyes shining with joy and anticipation.

At first I could not decide, but eventually consented. The idea flared in my brain that this might be the solution I was seeking.

When it was my turn to dance, I certainly showed them my moves. I do not think anyone had danced like that before and they were shaken to the core. They thought they were witnessing a miracle. Many bowed their heads before me; many hung motionless in a kind of prostration; and many stretched

out their hands. The girl pointed to the top of the tower.

“They have chosen you. You are The Centre,” she said.

The other candidates withdrew and merged with the mass of the people.

I climbed to the top of the tower and looked around, my mind completely empty. Full understanding of the situation which had unfolded suddenly came to me.

I was in the Centre of the entire human system. The eyes of all the people were fixed on me. Although many could not actually see me through the bodies of those in front, they were nevertheless looking in my direction, taking their cue from my dance. Those who had seen it tried to copy particular movements, and their moves were imitated by the rows behind. The entire round dance was centred on me, revolving around me, the great, motionless Centre. I was everything. Everything was dependent on me. Exploiting my exceptional strength, I could move entire human tiers from one place to another. I could shift and re-arrange them in my own order. Never had there been such a one as I on the axial tower. My abilities conferred exceptional power. I could rule people and control them. In my hands they became stones for building, units which I could combine as I chose.

I closed my eyes. “You could become a god,” I kept thinking. One part of me wanted to set people in motion right away, while another part resisted the idea. The image of the Wall-Walker arose before me, his serene smile striking home like a hammer blow.

Where am I? What am I doing here? I turned and everywhere, above, below, to either side, pallid faces were looking to me. They were all around me, smoothly, slowly paddling their arms and legs in order not to sink to the bottom. The darkness was all around us.

I wanted to say to them, “Swim upwards, swim to the surface!” but I knew they would never manage to climb up to the Light. Then I saw what my next move should be. I sped down to the foot of the axial tower, to where human bodies formed a solid wall. I descended at great speed and, moving close to the people, unclasped their hands. Below, black and still, was the abyss. I moved into the gap I had created and applied my hands to the backs closest to me.

I started something moving. At first I thought my efforts would be in vain and that the vast construct would resist my efforts, but I felt it start to move! Unbelievably slowly it shifted and began to rise. I could feel the veins on my neck and chest bulging with the strain. I gave it my utmost, pushing the construct up towards the Light. It seemed the titanic effort must surely burst my heart but I moved the construct up, up, up. My eyes could no longer tell darkness from Light but after a time I felt the whole interconnected human chain judder and knew that the top tiers were at the surface. I could feel the life draining from me but made a superhuman effort and moved it even further. A blinding flash exploded inside me, my chest was unnaturally hot, and darkness enveloped me.

I was floating in the Light and the Light passed through me, filling me with life. I raised my hands to my face and they seemed mere pale shards.

I was standing on a stone floor which stretched away in every direction, and far off, at a distance

of many thousands of human statutes, it curved smoothly upwards.

In front of me it broke steeply away into the abyss. I walked across and stood on the brink.

I became the Well, encompassing within me the Well with all its water and all the people, and that was not all I contained.

“There is much work to be done,” I thought, yet even while understanding the great plan of the Wall-Walkers, I could not stop contemplating the abyss. It was filled with Light. I stood on the brink of a world-hole which opened out to the same place as others of its kind. I saw people soaring in the Light of the abyss and people climbing its walls.

“Are you disappointed that the walls are still there?” the Wall-Walker asked me. He stood beside me.

“The walls will be there for as long as we are here, as you must know,” I replied.

A gigantic new Well now rose up in front of me, and it too I needed to contain. I knew that with time that would come to pass.

But for now we faced a different task. We needed to raise to the brink many more beings in order to be sure the explosion would suffice.

“Your friend will shortly join us,” the Wall-Walker said.

I knew that myself.

I knew that we must all become the gunpowder which would explode and throw those in the water far beyond the rim of the Well.



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Kevin Higgins is co-organiser of Over The Edge literary events in Galway, Ireland. He has published four collections of poems: *The Boy With No Face* (2005), *Time Gentlemen, Please* (2008), *Frightening New Furniture* (2010), & *The Ghost In The Lobby* (2014). His poems also feature in *Identity Parade – New British and Irish Poets* (Bloodaxe, 2010) and in *The Hundred Years' War: modern war poems* (Ed Neil Astley,

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Descendant of American painter James McNeill Whistler, Moser began painting under the instruction of Pop artist Robert Indiana at the age of 10. He later attended the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia and the Croydon College of Art in London. Critics have called a major modern artist, his work being compared to that of the Renaissance masters, to Goya and Francis Bacon. In 1984, his first solo New York exhibition

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