

THE BITTER SHIP.

SILVER & BLACK and WHITE.

by Peter Darach.

'Hitori to chomen ni tsuku yosamu kana.' Issa.

"I'm alone," I said.

He wrote it down in the register;

How chilly the autumn night!

'So much is reality encumbered by those properties of invisibility until a chance occurrence has divested it of them.' M. Proust. 'Cities of the plain.'

'I can imagine as a pure fiction a bench with a mermaid sitting on it, in no place & no time, free from the weight of actuality, free from any restriction to the factual world.'

E. Husserl. Phenomenological Psychology.

FIRST. A STONE HOUSE, A HIDEAWAY, WITH THE WORD TURNTABLE  
SCRATCHED ON THE DOOR.

The stones had been collected up over the centuries & piled in two places. These piles winked like wicked eyes & the snow never settled on them. There were almost as many stones left scattered over the field, but even so it barely shone silvery in any light. It was only when the thin grass, which grew in hardy patches, caught the morning light with its dew that the field briefly held a lustrous white shimmer.

It was on one of those rare mornings, as I stood in my doorway looking at the silver sheet of land by the seashore, that she arrived back with a silver smile, silver necklace & a black brooch shaped like a raven.

She had appeared from nowhere round the back of the hill & although it was very early she had already been swimming with two friends.

I had sent her off wearing only silver drops of water. I had been reluctant to let her go alone. I sent her off to the end of the world. I was reluctant to let her go alone again. She went off by the way of the middle of nowhere. Time & again I will always be reluctant to let her go.

So I sent her off to buy the end of the world.

“This can’t be the end of the world,” I said.

“Don’t worry,” she replied, “You couldn’t meet the price for that. So I bought you the middle of nowhere.”

In layers alone lie the bodies. She glided through the connecting passages from one place to another, her ebony body glinting with sharp dabs of silver as the fugitive light caught her. A dog put its head down, lowered its tail & slunk after her. A secret trail, a way she rarely came, but it was quick.

“Bits of old bone everywhere,” she remarked, “& iron nails.”

The dog nosed her bare arse. She giggled & slapped its ears. The dog was only bothered by a blue stick & she didn't have it at the moment.

A snip shuts the door.

He slapped her bare arse.

“I've heard her tell the story. She's never the girl in it, getting it. But forget that.” He squared the sheets of paper & slotted them into a manilla envelope. He tossed the package into a drawer & shut it with his foot.

“It's seeing through events,” she said, “You know, beyond, nearly seeing it right. While knowing what you're going to have to face eventually; hoping for some astonishments in between.”

“No happiness?”

“That very often means someone else is unhappy.”

A trap full of larks.

In layers lie the bodies east to west. They never share that joy now.

The dog gave a long yawp & looked out with its world eye & blinked. The world turned.

We met. She took my hand again. The hand trembles when the knife hits the beast's heart.

The dark. Not a sliver of light through the window nor a slash under the door. A pale blue static flame trembled on her nightdress as she stood out of bed. She glanced down to the white pleats & her face showed for an instant. I saw the straight line of her nose, a sharp flash of her green eyes, the quick curves of hair, chin & neck. Her lips glistened red. It was gone. I do not live in this house. I cannot, but I must stay here until a plan set by a parting has been fulfilled. We are nearing the end of its text.

“Tomorrow, when we meet again, I’ll ask her.”

But first the waking dream. . .we began that lovely warm embrace weighed down in feathers & sweat. . .a swirl to close the day. . .it was difficult to make out the figures & what they could have been doing. . .they’d be making love or be dead I suppose. The dream was easy to make & took little time, but fragile, easily destroyed, so thin that life soaked straight through it. It had the appearance of being charred as if the past had burned away. . .had been sacrificed.

And now the room.

On the south wall which had been white was a sand sieve central near the beams circular meshed so close it caught the light crossed by four thick wires two & two about hanging on a wooden chock loosely pushed in between the stones rising like a full moon above a black three foot band of ridged tarred cardboard with five thin strips of rusting metal skewing the length of this black sheet covering the blank wall. Along it ranged six cans a black brush on the second a white brush on the top of all the pieces in a cardboard box on a circular lid on a cylindrical tin one on a mess of things in a rectangular box. In the tin black stuff for heaven & the rain. In the box under the white flakes a roll of scrim a

mallet a funnel paste & some shiny loose slippery sharp flexing tape synthetic stiff & unusable. A copper jelly mould like the crown that stopped the assassin's bullet was lodged beside them all & a saw. In the north wall the blue window blocked by a brown board with a corner square missing & that blocked by a long-sleeved secondhand green jumper made in Norway with a fancy pattern around the neck & the very neatest darn in the world in its elbow. In the other window an earthenware jar containing three candles & a stub a coke bottle in glass an angular vague horse-head stone mounted on an oval empty undulating mackerel tin. Ranged along the window wall a long handled three pronged (Neptune) fork bits & pieces of wood a worn shovel (been there years) a pick likewise a stirring stick & some hoops. The table diagonal near to but not touching this wall. On the table, to begin with, a screwdriver a black portable typewriter a claw hammer & a knitted bag full of wool. A pole stretched from table top to the window ledge & on this a sheepskin drying from a small wedder killed on the road in Luskenytre about ten months before. Six fathoms of chain neat & oily lay on an oily frayed fibre-glass folded black stained coal sack a blue polythene bag with sieved sand in it was next to a black bristled brush with the bristles most worn near the tip (but none of them loose) a box with wood chips shavings bark egg boxes & currant packets for kindling fires. In the east wall a fire burning brightly with a thick backing log on giving off profuse grey smoke & a round pot. A log too big to saw lay nearby next to a cwt. bag of cement wrapped up like a baby. On the hearth, a pair of sandals, strapped, buckled & wet through. Under the table, a yellow bucket with a brush tied to it by a long piece of sisal. A box of coal. Two grids for

grilling. Two hand axes. Two of us. Two dogs outside. Two doors between us & the fresh air.

The green lump of an apple bough, the green meadow ripped open by the wound of sorrel flowers, if you can call them flowers, through the window. A young woman wrapped in a green towel sitting on a grubby whitish sofa. Her knees tucked up into the cushions, her feet bare. . .I can still feel that room whenever I want to. . .her golden body. . .& then four more young women. . .a girl. . .two boys. . .an older woman. . .could there have been that many? Yes. They were there.

I didn't look round, took in nothing except the feeling of her presence. The puppy was tucked inside my green combat jacket, she poked her head out.

"I call her Shader."

She wriggled. The young woman held a wet towel around her body. Our eyes met. So we first greeted each other in a house barely better than a barn. I had never been inside it before. I was never in it again.

"We swim in a deep pool in the river behind Moll. Allt Darach. The water is cold cold cold," They chorus. We smile.

From my house alone I climbed the moonlit rocks to that pool & saw it once, empty. The surface of the water distorted their bodies reflections. Night clouds became skin confined by the banks & the black pull of the river over the massive boulders. The bleak moorland made vivid & wild by remembering the young woman's look as she asked to hold his hand & then tucked it into the cold grip of her wet & numbed body.



Between the outline of bliss & the hammer of want you came & the fear of loss began. The green towel slipped, she held it for a moment, leaned slightly then, unable to keep it on, stepped towards me her hands diving over my shoulders, her eyes tightly shut. The screwdriver bounced on the bulge of its handle & clattered against the concrete wall. The typewriter was carefully placed against an unmentioned barrel very near to an also unmentioned short batten of wood five inches by two inches of immense importance. The claw hammer got to work in the tool bag. The wool bag, full of wool & old clothes, was left where it was as a special treat. The pole supporting the sheepskin fell down & swept the pot with candles with it. The pot didn't break. I balanced on my toes on the batten of wood. Through the window apple leaves wrapped the grey sea up, moved by the off-sea breeze. She sat on the table edge, just enough over, so her cunt was pushed up as she let her knees come up & crook over my crooked arms. She kept her balance with one arm behind, palm flat, on the table. Her other hand flicked her cunt lips & pressed the cock in. I pushed gently & swore I'd cut the table legs down because this was one of the best ways YES YES YES we said together in time after.

August moon. Drawing hidden birds, I wait. I know I am waiting because I say out loud to the dogs, "I'll wait two weeks, that's all."

I had never been so deliberate. I had thought it out. As I usually take the first opportunity of a fuck I can, & as this first opportunity is the one I'm most likely to choose because of some irrelevant factor; predilection; block; lust; trembling or because it happens along

first & I never held back. This time, I said, I am going to reject the dark pushy type who will certainly turn up first, & wait.

She was hunched up in a dirty easy chair in front of a sofa full of kids & looked as if she knew me. I knew her. I never asked her any questions about that first meeting nor she me. She was there after a swim that's all. I was taken to meet her. I seem to remember being asked to go in & see her.

“I remember him being balanced on his toes with his batten level with the table top I was sitting on & a dog came in & sniffed at my underwear scattered on the floor. Its paws on the concrete sounded like a sharp shower of rain drops against a window pane.”

It was twilight. I was down on the road by the boat. I waited as she approached. She turned the other way, slowly trailed back over her morning's footsteps. What more could be added, she wondered, the boat had moved snail-like over the flat blue sea, a shimmery wake left behind with all the coolness & smoothness of a shell. Silver frost on a sky's blue reflection in the window pane. A dark shape, a figure, black perhaps, in a white fog, moving. Not sure how, where or why, but still gradually, step taken & step followed on from the position of a watcher to becoming part of the movement.

I waited & winter came.

The Frostwort, with crystals of ice squeezed from cracked bark at its root, stood in the icy interim. The clouds flew around tuning up the season. The acid wind mourned her at the four corners of the house, its interior world mediated bliss & anxiety for me as I watched the fire.

She came through the door just as I wished. This should make it obvious that words can be compelling & dangerous. So we met & talked of that bare room from years ago & a tinkling bell sound. A room with no trace of its occupant.

“Is this possible?” I ask.

“All his belongings were under the young woman’s bed.”

“They must have looked?”

“I know what you’re saying. It doesn’t add up. I thought that too.”

“Well did it?”

“The tinkling bell so she knows where you are,” he grinned at me.

And we regained the present. The black cloud of murderous searchers dispelled.

At that moment I couldn’t make my mind up, whether I loved her & wanted to fuck her or just wanted to fuck her, if there was any difference for me. And I never knew whether it made any difference to her. I never asked; she never said. She smiled back but said nothing. I turned, she was even further back near to the door & a shadowy figure behind her now was apparent. There was no need to answer so I smiled & half spread my hands. I nodded & pointed to the central person of three in a full-length photograph on the back page & she nodded.

“The same. But doesn’t she look different with her hair cut short?”

“It’s plastered down. Can you tell?”

Two curves of hair curled like hooks on her temple as if she had been snapped emerging from a swim.

She had run out of time again & again & spilled out & swerved crouching as if to avoid a devil. The blow wasn't to come there under a cudgel, the ravage started long before she skipped, devil-may-care, into her boots & struck out, a gully hidden under her frock, to change the timing this time with her bid to cut out of the story.

“Out. Out. Out. Once & for all. Never to see those ominous clouds building up & feeling some undeniable tug yet not knowing why. And then the collapse into knowing with the dreadful wait. Never again.”

“I wonder what she did say when she asked me why I had written about the rescue. She enquired in a way as if it had happened, as if there had to be some internal significance to it for me to need to write it down.”

“You think she wanted to know if you were trying or had tried to rescue someone, lost now except in memory, as a psychagogue. And yet you have forgotten how she put it!”

“She was haunted by that critical moment so much that she phrased any question to do with it in such a way that it left you feeling as if you had been counting stars.”

“What did she want to know when she asked you why you had written about the rescue? Perhaps she was expressing some fear. . .”

“That the rescue failed.”

“. . .some inadequacy she felt that she was unable to face something. . .”

“I couldn't ask her, she didn't share those contradictions or fears with me. It was enough to stump around, to absorb & dab up feeling like a rag without desire. To say things that didn't matter. To invent a new use for things which had been worn out by conflict.”

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I wanted to linger & dream about her red boots I could see under the black bench but instead I quickly turned the wooden kitchen table upside-down. As I reached down for the best position to hold the two legs I saw the new crimson leather shining & the perfect unscuffed heels close together. On each one the black seam opened up.

Where was the rope? I must be as quick as I can if I am to save her.

A large steel washer lay on the floor near the left heel just to the right-hand side of the crack between the tiles which came straight from the left heel. The intersecting joint ran under the high arched instep of the two ruby-red boots. My eyes came down to the four broad worn planks of the table, there was an open crack between each one & at the table edge was a similar washer to the one next to the heel but this washer had a long nail balanced on it. I knew there was nothing under the table top because I had already looked.

Quickly, I thought, where's the rope to save her?

There were four knives in a cluster on the far side from me, two of them had serrated edges but one was used for eating with. A large fluted-bladed bread knife touched a tall glass pot of dried flowers & three plastic animals; a hippo, a tiger & a wolf walked round the same pot. The round, chrome-edged mirror was leaning against a chopping board covered by neatly separated piles of chopped aubergine, tomato & onion. The aubergine was diced in large chunks, the white flesh was already flecked with brown, The tomato sliced & the onion chopped finest of all.

I stole a glance at the bright boots, a scrap of paper reflected the red of the right one.

There were two bowls on the left side of the chopping board; in the blue one there were six hard pears, one had been chewed at the stalk end, in the other bowl there were two bananas & two nectarines, again one had a bite out of it. The piece of paper was a cherry colour. A loose green pile of chopped parsley lay in between the glass pot & the mirror. I was right down now & my fingers tightened on the best position on the legs. I could clearly see the many layers of leather that formed the stacked heels, my head turned slightly obliquely to the right, my chin almost touched the cold rim of the mirror & I stared in it.

The rope was white polypropylene with a black thread running through it & if it wasn't given any sharp jerks or run over rough surfaces, held very well. The stick had blue keel rubbed into it & was tipped by a copper ferrule. This rope wasn't as good as the smooth terylene one, but it was longer.

The ice started to star almost as soon as she left the edge.

A bright light reflected off the tiles between the table & the ruby leather boots. I could almost read the words on the scrap of white paper. The flower jar toppled first, but because the stalks had been packed in, the flower heads cushioned its fall & stopped it rolling off. I knew that if I could push the upturned table across the ice with me spread-eagled over it I might be able to reach her in time. No available ladder was long enough to reach, but the rope was very long & would reach double.

With a crack a white line opened up beneath her sharp heels, her knees slowly bent as she expertly absorbed the shock of her jump. The ice became transparent as seeping water dissolved the thin powdery snow on its surface.

The knots & places to tie them were easy, I put in plenty of hitches because the rope was nylon & it must not slip when they drag the table back loaded.

Her arms fluttered helping to keep her balance & then came the hiss as one thigh brushed the other as she took her first pace out.

I placed a hand on both of the legs tied with rope. I put my right foot down carefully on the transverse member making sure that its heel & instep felt secure & then I pushed with my left foot, half crouching at the same time & also rocking the table gently to ease it into movement. A length of rope was strung each side of me from the legs, they were held up & out so they did not become entangled or impede the slide by friction. The old planks of the table were warped so very little surface was presented to the ice & I almost glided out to begin with, but soon the pressure of my left foot made the ice sag & bubbles run wildly underneath me so I lowered myself carefully to lie over the table. To propel myself now was considerably more difficult but by using my toes in short scrapping movements away from the table edge it kept going. It would have been very easy indeed if another length of rope could have been tied to one of the front legs & this manhandled from somewhere approximately in line over on the other side, but the other side was so distant that I could barely make it out through the powdery haze.

The ice is getting too thin, she said to herself, as her heel stuck in slush.

I had with me a three & a half foot blue stick & a hank of stiff rope in which I had tied a loop. The size of this loop I knew to be the most crucial decision I had to make, if it was too small it wouldn't catch her, if too big she would slip through.

Will she be able to manoeuvre into the loop, I wondered, as I looked sideways at it in its position against the front left-hand leg. When I came to that part of the ice which had a covering of slush over it the table slid less easily & I found I could only keep moving by kicking my toes right through the ice & using the purchase thus gained. Eventually as I came closer to her the table moved easier as it almost floated because of the depth of the watery slush on the ice, but was less easy to push in the right direction as the ice was very thin & crumbled at nearly every thrust.

How was she able to walk on this, I wondered, as the table floated beneath me as a mixture of icy water & slush submerged the table top completely so that I appeared to be spread out on the grey water between four table legs. Now I had to delicately adjust my weight against the pull of the ropes, against tipping the table & yet be able to propel it by paddling at the sides with my hands. I lodged the blue stick transversely under my chest & trapped the loose hank of rope running from the loop under it in case it floated away despite its stiffness.

I'll skate, she thought.

I also had to make sure I didn't lose the blue stick because, when I had secured her, the signal to the shore was to raise the blue stick as high as I could & to wave it. Simply to raise the blue stick would be enough to set in motion the pulling of the rope. There were now dried rush stalks mixed in the water & trapped in frozen blocks of ice which made



me realise that the lake must be very shallow under me & in fact, I had safely negotiated the deepest part where a slight current always moved keeping the ice at its thinnest. I had changed again using my feet to push forward but because of the broken nature of the ice & rush surface I could no longer move the table. Leaning all my weight to that side I pushed down on the frozen lake with my right hand & feeling the resilience I had hoped for I continued the movement & turned it into a stiff-limbed crawl off the upside-down table. I kept my legs as straight as I could as I did not trust myself with any fine movements & wished to give my body as much clearance as possible. It was also more comfortable to let the icy slush drain off in that arched position than have it all run down my legs. I stood up next to the table leg against which the rope loop still leaned & walked towards her. I moved slowly easing the table up by one leg so it would slide after me. I stopped with one of the longest sides of the table as close to her as possible & lifted her putting a hand under each armpit & supporting the back of her head with my arms. I was not standing upright but half squatting with my body mainly to her left side while my right heel was clipped over the side board of the table to stabilise my position & to prevent the table slipping away under the impulse of the half dragged body. I had decided to get her safely onto the table before giving anything but the slightest glance to see if an obvious wound should prevent me. At my second lift during which I partially straightened up & leaned backwards she finished up in the centre of the table & I then slipped the loop over its adjacent leg; over her head & shoulders & over the diagonally opposite leg. By keeping the rope high on the legs, by threading her arms out of the now distorted loop & by using the rest of the hank of rope to tie the loop firmly at each leg &

under each armpit using simple hitches I was as sure as the circumstances allowed that she would not have her head submerged if we sank deeper on the return journey. I expected the upturned table to move much faster & hoped with my extra freedom of movement to be able to lift up the plane of the table sufficiently at the dangerous patch so that we skidded quickly over to the solid ice. Her curved back now faced the two trailing ropes & her head hung so low that her hat brushed her right thigh.

Quickly, I said to myself, even if she is only slightly injured the cold could just as well kill her. Perhaps I had only four minutes left. I placed my left foot on the table but near to the centre to balance against the uneven distribution of her weight caused by the way she slumped in the improvised diagonal harness.

I waved the blue stick high with my left hand, saw the ropes gently start to move. tossed the stick carefully into the empty triangle of table into which her back protruded & watched the bright ruby-red boots wave & jig trailing over the ice beneath my knees. As I shoved with my foot the taut ropes stretched & began to pull us along.

“Who pulled the ropes?”

“Same people as always.”

“So nothing much changed?”

“No. They didn’t get her that time.”

“But she didn’t want to be saved.”

“How do you know. How can you be sure?”

“I don’t get it. Why was that rescue in?”

“Someone had to save her.”

“Why? She has to go.”

“Not like that this time.”

“How do you know?”

“The rescue was a success.”

“It seems clear she keeps the balance.”

“With love?”

“Yes. Even though horror winks at lovers & waits until its time comes.”

“So it didn’t matter. . . saved or not. . .”

“It would be a mistake to try & define the boundaries too clearly; black & white make a very sharp cut.”

“You need her for later?”

“She was there already.”

The limit reawakened. The dizzy memory is lost without action to couple with it & make the seeing of a tender glance possible. Inapprehensible overwhelming spaces are easily blocked out of sight by hearing certain words. A touch burnt to insensibility.

“There were the pulling emotions of love making her unwilling to go?”

“Every time she had to return it was like ice forming. . . the instantaneous appearance of a black sheet. . . an invisible, separating, silencing skin over her senses.”

“She became the change? A deception?”

“She couldn’t hinder it. Her heart knew that.”

“And you knew too.”

“I accepted it; but hated each change as well.”

“It was as if she was in a trance; answering by rote as all feeling shut down?”

“Had to shut down. Or she couldn’t bear it.”

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I think I had meant to say – I shall go. I was sure this time I could tell her what I felt but I thought that would take too long, so I said.

"I still love you."

I had meant to go & take the love with me along with my carcass. If I had made a mistake it was a simple one, I didn't mean to say that; I meant to say, I love you & then go away. I didn't mean any of that. I meant to ask about my part in love, but I knew that was no good. I wondered whether she ever thought back to certain lovely days. I meant to ask her what exactly made her turn. I didn't mean any of that; I just hoped to cut completely clear. But I said.

"You must have heard the dogs barking?"

She nodded, keeping it all to herself. She knew I wanted her to talk. It opened up doubts. I had meant to dispel my doubts by going & taking my love with me. I suppose it must be in my carcass like my blood. I didn't know. I had meant to ask her the question that if someone loved nobody did they still have some love in their body like their blood? I knew it was more subtle & difficult than that. I wondered what the other person got. But I said it would be easier if we arranged things to suit her. Someone was capable of love but loved no-one. She knew I didn't mean any of that but kept silent. She had doubts. She thought her silence would destroy them. If no-one loved. She wanted me to be silent,

because she hoped a complete silence between us would absolutely destroy the doubts. The doubts could not guarantee the certainty of a lost love. The doubts had nothing to do with love. We knew that. But we denied it. You can see why I counted on saying the right words by chance. I meant to say a lot of things but when the time came I never could say them. She knew what I was trying to do. She waited, hoping I would forget. I never could tell her although I thought I was determined to tell her what I felt. Perhaps she hoped more than anything for silence. I didn't know what to say in the end. I counted on saying the right words if I could say what I truly felt. But that was nearly impossible. She shuddered whenever I was able to say something near to what I felt. She was dismayed by it. What she was trying to dispel had nothing to do with me. It was hers. She was uneasy whenever I touched on it.

"Just a touch."

"A light touch."

"I can't stay. I must get back."

I no longer had any doubts. Or did I? Perhaps it doesn't matter. It's better to start with something you've used already. It should know the way with any luck. I really had meant to say - I love you. And you know I said nothing. How could I for by then the silence had been too long for either of us to speak.

"We miss things because we are uncertain & careless," he said.

"Whose is that?" She asked. "Oh, you said it. I like that!"

Colourless & formless some words are taunted by any child's scribblings. Intuition became a crowbar. You were chasing, so desperately, to truthfully express your feelings.

"Yes," she whispered, " The same humiliation. No mercy no momentum."

Her handbag gave a reassuring clump when she threw it under the chair.

Annihilation. . .the steady rhythm. . . the tom-tom beat marking the pompless reminder,  
the death rattle cut out, gone.

"Sincere," she breathed, over the hollow click of the listener's knitting needles. . . an hour  
by the guillotine. . .beheading yourself. . .the knife completely separates head from heart  
& mismatches meaning & thinking until your head feels as though it is shrinking. . . a  
spill but without warm blood on the haunch. . .the babble frequenting that underside  
under your feet, a woollen brute embrace, a bell ringing every time you lift your head  
declaring a desire for the view from the human side while the dead can fling themselves  
off whispering bridges like poodles.

"I need, want, will have unhappiness rather than indifference." She whispered.

In the end you were too often under there, bewildered.

"That's not true," she whispered.

Catching at drabs of old conversations & patching them into neither this darling nor that  
bastard but a sludge of barren & false accusations. Forlornly leafing through memory that  
hardly ever was there; while those who can weather solitude's mistakes crack their knees  
& whisper into boxes, defy the technique of ape-men, flap a signal hopefully around even  
though they know they cut an absurd figure while doing it.

"They do it."

"So do I," she said

Why listen for the click click click & slice & slop of reason?

"Big voices?" She asked.

They fish their own cold sun mornings. China bright with poverty although they didn't know it.

"It was my only support," she said emphatically.

The wing flipped, & lime dribbled onto us. We brushed it off. We were under the nesting bridge, black arched, narrow. Constricting thoughts were shook off or rationed with grimaces until we turned the corner panting into June's territories. Sunlight slipped her hand in mine & led us off to caresses.

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"We worked, we opened doors, if we had thought about it beforehand we would never have started."

"What did you need to be able to start?"

"I had to be able to bear disorder, loss. . .not having a goal."

She looked down the vertical buff-coloured wall towering above the trees & with a very careful horizontal sweep of her bare arm brushed a paper butterfly she had made into the breeze. Its yellow paper was too heavy for the light wind & the scrap butterfly plunged, tapping & fluttering against the stone wall, until it landed on the blue tarmac.

"Think of what is hateful."

"Death is. Is that a start?"

"Could be. What are you covering up?"

"Don't know."

"Think of what is joyful."

"A fuck is. Is that a start?"

"Could be."

Hat? Take it off & change.

Blouse skirt bra tights shoes panties take them off. I'm really trying to find out why I can hardly remember anything about that meeting. I know it happened. We met. We wanted to fall in love. We both knew that before we met. The meeting was arranged. The solitude broken. But was it just me that wanted to fall in love?

"See that woman in the water? I'm sure you said it."

"I never said anything."

"You always say that but you did."

"You were watching. You could have seen her before me."

"I didn't."

I wish I had.

I was watching, I know, until a tidal noise started up; the flowing sea on a loose, fine grey gravel shore. I'm sure from that moment I didn't see the same place although it was only a stretch of water. I'm not sure it was even at the same time. . . of day. The sea became a pulsing grey-blue mist & out of it appeared a bunch of animals huddled closely & darkly & becoming clearer & blacker with each pulse of the shock of the water rolling up the gravel bank. Sometimes the animals nearly faded into the swirling haziness in between the pounding rush & in those lapses I did see another indistinct image but it never lasted long enough for me to distinguish any part. I thought at the time it must be another



animal trying to join the group. The main body of animals moved as if fixed together by an unseen net & in the long sigh of the subsiding surf I could hear hooves drumming frantically against a wooden palisade.

"And then you slipped off your wooden batten?" She giggled & put her calf on each of my shoulders for a moment as she slipped to a new position. Put both arms straight up in the air. Stuck her tongue out saying, "Suck it," grabbed my pigtail when I bent low to lick her. Bit my left ear as I stuck my thumb up her bum.

After a long retreating interval the sea sound beat the shingle bank so hard it set up a boom that made the surrounding mountains disappear into tufts of purple heather & the lump of animals slowly capsized only to reveal an identical form in the same dark metallic colour. When the turnover was complete I saw the shadowy figure a little way from the main group. My eyes flicked from her to the intense green black of the moss, which glowed in the grey light by my path, & back to catch her slowly collapsing & spreading like a ball of dried moss in a grass fire.

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I tried to fall asleep. What had happened? I decided it was absurd to even think about it any more. I pulled myself up sharp every time my thoughts wandered off after any old event.

"I like coloured things. S. I like everything."

But I didn't mean that. If I'd left it unqualified I'm sure you would have followed me. I like grey.

"Is luck grey? A." She said, "What a question. Where will it lead us?"

Somebody always knows. Was it a dream? No. There were no grey dogs out at all. Why are you here? Somebody knows & they are lucky. They are sure. They are certain. Why do I envy them? Would you have followed me? I'm not sure. Did I mean I like bright things? I'm not sure.

I lost my love days ago & it was like losing my name in a dream without which I couldn't awake. I lost it on the slopes. It was a dark colour. The slopes is a place. Nearby, not quite round about.

It was the 4<sup>th</sup> day & I said to myself I had given her 17 days to arrive before I would take off again. I had been waiting for her longer really. I knew a fall was imminent. I fell better. I was on the slopes. It could have been a dream but I didn't see any dogs out. Did I like the slopes because of its colours? The fall shook me. Is that what I needed? Before, I was too cold to have any doubts. You know that's wrong. I fell asleep & the dream shook me. I didn't need a shake. I needed to dream. I lost that dream on the slopes & all I got in the spin-off was a name. What happened was absurd. I lost a dark colour in an identical colour. Indigo. . .violet. I lost the use of it when I was too cold to care. Again I wasn't sure. Nothing lasts.

S. said I might be sure later.

"What a feeling saying that gives me."

The taste of a first kiss can last until you die. A kiss isn't grey. That's the most conclusive thing I've felt about anything. I wasn't sure. I was certain.

I'll interrupt her long enough in eternity to make her forget as she kisses the truth of love into you. We kiss into that love. And we kissed again in different shapes.

A merlin hawk flew away fast down below me in the hills. When it saw the two dogs on the slopes it abruptly changed the direction of its flight. I lost the hawk in the heat haze.

"We miss things because we are uncertain."

Then I lost my envy in the easiness which comes after a fall.

I followed her down the slopes as if I was in a trance. I was glad I had lost the envious feelings. I didn't lose them because I was uncertain, careful or careless. And I still wasn't certain. When I realised it could happen to anyone I was happy.

"How long will that last?" She asked looking askance.

"It can last until you die. . . I think."

"Death is grey," she said. "It is. It is. It's not how I please. Nor how you please. That kiss was pleasurable. That kiss was the truth of love. It will be that next time for us as well."

And she was gone.

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I stood in total blackness. When I looked before me I saw blackness. I could only hear a torrent rushing to the sea. It was called the stream of roses. It was a swift, sweet stream. I regretted that I had missed the chance of living with beauty. One of my grey dogs fussed me. I had an unforgettable regret in the darkness. Who would be lying by her beautiful body? I was left in starless darkness. Who would take what I would love to have? Left by

the rushing rose stream the regret was blacker than the darkness & heavier than the scent of roses. Now, because I know it, it will last until I die. That regret is what I am. That staring into darkness pointed the way. I wish I hadn't known it. Why should I be given the balance of darkness & a rushing stream to play with. I wanted the soft curves of a lover. I was given the black plank of darkness & lulled by hopes of beauty. I know luck is grey. Was that death my luck? I know beauty is radiant. But I've seen what happens to it. I know a part of that is in me, but what is it? I was dishevelled. Is beauty luck? There is no destiny. The future is there already, whatever that is. I made a mistake & I was glad. Beauty is a risk at the end of a plank stretched over a dark wilderness. Underneath I roam between shinning desperate positions unenhanced by shit or its substitutes. Beauty has no colour nor is it lucky. It is blunt & sharp & never calls a halt. That kiss was beauty turned on its edge & softened. It was a ravine. She had one lip either side. Between them soared silver risks over the abyss. Below was a never-ending swirl of blue. She was spread-eagled. Her thighs were wings of silk. How could I escape. Why should I say that? Escape! I launched. I was plummeting down that kiss. I was going to smash my bones into beauty. I was left. My two grey dogs snarled. One had killed a moth. The other wanted it. I was rushing down the slopes with my hopes. It was levelled. The dream was shaped like an animal pen. I stepped into it. Blue took me. I fell better & I smashed my bones into beauty. I would have preferred a lover.

"A risk is not a trick. Beauty is a trick laid on with a kiss & hardened." A. said this & so did F.

"That was why I was able to forget my body. My blood coloured the slopes. I didn't care about beauty. I never will care about beauty." She said over her shoulder.

My two dogs were grey. They were grey & lucky. they tumbled down the blue slopes with me.

"Happiness is surely related to our luck." S. said.

It's true that one of the dogs had four black patches of fur in the grey on its back which looked like a laughing face. The blackness represented by the four patches was smiling not laughing. It was the smile a lover gave a lover.

The west wind was as ugly as the others & blowing stronger. Blowing its heart out. . .my heart. . .her heart. . .till the blue lightening & its thunder flattened the dogs on the dusty grey floor. their heartbeats louder than the blasts. One crouched so that the face made by the black shapes in its fur grinned.

"Nowhere to hide."

The moon was behind the walls. The night as black as a stumble. A hare ran, with its ears straight up, straight up a hill.

"Shall I ever get to the heart of it?" She asked, tossing a pebble negligently from hand to hand. This action countered her words as if it was a different question she wanted to ask. She felt at the heart of it already, perhaps.

The hare looked grey.

"If you can't say it was love I'll never know. . .why be chilled by that kiss. . .there's nothing to grieve on."

He obviously wasn't sure. She saw that.

"You say so. But it's difficult to admit losing the main part I played in a love without knowing how I lost it. As if I'd been sleep-walking a role."

The hare had gone.

"I know it's sad. love's meaning destroyed. But we always know. . . I think."

The image of the hare's ears danced like tiny whitish leaves on the grey mountainside. A fact blasting the foundation from under memory so taking all with it, past, present & future. Time topsy-turvy. On your back or upside-down, with most of the key people absent at those moments, or hidden behind a curve in the cliff of time. The bulge of hope playing into the hands of reason & stifling out intuition.

"A chance reveals that you misunderstood half your past. You accept this insight."

"That's the difficult bit," she tossed the pebble.

"Then the past can be renewed. And include quite a few new letters of the alphabet."

"And fuck the unconscious." She leaned over as usual & suggested a capital U.

"Because it's no longer frozen into one useless lump?"

The hare appeared again out of the grey, running just as fast down the hill. Its white afterimage scattered like rocks amongst the heather.

"Maybe."

The strong light of passion cast on one side of the affair leaving the rest in darkness momentarily swivelled over the whole scene enabling chance to mate with detail & give another angle.

"But the rubble. . . the mess of a thaw. . . is so difficult to bear, to get a clear feeling from."

"They will come, the ice of anger melts."

"It's also sad, while misunderstanding then, I can accept a strange unnerving love now, thinking I know how it came. Perhaps I'm wrong again?"

"Reasons always lack surprise. . . I never cared how love. . . you know I don't care how it comes as long as it's full of astonishments."

"Who knows how it comes about. We only feel the pain."

He wasn't deceived. Nor was she.

The night was frosty. So it was the same night.

SECOND. A CRAG MADE FROM FROZEN BLOOD WITH THREE WORDS ICED  
ON IT. BOOK: BANG: RIB.

"I'm going to need that fuck to warm up."

"The fuck happened pages ago, in a different place, & it eventually devastated millions."

"I've still got to have it! How much is it?"

"Thousands. I know the actual amount but I'm not telling. And I'm not giving."

"Write it in, but hurry up I'm freezing."

The BOOK is about being alive again. And how difficult that is. A woman starts to talk, but before she has spoken a complete sentence you feel in your guts she wants to twist the words back in a knot. To grasp something for which a light touch would be enough.

"Again!"

The BANG is in the middle, but a little to one side.

"What do you do?"

"She's from the RIB of, so rib her."

He smiled & with broken speech suggested that his plan of action was really your own dressed up to suit the technological world you were messing about in.

"You must cook everything, set a table & eat it up. Describe everyone gorging themselves."

It was at that moment I realised the fire of love must start at that feast. Someone gets cooked.

"You need two chow-chow, a green banana & stop stroking them & a pinch of this stuff."



He shoved a phial under our noses.

"And stop stroking."

"I was doing it without knowing."

She looked at him quizzically. "How did they cook that chow? I couldn't cook anything I'd stroked"

I wondered why, after all I thought they were only vegetables.

"I don't know. . .what's it like?"

"It's a dog, isn't it?"

We grinned in the gloom on the stair as she stopped & tightened the straps on each thigh.

Down another tread, our fingers interlaced, our hands locked. We knelt on the landing to peer through a little low window.

"What a beautiful view." She shrugged, but caught his eye for longer than it took to deny the come-on.

The boat glided out from under the bridge, hit the shoal & lazily rolled on its side. One figure slid slowly down the plates into the water. The dog followed in one bound. At the moment when his head went under, the fire started. I pressed the button, a wireworm of fire, the gas flared & the pot gave one of those whistles usually reserved for a foggy night, so that its pulses could bounce off a dog-woman's figure & back, to give you a direction. I lowered the banana into the pot & it spluttered. We dipped our heads into the steam, Haaaa! Breathe in deeply. As deeply as you love. The stars twinkled in time with their kisses.

"With a few of them," she corrected.

A greasy scorpion retreated into an almost invisible cranny between the iron stair-rail & wall. We clanged up & around the spiral steps; flakes of whitewash fluttered down & the large sheets of tissue fluttered as we passed to. . .perhaps a change of house & time. . .or is it. They came to a pile of black painted sticks.

"I want to observe now," she said. And sat back.

The sticks were shinning black. She chose one. He chose one. They closed the shutters shading the room to inky blackness. Past the folding traveller's clock with a missing screw wedged under a small table's leg. Past the unused teapot that he knew had a blue brushmark pattern. They carried on. I followed them in my mind's eye.

I lifted the teapot. . .hardly a pattern. I stroked & rubbed the black sticks as well as feeling their smoothness with my lips. I had made them, capturing in them the cruelty of silence. I stuffed them in a holdall. They can't have them. The metal clunked & chimed as I zipped it up. A stick bulged under the skin of the bag as a baby's foot distorts a belly & I pushed it back into line so I could slip easily with the shadows out of the way. She was coming, hurrying. . .I left the bag. . .they were like bones. . .perhaps she could use them. A glimmer of light, a glow, she arrived. The spots of paint which had been decoratively splattered to suggest flowers over the black iron bedhead winked like jewels, what else, above the sugar bowl bed.

She glistened with sweat as she messed around in the dust motes counting quietly & gesturing to an unseen partner.

A voice from below. Or was it one side. . .

"And STOP this. It's like having blood leeches. . .it's so bleak. . .I feel as though my limbs are going to drop off. . ."

The degradation of dismembering a love. The monstrous one-sidedness of memories prompted by rote, by the posed silence of careful listening. She picked up a crumpled white dress & threw it over the bedhead, smoothed it with her palms, took a cinder from the fireplace & started to draw some shapes & numbers on it with the piece of charred wood.

"Stop. . .it hurts. . .it makes me feel a chill right through."

In shadowy Hell on your own. That's the mistake. Banged under the lid with yourself sculpted on it in clay as well as the everlasting nag & that fucking delightful duck what couldn't find a pond if its arse was sitting on one. Bang full of craning necks as they masturbate over the warming fires of titillation.

"The torturousness of the barren dreams each night gave the days their fullness, so she said about him."

"And you had to believe her?"

A mocking tone. Juggled. With ardent tinkering. . .you were fooled. . .each interpretation a wink from his skull. . .the one with the bash mark on it.

'The stultifying, slob jowled siren slack & fat, is rolled off the stull onto a knife-edge, giving the groan stuffing work a push. I can't stuff enough nasty words down.' He wrote. Blazing.

She came in out of the sun.

"Choked?"

What do you make of it? She would ask. It's as clear as that crackpot slipping away all the time to escape her nasty song. It's the colour of hurtful things. . .blue. I don't know, but whatever was made of any of the signs nothing got done. She was always without trust, still in a wistful, unremembering, daylong confusion. But knowing what was exactly right & furious if contradicted; even the texture of your answering voice was examined by a locked madness; with a tooth-comb more like a cut-throat razor.

"Got to get her dress right, ugly old bag & enough white powder for when she leans forward & looks straight at everyone."

"Got to send her back tidy. . .straight away."

"Straight! That lean will be about the most harmless thing she's ever done."

The mangled sentences under the spotlight; a cruise of dirty words. help; home; hone; slit, having the shit of meaning beaten out of them, king-konged into the service of liars. The rotund babble, legs apart, of trouble on the rug by the wardrobe from out of which they choose their costumes & with them their parts.

"Look, it wasn't that important. . .it verified a feeling, a hunch."

"It was. I could see the pain slice through you every time."

"Well, she had to go. That was it."

Disinterested violence came to mind with a switchback glance to check your appearance. Jet. . .that'll cut it, write it bigger, precious jet black blood spilling everywhere. This time she had it tight in her grasp & she would throw it as far as she could. Her knuckles grew whiter & whiter round the black stick as she pushed & pushed away but it reached her chin & closed her jaw & turned the scream to a rattle & down, down, grinding the dream,

pulverising the never touched, hiding ingot of anxiety to jabber & slobber into raw earth. And while her blood ran cold as the shiny stick crushed her throat, & the first lapse into dizziness hit her, she also strained her legs open & arched her back in the ripple of the orgasm. Then the stick was behind her neck, each wrist strapped wide apart on it. A cold chain tightened on her waist & from it two chains pulled through her legs & clipped tight. Her ankles were splayed on another black pole. Then she was stumbled up hoisted held standing. The rope was slipped over a high bar that traversed the room, an end tied to the centre of the stick holding her arms & this pulled until she was fully stretched, her head thrown back, her toes just on the floor. . .this time. She had straps at the top of each leg with their bells & rings dancing above her thigh boots. She must have been forewarned that the time was close.

'I like to be ravished. . .now & again.' She had said when I asked. 'To be ready to go.'

Although the stakes were shortish they had been carefully carved with a few notches either side behind the point so they would hold in the ground. They found a round stone & knocked one in to test it. The stake held with only about an inch showing above the clay. One of them made a mark & a deeper notch was then cut in that place & a piece of string about two feet long tied by its middle around it. Little black ants swarmed around the empty peg hole. She took a pinch of fine white sugar from a screw of paper &

sprinkled it on the ants. They looped string into the notches of all ten pegs & pulled the knots tight.

"Take these with you." She slipped them in her bag with the knife & scrap of paper. She was silent but as I looked at her I saw her glance over to the other woman & move towards her.

"No! Leave her."

"I'll take it." She snatched the bows undone & pulled the black slip clear of the woman's body & tied it on her own waist.

"It's mine now." She gloated.

Solitude, like the wish for an empty bed when sharing with a malformed & chipped skeleton, a dry slice of stale bread, an evading pillow etc., is inhabited by your own repetitious thoughts that flicker back a blurred familiar picture.

"It's yours now." They chorused gleefully, watching her gawky walk as she started out. A touch of malice seemed to ring in the singsong chant. The artificial moment struck, she turned, her smile sinking to the flat brush of white chin pale cheek wild eye.

"Have I . . . taken the rib. . . the " and she made a slight, so very slight gesture at the bound woman, "her place?"

"Her place." They rejoined; & switched on the lights.

Beyond the anarchic shape of the captive she thought she could see to a point where a fire was flickering through the wall, through the banging music of her blood, between the descriptions & blanking adjectives, to the bare solitary figure by the flames. She plucked

the bikini ties, her buttocks lifted as she slipped out of the stolen cloth. She tore it in her haste.

"Too late!" The captive jeered. "You'll soon get used to it; the moon rising in the hollow of your heart. And the last dreadful weeks when you don't know whether or not you can see in the dark or you are dead. And everything passing is so fleeting. The beasts silent, folded twice in grey newsprint. The monotonous obvious or oblivion waved like a winning number before your eyes unendingly." She wriggled, the bells tinkled, the crude exchange was over. As they lowered her there was honey dribbling out of her slit, her thighs shone.

The silver paper garland broke, her fragrance sweetened the woodsmoke.

She waited.

Now she slipped.

A cold light wind fluttered through the stalks of bleached grasses as she passed out. A leaf brushed her shoulder as it fell. She looked at the sky, tears stung her cheeks.

"They had to, how else would you know."

Dewy eyes seeking out a gap in the confining perception of her awry self; a vacancy she felt. She was cold now, her hands lay in the litter of pebbles & sheep crottels that had marked out the last foot or so before the cliff dropped sheer white. Down. She called up strength, no she improvised strength like the bumble bee, by humming. Held her nose, stiffened her entrails into a spring. Devised to wind them by whirling her arms & all this within a few seconds of falling down. She knelt. . .it wasn't passionate, she threw a thoughtless head back. . .that was a pure moment she clearly noted. She felt lighter as if

powered by music. Now her outline could blend to that distant landscape, accelerate to be anonymous yet close by the massive figurative hieroglyph sliding open the snake doors of the soul, golden light leaking out catching the green & black skins in a slash, a revelation of slime, which as she stared slipped back behind the earth hill bellowing 'Follow Follow'.

In the winter light the plants & bushes were drab dull greys. Dead creeper foliage lay in the twisted grasp of a fallen tree. A few skeletal leaves still stuck to the branches & whispered secrets as she passed.

"Staggered past," she pointed out, "She is actually dying isn't she?"

They both frowned over that development, it was as if they were landing an aeroplane on one wheel.

A robin hopped from twig to twig.

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"I thought I knew you."

The fire was still smouldering. A foot appeared & its black boot stubbed the sparks out.

"In this heat," she murmured.

Slipped her foot out of its boot & in the same action tossed it away into the shadows. A jet of silver sunlight flashed across her waist as she cut its thin beam crossing to the table, she turned to check the white dress & slowly slid onto the pillow. She rubbed her thick mat of black pubic hair absently neatening it to a sharp, contrasting spade shape digging



the flesh of her thighs. An acrid plum-like perfume mingled with the sweat as she pulled up a little sea-blue skirt around her waist. She looked again over her shoulder, a new thought had come. She lifted a silver necklace out of its purple velvet box & clipped it on.

"Necklace, skirt," she murmured, holding each breast tip cupped fitting each one gently into the bra.

"To keep my heart warm in this incomprehensible land of ghosts."

She gestured as if trying to touch a body close by. Her hand curved down the air, her face twisted & its mouth became bitter; her fingers dabbed at the fine, white pigment in an oval jar. She rubbed it all over her face.

"I trusted him. . .a little. . .for a short time. . .never. . .never any of them. . ." She finally admitted. ". . .don't be absurd. . .the gloves last."

The dream she had been remembering of the snow scene & a large house with a stable collapsed back into the day. She gasped at the emptiness she felt in that moment.

"I was just going to go through that part when the rider brings a message again. I was caught, like my breath, naked outside but this time I was about eight I would say."

She looked at him. He was listening intently.

"That dream message though, if I remember right, was untrue. . .it was of your mother's death."

He was concentrating. He knew the landscape. It was mined.

"Yes. I was caught again making a substitution, rubbing something out & trying to conjure up a story of surviving, not freezing into the stone of anxiety."

Her beautiful hands were dangling heavy by the short blue skirt & patted in on it a seemingly derisory gesture. The presentiment of the flame her thighs transformed, two milestones of sex & repose.

"He died. Then?" He asked. His hands shaping a bowl, the fingers interlocked. It wouldn't have held sand.

"I went with him. But I'm not allowed to describe what happened in that cataract of embers. I can only live it. What stops me I wonder?"

"And that loss always smouldering. . .never out, never in."

"Grief brought coldness & stiffness & made me keep very still to mock me as I unwittingly mimed death."

Tap Tap Tap Tap.

"It's him at the window now. I can't let him in." She exclaimed. Flustered. "It's not time."

Now.

Luscious black paint for the lips.

We sat down for a snack, a salad. She fingered her right cheek close by her nose & looked at me. I looked back & then dropped my gaze to my paint covered fingers. I have never been able to remember her look or forget it happened. It still exists somewhere. She asked me to feel the place & I felt a hard granular lump, a point almost. I felt one on her rib weeks later, but said nothing.

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A gigantic crag made from the frozen blood of our murdered dead was at this corner of the world. At its foot were bunch after bunch of white chrysanthemums, the foam of duty, then a circle of bystanders.

On the back of a sheet of post-natal exercises was the list:

La tare - waste, damage, defeat.

sévir - to break out (war).

L'abruti - stupid, brutalised sod.

"That's why you need to have the feeling of being born or as near as you can get to it. . .time after time?" He looked at her.

"Carry on." She said. Still dressing.

This sizzling flesh, she almost said, as she stepped out into the silver jets of light beyond the door. Out of a silence into a cool then cold then freezing land. She pulled furs from nowhere. Packed her feet into straw filled boots. Then tighter & tighter her belly clutched as she realised what they were saying, repeating the words of the rider & as the dream bent & folded like a postcard, she felt as if she had been abandoned in deep snow.

"ADRIFT?" He shouted. "What else could it be. . .a snowy shipwreck. . .it was winter."

"Icy up to my ribs, I was just able to keep my heart thumping as I pounded the glass partition. I could see shadowy forms beyond but they never came & I cried until--when? I can't remember." She pulled the cloth up & showed her ribs.

The Traveller's Joy destroyed the liberty of branches & locked out a handful of stars. The thick shapes of its creepers & the slouching canopy of foliage held together the unbound trees & formed a roof-like square above her. And then it was gone, the instant passed, she was back in the room ringed by known things; chairs, table, lamp, sideboard, radio, their familiarity neutralized by the dusky light in which she always felt she might dissolve.

"Hold me very, very tight." She had said.

She spooned & screamed & ground her heel against the black iron bed & the deaf night suffered a defeat again. She looked for blood.

"There is none," he said.

Her forehead came to rest against his & the dog night was defeated again. She cleared her throat & as delicately as it could be done, spat a white gob lump onto the flags by her side. Reached again for the glass of liquid. On the hand a ring. Its stone glittered as a match flared. The entire fragile equilibrium was dazzled upset by the radiant sparks that showered.

In that moment we took our chance & stepped (almost leaped) back through the door by the table. A gust of faithfully on line wind bit us & banged us into shelter against the tall, dark stone nearby. We circled in our voluptuousness, drenched by sea spume, we kissed to defeat the fear implanted, seeping out of the barrow we had innocently chosen.

Her own soil.

I surrendered to the embrace.

"I did as well at first," she said, "But I was drawn by blood to break it."

I rubbed her cheek. A mime for the future.

"Shall I call up to her?" I whispered at her neck.

"No! Let the plot thicken."

She continued. "My head felt it was being squeezed so tightly as I lay there. I'd never believed anyone when they described those kinds of sensations before. In the end I had to sit up & say something about it."

"Did she comment." I meant interpret & I can't remember if she answered this. But would she have wanted to encompass an 'out-of-body' experience at that stage?

"I couldn't stay motionless. . . everything was pressing in on me especially on my head. I felt as though I was being born."

"That is commonly & I think mistakenly ascribed to it."

The bulge of silence being grasped & thrust out.

"I felt distended as well."

The birth in shadow. She had bought a black cloak. The birth of the witch or its struggle to be contained in a body.

"But really your father died & scotched the plot."

An oblong black, scotchstone to hone the knife. The abrasive desire unable ever to be fulfilled while you live. . .murderous thoughts rebounding off the walls of adolescent years. . .no jokes able to destroy it, the mutilation became permanent.

"In this labyrinth you can get behind the dream demonstrating the futility, sprawled out & incandescent like its beings, of meeting death halfway." They said.

The motionless rattles of conversation breathed sweet amongst the silent listeners. Her ear grew cold pressed against the floor flagstones. She grimaced, mouthing the words she could hear, silently, as they were spoken & licked her teeth as she imagined the voluptuousness of their loving glances; she swallowed carefully so their low talk was uninterrupted, but it faded. She rolled onto her back & let her hands rest on her belly.

' I'll call up each part of my body to help me,' she thought, 'This ardour brings me nothing but shame.' She twisted her index finger into her belly-button & the flicker of feeling nearly made her piss. She shuddered, listened again. Perhaps they had gone. So that was it. . .the dream had been destroyed all those years ago. They were never going to be able to do more than endlessly stir it at that moment of confusion swamped under a wave of treacherous sexual feeling. Undone too soon, too young, too much adrenaline. The crack

brooding automatically on every passing moment. Coming from behind every triangle of action with a polished tenderness as dry as an empty bottle. Protectively stalking the child determined this time that all jubilation was going to be got through.

"And grind it was."

The fluttering of a ragged dustshot flag. An uphill rumour putting in order things that could be better in Spring with a horse in Summer with. . .a rack for pulverizing hope after each promise. She tasted blood & unclenched her jaw. An insect fell off the beam & in convulsively skittering for the wall disturbed a hieroglyph of motes into the single sunbeam. She twisted her hands together & closed her eyes.

"The temptation was to stay there. It was more like the urge of necessity. . .no it couldn't be that. . .there was no choice at the time. . .I was alone."

"There was a thrill. . . some powerful voice soothing you perhaps?"

"Toes," she instructed & they wriggled.

"Hair," she instructed & it turned grey over the years.

"I know what you're getting at. You think that's when I became dependent on a kind of wayward velocity in my life fuelled by the internal absence, a need to skin myself by arrangement with all my partners."

He had the sense not to nod.

"Hands," she instructed & they covered her eyes while brushing aside the few tears.

"How do I know for sure. . .I can never know. . .but in it there must have been a precise point of balance, the juxtaposition of an automatic continuation of forgetting against harm or a loss of delight with the undertow of disabled trust. It was giving that memory its

vehicle, an image. . .black sticks whacking into a pile of sodden clothes. . .that brought short relief before the vibrations were smoothed out by hints (the smugness of normality) & the whole was crumbled back time after time to that unshatterable glass. A fine black powdery dust blown scum forming over your blood."

She felt the scar on her left buttock, she felt the scalpel cut with fingers up her cunt. A voice over-ripe with deceit, soothing, carrying on the humped white winkle clouded mocking of her sex.

"I'd like to silence him for good. . .it would do me good." She tapped her head. "But it's in there."

"A dream or two would help."

A harsh cord crashed out as the needle bit. A blink & the music wobbled vases. The chain gang stripped horizon pounded her slack & open mouth as she joined in.

"Oh no I'll never stop lovin' you. . .never ever stop. . .lo.oo.v..."

The raving; the split; the stink of rotten flesh so soon.

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We lifted the table into the centre of the soft red carpet, the one with 45 white ovals in its design. Then lifted & secured its side flap to give us enough room underneath. Shook out & threw an embroidered blanket right over the table so that the blanket fringes just touched the carpet. We took off all our clothes & crawled under from opposite sides met nose to nose & carefully rubbed them together until our heads had tilted so that our lips



sweetly touched & parted. Our tongues licked each other. She kept her mouth open & I put my tongue in from the side, traced from her cheek to her ear & down her neck, the tip of my tongue circling & spiralling. She said carry on, go further down. So I traced along her shoulder across her collar bone & kissed each nipple as my head dropped lower. I had to lie on my back to continue down to her belly & bit & sucked fluttering patterns on it. She said further. I followed the downy seam from her belly & nosed apart the black hairs till the tip of my tongue touched her clitoris. I felt a wave ripple through her entire body. A musky perfume rose mingling with the rare scents we wore. Now it had become stifling under the table, our bodies glistened so we poked our heads outside smiling in the fresh air while caressing each slippery hidden body. Her little flag was out, I could feel it. I took it between my thumb & forefinger, she gasped as I tightened my hold. Her mouth opened, her tongue flicked out, her teeth bared. She moaned, it was nearly hurting her not quite, something else as well, a yearning laid down long ago, not just to be penetrated but to fly. Her eyes rolled up as the honey ran from her slit. I still held tight & the red flag had swollen now. I touched her belly with my fingertips.

"Just like spots of warm rain."

I ducked back under & sucked the swollen flap between my lips & licked & rubbed it with my tongue.

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Then I had a dream about birds being buried like seeds in a little plot of ground but I knew they wouldn't grow. I had a coat on something like broccolli. A ruggly azurely crimson crisp crackely smudgely overlapping loose fitting buttonless pocketless seamless frosted (so it was the same night) coat. She came & took a photograph of her holding one of the grey dogs while the grey puppy jumped up at her. Silence. Her visit had no purpose for her.

I had another dream. I threw open the door & was about to stumble out & did stumble & held back because outside was a black & silver end of the world.

I had another dream. I was throwing silver fish onto a stone causeway by the sea, I was wading in the water. It was black. The silver fish kept sliding back into the sea. I had to fix them. I stopped a few from slithering back. They lay like severed God's fingers, gifts fragile white with black thumbbed marks shifting the focus of time. I was given a dark room. I was given only one orange moonrise to find her. And I think I found her.

I woke up.

She came. At first the two grey dogs kept away from her. She ignored them anyway. They fooled around with each other near her & nudged her once or twice & then she smiled.

"I suppose you use grey like it is on the dogs," she said & I nodded.

"Only like that?"

"I like to see them against blue-green soft grass."

I walked outside & cut down a rotten tree. The pelting rain washed my face away. It hung limp on the crooked twigs like a grey start to the day.

I walked outside & the wind blew my trousers off.

I walked outside again & the wind howled.

"How do you use silver? Really tell me."

Answer : smiles.

Then the black whirlpool night came spoiling; digging up the roots of the day every day.

"Why lie there thinking of adapting, in all its intricate detail, an old door hinge into a razor sharp billhook. . .she wasn't Sleeping Beauty. . ."

"The billhook wasn't to slash a path through thorns, it was to cut off her Medusa head."

I wish I had known sooner; although I thought I had carefully considered my choices nevertheless I had made an almost grave mistake. I could only see it when my heart lived in a new house. My heart had nearly been frozen to stone. I opened the door. In front of me a strange figure was standing. . .had she escaped some danger by fleeing naked. . .a fire storm?. . .her body shone glistening with the effort of saving her life.

She said, "I saw only a huge silver flash & something made me run & run."

She disappeared.

I walked outside & waited to meet her again. I was going to tell her as she arrived. As I sat moonlight cast strong hard black shadows from two trees protected by a ruined wall.

The snipe played ghosts & I fell asleep. She didn't come along & the long silence was ended by all the twigs in an elm tree crackling as if they were being crushed by hand. I was glad she didn't come because I could believe that I really would have told her that time.

"Silver can be used to save lives sometimes. If she hadn't seen the flash the flame would have seared her before she knew because there was no sound."

"Is that why you save the pieces? All the pieces of silver paper?"

The moon was soundless. Our feet touched by accident.

I walked outside. The flight she had left roared overhead, amongst the stars, flashing its red & green & silver lights. I waved to it & touched the apple-twigs for re-assurance. The cold of the stones struck up. The black night was suddenly illuminated by a crackling frost which quickly covered the withered ground with pearls & I swathed through & under them with a long bendy stick.

"I wasn't going to tell them anything any more."

I struck the white stems. I'll keep it to myself, I thought. No. I'll make sounds, hum & sing songs & see if they understand that way, see if they ask. So you see it was a bad night. It would have been better if they had called me. I felt they wanted to. I was awake. Ready to go. But I couldn't have exactly put it into words at that moment. I couldn't quieten the dogs down & when one stopped hammering & the other young one wouldn't, I didn't know, even then, really what it was about. The night was so dark. And then the cold spell struck. It seemed to come in a rush in a few minutes. It sprinkled a few silver drops on the dark windowpane. Our hands touched. She spoke in a low voice that had been stripped of its timbre by the memory.

The mist was very cold. We lost each other. And when we finally found ourselves again, we were like two different people, who could in no way find it in themselves to carry on together amicably. The mist was an important clearing ground. It isolated with terrifying candour, freezing out colour & dimensions. Some things you could see clearer. . .each moment was as lost as the next. . .it had nothing to relate to except yourself. It seemed to

search out what was authentic. . .the rest became mist. Something in that fog caused the final estrangement; I don't know what it was that he met, he never said, though even before then he seemed uneasy, as if he knew there was destruction ahead, but he carried on because he thought he had to.

"Your future together was finished by that unknown meeting? That makes it hard. And what had you expected him to find?"

"Me" And I told him that & waited. . .but. . .silence. He eventually said there was nothingness. Dull bunched shapes, of all sizes, of differing fleetingness. It was like a journey into a dream. . .nothing to hold on to enabling him to slow down or stop the drifting sensation."

"Would you go back there with him?"

"Yes & I think the time is right."

The mist rolled away for a few seconds & left the precise detail of twig & stone & loop of steel bridge in the thought. Its red curve of metal seemingly holding the mist close to the black water just as a vertical shaft of light momentarily completed the bizarre construction. A narrow road to Hell.

"She knows exactly. It has happened before."

And yet I remember with a shudder all the signs. . .a rotting sheep & a grinning unknown face. . .the dreamless nights for years as my soul lay low to escape those jaws. The occasional warning dream slipping through with images of rain. I stand by myself in a strong, wide shallow stream. I feel I must leave these gates of Hell, but why do I find it so difficult to part from this barren, empty place? I think I am waiting hoping for her to pass

once more & make it the time I will be able to persuade her not to go, to stop the seasons with love.

"But you say no-one cared for you in your dreams. . .that you felt no touches of love."

"That waiting cost so much. She could never return, I knew it in my heart."

Each fairytale slips; the shoes fit perfectly & then, like dying at midnight, out of the thorn tree comes a rigmarole command. . .try to sew porridge & cure anger. The flattening red helping of anger.

"Who bought the flowers?"

"I did."

"And where were you?"

"Riding the mud ball comet, entwined to prevent flight, although I thought it was to fly. How could it be just a gewgaw adoration, just a bangle to slip off when any pallid discontent flickered."

"Torn between yes & no; day & night," she suggested, her hand sliding towards her knee.

"Take your pick. Always wrong. I waited like one of those stone figures still left standing in the icy waste constructed to divert or surprise wild herds by hunters as a veil of haze descended covering the olive grove. I saw that I was treading on my own foot."

Hallucinating the smell of wet ash on the day of the dead. One of them said, "I couldn't say 'I am in love' although love is certainly more than a chemical cake."

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"Where shall we start. Let's say we had a look at them. That should tell us something."

The man had stopped speaking to look at his paper. She looked at the photograph. In it one of the men was holding a sheaf of papers in a hand resting on the table.

"I thought we would be able to pick him out from previous patterns & types & so made a list."

"What if we come across a borderline case?"

"We miss them."

"Is that taken into account?"

"It must be but I haven't been told. I'm told very little."

"But what if they have made a fundamental mistake like over-simplifying something that can't be reduced without being changed?"

She felt the remorselessly painful grip of anxiety returning, it squeezed her heart. The click of reason will soothe you, she had said. It was impossible, a bland screen of lack-lustre reasons eventually only framed the hurt, but their selection degraded the love in the story & only left its hollow heart; a meaningless deceit. Being so densely packed, the stuff of life doesn't always survive a crude analysis, or ceases to exist, or is transmuted by a folly of memory into an idyll or catastrophe.

"We pick the wrong ones & won't know we're doing it."

"You don't care?"

"I don't care."

Puss is puss.

"But why are you here?"

He didn't answer. He didn't want to make a mistake. He was uncertain but careful.

"Why are mistakes so revealing?" He looked straight at her as if he didn't want to answer.

"I was in the garden behind the big house." She drew a rectangle on the carpet for the house & then drew a circle away from the top right-hand corner for the pit.

"It's a circle; you're sure it was circular?"

"Yes. I hope I've got the right one. The main thing about it was the tree. It was the dry season. I remember it without leaves. It was big." She extended her arms & shaped the girth of its bole & then sat back on her heels.

"It must have been massive?"

"Just about to start dying back. You could have picked its leaves off some years, there were so few. I think it was dying of silver leaf."

She still had a pair of scissors hooked on the thumb & index finger of her right hand, the blades rested open on the index & middle fingers of her left hand & she made several short snips as she knelt thinking about her answers.

"The dream pit had straight sidewalls. I think it had a tree growing in it as well because I always think of them both having trees."

I realised then that the whole irrevocable process had started again. The brown head of the match touched the brownish-purple paper striker of the match-book.

"I didn't use any pressure. It was as if she wanted to come."

"I was too shy to join them so I'm not on the photograph. If you look very closely you can see my shadow by the tree." She wrinkled her nose.

Her sharp red thumbnail dug into the white edge of the photo.



White juicy milk seeped from the branch after she had broken off the flower.

Butterfly across the moon. It was day. A yellow cloud across the moon. It was night.

"When we all get together something is temporarily added to each of us. . .something we very often cannot control unless we make a special effort. . .even then we can only act together."

He was coming up on me fast. He would call me soon, I could feel it. But the man did not shout. He made no sound at all. She was coming up on him & would call as soon as she caught a glimpse of him. She felt she had to stop. She stood hidden from them just within earshot of the buzz of their conversation. . .the dustless air carried their words clearly.

"She never intended to stay, but couldn't say. Everything they did had to take place outside the 'sacred' ground of her family or it became a 'killing' ground. . .how could you make that place the perfect conjunction of happiness. . .it only happens retrospectively in the adoration of childhood. . .so you see it never really had a chance."

"He went along with it? Hostility for supper & aggression for breakfast."

"Or fuck off."

"More like a punctilious degradation, so closely woven to good reasons that you couldn't have got a quirk between them or proved that it was all nasty & obsessively mean, deliberately preventing any reconciliation, forcing a rupture."

"She had done it before. She knew it worked."

"There was something else?"

"Perhaps. . .the world never rimes its events. . .& I don't want to fuck a corpse."

"It sounds as though you did & miss it!"

"She had an innocence about entering the underworld, chose a cheap guide & quickly ran into trouble."

"So she discarded you."

"I was superfluous. . .or perhaps I represented a divided choice. . .the artist causing the catastrophe of fun. . .mocking my threadbare heart by massage. . ."

She couldn't stand it any longer. She stepped out. The crash of her echoing voice startled them.

"So how many of us are there in this story? And where's my fucking voice?"

"Find it. . .speak your anger. . .you will still be loved."

"Let's count. . .the numbers seem to grow & some who should have been kicked out long ago still hang around."

"That would make at least four more of them."

"Easily, without bumping into their ghosts at every turn as well, as I do now, as you know."

The untouchable wound bearing through your life like the crest of a roller. . .the dizzy core. . .the impractical spiral that doesn't leave a stone unturned except. . .

"I see. . .my future being scorched," she interrupted as it was being written.

"Bum," she ordered & squeezed her buttocks together so her cunt gave the very quietest of kisses to the world & a metallic tang in the air.

"Some mumbo jumbo! It ignites fuses which rip though all your encounters faster than a snake caught napping on oats." She smiled at the reference to his secret summer, the

China of vengeance for her disdain, the explosion of force in vain against the scissors of

fate snipped in the air making that lovely silver sound, a squirting repetition of licks. She muzzled his mouth.

"What we need, we are very lucky to find. . .I found comfort with those listeners. . .hearing words without getting angry. . .it was the end of my childlike pain & the beginning of a deeper one I know. . .but it seemed to help."

"Seemed! That's new."

"The doubts came with my loss of feeling, my tight chest."

"There doesn't seem to be any flesh whatever on each cadaver of memory you exhume."

A body ribbed gaping & flat; a white apron over a hook on a black wall; grey pleats; not even a slogan sprayed on it in garish colour; none of the necessary defacement that life makes by its passage. Look at the unrelishable core; the maddening tightness of one memory. . .

"Not disfigured yet marred you still stand a child with grey hair, slack cunt, yellow-soled feet but with no ease of experience. . .a hand groping for the silk bow to spring a surprise strip on time."

"I want to escape with grace, serene; not with a grin of fear worn like a permanent mask while grimly pitching the crockery at every wall."

Enormous graffiti stretch over the years, each sign howling whiter fears than last years.

"I wouldn't want to be in my head that much. . .that amount of time."

"She was in it all the time." She came, caught up, lay rigid.

"You say it as if it's part of a plan. . .it's just happening. . ."

"All those. . .these tears. . .no." This interruption came softly, a rose petal, a tentative pat. To skim the stagnant pool & keep the water clear underneath. The ripples of hope over a farewell to the arrogant tyranny of meaning.

"Just a sigh & let that be it."

Their glasses should have clinked to that, to rub the clay smooth, but deafness makes more clamour possible & the light was dim & knotted them together. Empty husks of conversation scattered over sham reason. That axe-like blow irrevocably splitting feeling from event was the one surge of true feeling under that fragile black cloth of dusk (executed at about now all the time) that formed the inescapable root grave & gave the rhythm in time with her heart beat. She wore the blackening silence as a lead beaded necklace smudging her throat, infecting her voice making every word a derivative, entangled in that early storm of lovelorn hollow murderhope.

She chewed slowly. "Teeth," she ordered inquisitively & a smile flashed coercively.

The raven's beak rimmed with white scum scooped the cockle out of its shell.

"The petal lips it should have been," she said pointing at the text, "mmmming round something tasty."

"A fruit. . .a persimmon. . .Oh they're like full breasts."

"No. A flower. Mine."

"Framing the smile."

She shook her hair & seemed to lose her body, just her head left to puzzle his lips & eyes & shred his embrace, the venture of forgetfulness, the somersault of french kisses sweeping the table clear. The gold becoming silver.

"So in the beginning, coiling round ourselves we are not born, it's not then?"

"It's later when we want to bite but not eat."

"Devour with love."

"Something like that. . .crunch the private. . .untouchable. . .Yes of course. . ."

She grinned in response, "Grind, grab & a third to beat into that part romance, part hate, the flame that can never turn into nostalgia. . .only the quick masking clown-like part gives you a chance to lithely side-step the hurt for a few moments."

"Imagine we shall not return."

We didn't. We couldn't.

"Split."

She shook her hair again to free herself but the thoughts stuck like the hum of honey. The moonlight now brushed the buildings with birdwings of imperfect slender light with which to pursue her way on the distant landscape of many years ago. In the dashed dream a cut glass chime marked the sounding out of the immense length of unlived time.

"Knees," she said & they knobbled under her reflective downgaze as she now stood beside the table rubbing the edge of a plate. Silent dusk, a silent greeting to the rare silver laugh, superfluous but a heartrending violation in the musty cupboard of childhood.

"Now speak the final lines to reach it."

"Yes. I am angry."

She fingered the red weal on her neck. Concurring evidence from the sustaining error. . .'the wrong death,' she thought. The masculine broad-brimmed gloom inveigling her to despise that first notch of awareness.

"We were caught up in it (four corners turned in & pinched) a mandala of thorns."

"Fucked, bluntly put, by the ashes of that passion, not saved, as you could be by the fitting & perfect poetic melody of undressing."

What a loss only to be able to know ourselves at that moment of violence. To be contained & rigid before those glass shagged spectres who could have come if they had cared at all but they didn't, not enough. Not at all. She smeared the grey ash paste onto her face. The grit stung her eyes & they watered & tears rolled a pair of clean marks down her cheeks to square the buckle of her nose. The callous emptiness, without a frill or bow, of being alone. The door, whereby even ambiguous or fickle strangers could enter, was sellotaped to check & deter a visit. Even the bore of nothing prevented from gliding his airship of fleecy unastonishment through taciturn moonlight specks to the writing on the wall.

She bumped herself against a chair.

'Beyond all this I am pressing towards. . . (The crowd gazed). . . delirium,' she thought but smiled & stamped on the threadbare carpet.

"You are not quite sure whether you inhabit one body or three or four," she said. "And to make sure I'll run through their attributes; the stops along the fleshy column."

The spurt of anger returned as she felt the raised weals across her buttocks under the metallic black silk she pulled off over the marks. She stroked to soothe them & the craving slipped in thigh high, rigid, final. . .

"Foreleg," she grinned.

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That a bird had a piece of silver garland in its beak & a squirrel was hanging a piece of bread in a tree was bye the bye to those below. The blood of hatred had been spilled for there was a dark stain on the ground nearby where she squatted. She put her hand in it & looked puzzlingly at her fingers. She pissed & then shuffled sideways a couple of feet & stared towards the tree as she wiped herself with a bunch of dried leaves. She rubbed her hand then quickly flicked up her knickers & shook down her dress & smiled broadly at him.

"Where do I fit in, in all this?" Reaching down she picked up a little book of pictures & began to look through it. She handed the open encyclopaedia over & said, to hold things up, "That way! O.K."

We started to lean together into an embrace.

"Is it possible without a shave & a big squeeze?"

"Could be. Only you'll need this. . .the fantastic pulse, the zigzag of joy, the panting trumpet of porcelain extinguishing like a jasmine marker through text the doubt of impossibility. . .the selfsame act trying it on itself hand & foot 99 times drilling."

"Warm!" She said.

". . .the bark (a sound he indicated by scissoring two fingers) of skin & soul. . ."

"Cold!" She said.

". . .the volcano. . ."

"Got it!" She said.

". . .in the dead centre. . ."

"Carry on," she said.

". . .in the steel bubble of a kiss. . ."

"Warm & yes please!"

". . .devouring while pissing. . ."

"Sounds interesting."

". . .in the black ash & in case you've forgotten. . ."

"I haven't," she exclaimed, but she was flicking through the book for another diagram.

"Here. See if you can take root in this one," she handed him the book again. Better luck this time with the pulverized hallowed act to urge the chase; attract the swirl of claw & cock. Grind the inky. . .

"That's right, at last," she said, "at least you've got some of the words."

"I'm parched." He croaked. A black wing flapped.

'From shrieking? Crying in the wind.' She wondered.

"So what has happened?" They asked.

The gorgeous accumulation of flesh like the flower of mangled jewellery split with the rose petal. She read the text. Tapped his shoulder to get his attention.

"Here you're making me giggle & think of words like 'diddle' so cut it out. . ."

The swelling flange & banner.

She lunged. The book fell to the ground a page torn out. Tail in air.

She studied the picture, she could even see the dark patch of piss on the ground despite the coarseness of the newsprint.



"So that's it. Catching the words." They thought they understood.

She flapped the book back open & got really interested, put her index finger gently into her ear in disbelief. She turned to him. He had watched.

"I told you we nearly went to Trieste on that first journey. We planned to just because of Duino."

"To try & find that space?" She asked, turning the pages & pulling a mouth at each diagram. She snapped the book shut. Slumped down with lower imagination & tested the looseness of her knee joint.

"The vertical link. . .do you believe it exists?" He wondered. "They raised so many stones to it."

"It's the lack of anger that's so new for me. . .those feelings used to push in, dead & dry & shatter the delicate weave of my hopes. I began to feel it was purposively destructive; a creeping, scrawling, heavy, unimpassioned, rejecting blubber of emotions. I never got the chance to unreel the thread & find a gift. I was always pasting the entanglements of things together, trying to cover the cracks opening up in the necessary wall, that divide between times; opportunities; genders; any evidence. In fact, anger always screwed it up."

"Elasticity none," he murmured.

"Brittle. Scorched. That's right!" She agreed.

"Yes." He said at the same time.

"So now you can turn off the anger?" She put the question, she knew she'd get her turn.

"It doesn't come so often & when it comes it can't hold me, doesn't force me into actions I don't want to make. I don't know how it was stopped from being destructive."

"I don't want to stop mine. I want to get it here." She shaped a massive pillar in front of her & pushed & kicked it.

"That's too clumsy, it has no edges, it's always frayed; remember."

"I need it." She said with finality & the speed of incoherent desire, "To fill in the flesh between the crystalline aches & despairs & refusals. All in. Tight with longing, plump waiting for the kind of touches no one had any intention of giving me."

"I'm sorry that no one came. Would it have been possible for anyone to have helped?"

She nodded, shrinking away almost, "I banged & banged on the glass. And when the glass eventually shattered 27 years later he came through the gaping rent (what is the shape of a smashed window?) sucked in by the elaborate woman that child of long ago had made her fortune. His prize: a sexed mermaid & obscenities. The harsh delights of fucks as if in icy stacks of wax fruit for a short time. The ritual gutted fish; a womb's scar wrapped in taffeta. Plain as a pike-staff; now."

"So what she is. . .is from that moment?"

"Who knows these days, but years ago. . .dainty. . .delicate. . .the child tagged too early by the groan of her mother humping work alone or rather only showing that & keeping secret dates needing algebra to be understood."

"Is that damaging?"

"Wait for the mush & blurb of reason to haphazardly fold in on itself in years to come.

Then you'll see."

"If I'm alive."

"You have a black heart."

"It was stolen from me when I was vulnerable. . .A. seized her chance with a precision & ruthlessness that was near to breathtaking. . .but I never realized why until it was almost too late. . .I had to steal my love back in a vitrified heart."

"You took the string of five red & white glass beads from around her neck while she slept & in that instant were free? That's what I've been told."

"That's one version."

"O.K. You think that's part of it. Stuck in a sludge of categorical & unpleasantly formed humiliations where a pinwheel of petty outrages flipped over arbitrary ways that had to be followed."

She flapped her hands, to cool the conversation & move it on.

"I'm not sure it was as clear as that day by day. Proof came later. I know we laughed in between the sadistic clinches. " He added, he had caught the signal.

"If you call that tat proof," they said.

"I see you keep the other man out of this?" S. asked.

"He's made less important by his enforced absences, the broken promise of a pony doesn't count for much in the never ending additions magnified outside of childhood."

The thought was obvious, cold, glistened white. How could the memory be wrong? It was a scaffold, a killing support of this remnant of growing up: a misfortune. a derrick of fear blocking the skyline: it was anxiety piped from the mother.

' I knew it never felt right,' she thought, 'I see all the years that roll back like an irreparable pantomime. Now I feel I can respond. Without that chill of disbelief which never actually quite formed an emotion but blocked whole rainbows of them'.

"The gold can now quietly be counted out to grey. . .you think?" One of them asked taking up a biro & shuffling a notebook into place beside the plate.

"They are made ready to carry the burden & transmit it?"

How the simple sweet fire of love can lovingly burn. It might even turn the ashes into the sweet bird again.

"That was a raven. Nothing sweet about it." S. interjected brusquely.

Something broke under the roof above them. The woman's blue skirt flew as she tossed the black sticks out of the bag onto the fire. She breathed deeply & the sparkle dimmed on the rock as its particles fled to her. That there were exactly ten magpies in the middle poplar tree is of no consequence. . .as I reach & hook you near. . .feel your cunt.

"You counted the birds & that makes me question your gesture." The minutiae give the tale its twist.

"Remember how large my hands felt," she whispered.

"How rough & warm." I added.

"Still? Now we are coming at this from slightly different positions; but it's the past & a dead & gone one at that."

"Her hands had never felt so rough, you said, now what about before?"

I could feel her shaping the question. Working with tentacles of doubt. I had withdrawn my support.

"That didn't help anything except the muddle," she said.

I resolved never to try absence again & then kept feeling she was acting pleasure in my presence wanting me to leave. When I asked her about it she said nothing to reassure or deter me.

"Come on you're avoiding describing the events." They said.

"I don't want to sharpen up that time from memory just yet, we should have got through it."

"You felt you were unfairly treated?"

"Still do. I'd say." She interrupted.

"Perhaps you were lucky you didn't get through it. You were being slowly emptied by the sound of it."

The need to taste the nectar of flowers not blood in the mouth. To have white stones by the path & reach the door safely. To bombard the neighbours with grass sods lovingly. To put the killers in a hard vein of quartz until they explain themselves & sing it like the thrush. The vine of the night holds us with our dreams & we are drenched protective blue against the disorder of electric cold mornings being booted out across the lawn to school; where we lose the hooks of anonymous help from our ancestors & so blunder unwittingly in our labyrinth (decoded even in a red coat) where the material wolf naturally gobbles us up to join the stones. If you resist the chimney burns, the well is fouled & her breasts though glittering with expensive perfume are untouchable. The cost of an azure spin is your life. Each fluttering feather from the raven takes ten years to fall & that's it. Enough.

You've had it. Although you seem to be all one, your speech becomes loose & you find you are addressing embers as your companion slipped away.

"Although the walls are paper thin you don't push through them. Is that right?"

She nodded, repulsing a fledgling disbelief as it began to hatch. The curlew of warning notes cut by them. The tapping footfalls of departure rang out above. With the sting of smoke all around her gaunt cheeks she bent over, her slit eyes magnified by the awkwardly poised spectacles. 12 to 4.

We seek & probe.

"I pushed him away because it hurt."

"Why should he have been prodding her? What use was the feel of that liver to him?"

Curiosity. . .the sadistic bastard. . .& was that injection really necessary?"

Calm down. The choir of thoughts is now defunct, you did care.

"Did they ever have a chance to sit down alone together," she asked, curious about the wearing bustle of the way they lived, "And try to. . ." And she realized. "I'm sure she wouldn't say, wouldn't tell. . ."

"Couldn't say. It might have hurt someone." He said with a tremor of weariness.

"And you see that as an excuse, or even hurtful?"

"I never do when face to face with it, patience takes over, but away from it then anger narrows down the imagination, drains it, turns sex into those imaginary murderous encounters of childhood, a shifting madness leaving every emotion feeling skinned." His voice sank. The sharpest loneliness cuts anger into slices to toss out as shrivelling

vermilion gusts of bad luck as well as squeezing pearls of sweat & frost to prevent the wear of interfacing hate & the world's street corner.

'You're air kissing the arse of chaos, predicting nothing accurately again,' he thought.

Her grey smeared face peered at them seeing a timid trust in the way they sat so close.

"I don't know why. . ." She nearly interrupted, fiddled like a spider looking for an excuse.

The thump of her heart lost their words for her. She held the pain back pushing her knees together with a hand tight over her quim. Blood pounded through her ears as she strained to hear over its pumping.

"Remind me," he said, "about that dream of yours."

"It's mine." Curtly, possessively she spat from the oldest unshared panorama, oblivion's gate.

"Well I'll tell you mine. It was the tenderest feeling I've experienced for years. The enchantment of being met by a loving welcoming person not yet defined by gender but with the lascivious promise of sex. The drab background was wan grey concrete slabs splintered askew & tunnels, & opening voids but all negotiable in the singing silver charm of my welcomer. I was beguiled by the husky voice of my narrator guide. I was there. . .in my landscape. . .candle lit. . .there was no resolution of any image. . .I just drifted. . ."

"A fragment of the labyrinth, perhaps a corner, an edge, perhaps the only way in."

"I was invited in, that's what was so warm about it. The friendliness of a Hell-hole. I know you think that."

"Guided by glow worms," she grimaced.

Little night insects wafted, their columns map-like, irritating & indecipherable but the very dust with its own velocity. Our dead hovering. She flapped the gnats out of her face & blew a jet of air up around her nose to dry the glycerine tears & ash film.

'So they were back, had to be allowed through, not only him,' she wondered.

She hissed with astonishment. He'd seemed trapped, transfixed, by those clever hurts.

You could see him trying to remember them at times. Stellated, the thoughts winked & whistled down the crumbling, smashed but dustless passages, solid enough for them because the dream is short. The landscape yawns composing a love threat, daggerdrawn & gentle scene, the top of the wheatfield shimmers beneath the billow of her silicon frock.

'I want to get back to that moment when she smiled over at me,' he said to himself. 'You'll never do it.'

The horseshoe of black round her neck, the slash of red, grey eyes, she cut across the room serenely wafting with her forearms the diaphanous gauze, which caught what little light there was; she seemed to float footless, churning the air with daggers of silver folds.

'You'll never do it. . .it would cut too deep beneath the safety net that will be thrown by anger wait & see.' He thought but said.

"How can I deal with this deliberate stream of actions & words intending to hurt me & yet proposed as innocent. . .how do they achieve this inviolability. . .not by charm?"

"By your acquiescence," she said. "Accept that & you're through. You follow the twine back along the maze but didn't tie the knot at the start, you know this, as you peel round each corner you expect to find. . .in fact your sure & certain, black & white, that the



remorseless night will be ended by TOMORROW. She knows this fragile tug transfers just enough hope to keep the obelisk afloat, but undeciphered. . .all you'll find is a blue splashed dog howling savagely at you for going back the way you never came."

I drop the thread & feel the passage walls for the first time. Are there any footprints?

Under my gaze the faint smudges of moisture seemed to draw themselves into paws, a gift to the stalker. Their faint perfume traced the way they quitted.

"You can almost hear their chatter."

"And their terror. Just because it was night, an empty endless night."

She shuddered, her hand reached for her other hand & held it. The cloth of her blouse stick limp to her skin.

"Why why why am I here," she muttered. "I should have stopped on the sixth at least, or the last, the seventh. For on the sixth there were slow colours to accompany the lovers in their melodic adoration, only a short swirl, I know, before being cut by the wire stretched from rock to rock."

"The sixth, don't forget, didn't exist!"

"It felt real enough at the time."

"Only those dogs with an iron collar get through that place."

"They needed a chance?"

"They needed to be able to cut into the open on their own & not try & make use of anyone else."

Naked, Numb.

"I wonder," she sighed & pulled the fabric of her blouse down out of each armpit, delicately airing her body with these pinches.

"But I'm here with wooden eyelids, too hot to come & feeling as if I've forgotten how I'm dressed as well. In the seventh I was able to see through people. Now confusion has taken me, along with its old charred garbling. I'm left with a rush of glass-shard filled mud & stony dullness to sculpt my companions' bodies with. It tells me nothing. I feel entwined, round & round I writhe."

"You've obviously come too far this time."

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There is the lameness of words, & yet their spite carries against rough clay & dabs of colour unless the shapes form first & undermine the conceit of meaning. Because of a need to change a doorway appeared. She stepped up off stone crazy paving onto a box step & smelled the creosote impregnated plywood. Four brown-stained vaguely familiar walls surrounded her, sucking in any colour & reducing it to a grey whisper so that while she felt haunted by the conversation of the previous evening she couldn't remember it, not a word, not even the important notes she told herself to remember. She acknowledged the 2 or 3 persons emerging amongst the objects piled haphazardly on all sides. She was also drained by the feelings experienced then but couldn't recall which emotions had taken part. It was as if a tape had been erased leaving only an annoying background hiss. She opened a door set in the rafters & entered a little wedge-shaped cubby-hole leading into

the loft. The painting loomed with its snowball world boulder crushing & mopping up the animals & the artist near the whale-tree containing the mashed remains of a lover. All split by lightening.

Next to that picture was a tall thin matt-black metal cabinet with a white toy skeleton hanging on a silver chain. And the moon sieve again now years later on a nail this time hanging like a dead sun. A patch-work double door 2 bolts at the top 2 at the bottom 2 padlocks & a Yale. A single bed with 2 mattresses 2 carved panels from a screen that fell over one night & nearly crushed . . . a black plastic sledge. The scythe again its blade rusty now. The same chain in a new plastic bag. Many, many battens of wood. And the large spirit level with a small hole drilled in the round compartment to let out moisture. A table used as a large palette, on it a claw hammer another hammer set square pincers. Old all metal table knife extending rule cylindrical blue plastic glue container small green glue container of different shape 2 pieces of sandpaper of different grits black pencil short piece of sisal an old patterned towel 4 pieces of doweling of various lengths & diameters 11 tubes of oil paint & a tin of green paint a tomato tin with 4 brushes of varying widths standing bristles down in white spirit a palette knife a small heart-shaped palette with 2 round metal containers stuck to it. The colours were yellow ochre; raw sienna; french ultramarine; sap green; cerulean; scarlet; Van Dyke brown; Venetian red; crome green; black & flake white.

THIRD. A LEERING HEADSTONE WITH THE WORDS NET NIP NOT SLIDE SLAP  
SLEEP CARVED ON IT.

A green net round the garden kept some of the wind out.

A nip not a pinch made me jump.

It's not for you.

So slide closer & closer & closer to the warm moist lips.

The slap cut my sleep.

The conversation lasted about 13 minutes. A certain plum pudding takes 13 hours to cook. There were not 13 people in the meeting. They talked about more than 13 identities but only one subject. And there had to be more than 13 words spoken. It took place at night. Which was frosty.

. . .a net hurling through the air. . .slide quickly to one side. . .

"Slap your palms down hard if you slip."

The three women were all on him together as they had to be to hold him & the net down. They hammered the pegs furiously until it was sure he couldn't escape. Then a woman sat on each arm & tied thin twine to the thumb & pegged that into the turf. Out of sight he heard their whispers. They took off their rough clothes. The smell of perfume & sweat wafted up as they fastened down the net either side of his legs. Two hands clamped heavily over his eyes, hands tugged off his belt. . .his cock delicately prised out. Each stood over him & slipped out of her knickers. One deftly sat on his cock. Another balled two pairs of knickers up & forced them into his mouth; the other one twisted her panties

into a tie & pulled it tightly down forcing the gag in. One still rode gently pushing up.

The other two looked on waiting their turn. One stepped forward & slapped the riding girl hard & took hold of her hair yanking her back & off.

The victim squealed, "Fuck off. That hurt."

The third woman stepped over & mounted while they rolled in tigerish melee. The attacker was much stronger & quickly subdued her prey kneeling on her arms making her helpless while she pinched her nipples & slapped her breasts. She pulled each breast high by its nipple then took the twine & while she sucked she looped each one & deftly tied the end of each breast. She then leaned back to caress the moist cunt. The woman riding was increasing her pace & grunting; sweat running down her face & body. As she reached her climax she threw her arms up squealing & jabbering, it's lovely lovely lovely lovely lovely I love it. The other two women came over to her & each took an arm, kept it straight to keep her where she was, then slowly forced her down onto her face. She gasped as the cock popped out. Then they each sat on her arms & pegged her wrists down. They took little lengths of string & tied her thumbs tight & pegged those. She was spread-eagled on top of the man. One of the women leaned over & stuck her forefinger up her arsehole & told her to piss. The warm liquid bubbled from between her swollen red flaps & the acrid smell worked a switch in the fighting pair. The one with her nipples tied took control & deftly snapped a tiny manacle on the thumb of the other, pulled her arms behind with a dancing swing fastened the other thumb & then lifted the arms high without a break of action. Unceremoniously she tripped her manacled victim by kicking her legs out from under her. She flopped down awkwardly onto the net. A collar was

quickly threaded through the net, round her neck & buckled. Then she was roughly pushed & pulled & rolled onto her back. Now three figures lay amongst the net. The raven-haired woman secured this fair-haired woman's legs wide open with straps so her knees had to come up. . .

"Was there any real flesh in the fantasy?"

"Oh yes. And the pale viridian net was thick & strong; a piece of deep-sea trawl cut to clear the lines & washed up in the bay. It cut into their flesh. They have the scars."

"You were there?"

"No. I found them."

Then the black-haired woman took a short stick. The stick was black. And forced open the mouth of the splayed woman with it. Tied it in to bridle her. A slice had been taken off the wood so her tongue would protrude as the jaw clamped down. The raven woman stretched down beside her & sucked the tongue hard. Bit it & kept on sucking till her mouth was crimson. The captured woman shook her head again & again & flecks of blood began to appear on her blonde hair.

"You found them?"

"Yes. I found them one by one."

"At different times?"

"Yes. And in different places."

THE GAP CLOSED.

"Why is that in upper case?"

"I don't know. I think it referred to the space between the dreams & sheer events."

"Can there be a space there?"

"Not one we can be alive in because its time is distorted. Or perhaps its space is compressed making organic life impossible."

*She had a dream in October 1975. The Bitter Ship would arrive at 4 o'clock. . .a woman & her 6 or 7 year old daughter went past. . .the girl wore a turquoise & white floral patterned dress. . .the woman stopped & asked us what the time was. . .she said 10 to 4. . .the woman said the Bitter Ship left at 4 o'clock & we ought to be on it. . .She died at 10 to 4. . .eight years later.*

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The car slid this way & that before we stopped. As soon as I stepped out I felt how thick the ice crunched underfoot. I knew what the road must have been like.

"She said she would always stay with me. I was glad."

"And now you believe her?"

The tyre ruts left in the wet slush had frozen & made it difficult to walk. But we got there & R. was waiting, suspicious of our delay. We sat, but didn't get down to it straight away.

First R. described two kinds of black birds. One was called Kling Kling & lived on the backs of cows pecking off the pests. It was a dull, scruffy blackbird with its feathers in disarray. The other was a really smart blackbird, & here he put his arms stiffly down at his sides as he sat, & beamed, his face shone like an oily rainbow slick in the sun.

"That was an executive bird R. It rented out plots of cow's back to the others."

"Right! It was very smart."

"Have you got to tell us about it?" They groaned.

A large, hard, speckled, shaft of free afternoon sun streamed in at the slit door enlarging one side of a white desk so that R. bumped against it as he paced, wringing & rubbing his interlocked fingers, to fasten the door. R. pummelled his hands, screwing a fragment of paper until it hung like a piece of Nottingham sky from his soft, pink fingertips.

"There isn't going to be enough time," he said half aloud. His upper front teeth stuck out slightly & so he always looked as if a half smile was hovering about his face & a little worry had difficulty in showing. His hands felt sluggish. He couldn't get them to feel properly today. Nothing moved as R. advanced. We sat down. There was, on the other side of the doorway, a little corner in which was propped an eight foot batten of 2 x 2 white wood, behind which was a blue-rimmed white enamel basin full of water & upon which floated some smuts of black & grey ash. Very often this basin was purposely kicked over. On this occasion the basin remained full of water. The door slamming shut set his teeth on edge.

"I suppose they expected to win!"

"Here." Said R. "We have got to get down to it." And he did.

"Their infernal buckets of light," she muttered, "So easy to see, so difficult to move."

At evening the shadows of the rough stone graves saluted flocks of roosting birds passing to the elm trees rotting at one edge of the yard. They scrawled exclamations of surprise &



lament into the petrified soil under-wing with unnecessary swoops & falls & turns. On my way I examined the leper's stone niche on the steps leading down to the bottom of the hill. It was filled with rotting leaves, a dank parcel, never any different any time in my childhood. The hollow steel rail banister by the steep steps, all rust & shine, as always barely used, most passers-by taking a gentler route widishins by the massive earth thumping elm nourished on bone complimenting the rooks' trees round the back bork. "Our life together certainly wasn't the kind of Eden described so blissfully & painfully by J. Clare; but it was an idyllic existence."

"And sure enough came the catastrophe that an idyll generates just being."

"Was it certain to fold?"

"I don't think so. . .you were lucky you didn't talk too much. Too much chat destroys the black side of life, chases away the shadows. . . can blot them out completely. Then in waddle the penguin reasons for not doing anything. . .the aggressive pasting up, lily by lily, of a surrender to the margarine statements of facts."

Dung. Dong.

Hammered at the threshold.

"I couldn't believe it. There didn't seem to be any lasting change. Even the weather shifts a little."

It was like a permanent departure; the vomit down my neck; the ice building up in steps & ropes on the glass; the murmurs of dissent or just a vague discontent V-ed into the link of our touching hands; the zero of coconut matting & glass shards permanently underfoot, no twirling fresh skin, taut, mute & assenting.

"You lot were banged together without restraint, a gaze caused trouble, no child's heart could transcend that. Every fold in the curtain was tasteless, the furniture bashed, the lino shunning the broom with its curiosity of spots & splashes. All a wobbly fleeing that cancelled form with no content. It all had to be taken on tiptoe."

Only the stamp of a foot. Out! Out! Out! A deep gulp of air. A dive & being enveloped in green water. The river rushing your body & you thinking, 'well this is it.'

Irreversible. A slide. A sidle. The sow thistle left to wait for the autumn goldfinch

She sang unwillingly. She found his presence intolerable but remained polite (as I did). R. rambled incoherently in his languages. He sold us his home; land; sheep & family trying to raise a stake to buy a drink. But he drank nothing. And heard nothing as the chords smashed the night up black & blue. Slowly R. shrank & slipped away by the door at daybreak. In that minute a spear of flame had lunged the dawn sky, ruined a tall tree & exploded extinguishing itself. All the branches & all but the tiniest twigs were still intact on the tree. I turned round.

"You can't eat it & it only takes a couple of dabs to paint it, so piss on it to damp it down."

A loud hissing proclaimed the action but that same noise kept on long & steady after the bladders had been emptied. It came from a cloud of fragrant steam & smoke that hung about a tree. R. stood in his doorway as little smuts & wafers of white ash wafted in & speckled his black suit. He tutted as if a dog with muddy paws had jumped up. Then he saw the pall of smoke & his mouth opened slightly in astonishment at the sounds issuing from it, a speck of ash flew in & landed on his tongue. At first it stung but was followed

by an icy chill high behind his nose. Then his tongue seemed to slowly expand until it filled the buccal cavity.

'I'll let him kick the doors down & make trouble. I don't care,' he thought as he looked down. The next step was a cliff dropping away sheer to a brick-red plain intersected by dykes with rough clumps of herbage clogging them. R. hesitated, he knew the step was about six inches, but his stomach lurched & he felt as though he had saved his life. He held back because the drop looked so precipitate & he couldn't bring it back to a negotiable size by reason. The place on his tongue where the ash had dissolved was burning now & he touched a tooth, to reassure himself, but the tooth felt like a smooth slab of rock. It became more like standing spread-eagled below a cliff-face on a difficult terrain & searching the rock for handholds, seeing a thin line of sky dancing & dazzling high, impossibly far above.

R. opened his eyes again & was frozen. A snarl ripped through the still air.

"I'm so cold I must have fire."

I looked at his face & could see he was in earnest. He emptied the carton of petrol over his head. The match flared. He was on fire.

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When I returned this time within the four walls could be found. A splitting axe lying by the 'best' felling axe next to the bag of boat engine tools next to the bullseye wellingtons size nine next to the pile of wood shavings next to two sacks of coal next to a pile of coal

on a sheet of polythene next to a wooden box full of coal next to a cardboard box full of coal next to a paperbag 1/3<sup>rd</sup> full of twigs from an unnameable tree on the shore (it had been blown over in a winter gale yet flowered lying on its side the following spring. Their sweet scent drew me to the tree) next to a small piece of corrugated iron leaning on a wall next to three pieces of wood leaning against this wall next to me next to the brightly burning fire next to the kettle next to her next to a different wall a book & a chopping block next to a crate with a pig in it next to a pile of stones next to a fish box next to pots & pans next to another fish box next to two cans of paraffin next to an empty five gallon drum next to a new door a new step a new jamb next to a piece of fence next to a carrier bag of straw next to an old chest with a cwt. of cement in it ALL around the MAN OF STRAW at this east end of the room.

Beyond these things there was a ladder leaning in the loft trap a broom leaning against the ladder next to two buckets one blue & one yellow next to a white plastic water carrier next to a bag full of sand next to a fibre glass sack with coal in it with a saw lying on it next to a block of wood off a stub. The stub with a staple & a metal tag nailed on it. The metal tag stamped with an O. Another stub with a worn felt boot on it & another beside it beneath a small window next to a wall next to a pickaxe next to a six foot piece of lining wood leaning against the same wall next to a barrel of mixed potatoes next to a bag ripped open with a few potatoes in it next to a door laid on a barrel with the washing things & a yellow coat next to an oar poking up through the floorboards into the loft next to a green piece of nylon fishing net hanging from the roof with some float rings & floats next to a six inch by one inch plank over six feet long next to a top off a fencing stub with

a packet of persil balanced flat on top next to a thick beam of white wood treated against woodworm leaning up a wall one of three bought to use as supports for the boat engine next to two gallon cans for petrol one half full next to a pot of blue paint under a smaller tin of red lead paint next to a blunt pair of shears next to several small white containers next to a wall next to ten bottles with tops on next to the black shadow thrown by the oar next to a dark corner next to a fire place in the west wall. I missed out a door used as a table with all the food & cooking utensils on it two widow sills cooling eggs & margarine a pitchfork another man of straw several more pieces of wood a line many loose tools & a bag of tools a sack of levers & starting handle for the boat engine three strings of corks a rip saw a lamp more bags of straw a bowl of rubbish mainly tins & foil a red water container a large light green (viridian) net of thick nylon a double flock mattress seven coats three towels two rags five hoops a lamp & a mouldy set of seed keys off a maple tree. The space was eventually cleared.

"You're right when it's more probable that you will be right. And you're wrong when it's more probable that you will be wrong. So you're predictable."

"But there's another possibility, at any rate a delectable suspicion of one, which is that things might go the other way."

"They might get worse? They couldn't!"

The Fates' beasts yawned.

"Could they?"

At that point I broke off & waited. The dog barked at nothing. They soon realised that didn't make sense & were then on their guard.

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The windowless stairwell was entirely constructed of untreated planks of wood. They were grey & splintered with age. The thick plank treads were made comfy by a waterfall of cheap blue nylon carpet. The two doors at the top were without a lick of paint, the same as the door at the foot which opened into more of a corridor space than a room because the stair had been knocked up on one side of it. A door opened out of this area into the main house, another gave into a broad stone passage leading to the garden. As usual the rooks were flying into the stand of woodland by the church. There were many many more on the last V. Gogh picture, but that was what always came to mind.

She sat on the top stair. There were doors to her right & to her left, both closed. She picked up a wooden lath & pushed the light switch off.

"That feeling of tightness could be connected with shrinking or budding or shitting or being born. . .many many things but the one that came into my head first that I thought was the best I forgot. . .instantly. A fleeting clue, I always miss them. I know it wasn't any of those obvious things."

"Whatever's inside is too big for the outside?"

"Too bad perhaps?"

"Is the feeling the result of a struggle not to be turned inside-out? Not to lose a conviction?"

"To abandon your convictions. . .so become unhappy?"

"I can feel it coming on now. . .an anxiety. . .well, all pervading as if it could carry me off. It's not just that he went away. We didn't know where he was or if he was coming back. Yes. We were unhappy."

She took something off in the gloom, there was a rustle & slop as she tossed a scrap of silk over her shoulder. It was sodden as it caught my cheek. She had pissed herself.

"I didn't understand until A. said that."

"A kind of violent removal & absence? You were all too scared of him disappearing for good?"

"I suppose we were." She turned.

I left the corner at the bottom of the stair where I had been leaning & crouched at the foot of the well. I could just see her kneeling on the third from the top step, her chin cupped in her hands, her elbows resting on the top landing carpet. She must have been staring at the closed door.

"And yet I feel at times you also wanted him to go. . .so you could freely follow him."

"I think that may have been right before the time of his illness. . .No. . .it was all the time." She pulled the dress hem up to her waist & cupped her cunt with her right hand.

"What does that mean?"

"The impossibility of my heart ever being made to feel right. . .I'm sure of that."

"Are you trying to retrace that time through our relationship?" He wondered. "Trying to kill it off slowly, painfully & fill it full of anxiety & anger?"

"Like his cancer, do you mean!"

"Where else does your anger come from? It's so annihilating. There's never even the slightest compromise possible."

This question ran into a killing ground of answers. . .the image of being straddled by siblings. . .but unavailable. As if she'd read his thoughts she broke in.

"They were all unavailable, you could neither eat them nor fuck them but you had to breathe them in all day & night. It formed the ungiving part of myself as the past became like a thin crack in a rock. . .evident but unusable." She broke off.

"So your world was made unstable by a petrified event! Which cannot be brought to life in memory, because it cannot be changed each time as memory usually is, & then dumped by a psychic slight of hand somewhere near the unconscious."

She lay her head on the carpet & felt a thin draught under the door.

"That absolute blank patch in my past, it's no fun. . .it spoils the fun now & it's right at the centre of my life," she murmured to herself, as she slipped the left hand along side of the right & together they palmed aside her pubic hair opening up her cunt.

"I'm divisible into . . .mouth & cunt. Which one do you want this time?"

The moment of sacrifice to gain access to the maze. Had it ever worked? The tries. The chalk spiral she drew on a flat stone in the yard. The chaotic snakes, tamed in a plan of the labyrinth she had wildly charcoaled on the white dress, still twined in her belly. The ordinary cuts & bruises.

To what purpose did she try to fix the image? She was never really there, she knew it. She always held back. But not quite that. . .she always felt she had to hold back, that she had



no right to be happy. . .that the very sight of her joy may make someone else unhappy. It was a tenderness but also some intricate bane which, closed & vigilant, guarded her hurt.

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I heard her voice asking for me before I caught glimpse of her. She sounded husky & rasped as she softly tortured some of my dialect words. I knew she was mocking me. I imagined the smile on her thick lips. She was still invisible. I could wait & see.

She snuggled up in the white fur but allowed her breasts to flop out & arranged the mirror to throw the light away from her eyes to prevent a harsh glare on the underside of her face. Crack! She looked like that sound. . . I don't know what she looked like. . .she had blue glassy eyes. The effects she had tried didn't work & the light did its worst.

I saw her.

She crackled like a frosty puddle, a dry twig & a plastic egg pack. She sounded like a falling fire as she opened up to speak a few lines. I'll quickly describe as much as I can before her voice rips up every object in sight. I had meant to say 'I love you still,' but I didn't. She had her handbag on the floor beside the chair & one of its two handles had flopped out at a right angle because it had nearly worn through the rivet. It had become so battered, so drab it didn't match her glittering low-cut dress. She had a big plastic carrier down on the other side of her chair which was stuffed full of clothing. I could only see a black sleeve cuff of some blouse peeping out. Under her chair was a cheap wire hanger bent beyond use. Her white shoes were pointed & low heeled. Her knees were tight together & had highlights just left of centre.....

As he looked down he remembered the dead sheep's blue head in the swollen stream which was raging after two stormy days lashing the stripped skull as he tried to free the dead weight of the ewe from between the stones & set it in the strong current so its sodden bulging carcass would be disintegrated & wash piecemeal into the sea. The body jammed tight again a few feet downstream, one horn caught in a strand of wire & there it stayed. Its wool stripped belly grew tighter & blacker as the days passed.

She bent over to lift her carrier bag. He could see the sheep's belly bulging & rippling in the torrent of water again & he remembered the thin hind legs gashed & ripped completely raw of skin except for the knuckles above the black hooves. The legs, sticking up like lollipops out of the sheep's small narrow pelvic girdle shining & glistening pale blue & white in the water, looked frail, so I didn't try to shift the carcass by tugging them because I was sure they would pull away from the body. I picked up a stout looking sapling that still had a knot of root on it & a little jacket of moss above this. I pushed & levered with that until the weight of the water shifted the dead beast a few more yards downstream & then I scrambled after it in the pelting rain & poked again. Every move ripped a little more fleece off the animal & revealed more pale blue coloured tissue over the bone. The raindrops pelted the smell down. I pushed again with my pole & she showed a little more of the pale blue silk. As I pushed harder & harder she curled around the mossy knot of root till the strain made her fumble open the hooks behind her back to open her panty girdle she was wearing to conceal a fast growing belly. The sheep rolled into deeper swifter water under the bridge & into the high tide. When she turned the girdle smiled under her fat belly. I hooked my right index finger into the loose band of the

girdle about level with the top of her pubic hair & tugged it down off. She helped by shuddering. The sheep floated just below the surface of the sea. She rolled over & still her belly stuck up. She raised her knees around it. There was a white scum in her pubic hair & her slit's lips were swollen. I pushed down on her shins & she gasped, "Off." She reached for a pillow & struggled it under her buttocks. She sprayed as I forced her knees down to her waist.

The dirty ground killed the animals. It was impossible to go round so we had to make our way over. The going was very difficult, because of the carcass's various states of decay they gave no firm footing. Our heads were completely swathed in a thick layer of fine net to try & keep off the flies & keep out the stink. But it was impossible & made the going worse because our vision was very much limited by the thick turns of the material.

Nothing could have made the passage bearable. The easiest way would have been along the red sands that lined each side of the mountain river but so many dead beasts had tumbled into the water amongst the rocks & caught in the low branches of the alder trees lining the other bank that the stench was putrid, making it utterly unpassable. The stink made us vomit even on the clearest route. Many more dead animals were caught in the boughs. They swelled up & some of their bellies were black & others had burst open trailing weedlike fronds of guts in the current. At some of the deepest pools there were still a few bodies floating, bloated, blown tight which made their legs look short & thin. One of the dogs stopped to piss a few drops the colour of gorse flowers. On the far bank of the river was a green hut, reinforced with pine logs, a man inside seemed to be shouting. We thought it was at us so we cut away from the river through some broom

shrubs tangled with barbed wire. When we gained a clearer sandy patch I could see a man standing up to his waist in the swift current. He was bellowing too but I couldn't understand any words.

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"Some things are made INVISIBLE by words.

Sounds can change the LOOK of things."

He held his short silver-embroidered coat together in front as he jiggled sideways. His left leg remained firmly on the ground except for very short intervals, while his right foot lashed wildly about.

Butterflies! Their caterpillars made his willow leaves lacy. He kicked savagely.

"Lost your balance?" They jeered.

He pranced as they fluttered. The crowd roared. The dog ran snapping into them. The crowd lifted its skirt & ran. The butterflies roared. With a swirl of the dog's tail the Cabbage Whites lifted high up to the lacy treetop. I was up there. The crowd settled down. She was in the crowd. One wild cat-call cut across a wide ocean as the ship glided into sight with its figurehead cutting the waves like an enormous plough turning a pulsating dream field. The caterpillars ate the waves. The spread-eagled figurehead swathed through the lace & churned up the sea white. The green waves rose about her belly & swirled away either side. I lay close to his lacy willow leaves & looked as low as I could. The foam of the wave churned through her thighs & left a rime of scum in her

carved wooden pubic hairs. The ship ran aground on a blue-grey tarmac hill sloped like a breast. I jumped aside & the two butterflies dodged aimlessly until they were out of my path.

'That was a funny look she gave me,' he added thoughtfully & gazed at her thick hands dangling loose on her thick wrists out of her frayed woollen sleeves.

"Sleep under a tree in the shade, you'll feel better." She touched his bare arm at this & moved away.

The crowd had started to chant so I fiercely clamped its mouth shut. She slept under the tree I had indicated & woke up with red grass lines on her left cheek. I read the marks.

'I love myself in black.'

I turned the tap on. A jet of clear water shot out of the green hose-pipe. The child tried to bend the stream of water with his hands. I turned the water on again. The child tried to bend the clear stream of water again. A man behind a hedge was waiting for the other man to come through the gap. This other person was carrying a large stick. I lingered over that illustrated page in the book but can now only clearly remember that the stick was a smudgy chalk line. She put her right hand over the page. Her left hand walked on its fingers up my arm until I blew on it to stop. The smudgy stick slowly cracked down on the book as I turned her hand over to see what she clutched in it as she lay waiting for me. I kissed her & immediately tasted blood in my mouth. The two girls ran past my door jingling. My eyes lingered on the red stripes. I decided to try & feel if they were slightly raised & ran my hands swiftly over her breasts. The crowd breathed heavily. One section

began to sing but I put my hand over her mouth & shut that up. She dropped her red stripes & swayed & sagged at the knees & as she slumped heavily forwards she shouted. "It was a shipwreck."

I thought that was an important clue so I marked the place in the magazine with a slip of white paper so I could easily find it later when I knew I would want to refer to it, for it was the answer to a nightmare.

"Here I am. A rock. Smash your bows on me. A shipwreck, a Noah's ark with its planks sprung & all the animals tumbling out into a wild sea & being herded ashore by a man on a raft."

On the slip of paper that I slowly unfolded & uncreased she was slumped forward shouting she was shipwrecked. As she had flecks of foam on her lips I clamped my free hand over her mouth & then crumpled up the magazine with the marked article & stuffed that in between her teeth. Her lips were stretched like red stripes either side of a cigarette advert.

'Elle fait défaillir les play-boys.'

The sea washed over our feet & that revived us. We had to wait for our feet to dry before moving on to the next part as we didn't want to leave any footprints by which we could be followed. When we had broken through the cobweb strands & rubbed our tickling faces we saw the mistake we had made stretching out in front of us like a clear trail. We had walked off the map in the same direction as the last members of a long lost tribe & we had found them, much to their discomfort, trying to erase the dotted line that had

haunted them from the moment they had set out with the intention of reaching sanctuary.

They waved. Every gesture was flamboyant. One stepped forward. The crowd gasped.

"This time," he said, "I thought we had given everyone the slip."

The leafy branch with a few caterpillars on it dropped from his hand. The girl nearest stood stock still in a small black basque from Germany which protected her skin. I fingered the label appreciatively as she turned & looked me straight in the face. To one side of her waddled a white goose with yellow feet that occasionally pecked in the grass. I placed my right foot next to & on the outside of her left foot so close that our legs touched. She relaxed against my leg as she spoke.

"Last night as I was just dropping off to sleep I was thinking about a poem about dreamsmoke & I had this image of flying with two black wings." And here she looked to either side glancing down at her arms & hands with their fingers stretched & separated into feathers held like wings.

"Raven's wings, not attached, did you understand that? There was no body, me without a body & these two wings. They were dream people, they didn't have eyes."

She swivelled the top half of her body on her left elbow & her dark shadow seemed to peck savagely as she turned.

"Is this dream to be shattered as well?"

The crowd grunted as the two butterflies each took a wrist & pinned her down on the grass. The ship rode in, bobbing on the swell. I knew the ploughed field. I remembered it. I flattened myself as close to the wet brown earth as I could & began to edge my way towards the group of people. The plough had sliced a deeper furrow near the ditch so I

had more cover than I would have had further out in the field. The raindrops were sweet that I sucked off the grass blades. It took me a long time to get close to them but I knew I only had to do it once. I almost slid along. I could see the back of one of them very plainly but I wasn't so interested in him. The moon swam clear of the clouds. All their bare flesh shone. The left-hand butterfly pushed the wrist down harder. A bead of sweat trickled from her armpit. The sun cast a green band of light across her bare thighs. One of them glanced around as if she could hear my heart thumping. I pressed my face into the red clay & could hear every noise & voice of my life. A dead branch fell out of the tree above so that they leaned back laughing at their suspicions. They grasped each other's arms & pulled themselves back together over their picnic under a leafy tree. The arms of the girl showed a red compression mark at each of her wrists as she rubbed the left one with the fingertips of the right hand in a reflexive way. The moon raced behind the clouds again & I raised my head to see their flesh glowing in the dull light. I used my elbows to lever my body along & let my legs drag. A match flared beneath the pile of twigs they had built. Quickly flames burned on flames.

"I was silenced," she said; her leg against mine made me feel like I used to feel running through undergrowth.

"I was mute for days & then weeks." She rubbed her wrist again & I saw that it was an old scar. The crowd roared as she arched her back & kicked out. She lost her balance & the two butterflies fluttered up & down the willow tree. They continued their quiet conversation around the fire occasionally throwing fuel on to keep it burning brightly. I gained by every long shadow when a body shielded the firelight as they stoked it.



"I went to this partydance dressed very untidily. I wasn't dressed for a party at all. My blouse was undone down to my navel & I'd got a provocative smile fixed on my face. I picked out a man & nonchalantly threw my handbag under the chair he was sitting on & gave him the eye."

She ran her tongue over her dry lips & fanned her face with a hand. I was so close now I could see the flames reflecting in the snaps & clips of her underwear.

"I was wearing this!" And she spun herself round. I stopped her by gently taking her shoulder. I reached down to straighten the little white label so I could read it & she took just one step forward. The flesh of her leg was silky & shone & felt like a new moon. She held her left hand palm outwards towards the others to keep them silent & in the other she held a half burned twig which glowed at the end as she drew a bouquet of picks & gathers as she spoke.

"I used to go into the garden & pick flower after flower, gather a huge armful so that their colours were arranged by a sort of chance & then put them as gathered in a large bowl. Then I would paint my face first, work outwards to my fingernails which I made bright red. I was ready."

She was down on all fours. The flickering firelight cast strange shadows making the space under the tree like an upside-down room. I was close enough now to see the lizard shape between her legs as she snarled & splayed her knees ready to spring. One of her companions raised both of his hands as if at the same time warming their palms & shielding his eyes from the fire glare. The spray from the waves crashing against the black rocks wet me completely in the very short time that I had to wait for the boat to

beach. She sprang at the one who was sitting holding his body erect by using his arms like props. His elbows folded & one foot kicked in the fire momentarily sending a cascade of sparks into the foliage of the lowest branch which dipped like a paddle straight above them. She held him flat & slid over him all in one movement. My lips touched the damp clay. The field rippled & shuddered. I dug my thumbs into its glistening substance & eased my numb limbs into action. This time that I moved a complete silence overwhelmed me & I quickly shed the accumulated years in the furrow. Stumbling figures crashed by. I touched the silvered mirror lit by the moonlight & the ripples lifted my fingertips. Her lips shuddered & she was gone in that moment. I dragged myself the last few inches. I knew I could get no closer. The furrows curved at the hedgerow & the firelight raked their complete depth. I tried to bend the stream of water. Drops sprinkled on the flowers in the bowl. They were laughing around the fire & stroking her to calm her down. One of them held back, half turning his face from the glare while speaking.

"This time we have walked right off the map. Not a dash, arrow or reference number. One tree in a forest. A grassy bank overlooking a vast plain. This place is unassailable. The field has been ploughed to erase our footsteps & no one can cross it without stumbling & it can change at any time into a sea."

The wave surged right over the slippery black rocks & rolled up the naked girl's body splashing her face. She shook her hair smiling leaning over diving both of her hands in between her thighs.

'This time,' she thought, 'I'll go straight for his face, for his lips. I'll smother him. I'll make him never forget.'

The moonlight changed the field so I swam with slow even strokes, to be as silent as I could, up to the tree-top & mingled there with the smoke of the fire. She leaned over & arranged the cups on the table. The teapot was steaming from its spout under the wild bouquet of garden flowers. The arm by which she supported herself as she leaned across tipped the table & everything landed in a heap on the floor. She looked at me & grimaced but in a way so that I wasn't sure whether she had expected me to be distracted by her or commiserate with her. I was grateful for the change of feeling caused by the earthquake. It was quarter to three. I strode over to the large picture window & looked out onto the rows of blue-green cabbages. I could have waited until the stones hatched on the beach. I felt abandoned by the receding tide as the butterflies fluttered along the eroding bank above the pebbles. She picked up the teapot & held it high against the shimmering greys of the distant mountain range. The sea in between was oily.

"I'm making an effort to talk to you. I used to sit somewhere quiet all day happy to be away from everyone."

"The difference is that I'm listening."

"They would appear to listen but then what I said didn't seem to make the slightest difference to what they did & that made their listening worse because you knew it was a sham & they had already made up their minds or they just were not going to bother."

"I'm going to act on what you say. I'll try to do something you want me to."

One of them stared directly at where I was. He began waving his free hand in front of his eyes as if it might help him to see better. He crouched at first & then kneeled pushing his head forward & upwards. Some of them had noticed by this time & talked more softly.

Their eyes joined his in searching the gloom in my direction. The lizard grew larger & larger between her buttocks as she sensed her chance in the distraction. She stroked her scarred wrist with an index finger & its red nail shone like her lips under her tongue. She too turned her head up & looked straight at me smiling showing her teeth & then I saw her toes grip the earth & the lizard disappear. Her hands slapped into the unsuspecting face of the one who had nearly detected me. Her body was dragged sideways through the fire by the fierceness of his recoiling spin as he tried to avoid her spring. A fan of sparks radiated into the low bough & a few embers stuck to her thighs. She screamed. She arched her back & kicked out while the area beneath the tree had been rendered almost totally dark in a few seconds. I was completely blinded by the abrupt change. Then slowly a light flickered on her back & another stronger light showed the black smudges. The tree leaves caught fire one by one & then the branches, a few branches, & at last the whole tree blazed.

FOURTH. A CLAY EAR WITH WORDS SCRIBBLED ON IT IN PENCIL.

ONE OF THEM GREY.

Three of them rose abruptly gesticulating violently threatening & shouting at each other.

A thin rope hissed by the window dragging her by a ring in the leather collar she always wore & because his hand was covered with rust he left an earth-coloured mark on the page to be copied. We decided to go out & sit by the pit to get some wind through our hair, under its tree. Some of us fell asleep.

"That one should have been carried under-arm or have had a piece of thick string tied to her leg," he mumbled in his sleep.

I suppose the string should have been a soft kind so it didn't abrade, cut or graze her leg. They wanted her without a blemish.

Then she squealed. "Shit. It's always the same. . .not an inch of difference. . .no daylight between each task. . .Ouch. . .too tight. . .too short. Not that much movement."

And she put her tongue out to show a distance & hoped he would suck it.

"Look at that scar."

"It was probably hard nylon rope."

The meeting should have begun in the afternoon. It was delayed. When it began it was complicated, being entirely concerned with reading chance & foretelling the future for those of us on that frosty night road. The conclusions were all wrong & yet we were lucky to make so many mistakes because they nearly added up. . .which is pretty close. . .to a ravishing perfection.

The rage was turned to food.

We brought out the animals.

A cock breathes at about 30 times per minute.

A dog about 28.

A cat a little less.

A man about 10 - 15 times.

A monkey about 30.

A TORTOISE about 3.

We cut up the tortoise shell with a hacksaw until we had six pieces. Each one had a different number of lines. It was our chance but at that moment a visitor came stumbling into the pit at the gate & we had to haul him out by the arm & shoulder & put him on his way. That distraction stopped us. We threw nothing. After a while, a wire twanged as it was snagged, followed by a dull thud that seemed more as if muted by a dark night's closeness than coming on a clear sunny afternoon. We didn't investigate, but shutting the door quickly set off an interesting chain reaction. This door is always held open by an intricate, wrought iron rusty corner of an old fashioned ornate fender which had marked off a fireplace at least a hundred years ago. Sometimes the round niche into which the bottom of the door slotted as you manoeuvred the iron chunk with your foot didn't release the door quite as you expected when you flicked it with your toe-cap just before slamming the door shut. A garden rake with an extra long heavy home-made shaved willow log handle stood dormant for the greater part of the year behind the door, which closed another door-space too low to walk upright through. An old silver teapot, three

black sticks. a very heavy peeled hazel hoe handle more fit for a pick, a sharpening stone most useful for the scythe & a builder's level also occupied this choice storage space.

There was also a five foot steel rod used as a drill bit for making holes in rock to place blasting explosive charges & a large old-fashioned wooden handled rip-saw not very sharp & next to useless & a triangular, except that one side was shallowly curved, black stoved saucepan complete with lid also previously silver coloured but now a little smutted & a small four tined fork that shouldn't have been there & a Balahulish slate tile with a hole for the clout in it & with three protruding crystals of fool's gold (nicely spaced) & a wire brush with a tin head guard its bristles full of grey dogs' hair & a dead tick.

Having stooped through the doorway & slammed the door R. hesitated.

"I'm glad to be inside," he said, nodding the raindrops out of his hair & blowing them off his eyebrows. Here he was as he always imagined he would be wearing three stars of supreme merit on his chest, two of them for the same thing. . . work. And that strapped to his double XX waist was a 'frontier' colt made in the U.S.A. The belt & holster, embossed & sewn with gold. He was hearing badly, just as a child does when it wants to keep on playing. In his small hat he had stuck a green fir twig for fun. His big head was made to look bigger by the small hat. On his dandy shoes, quite unfit for this mode of life, were a few splashes of a very red colour & it would only have been a guess at blood.

The wind easily blew his hat off into the dogs' waterbowl. It was the only time I saw him in this hat which had the stars for work scratched onto the hatband, with merit embroidered on the brim, where it was thumbed on & off.

"Next," he said. He had shut the door. But we had gone.

"I'm next," she said.

Then P. poured almond oil into the cup of his left hand, put the bottle down against the wall, but within reach, & rubbed his hands together. Then P. dipped his left-hand fingers into the black pigment & caressed & tugged her left breast, then her right breast, until they were oily black. They grinned with delight sprawling in the August heat, so sweet barefoot cutting ice.

"So that's black. How do you use silver? (never?). On the shrewd mirror?"

"I used silver once for the colouring of some heavy birds in the summer moonlight."

Her unclosed scar harvests the thinness, the feeble glints shredded off the others desires, & stores them while they convert into a thicker frenzy which then pours out, sweltering & sometimes even gorgeous, to swamp her own hope. It muffles into agony what might have been.

"What should be."

The fantasy is bare, very bare. . . a few poles with ancient rags flapping a prayer for the return of twig & foliage & a demanding Thrush's song.

"The circle, the celestial door is also the ring of my shackle. Fuck it!"

She folded the piece of paper; the blotched summons, to begin again the catastrophe of black straw & Aunt Sally, to waddle before the prolific harvest, & then sleep a racking sleep.

She went away. She came back. She was still ill. (She went away). Nothing could be changed to turn the endless but shrinking cycle. By that time, all that was left of the



wound were two small brown scars. I didn't care. I knew the promised zenith would be further yet, with loop after loop of hairpin; but one step more & your head flies one way & your feet fly down the scree. You slide amongst the bladder champions, with a dog on your shoulder.

"Some people have their heads in the stars; it never says where their feet are."

This is one of the impossible tasks of fairy tales, to weave the happily ever after before daybreak, with the sudden switch from infantile timelessness, to coax another glimpse of bliss, before another monster is manufactured by Sleeping Beauty with her intellectual jigsaws & sudden emotional guesses.

"I felt time after time all the usual things. . .despair. . .disbelief. . .frustration. . .anger.

Suffered sadistic rigmaroles as if directed by a ravenous, insatiable monster fish that designated the exact level of possibility. You could miss it by a hair."

"But she was magnetic for you?"

"A deeper compulsion than that. . .it was a disorder contracted by having had to be arrayed against death. Not by choice, by love."

"A sacred isolation?"

"She was the child I keep losing now. But not only that. Her children had become sacred objects. . .you could either worship them or be damned. Their space was holy. . .you could only whisper in it. . . & carnal sounds were banned."

Bite the pillow.

Bite your hand.

Bite your tongue.

Bite the dust.

"She was beautiful again. . .you know. . ." She trailed off hoping I would finish the lie.

"In death you mean? No, much more ugly than just before. And that was bad enough for her to face."

Ash of the imperfect fairytale.

"Why ask me that?"

She felt the tug of the dream. "Back to work," she grimaced half smiled fluttered her false eyelashes testing their effect in a round hand-held mirror, approved them but changed her mind & peeled them off. She put them in an iridescent oyster shell on the table & nudged the ball-handled screwdriver as she did. It clinked the five glass beads & sounded out the summons of the dream again.

"A different coloured face," she discussed with her hand-held image. "Yes. . .olive green so these ashes will have to come off."

And over to the basin she went to wipe the smuts & smears away & rinse the rag & wash her face in a gush of the tap. Dried, her face looked waxen, intense, as if only just pulled away from the pressing of a grotesque mould. It shone strange loose lumped yet compelling as the olive paint curved it heart shaped, smouldering, ready for the smashed concrete palace of this dream.

"I'll rip this," she tugged up the skirt, tore the silk, her nipples hardened at this hiss. She let the lining fall lopsided by her left leg. A child of the rookery. Glass shoes mmmm the nearest I can get is jellied plastic refracting a pink glow mmmm the ducks were luminous pink & purple he had said, she remembered. But this pink is an industrial shine,

workshine, for the combat against the dead man. She carried on making-up musing aloud at times, sure of her separation; half sentences & isolated words became a poem of her loneliness.

The sudden black blows released him into a derelict location older than any ivy covered stone, to hear her calling him to eat.

"God! This place. . .what could be compelling about this?"

"You." And she was gone.

Her shoes tripped on uneven flags. Silent she touched a wall to steady herself & walked on. She trembled, but that was part of the job. Unusual warmth & a glittering light seemed to encroach & seep into the subway tunnel.

"Is this one uninhabited?" She asked the question out loud to herself.

"No echo. Was it polystyrene? What nonsense the wall are so hard. How long will it last? How far does it go?" She stopped & rolled pebbles under her foot.

"Does it matter? It gives me pleasure to think of damage undone, rolling that fat sow off & slicing her up to cure & cook for him. Sprinkle the basil from between my palms & smell my hands. It's a meal he'll love."

The wind droned & whined.

"Get back quickly! Haven't you noticed that there's no earth to walk on, not a garden just ash, not even a crack with soil & weeds between the slabs." They warned.

"So that's why he's coming here at last. . .he's found out. . .took him long enough. Ah!  
Before I go."

(She turned & ran back as fast as she could raising no dust. Oh! That's why, she noted).

She slipped back in through the door.

"I'll need stockings. . .night work."

She pulled the drawer & it bulged open. She deftly pulled out the octopus of loose  
stocking legs tangle & tutted the sheerest set free; quickly set them up her legs & gave a  
pinch & a twist of the top embroidered band to keep them up.

'Enough,' she thought, 'of the renewed white slash, the weal of bareness, to lick!'

"Unless he brings that cargo of hatred I'll be O.K."

"That's alright." They said. "He got rid of that stuff long ago."

"And she cawwed." She said. "You expect me to believe that!"

The door clicked shut on the never night.

"Belly," she centred its attention by placing her fingertips lightly on it. "I hope for a  
spiralling tongue for you. . .not rat's teeth. . . but jubilation to stuff the lagoon of  
memory." And she rasped the word 'stuff' several times against the corridor's walls. She  
trod lightly on through wave after wave of indecipherable anguish, the rounded moon,  
her burden.

"At last I've realised," he exclaimed, "It's a space I must move about in gently, not try &  
crash through the walls. . . couldn't do anyway. . .but that's just a way of re-inforcing the  
notion I've got." The whispers of tissue paper followed his path.

"That it will end?" They asked.

"I know it will I understand now." He answered. And faded into the background.

"You won't forget it?" They asked. She shook her head.

"No. The wanderings & omissions still lash & cause spews of doubt that angrily obliterate whatever. . ." & she gestured at them, both hands negligently fluffing up the space between them, ". . .chance there was of coming together."

"He wasn't there?"

"Yes. He was there, but I couldn't see him. Yet I can't see how I missed him."

She felt the thorn. The straight line of pain deep in her chest.

"That fat sow. I'll rub her snout in it. . .no she'll like that. I'll cut it off & boil it." She embraced her own shoulders. "And he'll eat it. A caring touch, not a jibe, that's what I wanted. . ."

The pink bowl was dropped almost flung & the coffee dregs inexplicably stained his cheek.

"Get back to it." They ordered.

Her body was cold & yet she sweated, she could feel the moisture on her shoulder blades. She shook as the thrill came searching, her breasts froze & expanded spontaneously, she started to vomit, she scratched a figure on the ground with a toe, a flick of dampness. Her guts subsided. She felt she had momentarily been appropriated, as if when reading a newspaper story it could persuade you to hide a sharp knife under your mattress in case some spirit came to steal your soul.

"The embrace that you needed to feel, did it happen, finally?"

"Yes. At last I was able to believe that the maiden had been laid to rest in Mother Earth."

"So a new image replaced that ghastly thin line of smoke & her body sitting up in the fire."

"It was still a sabotage of love having her body wafted away in air." He looked away.

"But she could be the breath of spring, not autumn defoliating trees. I needed that centred stake between her lungs. Heart rendered. The meandering heart faithfully charred. Given up. And the gift would have been a healing babble cut out from the thirst I had, at last & easily permeating dull performances stirred up by childhood, the bare words like rubies (because I don't know them) no haze, no crossfire of meaning, the liberation of the final fragments. A severed head. The solemnly gnawed bone."

And she slowly started to feel the spin nearing the end of the grey passage going towards him coming near.

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While the sun is still shining, although I feel sick & I know the sun will not shine long, I'll tell you as much as I know about her & the rest of them. The first time I saw him alone he was sitting on a hillside. Cnoc. It was nowhere, you see, but he was sitting there on his own body's hill wrapped up like a boulder. The sun caught the angle of his shoulder like a scrubbing brush & off flaked golden sparks of fire.

He walked down the black shadow side of the lane, kicking up spurts of dust. The daylight faded as he shut the wooden door. His head nodded as he reworked the view.

'Here it is', he thought, 'two figures, or more, lying under an elm tree. . .no, by a gnarled tree.'

While I am moving I can't hear anything, as soon as I stop all the sounds of the surrounding world rush in at me. I move again & complete silence embraces me. I am a boulder on a mountain & while I am like that, various people steal up on me thinking they can take what was destroyed by fire.

The two figures, a man & a woman, by the old tree are holding their coats around themselves in the gale & each trying to balance a plate of food on their knees. The man gave up & threw the plate down, spilling its contents into a ditch. Then he lay back & carefully picked up a cup that was at hand & stood it on his chest. They remained there undisturbed by the wind. The woman leaned across him & shouted at me. A dog had been yapping all this time but now it stopped & I heard her calling me over.

"Your head denies it, but I can tell that your heart hopes."

The man nodded between each word, slowly raising his eyes & then he sneezed in the dust thrown up by the feet of the men stealing past him, coming closer & closer to me. The old man was fumbling, trying to push the woman & keep his drink balanced. The dog was snarling again & nothing would quieten it down. I threw a small stone. It was such a perfect shot that the man jerked up spilling his drink coughing & smiling with tea running at the corners of his mouth & eyes all in one. The dog jumped down off the wall because the stone had hit it straight on the nose & now revealed behind the dog was a slice of the moon so thin & clean cut it looked untouched by human hand. A figure appeared on the bridge & two more on the road just off the bridge, & as they waved to us

the hand of the woman cut across the moon. Then I saw the boat glide out from under the bridge & I liked it more & more as the white mist wrapped around the moving figures feet as the boat crushed the grasses & reeds at the bank & just before I could lower my eyes I saw her bend over & slowly stretch out her hand.

"First of all, a finger to suck!"

"Pull the curtains. Pretend everything is as it should be."

Their boots crunched in the white gravel around the house. It was enough of a warning. Every bush was black as we slipped from one to the other. The frost came as if a spell had bound it. The sound of it made our eyes meet. Then she purred & came for me with her cat mask on with her fingernails lacquered bright red.

"It was something like this, the shadow I threw on the river," she stood up smoothly raising her arms keeping the hands held with their palms flattened close to her thighs & as the elbows hinged out so the hands flared & shook themselves free of the water. I stood on the bridge & watched the shimmering water trickle down her body as she stepped up onto a rock. The river made a different sound, in amongst its hiss over the pebbles, that was more like a dog pattering across a tiled floor. The river sound changed abruptly several times as she stretched & crouched & lithely stepped onto the grey-blue boulder. A little way along & high above the riverbed, on its ravine side, a live silver birch in leaf hung upside-down by the roots. The woman dived again into the prussian blue depths of the mountain pool. The river was soundless. I shuddered & watched. She stood up in the shallows & as she lifted her arms they were black wings.



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She became grim & unheeding only responding by a habit of precaution in case something dropped that might be useful later on, a (1994) Radovan of deceit.

"Now we need some exact detail to grill & chime something true out of that grunge."

'So this is a cure?' He wondered to himself, going over the lawn of surprise. 'The fine honing for each intact instant, enabling me, giving the brushstroke a nonchalance of intent.'

"The place between the tides."

"A goldfinch on a dry thistle."

The various voices chimed.

Her footsteps rang out amplified by the lack of any clutter. Nothing to cling to. The repercussions of clinging to a spent past are blasted by the sudden push & return of being.

The repartition of the whirlpool drumbeat heart on heart, closing the gap between lovers.

"They never meet in the dream, do they?"

Fleetingly she seemed to remember some other event. . .a flash. . .a pain. . .was that me walking down that passage blowing kisses back. . .no there was sunlight. . .I can feel it. . .the hum of insects all around & over on the exta. . .why was it going to be. . .the entrails told it.

Buds burst flower & wither in a mess of blood only a geck could miss it. The blood soaked away in the dust.

Click. The gun was ready.

Click! Clack! Click! Her heels went mincing down the passage. She put on a bit of a show to no one. She stopped & stooped to pull a heel strap into place. Her hair was grabbed tight keeping her bent. As the grip tightened she was pushed onto her knees. She felt a jab of pain behind her ear as the snout of the gun pushed ruthlessly in.

'Click,' she remembered, nothing had changed. The years rolled away, a multitude of pale winter days each swabbed with greyness. Piss-stained hours piercing each flake of memory with the thorn of yearning. Her knees were again on the ashes. She caught the plum odour of her awkward playing.

"Was it that rejection that sent her to Hell?"

"That attempt at seduction perhaps. But more likely that she didn't try one & felt she'd missed her chance forever."

Who are these people taking the poets prisoner & carrying off their words without a hoot?

Re-arranging bliss into apparitions with lint & pus covered limbs; black thorns delineating their cruel embrace. A living jelly shot with bits of rotting wood to glue the fabric of this world they construct & enmesh each tender slender figure with the poison of interpretation. To stab & sew poetry to become the aggravation of our hearts. Each fearful blow leaving not only a raw slit oozing pale slime into the yards of bleach soaked bandage, but a basin of severed heads negligently adorning the corridor, guarded by a blood sodden Medusa.

"You don't think anyone gets past. Do you?"

He grinned.

"Did she?"

"If you look in the mirror & only see your face growing old. . .what can you expect if you turn a weapon on yourself."

"Lose your head with that constant dissatisfaction."

"Perhaps she should have left that mirror in her belt & caught the light reflecting from his hat. And left it at that."

"That yearning for nourishment no matter where from, choice fragments of conversation like pieces of body, become a sort of cannibalism."

"So they disintegrate? Fall to pieces?"

"They take themselves to bits, to sacrifice, to burn up, to offer themselves in love to spectres long lost."

. . .she felt the blade then & now. . .first a peremptory glance, upside-down, at the broken winter sky, as the manacles snapped & stung on each wrist. She felt waist deep, sinking in a complicated half-lit delight which made her breasts swell while she pissed herself with fear. This was the pulp world caught & bewitched by each virgin; first stepping with shoes of silver, drenched by drops of light, then changed & transfixed by denial into a black stew of storm-strewn garbage.

"Transformed to survive?" Each bitter circle staggeringly mirrored a foliage of blood & butterflies. . .concealing a simple way. . .alone. . .the smell of damp earth. . .the airless passage gone.

"No. To her the choice meant compromise. It could never be right."

"But it would have ended her. . ."

"Sorrow. Trial. I don't think so."

"What she had to be."

Cinder walls splashed & rusting absorbed the crash of the first blast from the weapon 'click' then an undertow from the threatened annihilation clutched her trembling guts. The dream began disintegrating in flashes of mother-of-pearl. Hissing smoke lamming her brain.

"So this year is the same a well," she whispered, a bullet bursting unwearingly through the silence. Again hammering the cycle back, barrenly, year after year.

"I'll be naked by the door, blinded by the flash, turned mute by the explosion, the bullet will rip through it again. The door will open. . .the cathouse of the Gods. . .with false blue light the floor eking out its time in noxious squalls of bone dust. . .the commonplace of unwielded torment. . .it will bloom again when I enter, crocus & lily. . .the bell's half moon will clap & mock the gloom. . .I will gemmy open wardrobes & re-dress the dummies. . ."

The gun muzzle was still pressed into her carotid artery with icy precision but that click continued. Her headskin tightened under the strong hand twisting her hair with increasing force. The pressure seemed to invest her whole body.

"I have to tell you," she screamed, "that I want this year to be different. I don't want to return."

Click.

Muted breath.

A deluge of choking white powder fell on them from above.

'A tunnel?' She wondered, her countenance whitening in dismay.

'And I stepped willingly into it. Young, lovely, with awakening desire; stepped into this sid; an insatiable land. I could already be dead back there, or grey & old, in the click of my fingers here.

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The thrum of a heart beating close, too close; too bare. The blade slipped into her waistband & razored her skirt off with a swinging swish. The blade again diagonally slid into the wet gusset of her pants quivering apart her thighs & slit them open. The steel caressed the flesh. The cut fed the passion. She shivered as the blade iced her slit. It flowered. The petals spread.

"There are no words for this."

But the flesh burned. Her wrists & ankles felt like flint. They were blue.

"What had been the treacherous lure?"

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An amorphous contact with wakdjunkaga.

The white dust piled up against her knees; or was it snow, or a cloud, she couldn't tell. It made no difference now she was as pale as a corpse. So she lay down & felt a touch as light as a feather.

"Lips?"

"I don't know, I never found out."

Either honey or blood trickled down her legs. The stabbing light caught the colours of her bodice sequins changing as she shuddered on the cold stone. She rolled onto her back.

"Try it then," she called over to him & wrigglingly suggesting by the grin which accompanied these motions that words are silver & the action black.

"It's impossibly silly play."

"To lose the details?"

She liked the bit about the loop. . . then came the hiss again from out of nowhere. . .she ignored it. . .she liked to forget so many things yet couldn't get some events out of her mind. . .ever.

The tears were real enough each night & what kind of accomplished escape is it that claims all your feelings for grist & leaves you a grey powder to weigh out your day.

"It helps! I've seen it help."

"I've seen it spoil the journey, turn the narrow road into a masquerade & then an icy snake, hurting, hurting. . ."

The sobs were choked back so that tomorrow they could begin again in new flesh, newly frosted. All her skin tightened with the chill thought of her past destroyed, without a single shape remaining for the future to grow on, to fatten daily smiles. And she shrank back into the shale of fantasy with the meaningful buzz of mistakes blocked out & the droning hum of reason trapped in her head, its halo encrusted with rusty nails of hurt like a fetish. With more & more iron hammered in at each session, added to this, until breakdown forced the split which strained meanings beyond charm to vulgar change; to the very same place in time 10 years ago where END stuffed itself up the hole of

BEGINNING & whined like a dog in a dark shed to be let out. Love lifted the latch once & tiptoed back, like Valentine, but will never again.

"It led her where?"

"In the end to forget her body."

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Why should I wait until you've done it before asking you to do it? And why should I ask you straight out? Because you want me to? And why shouldn't I say one thing first & then find I could have said another & saved doing the work twice? And why shouldn't I think about saying a thing first & then say another & save a lot of trouble? And why shouldn't I think about saying a thing first & then say it & cause a lot of trouble? And why shouldn't I think about saying a thing & say another deliberately or by mistake & who would know whether it as a slip or not? And why shouldn't I ask you straight out & have another reason? And why shouldn't I think an unbelievable thing without any reason & still ask you straight out in unbelievable love? And why shouldn't I have said all this to show you that there isn't a reason?

"I'll go."

He made a mistake & I made a mistake. She called her. She called him. She made a mistake calling them both. He called her. I didn't call her.

There was a sparkling frost on the road. It made the road look like precious diamond ribbon lying along a coarse black hessian land. The moonlight reflected on it for miles

away in front of us for an instant. Then dark clouds again covered the moon but the road still glowed. It seemed detached from the landscape. The door opened. The world was silver & black. I closed the door. I turned.

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"It looks like the gates of Hell." We gasped.

Plumes of raincloud hid everything with their spirals except the long white lashes of waterfalls. Hailstones spewed out of crevasses in the lost ravine & buried the matted dead grass stalks. The ice rattled grey stones loose & tossed them past a grey sky. I spun my head & kept my blue eyes on the blue road.

"It's so grey," she said, "how can we tell where we are?"

"We've been blowing along this way for days. We ought to know."

If only I could catch her at the right time. When love blew through her & she felt it.

"Still a blank?"

"Kind of."

The grey sky kept scooping jagged lumps out of the mountains. There were snowed up heather pastures. No tracks. Not a sign of life on the ground with grim rocks & yellow slithering sludge.

I lost my footing. I rolled for days over the snow in blizzards & out as the dog's paw drills filled with hailstones. I ripped red scree from under the layers of sloping fells, slapped it into the sky gaps & kept the red mountains in shape & up to size. The dogs



ravaged the shapeless trackless animals. Row after row of icicles gnawed & sawed the cliffs & tipped up the clumsy stunted birch trees & toppled them, black & smashed, year after year, as I rolled chalking a honey-coloured mark on the cliff face, on the snowfield, on the sea bed. Each mark as quick as a kitten, lasting year after year, between the coarse blades of grass under the scattering moor. The raven flew crazy to prove it was something. It did it every time I watched it. Made itself into a child's bird. So easy to draw; so easy to miss. The bird nearly came to alight but wasn't giving up the air so soon. It hoped we had killed some little mite or dropped a morsel & so it followed every one of our smudged tracks, age after age, across the moorland until only a skeleton bird flapped slowly along with two alert black rolling eyes rattling in its bleached skull, scanning a trackless, quaking bogland that sucked the bird's hoarse croaks down so quickly that the bird seemed silent as I rolled under it scooping up yard after yard of peat & burning each lump to light my way as I pummeted brushing through life long thickets of raven's feathers. As each peat glowed in my wooden tongs I saw one smile, the same smile & nothing more. A wooden bird pecked for an instant at the skyline & through the break there poured an enormous ringing wicked smile. The same one.

"What boredom," barked the dogs, each licking up a rubbery red lip & slicing it down with their fangs. One dog's eye had the map of the world marked in it, the oceans in blue, the clouds in white. There was no land in its wall eye. So when the traveller came, almost at the end of her journey, I wondered where she had trodden. My dogs who bark at all creatures did not harry this visitor. They sat leaning against each other for the first time that day.

"When that door is opened the stones will cascade in on the dream." They predicted.

"It's only an imaginary door," he protested, " & behind it useless steps leading nowhere."

"The most dangerous door there is."

She smiled the most dangerous smile I had seen. I am going to say that when I saw the huge well-known jagged rimmed always rocky dark against the sky with never grim green topped although you couldn't see it, mountain; barely showing through the mist, I knew I could love you but I wanted to write 'love you again' so I know that at some time I had lost you.

"You lost me in the future," she said, "I expect to lose myself."

When she first smiled, both dogs stopped on the rocks waiting for me to catch up. I jumped down the rocks close to the sea. She smiled again & the wispy yellow clouds made a few more grotesque faces above the hills.

"I shall go."

I told the dogs to move. If you ever decide to stay below a curved grassy bank & smile at the thought of a bird slowly settling down on her pebble eggs & being under there as each stone chick pecks its way free, remember, that as I caught up with the dogs & turned to jump down the rocks that her smile was for me.

"Where are you going?"

And she gave me a look to talk to her. What could I say? I couldn't say if I love you I'll love you, I knew I would love her. It wasn't the place to say it with the concrete steps leading off the shore into thin air. . . I left her. When I came to a banking I looked down & saw a piece of coloured glass glinting. I went down to pick it up & uncovered more &

more things. I found several necklaces. They were all black. I was pleased at my find, because it was for you. Then I sensed danger.

He shouted to me to get out of that place, down the ladder. I looked around but couldn't see the steps so I motioned to him, 'what for?' He cut his engine & yelled.

"You. Whatever! Get out!"

I thought, 'Hell he's mad about it, maybe I'd better get out even though it's frosty.' So I climbed down, gingerly stepping on the frozen rungs & road. Leg ladders. I was glad to get out. The thought of a green, swollen horse-chestnut tree in flower with pinkish petals scattered over a coke pile & over the blue gravel path, came to me & vanished as quickly.

I was out. It was raw. I heard her voice asking for me.

"Come over here. I'm asking you."

I had meant to move & smile. I threw out my hand & she mistook it for a gesture of impatience. Nothing could have been further from my mind. Half of the action was to keep my balance as I was expecting the frosty road to be slippery.

"I ask you. . ." She started

"I was balancing." I already said, I had meant to smile.

He was still shouting.

It shows how quickly you can be misunderstood. As quick as things happen in a fairy tale. I held back an explanation. That was a mistake. Anything would have done even if it had never happened. I think she made a mistake kicking me out, but not because there was a chance for us to be happy. That had gone. He always thought too much about it & so he made the mistake of telling her too many things, too soon. I just made a mistake

leaving. I saw her glance back. Seeing her look that way was the mistake. You can see how awkwardly some mistakes come along. I wanted to say that the frost looked smooth, but I didn't; I still wanted to say it. He said something unkind about me. I said something tender to her that she had heard before. She said something back with a considered, hurtful indifference. We all heard something quite different. But we didn't know it.

"How do you know it?"

"Some things are uncertain."

"Something. Always some things!"

Click or Crash, the door shut every time.

That was the end of it.

I saw the icy road. She saw the sparkling frost on the road. He saw the road.

So.

He made the same mistake.

'I didn't make a mistake that time,' I thought, 'I have been so careful.'

She couldn't make a mistake either, she was right or the game was over. Although I thought I hadn't made a mistake, I had. I didn't know. She did. I knew later. By then, of course, it was a different mistake.

"Was it too late?"

"I wish it was that simple."

Because I had said nothing, she said I knew. I didn't. I already knew that. She was surprised at my persistent refusal to believe her. The frost still sparkled on the road. We kept still. We were silent. It could have looked as though we were holding something

back. Something worth saying. I wasn't holding back, really I wouldn't know how, unless it was to decide between something simple, black & white. I don't expect you to believe that. The questions came later. And I could only ask myself then, because as you know, she had gone. The silver frost made the night black. My foot slipped on the road every time. We know that. I should have kept my equilibrium at the time, but I wavered. I threw up my arms to prevent myself falling, yet I fell. I suspected later that I wanted it to end. He never spoke, he shouted. He had been shouting for years. I was glad to leave that behind. She believed me at first, so he had to leave, but even though we stayed there was something missing. She left as well, eventually. She appeared to be anxious whenever he appeared to fall. I asked why she did it. She said she didn't feel it, but she asked other people what they thought. They need not have answered, she never heard a word. He appeared again & she was with him. They showed up, here & there, occasionally. I was never curious about them. He didn't call at first, but quickly realised she was waiting. I wish it had been that simple. When he left we didn't have any questions: but you did. He didn't leave as quickly as the dog, but then no person could, nor did he fall. I hoped that he would fall. Actually I hoped he would die. I was impatient. The moon rose. He didn't disappear amongst the trees, but below the road. I was impatient to be going & stole a glance at her face to see if I could tell if she had seen enough to be ready to go. As you know, I hoped she was. I hoped some sign would show on her face, to encourage me.

"You can tell by the way I'm putting it I'm nervous."

That was wrong. I hoped her expression wouldn't have a smile in the middle of it but more a grimace. That was obviously wrong. I hoped that although she was smiling it would be a grin of exasperation at the delay.

"I know I'm wrong. I can tell by how hesitant I feel."

How could she have grinned out there in that cold, you might ask. Well she often did when she was pleased with other things. That was wrong. I hoped to see her face showing pleasure at the thought of continuing on our way. She didn't smile. He should have stopped speaking, before he had said the wrong thing. The road was black.

The black dog ran with its tail between its legs. The further it ran the closer together the trees looked from where we stood. We watched for the reappearance of the dog. The frost came first. So it was easy for me to slip away. Later, the dog howled at the door, not the moon. The moon was shining, big & small; with face & faceless. It was shining to one side of us as we stood & the main impression of that frosty night was lightness twinkling on an abyss. One woman crouched pissing. The dog nosed her bare arse. She was angry but laughed. We parted company. I was left alone with one other woman. Just before we parted the others asked me what I had seen & I described the jumble of faces as they had appeared to me. I didn't really stop for long to describe them because of the coldness of the air. I could have filled in more detail; I had seen them exactly as I later saw them. We went inside & forgot the crackling ice. I thought she couldn't stop herself blurting out what she had been denying all along. The dog was jumping. I can't remember what she said when she spoke. I know I shall never be able to recall what she said because if I had really heard it, & grasped it, I would have been able to stop her making me leave. The

dog jumped up & was snapping & chewing at my gloves affectionately, distracting me, so I can't remember much. I know she made me think that I had also made a mistake when she spoke to me. I misunderstood her confused words; perhaps at that point she was talking about herself. What she told me later made me think that I had set an incorrect meaning on her words, which I had incompletely heard & then probably changed as well. I was wrong to have changed my mind. I may have been right. What she said later was true then. Her earlier denial was to put me off, to place a doubt in my mind. Anyway, as I don't recall what she blurted out, could it have been such a key? I'm not sure, but I know I very often forget what seemed at the time to be vital.

She was undressed. She was not upset by being partly naked, or by the dog whimpering, or by having to speak.

"Mine was not an impulsive act. I thought before & fully understood its consequences."

She insisted on this later.

"You were free?"

"I could have stayed quiet & carried on pretending everything was alright or spoken out as I did."

"For what?"

"I couldn't have carried on in silence for much longer."

"What caused the strain? No one restrained you. I thought you had more choices than most. Was that what was wrong?"

"I suppose it was the anger inside destroying any choices because of his silence."

"Was it the only action possible for you? No compromise? No waiting?"

"I don't know whether it was right, but it seemed the only possible thing to do, to escape intact. There were such ferocious feelings around, barely contained. When I first counted there were 77 days to go. I thought, as it's that number I must be right about going."

"There are less days now. Do you still think it will be right to go?"

"I wouldn't be making the first count now."

When she came for the first time I knew her face. I had seen it before in a dream. It was a surprise to have been able to see it so accurately. I was still always wondering whether it was possible. 'I believe you. . . I don't, I said to myself. I didn't believe any evidence to prove it would have helped me. The greatest difficulty was to give a clear description when one of the most important sensations was of knowing that I would have no trouble in recognising the face, or person, when I saw them; because what I saw was more than could be conveyed by a flat verbal impression. It had something of their character or troubles. Could I think up the impression of familiarity? What would that mean if I did? The way I saw her face, when she came, was affected by having seen it before & by my expectation being exactly fulfilled in a breathtaking way. But I was not expecting someone ugly or beautiful & didn't think about attractiveness, appeal or otherwise; but only about the recognition of someone expected. I could not imagine it any other way. I didn't expect a particular expression but the very first sensation as I looked through the window & she caught my gaze was of an identical image to the one that had appeared days before in a waking dream.

"Who cares about proving it. I've had enough of people deafened by their own doubts."



He had emphasised that they were not clear-cut pictures of any person, although they were distinct images, but seemed to be caricatures as well. He said that he would & did instantly recognise any of them if he met them, especially by their actions.

"I've thought about the alternative of staying & trying to patch it up."

A robin hopped from an outside twig on a tree to an inside one. It was silent. She was lying on her back questioning me. She was not bothered whether I stayed or went. She was always tired. She was also angry. She didn't appear angry but the way she had put the questions showed it. She didn't laugh, but sighed. She made a slip but thought it didn't show. She didn't cover for herself. She didn't care. She hoped he would go away & stay.

"Even if I understood every time what might or even what would certainly happen, & I don't, what difference would it make" She asked impatiently.

"Perhaps if you didn't like the prospect then maybe if you acted impulsively against that restraint," he ventured hopefully, "And tried again, you could refuse to act in the first place?"

"What the Hell are you saying? And then have to emotionally override all my considerations! Something like that?" She mocked. "Is that what you mean?"

He was silent.

"It's called putting up with it." She shouted. "And I fucking will not!"

The robin hopped further into the tree, but an outside twig still quivered slightly. She yawned & rolled over & made a hesitant gesture by flapping her left hand backwards like a lid. I didn't know what it was she intended.

"I've turned some words on my tongue so many times that the very things I'd been trying to end, by understanding, destroyed some of the words. But the hurt was still there."

"Like sleeping for days & still being tired?"

She gave him a puzzled look.

The dog groaned in its sleep. She leaned over & looked down at the dog but didn't stroke it. She rarely did. It wasn't ominous then, nothing simple enough to be conjured up by that word. There was no choice apparent, although perhaps the seeds of discontent had been sown.

"It's become a joke, living this close to someone who I only feel I want to avoid."

"You could be so very tired that you're incapable of making the right choice, so fatigued that you can't see a choice?"

"I'm unable to say. . .I don't care anymore. I don't need you to find excuses for me. They aren't your feelings." She turned away & added, "Where are you. . .you."

"Why aren't you coming away with me?"

"Don't want to."

"But you said you would."

"I know but I've changed my mind."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I just feel like staying here."

"But you promised to come & help me."

"I know but I can't."

"What's stopping you? Nothing. You must come!"

"No. I don't want to. I can't face it."

"Yes. But you said. . ."

"Never mind 'yes but' I'm not coming with you. I want to be on my own."

"There must be a reason."

"None. I want to be on my own."

Each answer was a typical one to the same questions put time after time in a desperate persistence as if the repeats would eventually prise the lid off some interesting deceit instead of having to accept a blank & uninformative unwillingness. The answers were delivered in a flat voice that became more tired with each repeat, but she still answered.

"You must have seen someone & they persuaded you?"

"No. Where could I?"

"You must have known earlier. You could have told me."

"No. I decided now."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I felt smothered. I've other places to go."

Her face had a set expression with a hint of a smile. It gave me a fluttering sensation & my stomach churned when I realised the touch of finality that showed in her eyes.

"So that's it. I knew it."

"Oh. You can come if you want to. But don't blame me if you're not made welcome."

And she almost seemed to smile.

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It was a freak snowstorm for that time of the year. I waited for her. The falling snow made all the trees grey silhouettes while the low sun still shone. I watched, waiting for a lull before setting out from shelter.

"A man cares more for his dog than for mere acquaintances." He said & left.

The two dogs played about. Were docile. I don't know when she went. She could have slipped out anytime, you know. I walked up the hill as fast as I could. It was so steep. The morning mist had cleared. The day was bright & the blue sea floated the dark indigo island calmly against the sky. I looked at it for a moment, no more, & for the rest of that day that island was a rigid flash of grey & purple in my eyes.

Now the sea & sky had no colours.

"Get facts! Keep trying things out. Keep finding things to try out." He said & left.

The night stumbled in over the mountains. It was so black I had to feel for the doorway. The cow was black. I felt for the dogs with my toes. I didn't want to tread on them as I went to bed. The puppy wagged its tail. The calf was black. I left the house door open. I always left it open for the two dogs at night. I was alone, the dogs sat outside. I heard them pad in & out. Then they started to bark & kept on in spite of my calls. I would have been willing to go. I couldn't hear any commotion that would cause the dogs to bark. The dogs barked a long time together. Then only the puppy yapped. I couldn't quieten him.

"Your mind will always spin when you think of me." She had said & left.

I asked myself a series of questions & tried to forget the ring of her words. If someone were wishing for my help, I certainly would have gone if they had asked.

"Why are mistakes revealing? She asked as she left.

They should have butchered the black horse there & then.

"Were any of your actions accidental?" I asked.

"Is anything accidental," She said & slipped into bed.

I didn't know how many steps there were. I didn't know how to conclude. I didn't believe there was a conclusion. There was a conclusion & it didn't include me. I said that there was no conclusion & I felt that I was right. She thought I was right & emphatically said I was right. She trusted me. He thought I was wrong. He didn't trust me though. He said something which showed that. She seldom spoke. A bird sang three times in the middle of the night. It sang its song. The night was silent before it sang & silent after the birdsong until the grey dawn. Only I heard the singing. It didn't wake me. I wanted to share the feeling I had when the bird sang. That feeling kept me awake. That night was not frosty. It was a different night.

"So why is it in here?"

At five I got up. She got up after me. At five-thirty I was alone. The two dogs padded uneasily about. I watched them. They were not usually so uneasy. The morning was grey. The dogs were grey, you know that. What else was grey? The floor was grey. The soles of my feet were grey. So far without any pretence.

"Couldn't life be easy," she said. "But we realise. . ." She said no more.

The road really was grey in that light. The cleft in the mountain was filled with grey cloud tufts. I was incapable of making the right choice although it might have been more fun. She got up after me. It was fun to watch the morning change from grey. She was

tired. She didn't show it to anyone else, only me. It didn't add up. The dogs were still uneasy. That showed. She didn't realise the dogs were disturbed by her presence. The dogs showed it to me but I tried to find another reason for their actions. The dogs watched her closely. They also kept near me. One dog didn't like anyone else near me. I liked that. The other dog was friendly to everyone. I didn't like that so much. I realised that something had ended. I thought about it constantly. I couldn't say when it finished. It made me uneasy. I said she got up after the fun. She didn't seem to know how to show it had ended but I think she would have liked to. She tried to pat the unfriendly dog. She didn't realise the other dog was friendly. That something had ended didn't add up so I watched her closely. Naively, I thought it could be possible to find out when it finished. It became a possibility. Then at five-thirty I was alone with the two grey dogs. They were no longer restive. I was still uneasy although she had gone. There was a greyish light & nothing much could be distinguished. Nothing much showed. A direct relationship like the astonishment over the vastness of love is truly nothing much. If it were it would be a deception.

The dogs were going out. They were sheepdogs. The sheep bunched up. Then the sheep broke the way we wanted them to go but one lamb strayed & the dogs were on it. There is nothing secondhand about love. The dogs showed that, they wouldn't let the lamb stray. They knocked it over once or twice & bit it, drawing blood.

"Before we go on, or say any more, I'd better get the important fact sorted out. I'm mixing up two or three departures. Will you accept that as the best way to describe a parting, an ending & a possibility?"

"Was the astonishment a deceit?" They asked.

She called, "Where are you going? What are you doing?"

But I neither looked at her nor replied. The dogs were in front of me. The grey dawn had gone. I was alone with the two dogs & they were running. I was doing nothing. I was going nowhere.

"So she was the one. . ."

"I only said she called out," he interrupted brusquely, "But there was a tremor in her voice."

It was neither pathetic nor querulous. Her voice could have wavered because she was waving her hands. Her face was also partially covered by a black scarf. Her voice had no force though. It did not demand an answer. They were the last words she spoke to me before she left. I had been told to expect it, but it still shocked me. The raven flew over slowly. It flipped upside-down. Back to earth & feet to sky it croaked. Then it flew on. Again, the raven flipped onto its back in flight & while it glided upside-down for a few seconds, it croaked. The bird didn't utter a call as it flew the right way up. The raven was black & where it touched the air the sky was silver. It flew & croaked on its back until it was out of my sight. It is difficult to describe a departure, a disappearance & a possibility. Keep that in mind with the lamb.

I felt numb.

"I'm trying to tell you in a clear way what happens to me." She exclaimed.

"You can't, so don't be misled about that."

"I'm not trying to form any connections between the possibilities."

"Tell us a straight bit about it. You can't, can you? There isn't one, is there?"

She gave a little information at first. It was typical of the importance she attached to those detailed touches in the story. There was nothing common about her concern for my emotions. She met my expectations. When I thought about meeting her expectations it became a possibility that we could stay.

"Don't try to jump the important parts."

"And leave you dangling & nothing else!"

"Yes. It's like being folded up, in whatever had been decided was my thing, such as heavenly music or warm flesh, & forgotten."

Increase the thickness of the blood. A sign of something.

"What gets told is the important thing. You don't get the light until you throw the switch."

They reminded us.

When she came in from the outside her breasts remained cold after the rest of her body had warmed up. When she lay on her back her breasts didn't flatten. She had said to me.

"I was lonely. I met him at the right time I suppose. He was lonely too. I don't know if you'll believe me but my two best friends used to get on so well together I used to feel out of it & they never went anywhere where I wanted to go, you see they went to dark places where they could hold hands. I was lonely even with them. And then I met him & that was that."

She didn't tell me his name. I never asked.

"I know I'm wrong. I can tell by how hesitant I feel," she said, "But I've got to tell you."

An elusive form of communication is the only truthful one.



"First kiss me." I said.

For happiness is surely related to your mode of existence.

"I know roughly what I want, but how I get it is something that may be changed, time after time." She said.

The best that you can do for someone when they are puzzled by themselves is to continue to say things which fill them with concern & discomfort. I meant no harm to her. She meant no harm to him. The dogs meant no harm. Is harm as grey as that? The girl who loves, who hears & interprets each sigh, has something to lay hold of.

The lamb was knocked down & rolled over by the two grey dogs.

"It may be changed, suddenly you may fall in love. But you could expect something that fails to turn up. Then, no matter how roughly you had planned, you would feel deceived."

I would like her to have been a little more convincing.

I rolled her over.

The lamb rolled over. The raven rolled over. She shuddered expectantly & sighed & opened her legs easily. The lamb rolled over & over & the young dog ripped a lump of wool out of its fleece. The raven croaked. I stripped the rest of her clothes off & she quivered as I caressed her breasts. The lamb jumped high in the air away from the dogs & regained the flock. The raven rolled back in flight. She shuddered & quivered & opened easily. The lamb sucked at the ewe. Its tail wagged rapidly. The fierce grey dog ran back with a tuft of wool sticking out the side of its jaw. We rolled over. The lamb sucked jerkily. The dog rolled in the heather. The raven rolled over & croaked. I pushed her buttocks together. She gave a little croak. The girl who loves must have something to lay

hold of. The lamb mingled with the flock. The dog, still upside-down, snapped at the heather. The raven rolled over.

"I was right not to meet him again."

"But you had promised?"

"What does that matter?"

"I would like you to have been a little more convincing," he finally whispered.

I rolled her over, the lamb. Was it luck? Is luck as grey as that? The lamb, she rolled over easily & expectantly. I had ripped a lump of her clothes out of place & we couldn't suppress a surge of excitement. But I felt numb as she bunched up. The raven croaked. It was the last one I heard. I felt. Numb, she bunched up.

"I'm saving that for love," she said.

"Surely happiness is what you do?"

"It can't be the same. . .who knows; I know once I do a thing it may well show that the conflict belonged to some other time. . .I merely accepted the memory. But it's a risk."

"A risk is better."

The raven was black but you know how black feathers shine in sunlight. She had worn the black scarf & brooch. I pushed her buttocks together again & she gave another little croak.

"You would never try to live together because trying would have made you uncomfortable or even ill."

"I'm sure I should have, I tried. But although I care a lot I couldn't." Pause.

Frosts crackled.

"I would have been mad to try it."

A cry. Outside a man said, "I wonder how long it will last, this hard winter."

"Some people say the detail is unimportant. But to me it's the knot."

"Without a clear, black & white, conviction I can't be touched." The man said.

"Who says any (or did she say my?) truth can be touched."

Both dogs shuffled under the bed.

"I'm saving that for my true love," she said. I already knew. She was naked.

Why did the lamb break away from the flock?

Her clothes had fitted so tightly it had been a struggle to pull them off. They didn't slip off easily so I finished by cutting them off her with my knife.

The two grey dogs ran together & snarled at each other. She had shown impatience.

The lamb had skipped away from the flock. The dogs were crouched ready.

She had helped to undress herself. Was I too slow?

The dogs raced after the lamb & hurled themselves at its shoulders.

She could only find occasional joy before.

"I've racked my brains, I've failed to come up with a single trick to excite you."

"Trick! Is that the right word?"

"Kiss? No, trick is the right word."

We were lost in our own perplexities. A grey mist hovered low from the mountains. She let her hair down & fluffed it at her neck with the backs of both hands. She smiled.

The lamb rolled over. Blood on its face. We kept still. Would she ever be really ready?

"Only a kiss, for happiness, is actually what I want." She smiled, the lamb.

"I'm puzzled because I don't know whether I love him. I met him at the right time."

"That's all."

The raven had gone. The flock was in the stone fank. The two grey dogs sat on the walls regarding the sheep. The sheep were still bleating. The two grey dogs grinned & their teeth were bared to the gums. She slammed the door shut & bolted it behind him & threw off her voluminous black cape. Her friend in the other room laughed, a ghastly trilling that sounded as if it was forced from between two worlds to which she would never belong. They kissed. A doleful embrace like they were being buried alive.

FIFTH. A FLAKE OF GRANITE AND MICA FROM THE CARLOWAY BROCH.

I carry this corner of my world with me. Along with several thousand words.

“Lightning is also silver sometimes.”

‘At last he has caught up with me again,’ she thought, & nonchalantly stroked her knee as she undressed.

The dog’s claws scratching on the floor sounded like a key in the lock, when it came in, sniffing around the underwear scattered about.

‘That dog always sniffed & always snorted,’ she thought as she gave it a kick in passing.

It slotted under the bed.

The jackdaw had been perched on the chimney for about a minute because the twig it held in its beak was too long for the bird to be able to dive down the pot if it still held it in the middle, as it had done to fly. The bird shuffled around the rim & put the twig down & at the same time pecked it up again nearer one end. The jackdaw looked around the garden before hopping down the chimney to land on its pile of twigs & ribbon & straw & string which had by this time reached a depth of nearly four feet. At that moment the whole nest started to slide down the flue. The dog skipped back from the hearth with its head & tail down & snarled at the flurry of debris that cascaded into the grate & onto the floor.

The jackdaw flapped out of the chimney stack & began to search for another piece of nesting material.

I let the dog out of the door & put a match to the sticks. Some puffs of smoke blew back into the room.

The jackdaw went head over claws down another chimney pot.

She started to climb into a pair of white satin pants. The dog came back & the smell of apple mint pervaded the room; it had dashed through a large bed of the herb & raced straight inside again. Ice-brained.

Her legs began to tremble as she bent over & smelled the sweetish mint. The top of her stocking had a small serrated fringe & then several bands of varying degrees of transparency & then the sheer rush of glinting leg, black & lashes of silver light.

Everything began to hover at the edge of a dream again & I knew I must start talking.

“Could I possibly . . . Oh, I see she’s standing . . . Ah, stock still again in the corridor of the dream.”

Too late.

Suddenly all is ugly. The slabs crash with the sound of colours mashing into grey. What had been forgotten, what had been corroded into dust was given form again.

A fish was sticking out of the wall. Leaden & desolate under the failing light. It failed to stop them in their tracks, as it should have, in the raw cement dust.

Now the jackdaw was nesting comically anywhere.

We, crab-like were jammed against the bed-head, sucking & biting soft flesh; creeping, crouching & then finishing up cross-legged.

“Yes. She was sitting cross-legged putting on make-up. Red lips edged by a thin black line; blue around the eyes fading into white cheeks. A face to shatter any seductive intent & yet I still felt a capricious urge to hold her.”

“It would have been a mistake. She wasn’t there. Your outstretched arms would have touched nothing but the foliage of a bush.”

Any words would do to counteract the seductive image & flip the picture out of the echoing grip of the labyrinth. Her body was sluggishly rising to the soul in it, rigging her voice, a call for her to advance, to end the panic of the months & leave the cruel anger (a turkey sound, gobbling) about the lost days.

The dog scrambled back under the bed growling & snarling & banging the low springs when another dog sprang into the room with its teeth bared savagely. She was wobbling around trying to keep her balance amongst the dogs flying under her feet. I rolled over & looked at the floor beside the bed & saw a snail.

“Round & round & in you go . . .slowly.”

“Dreaming?” She laughed in my face & wagged her tongue. The bells she had tied to her nipples tinkled as she shook me up.

“We aren’t as suspicious of each other as we were in the past.”

Too late again.

What you can do with a bell you cannot do with fragments of memory you have stepped on . . .that are already in the mud of a desolate garden abandoned to pigs despite the blue glazing of flowering chicory. The bell doesn’t give you the way. It dispels the silence.

I took four steps, it could have looked like paradise, but everywhere was thigh deep in muddy, orange tinged water. I held her close & tightly. I didn’t want either of us to slip away again into that streaked excremental celebration. Shrieking the end of fright as the

start of consolation. The black-rooted circle was squared by hand-written notes of a less troubled time.

“Let’s pick a bird before we do get carried away!”

“You want a diving bird? It’s not a real diver, but I want a Kingfisher.” She said.

“The charmer of the wind & waves.”

“Yes, I picked it because of the flashing colours & the way it flies . . .you know . . .dipping . . .particularly because of the blues.”

The winter solstice nest floating on the sea; a rainbow fuck in the lull when the wounds were healed & fresh ones a day away.

“I can remember floating along a river in a barge & seeing a kingfisher come out of a hole in the bank, dive & come up with a little silver fish in its mouth. I felt a bit on show & was constrained because I didn’t like being watched when I was playing.”

“Mouth?”

Stung by the bees, the Goddess tears off her pallid clothes & sucks winter out of the wound, her lips & tongue sugar the bitter commotion.

“Catching up on us,” she whispered. Then she slipped away.

I was left standing; like the man troubled by birds. I was alone.

But I had seen her silver hands! So that was one of her ways of getting out of the maze, she could touch anything & remain unscathed. When she needed the comfort of monotony; a rabbit run; to splinter safely without a feverish tally, when she needed the succulent bum end of her own tumbling, all that she had to do was pluck with those silver



fingers & the natural world fell away. She could undress the tree without destroying it.

She could bleach out every colour & waft through into the mist & blue yonder.

“So how had those spangling icicles held her back?”

“They must be through her heart.”

“No, that would be evading telling the power of her beauty.”

“So she was beautiful as well. Then I don’t know.

There were twenty-two pictures in the room. Twelve on two rough planks which were resting on two nails driven into the wall over the open fireplace. One on the easel that was standing by the window & that also had a green army belt with one brass buckle draped over it. And the remaining nine on the fishbox table which had legs made from fencing posts. As well as the paintings on the table, there were three boxes of oil paints, three paint brushes soaking in white spirit in a Fray Bentos steak & kidney pudding tin, an old kitchen knife substituting for a palette knife, a yellow horn & silver handled flick knife, a paint rag, a salt container full of white PVA & a small rectangular palette. A folding chair stood at the table, slightly to the left of it. In between the table & the baby’s cot that jutted out from an alcove in the wall, a ladder went up to the platform outside the room in the loft. The loft floor had been cut away from above the room, exposing the sarking & beams under the black tin roof & the north facing sky-light. A dusty cobweb from a beam to the window jammer swayed in a cold draught from outside. From the last hole in the window jammer hung a heavy old black flat-iron on a straggly piece of green nylon rope.

The plate & spoon were level with the child's head. So was the woman's hand as it rested on the edge of the table, the finger nails bright red. A coal fire warmed the room. Through the window a man could be seen talking to a small child as he held his hand leading him towards the thick bole of an elm tree. The man pushed the child up the trunk to a large nest-like platform of twigs. Saw the child was sitting safely & left, swinging out of sight behind a wall with a climbing rose strung up it. The woman looked down at the older child by the table, smiled & brushed out of the room.

The spoon & plate clank? chink? chime?

The man & woman met in the barn.

Later she caught an old hen.

The man had a choice, he could either stay & watch the woman butcher the hen or ride down the back lane past the cottage by the road & on to the sea.

She took the hand-axe, after parcelling the hen with sisal, laid its neck across the chopping block & her first blow bounced back as if she had hit a rubber pipe.

He spiralled across the grass towards the stone passage that led to the back lane.

Her second, much harder blow, seemed to neutralise the effect of the feathers & land with a standard dull thud . . . & now I begin to wonder if she didn't wring the bird's neck or was that after I had gone.

He took the bike & wheeled down the dirt lane & came off into the ditch as a figure barged out of the hedge right into his front wheel. Her large bag cushioned the blow of

the bike & she was first up & over to pull him onto his feet while grinning lop-sidedly as if she had successfully accomplished an intended manoeuvre. She had.

“That’s the first time I’ve caught you out without the dog. I’ve thought about trying to stop you several times but I was always scared of that dog lopping along side of you.”

“Now some of this happened,” he said, dazed by the ambush & obligatory ditch that happened to be a patch of black cinders by the low hawthorn hedge.

“Now you are going to dust me down.”

And she did.

“Come & sit in the sun.”

Outside the cottage stood a cast-iron table, a low stool & three plastic chairs. He sat against the honeysuckle. She must have told him her name. Was it Marie? I’ve forgotten.

She was small & determined. Dumped the bag & spilt the hay stuffing out on the yard & smiled at him. He stood up & kicked the hay. She stood on a stool to reach more level.

Her arms went round his shoulders heavily pulling him down to kiss him. The ladder shot from heel to thigh in her stocking & made her smile. She dug the four long fingernails of her right hand sharply into his neck just below & back from his right ear. His head came down diagonally across her face. She bit into his earlobe & hissed. He stood bent talking & talking as she pointed to the ladder.

“Climb it with your tongue,” she said, “And shut up.”

She let go of him & pulled her blouse out of the skirt waist, then pinched on the white satin suspender belt & tugged it high under her ribs. She felt the stockings tighten into her

cunt. She stood on his hands & dropped her skirt. The white ladder stopped at the fancy hem.

“You’ll have to jump from the top.” She said. Then pissed on him.

“Quick before it rains again.”

She bent her knees slightly so that they touched his shoulders. He gave a few long licks working the end of his tongue into her cunt & flattening it on her clitoris. She pushed gently. She slowly unbuttoned her blouse & shrugged out her brassiere straps & pulled the cups down & took hold of each nipple with thumb & forefinger. Then she closed her eyes & slowly her head went back. He licked her wet pubic hair away from each side of the slit & nibbled the loose fold of flesh gently. He nuzzled her & she responded by swaying slightly from side to side murmuring.

“That’s right, that’s right, ummmm that’s right.”

The hen was dead.

“The joy of having a body.”

She lingered stroking the feathers & took one to keep for later. The rest she stuffed in a plastic bag with the hen’s head, only after squeezing each side a few times working its beak.

“And the things you like it to do & return to recollect doing.”

Frogs eat butterflies.

She leaned crazily outside the door with a tight patch, a black slip fitting as if a skin.

“The bedroom is damp . . . feel the wall.” She stuck her bum against it.

If he doesn't get the hint from this . . . & to be sure she had the other hand lightly but firmly, resting on his cock. Nothing could be clearer.

“She lost all sexual feeling . . .now such a change . . .it must be your fault, even if she says it isn't . . .you must have something to do with it. . . .”

“Yes! Desire. Being at the door every night.”

“But getting what? Not even a welcome.”

“You ought to know that doesn't matter.”

There was a wafting singing of wingbeats as the owl hunted along the dark hedgerow.

Above, the dawn clouds were formed as grey lumps giving chasms & ravines above the neatly divided land.

“One or the other. Your feet in those fields with your head lost in mist. You can't do it.”

“No. Both. I'll bridge them if I can.”

“You'll lose something & perhaps someone.”

“It's the way in & a way out,” she looked sideways to conceal her expression.

“Yourself . . .I think.”

Sadness had touched their voices as if they had known all this from the first, ‘If it wasn't for the . . .’ Whatever it was, always meant never.

The backward winds of nostalgia blow over childhood & dry those years out with patient violence. In the asbestos memories so dry after so much pillaging you have forgotten how you stole your sex with tricks & chelp. Silent indifference would have been milk, & colourlessness incandescent, if he had touched upon that anguish just once.

So it was the same night.

“You’ll find out there’s no real fucking & loving without conflict & pain.”

The clock fingers spin like propellers.

Love switches the points again.

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The young grey dog gently stole a silver ormer shell from the window ledge & trotted off to play. It was one of those shells that shine so brilliantly beautiful under shallow water.

I had meant to ask her about our love but this stopped me. It was lucky I didn't ask; I should have seen it but you often pretend that the person who arranged to come isn't coming when you think it impossible that they care.

Then she came & said she was the one who waited as well. Shaking her golden hair so that it flew out on all sides till the ends caught the sunlight & spun some colour that usually took the help of fortuitously befriended beasts to mix up overnight. While you snored through the torture of an unconscious that had been prodded & probed so much it was as much use as a box of spent matches.

There is a parcel of thoughts in which there is room for everyone as long as they consent to distortion. As long as they don't mind losing some detail. This parcel, bloated or squeezed, while seeking absolution from drowning hatreds & the bumpy poverty of guilt & shame grinds along the track of memory obliterating the delicate spider-work cracks in causality that constitute the imaginative drawing of life on the tunnel of reverie, by reducing the walls to rubble.

I waited.

Although it was a waste of time I waited longer & when I had waited the longest I could bear, I climbed up the loose stone wall & kept dropped on all fours for a moment to take stock of my position.

The dogs whined & then after searching for easier routes & finding none, followed me scraping their bellies against the rocks. I stood up. The dogs came as close as they could.

“Get back,” I shouted. “You’ll have me off.”

And they hung back trembling with anticipation.

There was a long, long steep slope sliding away & on my right side as I looked there were gigantic boulders scattered regularly along the valley. There were none at all on the left side. Some giant, in a dream, had scrapped them all to one side.

A river ran straight between rushing over its bed of gravel & big pebbles. At a few places it deepened abruptly into black pools.

In one of these a woman was swimming. When she stood up in the sandy shallows the shadow of her body cast on the ripples looked like a gloved hand reaching over the side of a large bird’s nest with sunlight sparkling through the woven twigs. This image changed in a flash to a demon bobbing up & down with winking eyes. This first time I saw her I already knew her name, but I don’t know how it came to me out there in the wilds. Anyway, I soon got to know her because she decided to cook me a dish so delicious that I would never be able to leave her, let alone forget her . . .let alone (nevermind). . . let alone lift the lovely glowing, steaming frisky plate piled high after high with mash on mash of silver drops on the lugubriously creaking incised table top carved with the initials of every passer-by since the rickety situation of following word after word, Hell after Hell, had been invented to try & describe the beauty of potatoes frothed up in tremendous space, like a Monet haystack in the snow floating on chocolate when, after all, it could have floated in azure & before you could get to it the plate sank singing your very own dream where you won the race & made off with the rounded girl into the table top & then you felt the plate glance off your knees, roll on its rim down



your leg to your boot, without spilling a drop & depart through the pastel carpet without leaving a stain . . .

My hands felt sluggish.

“Keep them on the table,” she shouted in my ear.

If I’d eaten that glutinous pyramid of snow white slop I would have been trapped forever by the daydream girl & it was lucky, because I can’t think of anything else it could be, except a poison, that made people disappear before your eyes while they were closing.

“I saw you,” she said. “You got down on your hands & knees & quickly searched for the fallen plate with a silly grey groping hand sweeping under two low tables & behind a set of chairs set hard against the skirting to stop the dogs blundering after a plate full of food that looked like white fudge.”

“Who is saying this?” They asked. Losing the thread again.

“Shut up & listen.”

Now the girl, who had won you by her wonderful cooking of the only available potatoes, was dressed in slinky silver which shone in the cooking light & dazzled your eyes as you tried to make out her true form so delicately burnished by your favourite colour, after black. She was manifested on the table as an exchange for the disappearing plate of food. As you glanced at her knees which glowed in their delightful polished nylon you forgot the black night coming in through the open swinging door & the black bush mysteriously animated & saw the shimmering luminous frosting of her thighs right up to the compelling loose rim of the roly-edged, snug, perfumed pants concealing about half a potato of flesh, most of which was a neat mound, comparable with (for the sake of prose)

the hoed-up ridges from out of which potatoes thrust their stalks. From off that hump was reflected a supernatural seethrough glow of high-lit hair & flesh barely discernible to make it very tantalising & yet seeming available, so that you might feel satiated without actually (as yet) digging your tools into it. And you knew you had a good swop for your potatoes; the flash of rancour you had felt at the first wobble of the untidy plate seemed foolish. It was a puzzle why you ever had felt irritated, perhaps it was because the plate seemed to be made of a slowly changing viscous plastic, into which your knife & fork sank & out of which it took an effort to retrieve them. It proved impossible to bring the cutlery up with a little mouthful.

“So I threw then down. I remember, I think.”

She said, “You’ll never get her back. She’s too intent on staying away - too occupied – but I wish she would come.”

She had meant to say it to herself. It was spoken softly but we all heard it.

The dog very gingerly tapped the shell again with a paw & then left it alone. It lifted its head & cocked one ear like a bunched glove, for the animal was attracted by something none of my senses could perceive. The dog moved briskly towards something. I should have seen them. If I’d been on my mettle, I would have seen & seized the chance. I would have stopped then & shut up.

The dog had dropped the shell & shoved it along the concrete causeway with his nose, he couldn’t turn it but had dabbed at it clumsily with a forepaw.

The night came. I heard faint footfalls. I should have heard them earlier because I was expecting her. This was, after all, part of her dream.

And innocently you add, “The death left an everlasting wound?”

“A deep one. Yes, in a way the unhealed hurt you need to be able to outgrow the cruel voices. To be able to slip past that place where love is overwhelmed, the moon cut out of the sky & time crumpled up to bleak iceflakes. Where your bones feel scrapped clean of flesh, while you hang puffed, blotched & bloated on a steel limb, heavy with nonsense, unable to regain the maddening touches & sighs that give life its pulse of blood.”

They shook their heads.

“That way goes beyond terror, beyond the stalemate of fear goosing every move you try & make; if you can thread your way through . . . allow yourself . . . then you regain that incredible surcharge of rapturous love.”

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He had a live grasshopper on the lapel of his fuzzy grey coat. The insect was a bright creamy yellow with a green dash of hope.

He said that it was called ‘flat stone’. What did we call it? We didn’t say. We walked up to it, just a few yards from the edge of the shingle. He said it was reckoned to weigh nineteen cwts. just one short of the ton. It wasn’t a flat stone. It had an irregular step indented on the southern edge. Near to this, in a shallow pan formed by a flake having weathered away, were placed a few small round stones. That indentation carried across the stone as a line becoming shallower & shallower disappearing before it reached the other side. The stone was balanced at an angle on stumpy rocks many more at the west

side where they formed a complete wall with the highest tilt at the side which was also the longest edge. This flat stone had not been worked but it made me think of the symbol for a heart as I stood back.

The man then acted as if he had only just noticed the dogs, asked a question or two about them & then remarked, “Oh, have they got the silver eye as well.”

“Yes, both of them.” She replied & whistled them into her before setting off over the line of seaweed towards the shell of a house. It was windowless; doorless; floorless & roofless. There were still piles of flat stones at regular intervals on which the floor beams had lain. And a few roof timbers remained. The lean-to at the back still had its roof & a door on, so we crammed inside out of the wind & rain & shared our picnic with the dogs as the afternoon waned & the feeble light lost its grip on us. We ate, then stepped out of the rubble filled hut of childhood onto the road.

The cat we stumbled over in the gutter had been rolled into an angular shape & looked as if a mesh vise had squashed it into a grey lump with a red dash. I didn't see its tail, it had more than likely been ripped off. One grey dog dropped a hard crust that landed with its margarine side down. It barked. I tried to close the lean-to door but jammed it on the crust so I had to leave the door wide open behind me. Not a backward glance from either of us. The snow had silently filled up the night's ears with cotton wool. But the road was like a whip. We seemed to be spinning, but some memories are distorted & in them we take on other, different shapes.

“I was digging a hole . . . a huge hole.” Somebody was laughing in the room beneath us.

“Were you in it?” The other voices were giggling softly now. They must have shut the door.

“No. I had a machine, I think,” she said after a long pause. “And the deeper down I dug more & more of the black pyramid became silver.

The moon lit the black hedgerow.

“Did you say or did I dream it . . .that you were called Kora?”

She looked at the profusion, the explosion of blacks. “Are we in the same place?”

“How can we be.”

“Do we have to start again?”

“Tell me your name.”

“We can choose. . . I think.”

“Then I’ll have golden hair because this is a fairy tale this time round,” she said.

“And green eyes

And red lips

And a jet black collar with silver studs.”

“Alas the time is short but we’ll make the most of it,” said the other raven-haired woman who had appeared with a swish & stood with a silver belt biting into her waist.

That’s all she wore.

“I hoped for endless fabulous nights but what we get will have to do.” She fluffed up her blonde curls.

We got a green lizard that had appeared sometimes at black magic fucks; a yellow butterfly; a hornet & an ant to live in a ring box in a dream difficult to surrender but with

a clean floor because I do remember sweeping it with one of my brushes & leaning that brush back where it belonged, near the door.

As the hornet sailed past & made us duck the two beautiful girls' breasts hung down, one pair tipped by peach & one by bruised apple. We looked at each other & smiled . . . what a burnt up place. We hurried to shut the green curtains across the open window. Her lips touched my shoulder light as a butterfly; she looked at the drawings. Each one of the ten was a map telling us where to go & make love. She turned to me & said.

“I’ve found the very place to live, I’ll take you there, it’s not far.”

Of course, the other black-haired girl objected, because she too wanted to make love, until I said she could come along as well. And she did.

So I started out, a CERTAIN man by this time & was taken for a ride. As well as that we went down the three & a half flights of stairfancy out of the real town wall into the brilliant whitening sunshine of a foreign land. We immediately started to search for the well which was marked on the plan. Pacing the approximate distance from the corner of the barn worked out from the scale. There were many flat, dressed stones, damp & covered in green moss. We felt certain we were at the right spot. But under the stones was bone-dry earth & even the remains of a tree. We knew it was important to find the well so we looked at the plan again, measured again. . . but the ground was dry. . . what other way we wondered, can we approach this. We dug & dug. How we dug. Certain we would find the well soon.

Yet all we got was a new parched world.

“There’s one sure way,” she said.

We made figure shapes by laying out the flat stones we had dug up on the courtyard.

“Why, I ask you after all that, did she decide to go first on her own when she knew I couldn’t follow?”

“To leave you for me!” She laughed with delight & snapped her fingers in the air.

The vibration cracked & tripped the other inhabitants of the dream into action, stinging & nibbling & panting, a hurricane arithmetic of limbs & skin, so she decided to get ready.

The silver belt was not enough.

She knelt on the blue cushion adjusting her hat, distracted because she had no mirror, she kept glancing out into the garden. She was so hot.

“Oh! These layers of clothes.”

A long heavy dress tightly belted at the waist with ample folds down to the ankle of a honeysuckle purple colour. Buttoned from throat down to the waist. Open sleeves.

“That wardrobe needs a clear out,” she noted, “If this is the best they can do.”

A grey flower embroidered silk blouse hooked at the wrist was laced neck to waist. A white silken basque boned & ribboned with suspenders pulling high the grey stockings. Red boots & gloves.

So many layers yet open still with snowy thighs & a thick mass of black pubic hair divided by a pink slit. She methodically rubbed perfume into her pubic hair. The slit opened slightly. She rubbed the scent onto her thighs. It took many dainty touches before she was satisfied & then she sprayed her slit & gasped as the perfume burned. And then opened her legs wider, bent forward & sprayed her bum & gasped again. She started to tighten the broad black belt on her right thigh adjusting it up to the top of her leg then she

did the same to the belt on her left thigh. These belts pinched up neatly against the outside of the lips of her cunt & pulled at her buttocks so that her arsehole was stretched. Her thighs bulged below the belts & their silver rings tinkled as she attached a short piece of chain to each one. These chains were to be attached to a collar on her neck to shackle her close when she got her.

She oiled her fingers & slowly rubbed her arsehole round & round adding more & more oil until it was soft & relaxed. Next the rings. She put the ant in the little ring box for there it stayed to keep the pills company when she went out with hat & dagger to do poetry.

“I’ll take you there & bite & bite.”

“And you must bite & bite as well.”

I had to tie her tight to keep her? No.

So she could fly?

To objectify her? I’ve heard that one. No.

To control her? Likewise. No.

To make her anytime? No.

The facts slew round into fictions, events turn into wraiths, apprehensive & capricious under the cosh of interpretation.

To please her? She wanted to be a Goddess not a Princess. The hand held stone cold Venus. Not the half-animal still dragging feeling & fact back, back to its lair to chew over the bones of things. . .trying to get to the marrow. . .never mind that now they are dead. . . with the guts out of them.



“Find what part of yourself you are always trying to overpower & control. . . if you discover it you can then use the energy you have been wasting in that struggle to release that negligent Siamese twin of emotion & feeling, to glide you free of the past.”

“So memories are changed into spells?”

“Memories can be spells every time they are constructed.”

“And every time they are told differently?”

“Still spells if you want.”

“Or a black & perforated leaf curled round a caterpillar.”

The dead tree looked like a wisp of smoke amongst all the finely branched autumny trees by the roadside on the corner. I was repeating the route sequence in my mind. I think I had meant to say, “I’m leaving soon.”

And she had meant to say nothing, but said, “Don’t write it down, you’ll kill it.” But kept her eyes on the slippery road. She said she would always stay with me.

‘Why’ I wondered.

“I’ve made up my mind to write everything down I can.” I told her.

“That cuts a lot out straight away,” she laughed.

The picture I saw, strangely enough, was of us using a piano for a couch. How I don’t know, you don’t get explanations with that kind of hallucination. One thing I did know was I’d made up my mind to write one truth stretched along the keyboard & the other truth along the top where it wouldn’t get in the way.

In the rest of the house the string of thought wound round & round; the truth was we were thinking that there was so little comfort.

“Is he uncomfortable to live with?” He asked her many times.

“Yes if you’re dead – he eats you.”

“The piano could have been seen to be the future (a luxury), try the possibilities of the keyboard etc.” They interjected.

“For a moment we forget. You & I are saying one thing & not holding back, for the first time, what we really like to say. What we want to say & do.”

“And then?” She asked & wondered if she should tell him her pussy was hungry.

“It’s too late to say anything.”

“Impossible?” She groaned, “Oh! Fuck it. Why bother.”

“I am listening.”

“But what I want, can you give it?” She made a strange shape with her lips.

“You take it from here. . . you’re hoping you can make it come true. We are never told what it is. You pronounce that it’s a blank & that’s it.”

I caught her first warnings, but what is frantic doesn’t always look it, so I smiled. As I started towards her, to catch her, I heard her choking cries, “Hide, hide, hide, hide, oh hide.”

It was too late to say or do anything, as it has to be. I know she could have somehow worked all that noise I made into a dream but surely some flicker of it would have touched her into wakefulness.

“It depends on what she was dreaming.”

At one of the starts of the dream somebody was kicking the double door to try & open it from the outside. It jammed. That door always stuck on the concrete step unless it was lifted.

“What a damp place this dream is.”

Slowly the gap widened, more light then more light. I could see just light through the gap. Nothing. A white sheet.

While the noise of kicking continued, from out of a grey corner above a green shelf emerged a strange animal. It had a woman’s face & the body of a black dog with silky hair. Its face showed surprise, the beautiful red lips were slightly parted. I tried to look behind it to see what shape of space it had emerged from but I could see nothing. She had come out of a void. Without a sound it waited for the door to open. All the bolts rattled & rattled then abruptly stopped. Silence. A melodious voice asked.

“Who is there? Who calls so early? Answer quickly.”

Then I saw, as she stepped quickly in one side of the double door, a woman dressed in yellow seeming to sprout feathers. It was a woman . . . her breasts were bare. She stood against the light. A few feathers trailed out & fluttered down from her right hand, blew out of the door. I’m sure anything would have done-a hanky-paper-matches-anything to catch my eye for a vital second or so while she pulled the most hideous face. Was it so changed or do I think so because I remember my surprise? The whole sequence happened so quickly. Was it only after glancing away that I was able to focus on her face? As I involuntarily recoiled so did the black half animal, pretending to be astonished by the ugliness. I don’t know whether her face really was changed, or whether I thought it was

because I didn't see her face properly at first, only her body, & because of that I expected there to be a lovely face to go with it. You see, she moved so quickly & was positioned so that her body showed very well but when I had glanced at her face the light through a grille made it difficult to distinguish her features. I thought it was hard to focus. I peered & started to take a step nearer. Then I looked away . . . I didn't want to look too long. I didn't break her apparent surprise. I waited for the fabulous animal woman to make a move. I saw her purse her lips, keeping silent, sit very delicately staring at the door ignoring the standing woman completely.

“Could she see her?”

“I wonder. She must have made a determined effort to keep calm & not reveal that her arrival was expected. She played her part of astonishment so well.”

“There was a strange noise . . . hisses . . . from the street?”

“Perhaps then she should have shown more interest, or have said something about the sound. I didn't notice that she seemed to underplay her part at the time.”

“Most things happening then were unexpected.”

“There wasn't time to compare the way she looked, but now when I think back I'm sure it showed clearly that she was suppressing some delight.”

More light streamed through the door.

I found out afterwards from the half-woman that she too had thought at first that the light from the grille made it impossible to get a clear view of the newcomer's face & she too had wished for a closer look but had realised that it would have been no use to stare or move closer. She had dropped her gaze at the same moment as I did distracted by the

feathers. When I looked back the woman had moved slightly or the sunlight was less bright. I saw she had no feathers. Her face shone like a molten candle in the bright glare. It could have been waxen. It looked as if a flame-thrower had briefly played on it leaving no scars but raising a few bumps & blebs & sweening the nose into the general flesh of the cheeks. She smiled with a mouth similar to that of the black furred half-animal, a perfectly formed lascivious cupid's bow. Her eyes may have been blue or green . . . I only met their gaze once & they held mine with a piercing look that I couldn't understand.

"Why did I feel so peaceful as I waited," she asked.

"The neatness? The tranquillity? The large slab of ribbed blue sky, the obscure music of rain?"

"None of that. I had decided by that massive stone I didn't care."

The black haired girl leaned over the prostrate woman. . ."Off you go!" . . .she fingered the ring box open & shook the greenish yellow luminous disc of sweetly smelling compacted powder into her palm, pulled the blond hair of her rival back & twisted her head round & smacked the pill into her mouth as she gasped at the pain. The black haired woman's thighs cradled the other woman's neck till she had gulped it down. But when the foam oozed out of her lips she bit the black delta of Venus constraining her & kept the bite locked snuffling & braying under the frantic slaps she received. Then she went out cold as a rock. We prised her jaws open & stuffed the black slip in as a gag. I looked at the bruises & kissed them better but she had other things on her mind now. She took the raven brooch & jabbed the unconscious body with a pin. Not a stir.

“Good, she’s out now, we could cook & eat her & she wouldn’t know till she came out as shit.”

She looked at him to see if her coarseness had hit. He grinned.

Granite crying in a dream. . . I put my ear to the rock & know I am being fooled by the whispering of a different universe. A black cloth laid for a picnic. A long slab of rock sparkling in the moonlight, black shadows tucked under it. Nothing else near it. My footsteps cushioned & silent on the coarse grass as I walked towards it.

Snail trails of love

Run sweet on her bum. . .

The stone felt soft & warm almost like flesh.

There was a door cut in the rock slab.

A wisp of smoke from the hidden corner of hopes.

I lay in the roof. I was inside a white heavy feather stuffed cumbersome hand-sewn ticking cumbersome warm comfy cumbersome sleeping quilt on a mattress as hard as a tabletop on the floorboards. A skylight was open. The early day had the least of a wind, for that place. At the point when I’d got the right thoughts locked with the right memories meshed with the right fantasy & had blocked out the wrong desires & needed a sign to fix them, a bird hopped into the roof & onto my knees stuck up like a mossy rock with their covering of eiderdown. It was a skylark, of course, only John Clare let in the ragbag of birds to poetry. Well it worked. I couldn’t believe it at the time but slowly it showed. It was healing. I was alone again.

In a dream that night an angel stood on a massive bare rock below a mountain. A chamber had been cut in this rock nobody knew when. I placed this at one corner of my world.

The steady rock.

Rain siling down. She listens to his story.

“I’m wrapped in a sail, shivering, so ill I can’t eat. I have to descend the ladder to feed the dogs. They bounce around my bare feet. The pebbly, lumpy bumpy, hurting concrete floor quickens my concentration. The door is open onto the moorwide world. I absurdly knife the dogmeat out of a tin. A touch more for the big dog. The rain curtails the world outside the door as I climb back to bed. I pull the sail so closely around me the cold strikes through it. Rotting floorboards: an ache to be cared for. The dogs playing below me. Sandpaper nostrils & dust in my eyes; head like a rusty bucket thinking the clockwork past again. No hand touching me, only the sound of the storm tightening my belly. (This time I’ll do it, I say, till my ears in my head drop off). Day after day I lie, sometimes icy cold, as she descends & wraps herself around me. I choke on hate. I know it’s bad for me. . .it freezes me into her fish. That stone dead mermaid gasping at the centre of her world gobbling up all affection & still ravenous.”

Before dawn I again slashed through the ranks of grey trash thoughts that weighed down the boulder of doubt with fragments of her body & her acts. That mermaid of gutted hope, spelled, in shivering lines & lumps, a ghastly conversation as if the horrible intestines of a putrid corpse wrote the text. . .& that was that. . . no change considered. . .no compromise possible . . .the images frozen in glass. I had to push & trundle this lump of accumulated degradation away with my heart.

“I imagine you arriving. Can I kiss you, I wonder. Or are you passing by. So I lie & shudder in disbelief.”

“She didn’t fade but changed from a woman as beautiful as flowers to a stalemate of memories.” He said almost to himself.

“I felt your body change. This is it, it said. I knew something dreadful had to be told. We have a constellation of chances for our love . . .it’s how we use them . . .”

Too late. We used them up. He said to himself.

The dogs snapped at a crisp of burnt paper floating slowly down in the smashed concrete passage. One stopped & slowly crouched & bared his long fangs, then all of his teeth until the gums showed, then he rushed & savagely bit the paws of the other dog. It was raw. I turned. I couldn’t do anything else. All the dark places roared. Only our feet remained touching.

“I’m never going to get into that position again where I’m helpless & can’t do anything, not a thing about it. I didn’t like it. The charm was turned off after a very short time. I never really thought she was charming, something else showed through very quickly.”

She touched his face.

“What’s that?”

“Something silver, sparkling.”

For a moment the wind seemed to roar through the dream carrying the debris of an uncomfortable memory at which, although now destroyed, you still feel exposed.

“A sequin.”



SIXTH. A GOLDEN MOUNTAIN.

I THINK OF THE WORDS LUMINOUS. . .BENCH. . . MERMAID.

This corner of my world may not exist but my actions are modified by the idea of it. And many people have tried to argue away its non-existence.

Re-read the love letters.

Roll some stones into a picture.

He picked up the lump of black plasticene that had a touch of green in it & rolled it against his thigh into a snake which he then stuck in the rebated outside edge of the grey door at about the same level as the keyhole. He scrapped a blue piece of plasticene off the floor near the door jamb & rolled it into a ball between the palm of his hand & the floor.

This ball was then rolled into a short bar & divided by running a finger across it several times until only a thin stalk held them together, pulled into two & each piece quickly stuck onto a short flat stick. This stick was pushed onto the door & held in place by the plasticene. Then he pulled the black snake out of its groove, rolled it & fingered it into a lump on top of the stick about half-way along. He pushed a long nail into this central lump which held it ready for the hammer blow. His fingers spread as his arm swung about searching for the tool. He found it. Looked at the head & rubbed it shiny bright against his trouser leg. Then he knocked the nail in with a few sharp taps, leaving just over half-an-inch of it standing proud.

A brown rabbit hopped up the three steps to the door & passed behind him.

He said, "That should stop them bunny," as the rabbit hopped along the wall under the window, hopped in & out of a yellow plastic bowl full of dry clay & hopped behind the

blue curtain that only hid its head & ears. The man stepped back & pushed the door & nodded his head up & down several times. He squatted down, picked up the hammer & placed it in between his knees & held it tight there while cleaning plasticene off the head. He took out a hank of brown string & formed a single hitch in its end by rubbing a loop together between his thumb & forefinger which he then worked tight, formed another knot the same way but slipped the loop over the nail head before pulling it tight. About six feet of string trailed away from the door but was invisible against the brown tiles. The bench along the door wall was stained dark brown, its top was bare, worn wood. The rabbit sat about half way down it. The man threaded the loose end of the brown string through the lead weight shaped like a fish, went out of the door & put the string over a smooth rod sticking out of the corridor wall seven & a half feet from the ground. He then balanced the fish on a narrow ledge & thumbed a brownish-grey piece of plasticene onto it about the size of a brussel sprout. Taking a flexible rule from his shirt pocket he measured the distance from the weight to the lower right (looking from the inside) broken pane. All four windowpanes were smashed & all still had pieces of glass fixed in the putty. He put the rule away wrote a couple of numbers with his forefinger in the dust & then straightened up obliterating them by shuffling his right foot over them.

He went down the steep stairs, lifted the door-latch & at the same time used the latch to ease the door up slightly so it would open without jamming on the uneven floor. It opened easily & quietly. He closed it in the same way making a special effort when just about to latch it because he knew the door caught at that spot the worst. He stepped down the three stone block steps into the alley, it was hardly a street, three more steps took him

to the back of a house on the main road that was little more than seven or eight feet wide. After the slope down to his right had taken him past the heavy cellar door he came up against a blank house wall. He disappeared.

When we returned this time, at twilight, the string was invisible against the gloomy ochre wall; but the mermaid was a luminous gold reclining on the bench.

“At last! Got them in, so reason without imagination is defeated . . . I hope, or at least put to sleep by the book.”

She sneered at that, “It’s your own fault you have to go through all this again, once should have been enough,” & she kicked me with such force my leg was grazed. And I found myself out of bed just the way she had been kicked out years ago.

“You became so insubstantial. . . I can’t trust you to stand by me . . .”

I am defenceless against the combined fear of father & daughter & rendered fistless, bootless, gutless, nob-less. Out on all fours. The whipped cur mandala with a twelve foot drop at the centre.

She threw a black, cloak-like coat over her shoulders to see me out, her face hard & pointed with rage. . .about indescribable longing?

“Insults; every word, every gesture, every breath . . .you should be dead. . .you’re number two & I’m sure I have three lovers this time.”

The silver leaden fish dangled on the invisible string as she swept past rushing me to the door.

“I want the keys.”

The squint key unable to unlock my heart any longer anymore. I fled the normal cul-de-sac, taking the diagonal, hanging onto the upside-down tree, a silver birch, & lurched & tripped on sticks & stones as I reviewed the brutal separation.

She turned rapidly with the cold draught of air from the opening door spinning the fish which caught her eye & at that instant our lives began to flow apart in silence.

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Her hands felt large & heavy. (A dead weight). Two plastic tubes were needled in at her left wrist giving alternate flows of liquid to try & keep the amount of calcium in her blood down & feed her a little. They were in there, under a bandage, under the cuff of her red suede coat that barely covered it.

“This is not a story,” I told her, “At this moment a car is stopping a few yards up the road. There is a beautiful woman in it.”

She turned & smiled. I stroked the insides of her thighs in a swimming motion. She lifted her arms & leaned against the wall slowly rising on tiptoe. A lovely ‘A’ shape.

“As she twists to get out of the car I catch a glimpse of red stuff. . .she. . .stumbles. . .”

She closed her legs. My fingers felt the warm lips of her cunt as she fell back & down onto me.

“Luckily I’m there; the street magically empty; the scene pre-arranged.” She said.

“I’m going out to look,” I said, “She’s sure to be there.”

“I’m coming too,” she said, glancing to check her blouse buttons were fastened.

“You believe me! You really believe she is going to be out there.”

“She is if I’m there,” she pulled her blouse open & showed the red lace. We walked hand in hand into the sunlit side of the street & sat on the steps.

“Are we going to wait?”

“No need.” She took her blouse off with studied slowness. Her breasts danced inside a close fitting red corset set with fine lace. She sat & swung her knees to open up her skirt facing me. I leaned across & kissed a knee & slipped a hand along the inside of her thigh.

“In the story, she is never seen in the red basque. Is she?” She held my hand & gently squeezed it. “Is she?”

She stood up as if to return.

“Let’s stay here,” I said. “It was in life that she was never seen dressed up like that.”

“What was so pleasing about her?” She asked, sitting down on the steps again & opening her black vanity bag.

“Love is at least.”

Huddling in a corner, formed by the brown door & its wide concrete jamb, she rummaged in a dainty cosmetic bag. It was plastic, the zipper had stuck half-way; she threw it back into the big shiny vanity bag which had remained open with its lid propped against the door. It was positioned so the mirror fixed inside the lid would catch all the light & give her a good image when she found her materials. After she had wiped her face with a cloth it appeared very white & some lumps welled up as if from nowhere. She spread out the contents of a small brownish cloth bag in her lap, sorting quickly through them for the colours she wanted.

‘The liner. . .was it to be silver-grey or the golden green? Now was she really feeling here or there? More here with the green. The wind is swirling through me as though I were nothing but a copse of birch trees. If my stomach could fly, I would be up there on a bough of that tall sycamore, where the pigeons have taken to perching, though they aren’t there now, with that wind tearing me apart. Some thing is going to get loose. . .’

The green went on as a shimmery gold over the eyelids, up to the eyebrows, smeared away at the tips of the brows. She stared into the mirror of her compact. . . supposing he didn’t notice. . . if he didn’t then he wouldn’t respond & wouldn’t be interested. She gave the shiny top of the compact a quick rub on the skirt of her dress, watching the light flickering through the pattern of silver waves. Then she picked up the lip salve. This is smoothness, this is the first kiss, she said to herself, the gentle touching of lips, pressed close to the mirror with its cold glass & curious image. . .the real kiss is the deep luscious colour of a dark & juicy plum. The lipstick will rub off quickly, she said to herself again, because she doesn’t want to open her mouth. It’s only part of this game, she tells herself, but she knows that he doesn’t think so, because he is breathing faster & he has bent his head for the second kiss that would sweep her off her feet. She swiftly turned her head. She moulded the lipstick to the shape of her lips, rubbing off the overlap, moving the lips together to obtain the overall smoothness.

And a bit more for a come-on, just to see what would happen.

She picked a green crayon & stared at it.

“The make-up. . . the armour? The madness of the imagined play. What did she have to hide?”

“Ask her!”

“What have you got to hide?” He asked rather hesitantly, not wanting to upset her, because perhaps he should have known.

She didn’t reply, leaving him feeling the cast-iron wall of nothing between them.

‘He could draw through it, I suppose.’ She thought.

The creaming & painting had left her face without a spot or blemish, but it had taken a long time.

“It’s my face,” she laughed at him, “I have no other that I can put on.”

She turned away from his gaze after the merest hesitation. Vaguely she waved her hand.

“Stop it.”

Just round the corner from the door a marmalade cat pounced on a pigeon. Slashing out for its throat. Feathers were scattered about, as the cat’s claws ripped down the bird’s wings in a final tear, its jaws tore more plumage from off the bird’s throat. . .the pigeon escaped. A few bloody feathers floated by on all sides. I took one & stroked it clean & dry between my fingers; I thought it might be useful later on.

We dressed quickly now that we had made-up our faces. She packed everything away; adjusting her new green dress paying particular attention to the collar.

“Ready?”

We found a secret corner. And turned it. A door & opened it.

She was pushed up against the wall gently but firmly. She didn’t resist but rested her forehead against the cool, sandy stone, put her hands either side of her head & felt a light touch as the buttons holding her skirt opened. The taffeta fluttered down, its waistband

caught on a suspender & was dusted off with his fingertips. The inside of her right thigh was pushed sideways by the back of his hand she responded by lifting her foot high out of the skirt & planting her shoe down wide, three feet away from the other. She stuck out her tongue to taste the crystals she could see on the stone & rubbed her breasts harder onto the wall so their tips hardened in contact with the cold. She kissed the stone. Left a faint smudge of red. She felt a flutter as the gusset of her satin pants was touched to one side. His left hand came round her face stroking her nose & she licked the fingers & nibbled one. Sucked it into her mouth. Bit it harder.

She had given herself to the precision of the actions. His lower hand was full over her pussy & the slight pressure was enough for her lips to part around his middle finger. She rocked back onto her high heels. The movement ploughed a gentle furrow into her cunt. Another door.

A few knocks & we were inside. On the floor were piles of huge sacks stuffed with wool; there were also some empty sacks & cast-offs lying in between. It was difficult to cross the room, the floor was completely covered & the windows let in little of the sunshine. The door we came through was set across a corner. The next one we came to was very difficult to open.

“Kick it! Can’t you see it’s jammed? Kick it!” He shouted hoarsely from inside.

He had waited long enough for them.

“We don’t really want you here,” they said to him. “We’ll make use of you later but. . .”

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I thought I could hear the dogs barking away down in the valley. The houses were glowing; a black haze blocked out all the detail. The dogs sounded too faint. Of course, it was all over. I slept fitfully. There was the sound of boots on the stairs; I imagined them as a plate of food in my dream. Clump – Clump – Clump – Clump – Food – Clump – Peas – Clump – Bread.

An old black boot smiling at me on so sharp a hook on a taut line on a quivering rod on the rough arm shaking me awake.

But the dream won & the peas changed from their green to black & the bread became whiter & whiter & whiter until it shone silver. The meal & the end of the world slotted together. In a few seconds I was going to be able to stick my fork very firmly into a large glowing slice & carve off a beaming chunk with my sharp knife. I lifted the fork & it sank iridescently into a haystack of silver peas & then my knife flashed like a mad bat & dashed down & the stook of peas exploded & each pea became a ray of intense light & each one curved out away from me & when they hit the black shadows the black became blacker.

The plate started clump to clump grow clump & clump shimmer clump & clump it clump looked clump more clump & clump more clump like a lake & I had to rush now to beat the insistent noise of steps. My one chance was to lick the plate clean & so I tried to grasp its shimmering edges. The plate buckled at my touch. Seemed to try to escape. I held firm but it became heavier & heavier until I was straining to hold it. Then it was an immense weight & I knew that I alone couldn't possibly be holding it up & then a long flat

dripping flaring dazzling tongue swished across its still expanding surface & began to mop up the stuff that looked like a wet sky lapping right to the edges about my fingers. Drops scattered & shook around & they flashed & disappeared in the blackest corners. I had to drop the unmanageable searing plate; for even we, whoever we were, couldn't hold up the gigantic, dribbling, luscious, drifting, lustrous, silver flat of seasky.

Wake up! Wake up! They were shouting & trying to tumble me into a bubbling vat of green mushy froth. In the startling light the peas looked as if they had gone mouldy & been beaten up ready to drink, but I hung on & shouted that the plate was heavy enough to anchor us all forever.

Wake up! Wake up! They were still shouting. He had been shouting all the time.

Get out, he shouted. And then I realised that they had called for me, they were here.

I groped down the ladder, each rung felt frosted it was so cold & the darkness wrapped around with a close damp touch. I felt about half crouching. The lights came on. I was glad. I balanced first on one foot, then on the other. I was sure I could hear her voice calling me, but how could that be for she had left a long while before. I smiled at the thought. The engine died on the machine which had been throbbing outside. There were several obvious things I could have done, you can think them up. A woman's voice shouted very sharply & the engine started again, but there was a high note & a whine & although I hadn't taken the slightest notice of the engine I now realised that there must be another vehicle outside because the new sound was a different engine. Its notes surged in on a humming warm draft with reddish edges. In an instant the sound changed the way I felt, the dismal night faded. The pulse kept on, surging more & more crimson. Petals of

velvet air brushed past. I felt ready to start in the same way that I do when I read a few new words strung together around an old leg. I followed the creamy pull like sure arrows of dawn & opened my eyes wide. I was awake & the last cracked night thought left me fumbling like a hooded-crow chick leaves its cliff nest on nest on nest for the first time. Then I realised that the engine was running & they were waiting.

I had a dream, I shouted, it was to stall them as much as anything because of the time it was taking to get myself together, there was this broad silver river flooding over its banks. File after file of marching people were going past me rank on rank. I couldn't distinguish anyone clearly. They were silent but their tramping seemed like music. They were behind me in the darkness. The silver river flooded faster & spread & the ranks behind me became heavier & darker until they met. And then there was absolutely no sound.

I don't remember any sounds like grasshoppers & cuckoos that you usually hear in grass & trees. A dog barked in the distance but they thought it too far away to take any notice of. They were wrong. Then she came. They had never seen her before. They were unlucky. He said that as soon as we found out we would not stay longer than was necessary. I did not believe him. Would he understand even if he were to hear the quiet voices? He would probably be shouting out questions as soon as he heard a few words. The man shouted angrily. It's no use trying to deny it. That is why you have never heard a hint of a faint whisper. And that noise? Let's find out where the other man is first of all. We had taken the wrong road. The noise of the rainstorm was blotted out by the dismal groans as the plate spun a brass & cocoa disc twirling consistently in front of the

ponderously advancing blue plastic knife & fork. The log was set against the blade & just the tips of the teeth chipped & twanged a few fibres of wood; a short wooden batten pushed the log hard against the blade & blue smoke wafted off with the squeal.

She was below the crest of the hill nestling in dry long grass. She reached down & her nipples hardened as they touched my chest. Her fingernails cut into the skin behind my knees. As the noise increased to a whine the log dropped apart with a thump. Saw-teeth roughly clipped the slack batten. She bit. The batten was tossed in the air. She fumbled around until all of the bright red nails were behind a tendon. Then she gripped tight & dug them in. She couldn't see but she knew the bright orange picnic plates were laid out & filled & the wrapping paper smoothed & piled high with clothes. She pulled harder with her fingers hooked into the flesh.

One glistening globe of blood appeared.

A man was advancing over a field next to a half wall topped by a string of barbed wire. We lay deeper in the close leaves. Above us was a ruin showing four humps & a rectangle of bright green. The gravel road was out-of-sight. She said the timing of the change is the crux & if you miss that - well – the embers glowed in the sharp breeze. You see, she said, it is difficult to change on purpose & those who do may well be found to be just the ones who care the least.

I'm sure I could try even though I care a lot.

No. You care too much for me to believe you will try.

I felt lucky. She could see us but kept her distance. We looked at the map. Until we stopped most of the countryside we passed through had been silent. Debris tumbled about

us. I had my boots off. How lucky to be able to want like that. How smooth her thighs were. She looked at the love-bites in a hand-held mirror. How soft her thighs were. I saw the frost sparkle on the road & also that the road was black. I thought I knew an immense number of details about us, yet I felt I knew so little.

After a big spark the match flared again under the gloom & lifted it. She brushed embers & ash from her fleshy thigh. She rolled. She freed her arm. She curled her body bringing all its weight to bear against being pulled. Flames ran swiftly over the surface of the ground. Her head hit me in the diaphragm. The firelight flickered on her face as I watched her. She came closer to where I lay.

In a dream that she had interrupted, a man who looked shimmery like a tree with sunlight reflecting on thousands of leaves twisting in a light breeze, was hollow until I had read the text & then seen through him. As soon as I had told him this it was as if he came into focus & there was immediately a concrete (or more concrete or still more defined) image which was a tree yet a man. The next illustration I knew to be that of a traveller because I had looked at it several times but up till then the picture had only been black & white much like a woodcut. I knew that I was this traveller & where my journeys would be & what would befall me was in the text. But I was woken before I could get to it. Was that why they were sent? And why was it before it changed into colour? All the rest of the pictures in the dream had been in glowing colours, but this was black & white.

The crash of the teapot, cups & cake plate woke me. I saw the vase sliding away from her reach & cascading its flowers & water over the smashed crockery. I saw three faces one after the other, each one hers, reflecting in the water on the polished wooden floor. I

reached out, it was a natural action to help. She told me sharply to lie still & leave the rubbish where it lay. The puddle remained smoothly reflecting the flower colours up at us.

“That’s the way to choose colours,” she sat straight up across the table & waved her large hand backwards over the debris but at the same time about level with her mouth. I stood up & went towards her round the scattered pots. I went up to her & our knees almost touched. She stood up & raised her hands with their palms turned out towards me & I saw that she tensed. I had to look down. How close we were without touching, but she did not seem to notice our closeness.

“I’m going to leave all the pieces on the floor & wait & see what makes me move them.” The green curtains did not meet at the top & the splash of sunlight slashed across her lips as she spoke. It was if the light tried to force her mouth open & her head back. But she swayed back her arms hanging loose now. She was listening. Not close in to herself nor to me, but for sounds or a certain sound coming from afar. She breathed softly & regularly. A noise something like dried peas being softly shaken in a tin lightly cascaded inside the wall of the room. She sank back still listening & spread her hands to her left side inviting me down. She hesitated, stopped listening, & spoke.

“Pull the curtains open wide & pretend everything is as it should be.”

Every surface in the room was rippled with green light. The floor sloped very slightly in front of the window & although you knew it was there you always checked your stride to give the body chance to recover from its involuntary steadying reaction. Through a chink

in the curtains I could see a dark green bar of pine forest which covered the broad hilltop in the middle distance.

“You only get this kind of light up here in the north.”

I turned, startled, I hadn't realised she was so close behind me. She leaned back slightly but didn't give ground. There was a faint trace of reddy-brown colour in between her toes.

“Look at me.”

There was a pale blue patch of skin on the inside of her right knee. It was almost certainly matched on the inside of the other one but I couldn't see. There was a variegated pink & white crease patch where her left buttock had taken the weight of a short sideways leaning posture. She very slowly started to spin. There was a shiny rim of talcum at the nape of her neck. It was the sort of powder containing glitter. Her right cheek had a blotch below the outside corner of her eye. The lower lip had a crease dividing it & on either side there were small patches of white skin, a trace of red lipstick remained in each corner. Her predominately green eyes with their flecks of orange, yellow & grey flashed momentarily as the direct ray of sunlight caught them. She blinked & made up her mind which way to go. The wire coathangers jingled softly. The wardrobe stood directly behind the open door. She hesitated in the corridor & bent over supporting the curve of her body on the banister with her right hand. From that position she could see through a small square window set high in the stairwell. It looked out onto the garden, but it was only possible to see out of it from the top corridor.

I picked up a bunch of wild flowers from off the black rectangular trunk where they had lain through the night & brushed the few loose pieces of straw & leaf onto the carpet. I opened the room window to the fullest extent possible. It was arrested after about five inches by a stop made out of a hinge with a notch filed in its lower edge which caught on a screw fixed into the sill.

The wind held the flowers on the window ledge so that I had to flip them off with my fingertips & they lifted into the breeze but one stalk ran up the back of my hand to my knuckles before landing on the ledge again. I left it there with the wind pushing its wilted leaves this way & that. I shut the window & noticed if I had folded the hinge it might have been possible that the window could have been opened much further, but when I tried to close the hinge I found it was jammed in position by several layers of paint. The most recent coat had been light blue, but several chips on the hinge showed it had been painted yellow earlier. This room had one other much smaller window set low in the wall which formed a right-angle to the wall with the gabled window. The sill was deep so that if you were close up to it you could not see out. The sill was less than two & a half feet from the floor.

The match flared. Someone was still dragging her slowly over the grass. Their shadowy forms showed for a few moments, a match length, the little flame dropped suddenly. The pit was bigger than you think. It was constructed in a square of twenty feet or more & although the walls were thick shuttered concrete the floor had been left bare sand. I think they had dug out a great quantity of sand but nothing more. The sides had become darkened & the one nearest the house was grey-green with dark marks seemingly



haphazardly dashed on it. The other three sides were also marked. Each one had a predominant colour. The track separating the garden from the pine forest was itself almost obliterated by broom bushes which grew to seven or eight feet.

We sat inside the garden but far away from the house & were hidden from it by more thick broom bushes. We were there for the first time. We sat on a plaid blanket even though it had been fine for many weeks. The ground was dry & the grasses light & ochre. Every so often there was a 'pop' as a broom seedpod burst. A line of conifers had been planted inside the garden right up against the wire mesh fence; they were all about forty-five feet high & between where we sat & this line of trees the grass was never cut.

I put a match to the crumpled newspapers under the pile of beech leaves. She was lying down now & didn't have any shoes on. The leaves burned slowly & gave up much smoke as I kept adding more damp leaves the flames were covered. The heap smouldered. At the point when there was only a thin line of smoke twisting out of the bonfire she rolled over & took her stockings off, each leg sticking almost straight up in its turn. She then rolled back on her stomach & with one sweep straightened down her skirt at the back. I lifted as many leaves as I could between two short boards & while I strode towards the fire the wind scattered the remains of my pile. I placed the compressed leaves directly over the emerging smoke. They expanded & first fell into two distinct conglomerations before becoming the indistinguishable top of the heap.

I wanted to sit beside her & talk but something held me back. I couldn't describe the gnawing anxiety. I would simply sit there & she would become impatient with my silence. The book smelled of her perfume. She moved back very slightly as I pointed my

hand at the page in front of her with my elbow crooked. My shirtsleeve hardly touched her blouse front. She kept the palm of her right hand still as she pivoted slightly to face me. The third button down on her blouse was undone. I glanced at the book page & leaned forward to see the photograph clearer. She half stepped back & again my hip gently brushed the outside rim of her pocket. Her shoe had not been able to swivel on the worn carpet & this gave her right leg an awkward shape almost a welcoming one. She looked down at the threadbare patch deliberately lifted her foot, but the carpet followed the shoe up & so she slowly replaced her foot & transferred most of her weight onto it & made another short hop back with her left foot. To be able to do this she had placed the thumb of her right hand under the rim of the table & gripped hard with this & an angled index finger. In order to get the correct leverage to be able to form the grip she had splayed the remaining three fingers of the right hand & bent them into slight curves. They had absolutely no grip. The index finger & knuckle were white along the lines of the bones & the fingernail whitened as I looked at it. I stepped a little to my left jamming my left thigh firmly against the table edge. It felt as if the table was about to slide. The third button down on her blouse was now fastened. I had to adjust the book to bring the photograph back level within reading distance. The group of people still sat smiling around their round iron table. They did not know they had been photographed. There were six. She put her hand over the photo.

“They can’t come back. It would be a mistake.”

He said nothing.

“After all this time.”

“They will come & you know it.”

They were as near as the strange animals which appear in a familiar room as soon as the light fades. I didn't want to have to lift her hand. There was a faint brown smudge of an old scar on her wrist. She absently stroked the back of it with the fingertips of her free hand, which then nervously fumbled along the waistband of her skirt. The people in the group were as near to each other as the figure fleetingly seen before a shadow resolves itself. She brushed back a wisp of hair with her right hand as she studied each member. There were six; five of them seemingly listening intently if their expressions were to be believed. A tall still tree without any leaves grew close behind where they sat (was it dead?). The only other noise was a grasshopper chafing continuously close by on of the chair legs.

“So you were there or had been?”

“I don't remember the pit. Of course it was so easy to dig in the ground there. It was all sand.”

The chair, next to which the grasshopper was sawing, was that of the speaker. He had hardly touched his food & the cutlery looked as if it was still exactly as laid. Her thumb & index finger slid along the waistband of her skirt again as if rehearsing a move. To be able to do this she had stepped back as if giving herself room, searching for a shadow & for those few seconds her eyes went blank.

“I'm going away on my own this time. He doesn't want to come.”

She stopped, her right hand fixed as if holding a bunch of flowers.

“It must have been winter because the ground was sandy, no grass growing.”

She flicked the fingers of her hands as she held them horizontally in front of her face.

“Several small huts had been built around this pit. Perhaps three or four.”

Again as she spoke she flicked her fingers & used a hand to describe a quarter arc in front to of her face about level with her mouth.

“It was like a snake pit but much deeper.”

She turned & as soon as she stopped speaking her hand fell to her side.

“So you had seen snake pits? You’d seen them out there?”

“Yes. They had them. They had an enormous pit in the centre of the yard. They kept big ones & I don’t know what other snakes. Yes really big ones, not just poisonous ones.”

I sat there but I had missed most of the description.

“We wanted to block all the little holes up in the walls & under the door but as soon as we started a villager asked us to stop as it would prevent the dogs getting in.”

The pit was about thirteen feet deep with a floor of sand. It may have been for snakes at one time. The sand could have blown in.

“Give me the description of that pit again. Really try & make it accurate. Where was it?”

“Which one?”

“Which one. You didn’t tell me there were two.”

“Yes. The real one & the dream one.”

SEVENTH.

AN INVISIBLE BUT USEFUL PEBBLE.

THE WORDS SILVER & BLACK COME TO MIND.

Years ago. Years to come.

The river of Time leaks & gives us Space that we smear with our blood. Which eventually rusts the weapons, clogs the triggers etc.

"I can smell gas."

"It must be my perfume."

She takes his sleeve to smell his wrist.

"No. I wear it on my neck."

She bites his neck.

"Who was that?"

"You seven years ago."

"I didn't realise so much had died in me."

"Do you know now?"

The extrachance meeting & gesture at that moment when she lost her concentration. Her white gloves glistened as she protested that they were not so clean, pointing to the faint yellowish stains on the fingers. She slid off the large comfortable chair to sit cross-legged on the carpet. She looked around & licked her lips while pulling the hem of her red-brown dress over her neat shoes.

"Just a hat on. Yes. She'll finish up with just a hat on." She whispered over my hunched back. She jogged my hand out of the way & scribbled out some words. A more emphatic stroke than crossing them out.

"No," she said, "The first area she lost sensation in was her cunt. Don't try & wrap that up. Although she had pain deep in her thighs & down the left leg it was there, her cunt, where she said, and Oh what it must have meant, 'I can't feel anything.' Everything she said, she only said once."

She stretched her arms up extending her body to show a tiny waist. I held her hands above her head & tugged her onto tiptoes. She brought dreams with her because after every one of her visits I remembered my own night's dream.

The gloves shone nevertheless. She patted her hands once the gloves were on; looked up as if expecting me to fish out a pocket watch.

"No, you're the one who should pull out a pocket watch." She was puzzled momentarily.

"So you're Alice!" She ventured quizzically & giggled & pulled her dress up & tucked it into its own waistband.

"Does Alice have this?"

Sometimes the door is big sometimes small.

"You guess what is happening," she said, "I've not made my mind up yet."

She snuggled into the corner of the large chair drawing her knees into the cushions. I stayed at the back of the room.

"Am I the fool I have always been not to have seen or felt the mad spiral in that other stone cold stare."

"Did you look? You were standing behind her you said."

"I couldn't see, the light was too bright. I only caught a glimpse. She had become ugly. Her face changed by the cuts & permanently swollen by the stitches holding the gashes together."

The gloves were off again. She was beyond me. Even less now, I couldn't patch our words together. One had dried up, skeletal in the concrete passages. The music bumped along the worn fingering of its own repetitious rhythm line. I was still trying to make sense of staring at the back of a head. The leather thong on her neck snapped as she tugged at it & the beads trickled down her body through the bra, past waist & thighs & ankles onto the floor. She picked them all up. And threw them on the fire. Some popped, some glowed with blue & green flames flickering off them, some resisted & stayed black. The shute of the beads through her clothes, no, next to her skin, lightly teased & swung her mood. She loosened her hair & improvised a moon shape with her fingers at him. The fire whispered 'think' with its last flash, its ruby entrails of ashes under the grate made an unconvincing bed for the beads to devise a compass, a direction. The mud skin of her foot came clear of its shoe & the other one too, as she tossed them off & clicked the buckles of her indigo bag shaking its contents onto the cushions.

"Let's see what we have here."

----- a white book, 'Phenomenological Psychology' by Edmund Husserl, with page 53 turned down at the corner.

'Crystalline,' he thought, surrounded by all known & unknown things.

----- a scrap of paper on which was copied a stanza from, 'Angel surrounded by  
paysans.' by Wallace Stevens. 'I am one of you and being one of you

Is being and knowing what I am and know.'

----- a white paper 'bus ticket bookmark with blue printing of the fare(1s 7d) in old  
shillings & pence. The single fare(not return) to South Kensington.

----- a filmy, gauzy, chiffon french-knicker(ref. 'apparels of such lightest look')  
Isadora style by Janet Reger in jet black.

Although, she remembered, she had considered crystal white.

They had split raggedly beside the seam.

----- a pendant earring, a large silver drop with a long bead of lapis lazuli above it;  
the other had been stolen, not lost.

'To contain those thoughts in their proper place,' she smiled.

----- some seeds screwed in a twist of tissue paper. Secret.

----- a red comb with a few hairs straggling around it. She wouldn't say what colour.

----- a three & a half times five inch, not pretty, Indian red & white patterned, hand-  
sewn(child?) purse-like bag with a triangular flap & single press-stud fastener containing  
(and these didn't spill out)a safety pin, 2 no! 3 condoms, a counterfeit one pound coin  
(blackish) a yellow black & white 4b pencil stub, 4 co-proxamol tablets (pain killers) on a  
foil & plastic sheet, a mother-of-pearl button, the one she had always meant to sew back  
onto the. . .coat she had long since given away.

----- a metal puzzle ring composed of four loose but interconnected rings (cheap  
silver metal) that she hadn't solved yet.



Still loose.

----- a lipstick red red red. Just this & that red.

----- a green crayon, specifically bluish.

----- a mirror compact, pink plastic (tacky) no powder ever.

----- some sort of key she had picked up. She had attached a thin red thread loop to it.

Once used to wind up a toy, now she tuned the guitar with it because all six white plastic knobs had broken off the machine head.

----- a diary, but more a note-book & calendar. Full of doodles.

----- a grey, worn, newspaper cutting folded twice, of two laboratory rabbits in a test with masks on, each with a lit cigarette stuck in it, smoke curling above them like wisps of hair.

----- a diagrammatic map drawn on the back of a calendar page with BRIDGE NG553320 scrawled on it. The page had a seascape photo of the Isle of Skye with doodle dashes drawn from a boat to a box in a clear part of the sky. A continuous line angled from this box to an islet in the photograph. 'I love you' was pencilled in the sky box. The date Saturday 8<sup>th</sup> September was circled.

----- some loose change, a few pence.

----- a white plastic spoon; a blue serrated plastic knife.

----- a small pkt. of tissues, open, still in the cellophane.

----- a cheap brown envelope that had been roughly torn open, addressed :

'To The Owner Of The Dogs.'

In blue biro with a line scratched under it. It was an anonymous letter complaining about the dogs' howling (only one howled, the other danced about). In an illiterate hand.

Why keep it?

----- a tooled leather wad full of bank-notes, mostly £5's, she liked their colour.

----- an apple. Cox. She shook it. It rattled. Ripe. She had enjoyed finding that out years ago. She wasn't going to share that memory.

----- a 30ml. brown dropper bottle of Patchouli essential oil (from Baldwins on the Walworth Road). Bit sticky. And a smaller bottle of Ylang Ylang oil. She unscrewed its white top. The aroma nearly always made her feel uneasy perhaps even angry.

----- a thin black box containing silver-grey eye liner, mascara & brush. The made eyes to make them.

She pointed at the text, "'flattish' I would say."

He nodded, "I'll change it."

"I don't know what happened on that date do you," she straightened the calendar page with all the doodles on it, "Do you?"

"Sometimes the sweetest things. . .as they sing. . .drone & dwindle the event all away."

"I see, it's a blank for you as well."

"Worth looking into?"

"If anything important did take place then it's one more notch in synchronicity's handle."

"It depends what year. . .any chance of finding out?"

They knew he would laboriously search.

He turned a page & read.

'D.....e party. There's electricity between me & D. Held hands round uBahn pillar.

Kissed in the suburbs. It was soul talk. Didn't go over to his place that night.

M. had been crying.

Next morning taxi to station from bare room. Not unhappy about D.'

"How would you circle that?"

"Depends on the sex of the letters. Who was D. any idea?"

"M. was a girl, but I'm guessing." He shuffled through his notes & glanced up at her.

"There is this, a loose page with a short dream on it that could be counted as the start of one of those days. Listen.

'I was out on a balcony overlooking a site which had very tall skyscrapers on it. There was a square in the middle with the buildings arranged lopsidedly around it. After one explosion, I saw a watch, a black watch, in the rubble. I thought that the people would miss it if I didn't go down & tell them it was there. I went down a long flight of white stairs. There was a guard at the bottom & a piece of rope across the way. He had to telephone through to see if I was to be allowed access to the site. I told him my name, but he couldn't say it right. I ducked under the rope. When I got to the site, the rubble had been completely cleared. There was no sign of the watch.'"

"I can't make sense of that. . .so all those years ago she dreamed this," she waved a picture in her hand as if revealing a landscape.

"It feels like it."

"It looks like it!" He flicked the paper flat.

"She says time after time, 'All my dreams are turning to dust.' Any way, here's the last part of her dream.

'There was another girl inside with an anchovy-like creature. She gave it to me to look after. I took it outside by the oil tank, & in a box found a hedgehog. I took it out & went right to the top of the house to a room which isn't there. P. was lying on the bed. I said, look what I've got, & the hedgehogs snout was peeping out of my cunt. I brought it out gently with my hands.'

"M. M. M. Good start to the day. You might circle that one."

"How about this entry. 'Ate like a pig. S. came back. Talked in the kitchen. Made love till 4. Will it fade out?'"

"Did she go through all the alphabet?"

"Not on that date. There weren't enough years."

I went over to help sort through the things tumbled out of the bag & saw that she was holding something tightly in her right hand as she moved the pieces around with her index finger. The intonation of her exclamation to keep secret the object she had palmed was distorted by its delivery. . .it should have been whispered. . .it should have been spoken under water. . .

"Really under an almond tree there isn't much shade. We were in a sunken lane about a piss wide. . .you should be able to gauge that better than me. . .surrounded by clouds of butterflies, hundreds & hundreds." She murmured twice & her voice tailed off as she recreated that sight.

"From a distance we couldn't make it out but the strange look of the tree drew us up the hill. When we had climbed closer we could see that yellow & pink plastic sacks had been tied loosely to its branches. The red earth under it was hard & cracked."

She paused, "Why we were there I don't know, I still don't."

I passed her a drink.

"We spread a blanket. There were many very small ants running about. . .black. We lay down not quite touching each other." She made a gesture to indicate the space spreading her fingers a little & something flashed in that half closed palm & she grinned at my quick glance, tossed it negligently in the air & caught it.

"Later. . .later."

"Why have you stopped?"

"It wasn't the kind of enchanted place I was going to conjure up & I was just wondering why I wanted to change it." She glanced over to the window. The fire danced in the night. She tipped her head back.

"I'm going to look at this part of the story first & consider why they came later."

"Who came later?" I lifted my feet & gently held each of her elbows down with my toes & then slowly rocked forward till I not only pinned each arm down with more weight but was able to reach her hands by leaning one way or the other.

"Before you get puzzled & cross I'll admit someone did come later. I hadn't told you. But put it to the back of your mind just now. . .I was sleeping. . ." She looked down.

"Now those three words tell a story." I blurted this out & regretted it so I reached for her right hand but her index finger came up in a straight no.

"I had written it down. . .I concealed nothing. You never read it. It wasn't important." She said this as she gently touched his nose.

"They had painted an orange line on the floor covering & everything passing over it into me had to be sterile. Books & magazines were baked in an oven. Knives & forks sprayed with a special aerosol; even apples were treated this way."

She eased her body from under the pressure of his legs & rolled onto her belly.

"I survived. She died."

He rubbed her back either side of the spine & spoke as he rocked in the massage.

"The glossy magazine picture stuck together, the models were often stripped as you turned the pages. . .I saved them. . .I read your comments. . .I saw what additions you scribbled on their bodies. . .what if they had come alive. . ."

"Of course they did. You know it. It seems you've met most of them." She felt in the deep indigo bag & took out a dainty silver metal vibrator.

"Now this is useless." And tossed it away. To gleam in a corner. To hum.

"Huh." The suppressed, metal appeal slid out of him.

"I found it in the room after they had carted her off," she coarsened her speech to soften the act in his feelings, she hoped, & shrugged a bit as she said it, to help. She gave up at that moment, as soon as she saw that he knew what she couldn't exactly convey.

"They stole. . .how do I know. . .so much."

The waltz.

Good star names.

"They left you that note? It was a cold evening for a woman to be naked?"

"You still want to know? Forget it. Most of the place was boarded up It wasn't too bad. I used the clue on the note & got nowhere." She grinned at him listlessly.

"You turned up just at the right time for them."

"Mere fantasy would have served them just as well I think."

"I thought you swapped?" She shook her head.

"You were tricked?" She shook her head.

The fire dropped. She drank again.

"There was an undetermined sameness about us, I slipped into. . ." & she smiled at him & he never knew why, "it."

Her voice was like a turbulent soot blended into a heart-throbbing paste capable, if washed on thin, of showing where the caressing lines ended & the crawl began. The zebra bars of deceit can almost disappear in the dapples of sunshine & careless talk, but here, & there & then in the gloom, when struck they rang like bells. She leaned over as he wrote.

"He didn't ever say that. He was never loquacious. He was weighing up the chances whether he was in for a fuck. That's all."

He crossed out the quotation marks as the bolt still quivered in its mark. A sharp green taste hit his mouth, its astringency caused the gasp that seemed to be the affirmation she sought. They shuffled the objects together.

The bag still had plenty of things left in it. She caught him by the ears, held his face close to hers.

"For nine years it was there, in black & white, for you to see if you'd bothered to look."

"There were four pages torn out by the time I found the papers."

"The first day? I know. Oh things sweeten, ripen."

"Fall."

Her hand was suspended over the curve of her hip. It lowered slowly as a gentle slap.

"Ripen." She emphasised.

"Bright fruit, leave it at that. I remember placing apples in rows, each one wrapped in newspaper, under the bed all winter. Their fragrance a bridge to spring."

She picked out the apple & took a bite.

"Did he get what he wanted?"

"I got what I wanted." She replied flatly. "And very often you, when asking a question like that one, when talking to me about women's sexuality (mine) have to or seem to like to confine what is said to an outline. They sound strange to a woman. We flirt but you can't really take it."

They were facing each other sitting sideways with all the objects between them. The bag still bulging. . .its indigo practically black in the fading firelight.

"Are there any other entries for that date?"

"There's an A. mentioned a few times but never on that date."

"Not his lucky day."

"Never had one by the record! There's a longer one. . ."

"It would make my day if S. came. Quit crying for the moon. S. I wish you could read my thoughts. I was singing, S., I love you, love you. Is that really me? I make such hash-ups of all relationships I get into. Just don't think about the others at all. Who else would have been so absolutely thoughtless as to sleep with L. in the same room as someone else (A)



I'd slept with. Who else would have got a poor innocent like M. into bed with her, scarcely two meetings old. Abstractly it is very amusing, I think, but if you consider the effect of these actions. . . I shudder. He's not coming. I know he's not. I put on my green dress in case he came, because I wanted to look pretty, but he's not coming.'

There's more, but that's the gist of it."

"Are you sure about M. being a girl," she asked. "I think if S. had come she would have circled that one. So she might have circled it in anticipation."

"I'll keep looking. There are a few years I can't find any papers for. . . Here's one, probably the last I'll be able to be sure about as she stopped dating them later on.

'Listen. This was the way I met you, you said, & it sticks pretty close to the facts I believe. I'll remind you. One night a knock came at your door & outside you saw a girl dressed up ready for a swim. You said it. I couldn't have been wearing much less. And I wanted you to go with me. It wasn't far & there was a moon in the sky, behind the clouds. Fairytale light. You invited me into your warm house. I hesitated (or seemed to hesitate) & looked behind once. You said you thought at that moment.

"Awful," he interjected quickly.

That I had a whole troop of friends in the garden to back me up. I was sweating slightly, perhaps from the effort of coming over the hill, perhaps not. As I didn't move, didn't seem inclined to jump was the way you put it, you drew a circle in the air in front of me. I punched the round out before daintily stepping inside the house.'

"You were fully dressed! A light blue sweater &"

She stopped him.

"Well, unfortunately for me I must have hooked a fold or something on one of the uneven sides of that circle, because with every step I took a piece of clothing fell off, until, by the time I had reached the fireside, I was dressed only in stockings & a suspender belt."

"Red." He remembered laconically.

"Yes. You can always remember the colours."

"Didn't you know it was happening? Or did you just accept it?"

"Like now!" She grinned back at him. "And you thought I was a virgin." And she laughed & laughed.

Between the red belt & the feather bed; two black silk stockings; a pink ribbon; a wooden step ladder.

"Now where was that found?" He had picked up a squarish flattened silver piece of tin with a bird shape drawn by hammering holes through it (a kind of single point crible).

"On the road! It's the bottom half of tobacco tin or something like it squashed by the traffic." She held it in front of the candle's undulating flame.

"Come on. You did, didn't you." She caught his hand & placed the warm metal picture in his fingers. The soot blackened the tip of one so he took her hand & rubbed a black spot onto her palm.

"I still do."

She picked up the bag & shook the remaining contents out. A feather floated last of all.

Their hands touched as they spread the pile. A sequin, brilliant green like a supernatural fish scale, winked.

"Make up the fire." They shuddered at the chill. And the shapes that seemed to leave them but stay in the dusk beyond.

The burning logs, the tinsel, a stroke, disorder, a divination of objects, the entrails of a love. Little boy blue hunched over a sheaf of papers & stalks.

"They've tried often enough to throw the lights away never mind just blow them out."

Each page a pale light. Silly words reinforcing the absurd.

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As well as the rough mounds of bricks & neat rows of stone slabs standing on their edges all overgrown with brambles, there was a vague outline left of the stable foundation filled with a black mush of dead twigs, rotting leaves & oily water. A ragged stepladder of broken wall stood. If you dared climb to the gap you found an invisible entrance, only open at night behind closed eyes. The pull of nightmare's fear was there; a clutching thrill of something more deadly than the fearsome passage it was hidden in. . . a compelling force.

"De Vases; how could we have sheltered & played in the ruins with that name!"

"So it came at a particular time in your childhood? 7 years? 8? 9?"

"Nothing could withstand it & I'm not talking about an imaginary feeling, it was inexorable & I was utterly vulnerable & afraid."

"The child unwittingly saved the child by giving in to terror. But why call it up?"

"There was the most delicious tempting feeling, a divine venom that left the body floating in a bottomless azure. Spinning in a reality outside the error of time. It was worth everything to be there as if slotted between the hard frost & the hard road."

They both went for the same thing.

"Hands off my pussy!" She had just cupped it before his hands slid over hers.

"What's next then?" She put his hand back on his own knee.

"You like blondes."

"You said that with a certainty difficult to deny as if you've got a checklist containing the possibilities of an all-embracing detailed psychological match. . .it must be a useful tool."

He had reeled it off.

She winced, "It was a bridge. . .I was giving you a bridge. . .you could have said 'mostly' & then with my certain look following that you could have added 'sometimes I'm attracted to' & then you pick a characteristic. . .of mine."

"Follow the emotional line?"

"And learn to separate this line from those emotional feelings from the past times you've put your foot in it or in this case tried to put your hand in it!"

----- a small red woven cloth purse with a fine silver filigree band decorating it below the snap clip of two acorns; in it, by memory, a triangular shark's tooth token of love from B. probably (or was it M?) That tells it all. Two plastic money cards in their own soft blue plastic sheath. Several receipts. A black oval folding magnifying glass with two lenses.

"Why do you want to measure things? I saw you inching that purse up with your thumb."

She took it.

"I wondered what use a thing that size could be."

"Well you don't find out by knowing its size."

----- a rubber, not the vertical rub of what she'd just said but an eraser of irregular shape made of red gum with lots of dots in biro on one side of no apparent significance.

"You should be able to work that one out."

----- a candle stub, white wax; taken off his hat he'd say.

----- a book of paper matches. Tsunami. With the words 'close before striking' over the purple patch striker plate. In red, black, blue & white. Three used. Seven left.

----- a sharp bladed folding knife with a cherry wood & brass handle. Kept in a loose cloth bag, half plain blue, half yellow stripes, not originally sewn-up for the knife.

She opened the blade with her thumbnail, its steel shone like rain.

"Good enough to be buried into anything." She said with a deliberately wicked smile. A mime like night falling. The blade chimed on the edge of her wine glass as if she was at the limit of a silence she had endured too long, in that shape.

The next song started. (The Cowboy Junkies version of 'Lonesome Blues' by Hank Williams).

She sang.....'Hear the lonesome Whip-o-will his song too blue to fly.....'

"These ploys of mine get misunderstood so often it's as if I have been wired by the wrong diagram of emotions, or they only had a crude copy to work from some times."

The guitar break finished.

The singer's voice came in.....'I'm so lonesome I could cry.....'

"I'm sure it can't be as easy to give a clear signal like a robin's red breast when flashed to another bird. To us it's Xmas : to the bird it's fuck off."

.....'have you ever seen a robin weep when leaves have turned to brown.....

.....like me he's lost his will to live.....I'm so lonesome I could cry.....'

The guitar slunk in again.

----- two loose white tampon bullets with a blue fuse packed in cellophane with a yellow tag to open them.

"I stood out of the bath & looked down & saw a large gob of blood between my feet. You can't imagine the relief I feel. And yet if I cut my finger I nearly faint.

The song drifted back. . .

.....'my moon is gone behind the clouds to hide her face & cry.....

.....I'm so lonesome I could die.....'

"Not the body of flesh; not the body of bone. Not stone or bronze either as it is set up in so many places, but flowing blood. I remember swaying elated over the dripping blood.

The pain lifting through my body like a curtain rising & then out of it."

The potent juice of the labyrinth dribbling from the heart of a rose.

----- a clear rigid plastic box containing two false eyelashes mounted on a moulded sheet of thin plastic with a channel holding a tiny tube of adhesive.

----- a tube of Payne's grey watercolour paint.

----- a pin (a nob pin she called them); a paper clip; a rusty nail slightly bent, still showing silver flecks here & there.

----- a screw of discarded silver wrapper from a chocolate bar.

She knelt down, picked the silver paper out of the pile, flattened it carefully, pouted her lips, pressed it over them & asked, "Am I pretty?"

He was astonished by the question, its innocence & need & trust.

"Are you asking if I love you?" He gasped as quickly as he could.

She pushed a little finger through the gag of silver, cupped her mouth with both hands & stuck her tongue out of the rip.

"Am I pretty?"

She felt as if she was drowning & needed to be buoyed up by a smile, a caressing word.

She blushed.

He looked confused.

They were in love.

----- an old-fashioned toy car, rusted red tin, clockwork, its key used to tune the guitar. Eight tiny stencilled windows, the left passenger seat beside the driver showing a man looking out. Behind that a blank window & in the rear a woman vaguely smiling. The windscreen had the driver concentrating over 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of a steering wheel & the right profile of a man. The other windows were abstractly glazed with black & white zigzags & dots except the front right one showing the driver side on. Or was the driver shouting & waving his left hand? And didn't the woman have rather a set expression, intense, as if she had caught a glimpse of something or perhaps someone? And her mouth was just open about to speak? Only the other passenger fixed in the delicate tracery of imaginary car doors & wings & bonnet, finely drawn in black, seemed content. Or was he oblivious, having been caught a moment before the woman gasped in amazement.

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We stopped in the middle of the narrow winding road. The car doors were flung open on the icy burly night. We had to stop. The first animal out. . .I could hear her words as I wrote that. . .'you're all animals under that' & she contemptuously flipped the sleeve of her own coat. . .'& I like to think it.'

She smiled & hugged the soft dog who was first out on the ice splaying its legs skidding because of the thick tufts of hair which grew in between its pawpads.

She did.

She loved to have whispered exactly what she was going to get.

I saw the dog's breath puffing round the crisp frozen grass stalks just before my attention was drawn to a large black bush. It was changing shape before me. Opening out, becoming the dense evergreen lining to an avenue which slowly uncoiled on an odious plain of marsh & flats & rectangular fields of water with narrow grassy causeways. The landscape itself wasn't repugnant, nor the wind which blew across its grey-green & black-green forms with a constant strong force; it was the group of animals I saw groping & writhing as if caught in a treacherous swamp. I reached down. I was going to pick up a stone to see if I could hurl it to frighten off the crows I saw hopping & nudging in a cracked & whitened tree close over the huddle of foaming, sweating animals. I reached right down & then I felt my hand constricted, held firm then tighter by the warm jaws of the earth.



Warm & tense she crossed her thighs over his hand & said.

"Where were you going? And what were you going to do?"

"I was going to throw a stone at those. . ."

She looked at him closely as she twisted over so slowly onto her side taking first his wrist, then his arm, then his shoulder down.

"There's no stone there," she panted as she struggled to keep the momentum & advantage of her first surprise roll.

"There are no birds either. . .now."

She rolled off her belly to her side & propped on an elbow. There were a few white petals off a stitchwort stuck to her groin & she brushed them off along with the flecks of moss & short fragments of withered grass. The imprint of these stalks on her belly had written a few words, not all in English, but it was a start. I got closer to peer & read them, I was counting on her to translate when needed.

'I was squashed' it read '& could hardly breathe when you rolled your groins up her buttocks & pushed the flat of her back with your palms'.

The windrush cleft in the mountain, about as big as my foot miles away, was filled up with light grey cloud tufts. The ground from the door to the sea was several feet below a nebulous grey absolutely still fog & no colours shone through. The sea was rapidly producing its own white fog. There was a woman's cry outside. The man said to himself 'I wonder how long she will last'. The dog pounced on something. I was too far away to see what it was. The woman's voice was raucous but I couldn't complain about her harsh senseless cries because I thought she must be ill. She was ill. The dog became so excited

that he bit me high on my left hip. The ground was moist. Her lips were moist on his fingers as he stroked them open, her teeth were moist & open under the lips as her tongue came out. The sounds wound up like a string of raw meat above the conifers. I could see a gigantic frayed breast of lamb being threaded through the gloomy aisles of tree trunks & a pack of lean dogs, their tails pulled right up between their hind legs, snarling & tearing at it & being dragged along by the jaws until they were brushed off by a trunk or low branch with a shred of fat in their fangs & the dull-red & yellow-white lump rippling up as the log was forced firmer against the teeth & then fold as the blade bit through & raced free singing light & crinkly & dispelling the dogs & throwing up a gauzy screen of dragonflies for a moment & then the dull rip at the start of another cut & the underlying hum like the swift dash I saw each dog make. I could see a thread of green smoke flatten & disappear a few feet above the forest. There was this swish behind me & she came rolling down side over side her hands protecting her breasts & she plumped against my back with her chin in the grass. I heard the distant motor cut out halfway through that last full thrust. The dogs had stopped the long lump of meat & were tearing it & dragging it out of shape into balloons of skin that hissed as the dogs tugged harder. The blade stopped with a yelp. I pushed my hand right down her shorts, down that smooth little hollow round the saw-cut & flattened my fingertips on her nest.

The mistake was stopping. The black night became heavier & heavier but that could not have stopped us, it could have claimed us for longer & much longer until the solitude & waste ripped us up & raggedly used us to mop up the pain & whisk the silver flies away from the wooden frame covered in a black & streaky yellow dangerous slime & off the

runny eyes & muzzles of the dogs. It could have slowed us but not changed us. Only that could happen if we stopped. And we did. We stopped to sort out who was right, which of us black & which silver & to make our points tell we needed to tap each others shoulders & shake our heads & arms. We were almost going to dance it. We were going to pick off until either black or silver was left. We counted. The night was at us like a hammer. I slipped on the road & reeled. I seemed to be stopped by a warm furry head & as I groped over it I felt warm saliva on its teeth as it drooled. I had started to fold up from the moment I slumped against it. I was wafted upright by no more than that except a nudge & it was gone. Shoulder to shoulder with the frozen earth I stared across to the mountains so far away that their rim was still touched by light. I heard him shouting to come before it was too late. It sounded as though he was hoarse from the effort & duration. I lay alongside the myriad stars of frost. I should have kept my balance. . .

Should the last word be black, or should it be silver? If I started now would the last word I spoke be black or would it be silver? The jack frost on the window panes hadn't started to melt yet. It was black outside. I could start with BLACK. Now, I wondered, should I ask her. She came in a square-looking coat so blue the usual sky winced & she snapped several photos of the three dogs in the haze. The first yellow flowers were out on the broom. The wild cherry suckers white blossomed. The grass cut.

I took exact measurement of nose & mouth when smiling; distance from arsehole to left earhole measured in handspans; distance from nape of neck to belly button firstly direct like a shiver or shock, secondly as traced by a finger; big toe to nose when erect. It was a shaky start but then, if those adversaries we carry within us were intent on stopping me, I

would rather they tried with a rainstorm or hailstorm than by a hail of blows. It is a fabric which is plainly at risk & which would be destroyed irreversibly, he clicked his tongue, if we seed the clouds we change the seasons, we may well stop it freezing all together. But the road was icy. What was the fabric he talked about in that slippery voice? Was it the mind? The skin (abraded by rough handling & the rough road)? The frostiness? The jet-black night? Both sure to disappear the next morning. None of those, he said & his tongue clicked again but not as he pronounced a word so I can't show you. It concerns more than one of you. It was all the bunch together. A fabric impossible to weave again even if you momentarily gathered again on a frosty night by that roadside & admired the sparkling jewel-like glitter & repeated the talk about the certainty of Love. I doubt whether the dog would smell her arse again anyway - it's much older now.

BLACK she said, NO SILVER.

