

**Book Two of 'The Angel Maker' called
'The lost Picnic'
by Peter Darach.**

I like to start with a true story. What you get later is your own look-out.

1974.

I drew a caricature bone on the rough worn lino of the studio floor. A dumbbell shape. My dog watched intently. As soon as I'd finished he came over & looked down at it. Then he pretended to dig it up glancing at me a couple of times, picked it up & skulked over to a corner behind some cardboard boxes. The dog carefully placed his imaginary bone down & looked at it. With a few dabs of a paw the spot where to bury it was decided. He dug only a small imaginary hole, occasionally looking warily over his shoulder at me & seeming to be irritated by my watching. Then his bone was lifted into the non-existent hole delicately & the imaginary dirt nosed back with unnecessarily vigorous sweeps. Finished, the dog's tail came high & he lopped back to my side.

1983.

She partially listened to my grumbling as I smashed the plaster head from which they had cast the plastic guide mask used in the cancer therapy. The first blow broke it into four pieces & I hammered until the stark white fragments were all embedded in the dirt track. Then I kicked my boot over the pieces to soften their dazzle. She looked on. I pounded the fragments again. She leaned against the massive stone wall of the barn, standing on its broad concrete step, still waiting. I brushed past her & hid the sledgehammer behind a pile of straw bales. A grey rabbit scuttled from its hiding place & stopped abruptly by my feet. I leaned over & stroked its long ears with both hands. I looked up. She had gone. I could just make out the word SKIDGATE faintly chalked inside the barn door. I scattered

the ashes. I knew they were full of old nails. I knew I had to drive my car back over them, but still I did it. They sang beware of the nails. I knew we would never fuck again.

1968.

Years before, from under a bridge, near which we had stopped for a moment, came a man dressed in yellow & black waterproofs carrying glowing coke in a brazier. He was followed by a man with a shovel & together they set the fire safe in a sheltered place on the road embankment. Snowflakes were being driven almost horizontal by the fierce wind so that none were settling on the cables which criss-crossed the area by the side of the bridge. Behind the men stood the wreck of a hoarding with its supporting poles & struts hanging down, its trellis border broken in. All I could see that was left of the advertisement on it was an arm in a red sleeve, the hand had been torn off so strips of the poster waved like fingers.

Allt Phocaichain rushed into the river under the bridge.

“You have been silent too long, & it was filled with so much violence that you may have destroyed any possibility of enjoying any of your choices.”

She nodded approval of that as she read.

As the last blue truck shunted past over the bridge he saw a pink rectangle flash momentarily against the grey sky, this afterimage was covered with lighter dashes of green, the afterimages of the snowflakes.

I had no answer to her.

Although represented as pink the truck had not been pink; the pink afterimage represented nothing that was or had been a truck or pink. Was it pink itself? (Come out of

the blue). The green afterimages of the snowflakes depended on the pink for their colour otherwise they would have been as all the other were, a lighter grey against a darker grey background sky. These green snowflake afterimages were lighter on the pink but were darker in amongst the snowflakes still floating down. They had been engendered by snowflakes that had already settled, become snow.

“I get you. Now you think we are deceiving ourselves in the afterimage of our love? Neither its real rosy colour. . .nor even love itself! I can’t take it to that extreme. We were fiddling around, we knew we had gorged ourselves & should have made off. But each disappointment instead of using up our store of desire seemed to give us a cast iron reason to continue quite the contrary. For love to flash & flash again.” She stared down. “Like a weld being made.” She paused again.

“I can’t feel free until we . . .stay apart. Keep apart. Keep.” She stopped. All she had said & would say had been said. Unheard.

“I was sucked in by grief, that stone tiger & held till a scar formed & then I was spat out as. . .a scintillating skeletal remnant . . .the flesh forgotten.”

“Thanks.”

“A tree of bones made ready for some tormented uncaring but blameless woman to hang her trouble on the tips. . .”

“Baubles.” She faced him. “Couldn’t be anything serious, could it?”

“No repose. Sharp angles. . .The pictograph of a Christmas tree gives it.” He drew a zigzag line up her belly, between her breasts with the light touch of a fingertip. She

brought a hand down fiercely on his hand & held it in a hard grip just longer than was necessary.

I'd read him much differently.

How was this chord able to strike so deep a note in him?

How had she got it so right?

1968.

At the same moment he saw the pink afterimage a snowflake hit her eye & she blinked & saw glowing whitish-yellow edges sizzling around every object in her field of vision & although following the line of sight he pointed in, didn't see anything pink.

"How would he know?"

"I know this is news for you," she shook her head & swept loose hair from off her face as she spoke. A double handed swing. "But some people talk to each other."

"In between fucking & lighting fires? Or while they're at it?"

Her hands stayed cusped on the bunch of hair, a ribbon dangling from between thumb & finger.

"I see you are surrendering!"

She tied the pink bow & again stroked either side of her face.

1995.

A small eagle desk. Oak & veneer. Varnish ring scarred gouged splattered, but desirable it seems from the way it has passed from hand to hand. My knees under it. My hand holding a pencil over it darting above pieces of white paper. My feet scuffling files & piles of discarded books. Everything on it shoved to the back! The pencil hovering while

I reckon if at this point it would be a good idea to sketch in the plot of the story; give it away, so the readers can, if they wish, embellish the rest of the text with their own desires & be in the know while the characters flounder around, much as they did in life. And this stuff pushed out of the way, these disconnected things are the stuff of this book in a way.

On the wall behind the desk is hanging an upside-down clock. Tick tock life death. To the right a round bonbon tin with a domed flower-patterned lid irregularly embossed in five places, a garden of four blooms & one rock, in reds, greens & gold on black; containing numerous snips of card each inscribed with a number. Buried with these was a heavy silver ring holding a flat lump of purple granite as its jewel. Beside:

A saucepan shaped pottery shelter, in Neolithic style, made by a child to house (under the lid) a family; three tiny clay dolls, one of whom is gesticulating violently (for clay), the others of indeterminate sex, more passive, lying around the deep red clay fire & green slab chair. A rabbit & a shark touched with blue complete the group slumbering in the light from a circular window. The door is, as ever, open.

An anglepoise lamp, unlit.

A burnished black frog-like ornament but having stubby poles for legs with eight holes in its back, never used for anything.

Pig iron horse, sawn & hammered in West Africa from one ingot, surmounted by a warrior his zigzag legs defying anatomy, brandishing a sword. Two odd earrings dangling from its wire rein & silver bracelets thrown over the beast's flank belonging to . . .

I can't say. I like to be secretive, deceitful even. I can't remember.

The woman on the colour photograph; blue hazy sky, blue sea, green clifftop. A seemingly negligent smile for the world from behind her wind-swept grey-blond hair.

Reach over & tear it to pieces.

“There. You were always claiming to be shown in a bad light in the story. Out you go & this time for ever.”

She grew thinner & thinner.

“Do you really know if he started off telling the truth? You never can tell. More so as soon as the question is asked. What would it be? A collection of events that look as though they could have gone together? The true ones are more likely to look impossible together, their actuality questioned by their juxtaposition. The real things can float in shit or the pretty flexible ether.”

A red perspex ‘plane with a yellow yolk flash stuck on a rectangular blue plastic background cornered by a white quarter cloud. The cockpit a clever light bulb occasionally lighting up. . .

An exquisite Ensor seashell with the cunt rim of the world in mottled earth pink kissing a secret note pushed under it for safe keeping. . .

next to a sea ground sand imbedded glass shard. White. With a few worn incised lines.

Then a Raku fired black & grey cottage (mud hut) with knife slash windows & door guarded by two Ashanti gold weights, one a hunter, satchel slung over one shoulder & game tied on his back, a rifle over the other shoulder & short baton in his right hand. The other man smoking a big pipe, holding a stout staff in his right hand. Both menaced by a

lead crocodile pored in a clay impression taken from a plastic zoo toy more than twenty years ago.

A photo. Two youths tussling in front of a large daubed painting of figures in a chaotic Hell.

Another horse, brass cast, bridled, decorated with abstract inscribed lines, from another continent. Pertly regarding (unless knocked)

An intricate pencil drawing illustration of a demon war god dark knight on the back of card salvaged from a cereal packet in Italy.

Crumpled in by lamp & hut lay a newspaper print photo of a sleeping Celtic prince (2,500 years old).

Also artefacts (of the Mexican people) rustic carnival animals, a donkey & a rabbit; stamped out of cheap tin. Painted in lurid colour; an orange rabbit edged with crimson eating a carrot from a green paw under a green nose; the donkey smiling with pink lips delicate, its blue-grey form saddled by a bright red blanket, trotting on dainty gold hooves.

Oh! Its eye: a knowing but winkless eye.

Any more & you've got the whole room's history.

“I hope this isn't a plan aiming at perfection again! So many cross-references & links proposed that it becomes unachievable. The plan accomplishes only that; nothing compounded by designs.”

1975.

An oily creosote coloured scorpion came out from behind a red yellow & blue kite hanging on the flaking white-limed wall.

Then a frying –pan magically appeared.

Why?

Well a frying-pan full of bacon was sizzling at the moment of your conception.

How do I know?

I **was** there. I saved the red suspender belt your mother wore at the time long after she died.

The pyramid of memory growing, the jackdaw's steeple . . .and gutter puddle with reflections that looked like a stout batten of wood & then into bed back to front fully dressed after a good time.

“Did I lock the doors?” She fanned both hands down over her belly brushing his hands off.

“I see I did.”

Did acting pleasure in my presence want some counterweight? She didn't act it very often.

It was then I saw a scorpion beside the Chinese bird kite as smoke curled out of a green mound of weeds. My childhood signal. Acrid smoke filling my head. I ran out of the dense conical shape of choking gases to the end of a slab path that divided the garden.

Plums : Apples. And disappeared through a privet hedge into the back bork. A long line of

people wound down this narrow path under overhanging hawthorn trees to the river. Each one carried a log of wood for the pyre.

"There were no women then."

The rat catcher's terrier went for my leg. I beat it off with a cudgel.

Two lovers playing with a monkey came on a card from KHAJURAHO.

A beautiful maiden with a scorpion on her thigh. She's carved in stone.

"A scorpion tattoo, that would be yummy, just above the knee."

Breasts luscious as persimmons, but carved in stone. Rubbed incessantly, touched incessantly. The need turning the full stone breasts black.

"Mind full of scorpions. Which one. Which one, to sting me with." (ref. Macbeth)

"Why have you come to wake me up?"

But she wanted him this time. He looked a lustier, younger embrace than she could have hoped for. Yet she kept her place, posed but evading & simultaneously barred her door rattling the bolt unnecessarily.

Of the truths I try & pick out the one I can bear the light of, call it what happened or happens, but my inclinations can't always be made too steep.

She lay on him & wriggled his legs apart.

I waited my imagination sliding me down several slippery inclinations into tumbles.

There were violent rumblings behind the door before he emerged into my chaotic but subtle jealousy. I ignored his reddened eyes & his slightly frosted frayed lips opening & closing like an anemone but told him to buckle his belt.

“To keep your mind in.” I poked a finger towards his fly as her face sailed round the door with a halo of fuzzy hair just as we now see a Goya lady with her fingers in the socket; not a fashion plate more a lop.

“Mmmm.”

Her foot crushed a ripening poppy head & out jerked the white froth of immature seeds. She froze.

The horse-chestnut tree leaves were hanging limp & curled like worn-out rubber gloves as a back-drop through the window as she bent & mournfully wiped the splodge up with crumpled green newspaper.

“So you don’t know where to begin to get out of it, do you?”

She lobbed the ball of waste paper out of the window.

“I wasn’t thinking of trying. I don’t feel in it. Whatever you think it is. What I do know is you’ll blunder about with this line of sombre thought as if it’s a completely anonymous crusade until there’s no space left for anything including a picnic.”

She held up a fist as if seizing a message from the air.

“That can’t be mended or changed. It has its own form now. . . “

“Still in your Cardboard castle. With your pal Aggrandizement,” he murmured barely heard in the clatter of a dog starting up to run on the lino in such a frantic haste that it actually didn’t move at first.

“What? Fragrant did you say? What does that mean?” She tightened a strap on her bra, deftly flicking a button open at her neck to do it. He saw the scar.

“He said. . .”

“Oh. Shut up.”

The dog whined as it tore through the door.

“Let’s forget it. I have to forget it. There’s no way we can talk about it. There are too many ghosts attending. . . waiting in the corners. . . grimacing at every try. It’s hideous the way you treat me.”

“Was it me?”

“ Add this. Add that. How can I tell exactly how things are.”

“You seem so sure. You never let any word of dissent be heard. It’s wagged away with a finger.”

She mouthed 'Loggerheads'. And placed her palms flat on the table.

That conjured up the pile of skulls.

He smiled.

"Do you call that a smile?"

"You always pull away after wagging that finger & claim to be under attack. But you don't want to take anyone on."

They continued eating, tearing lumps of bread & dropping them into the soup.

“I can see it has to be dismissed because there is no space between the candle shadow & the wall. That faint & flickering dance is the only dialogue possible & she is capable of nothing more to keep away your probing which she feels could be the battering ram that finds the body wall is a sham; a layer of strapped plaster thin as a serpent skin over the void she travels in front of.”

“Let’s forget it. It’s too complicated. . .”

“I don’t think it is. It’s too simple & silence just leaves the shit on the floor.”

“And I trod in it . . .as usual.”

“And tell us,” he sighed & stood taking up a folded white sheet. He shook it out & pegged it on a line that crossed the room in front of the window.

“Now let’s see how we look against this.”

They huddled over the table hidden by the sheet.

He moves in R.H.S. crossing in front of the whiteness. Street sounds, but we can't see it.

"If we can't reveal our wounds to the world. And we usually can't. What can we do? Then they are expressed with more huffing & puffing than that wolf made without our control.

The artifice of control is our best chance."

"I need a shift in vision. In the same way as we now see Cold War weaponry after it's over. The B.2. 'stealth' bomber needing to be kept in an air-conditioned hangar because out in the operational world the anti-radar paint washed off in the rain & the whole aircraft started melting in the heat."

"Costly to develop; expensive to maintain; dangerous mmmm like our wounds."

"I'd better write them out."

"Yes. Write them out of the story."

1980

“Where do you like to be?” She pulled a long face as I lay face down on a narrow, lumpy bed.

I shouted back. “In barren lands.”

As soon as we came to that place where streams were still frozen over the rocks, where the withered yellow grass was dusted with snow & where the persistent strong winds slashed grey swathes into grey fields, I felt better. Then, after a short while, I didn't feel better.

“Bed.” I raged.

The springs creaked with the effort of holding him as he furiously rode the flimsy piece of junk his head hanging over the side staring into the gloom.

‘Somewhere else always somewhere else he didn't know & when he got there he didn't like it. . .or is it me,’ she wondered, nonplussed, she wondered, ‘No’.

“We must move. I'll find a place.” She tried five & took the sixth.

We stopped once on the road to look at a waterfall; because of the driving rain the usual flat flash of it in the stream had changed to the detailed shape of a stag.

Round a sharp corner we were surprised running next to the surf; passed a sheep crumpled dead. Sand had been thrown by a recent storm over the track (two white bars of it drying as we pass). Tight batches of bracken tufts showed in a regular pattern on a vertical rock face surface, stuffed into drill holes to keep the blast in. Thin wires from each charge were collected to a cable in the ditch. The river ran past ice covered boulders with trails of cadmium orange moss splattered up to the grey road which followed it

painstakingly by checking off each white stone with a speckling of brown mud. No trees. . . .barely bitterly glossed with furze a low hill pushed the road into. . . .a copse.

They paused. Then took a shattered lane under the trees.

Greenish light.

We were there. Gateless doorless roofless floorless buildings & yards sank into the mud.

The house was a massive wreck of shit & dust. Tight, cold spaces bare & more forlorn than a winter tree abandoned by a pair of nesting crows who knew a March gale was going to take it down. Straw bales & newspaper over the windows completed the story.

Not a chance we could miss it. What better place to take on the twisted steel of time at an imbecilic gallop while the ship sank like a rising moon. What a pity we didn't know it. Or did we? Don't the paintings show a rotting landscape; figures with their clothes ripped off under animals. Isn't there a woman glancing back as she flees naked semi-transparent into a grey mist; black shadows slope as wolves break cover; disembodied voices snarling abuse at her driving her with the dagger of pain; something she didn't determine that winter, the wall showing through her body. Trying to explain the hindrance a space which no longer existed & love which she was bitter to leave before the brush slapped her silent with a gob of thick red paint. He didn't know as he hurried to blur out battering clubs that kept inserting themselves into the compositions in a desire to layer on junk sunsets; or as each smile turned to a grimace he blamed the brush & threw it over his shoulder. When he absently lashed a board lying on the floor with his boot & out appeared a face with consternation kicked into it as easily & completely as if peeled from

a transfer, he stuck it on a picture as a gift & thought no more of it. The head fitted a body iced up against the side of a building, patches of agitated light made it seem as if he was striking a blow. But in the raised hand he only saw an innocent wave or a protective palm at the most.

She sat on the open book.

To placate the memory of a contrived journey where I had been, I felt, forced into forgetting my body, I measured the place in paces. Only one number went down on the plan: 43. Nothing in that I thought as I scribbled it in. What had I measured?

A part of a spiral that I had sketched as a possible design for a path leading into the heart of the place?

Maybe. A life line? Significant years? An age?

Perhaps it was the plot, the narrative, condensed to a number. A jot.

I said I didn't want it, but here I am, trying to get the measure of it.

Now for the well. Taking bearings from a large scale map where a dot represented ten square feet I stumbled into a pile of mossy rocks. This cunning trap was heartlessly moist & gripped the mind so that it perceived with hope & not sense. The deeper I dug the drier the soil. A powerful curiosity revealed sand hotter than a scorched bone warren; the full powder & blast of drought, Now that should have told me, warned me. Pass it up. I paced again, call it 14, one pace would miss it. I measured again; dig it wider. I drew a spiral.

Try there. I believe the earth could have taken fire from the sparks flying from the angry pick. No way out.

Catastrophic pressure. A large solitary figure crunches a massive boot down on the blue house's roof & animals cascade out of all the windows. "Fuck that giant," they all chorus.

Her face stiff under a white mud pack, she called me in. Thick lipped she mouthed a silent query.

"We're stuck."

"So." She breathed out, keeping the surface paste intact.

"Two returns to?"

"She fished out the crazy tickets pasted together from card & crayoned paper.

"Valid for Thibet."

She nodded.

"Splendid. At this moment."

He showed the blisters. She spat into the palms.

"Ah."

"And here's the money for our journey." She held a thick wad of roughly made newsprint banknotes, most of them worth millions in all the unhinged currencies of the child's mind, on top of a shoe box containing cardboard coins wrapped with silver paper.

He took a note off the bundle, "Can all these promises be kept?" She shaded her eyes.

They are entanglements, thrills tracked through a pocket jingling my heart. Their sowing leaves rubble though. They can be the diagrams of hate.

"With another promise."

“With an imaginary promise effortlessly produced. This one’s worth ten eyes, that could be useful pasted on the back of my head.” A note fluttered off the pile. She caught it with her free hand.

“What luck, fruitfulness, simple hearts overprinted with lots of zeros to beat inflation.” She waved it in his face.

“This one can buy you any woman.” She rested her chin on his shoulder & put her tongue out behind his back, reaching blindly to screw up the paper.

“I see you’ve slipped a real pound note in.”

“It’s not valid, too big, that sort went out of circulation some time ago. I found three in a notebook.”

“What was on the page? A drawing?”

She shook her head, “Come in & wear yourself out. That well has gone for good, if there ever was one.”

And she tugged his sleeve to bring him closer still.

White satin. A spark.

She was now naked proffering the wisp of ribbon on her outstretched hand. I took it between my teeth & pulled.

Ghostly light. A spark.

She was arching over the night. Eyes like coal. The stars twinkled under the tips of her breasts as they brushed my lips. It was as if a huge swarm of bees blackened the sky. She carefully licked her fingers & rubbed her cunt open.

Green shade.

Red lips smiling caught in the candle flame. Never hard never soft lying close by,
sucking.

Green delights.

The splutter of poisonous spit blots out the radiant yellow light crackles up acrid smoke.

Now this waterfall of no-shape larch boughs sickens me.

“I’m longing to taste you again,” I tell her.

“I’m longing to hold tight round your waist,” she replied taking hold of my belt &
laughing.

Green on green on green. I can’t stand it. Larch branches are streams of spew.

1984.

I yearn for flesh colours, black through to white, flesh decked out in the synthetic
rainbow of tiger hues.

A spark. You tiptoe an ‘A’. The lumps of your spine smooth dashes from neck to arse.

You palm your cunt & laugh shadowing the flowers.

“I need you.” I say. The numb clay speaks. You arch an ‘n’.

“I could offer you all this treasure,” she said vehemently. There it was. A hand gesture
revealed the picnic like a sunset. The stone on her ring flashed next to her cheek.

Moonstone. Pearl light.

A glow.

She squatted over my mouth haphazardly shaking her head. The steel jewels on her
leather collar shone as she rocked. She circled carefully. Then was rigid. She looked over
her shoulder & closed her eyes.

“Do you remember?”

“Can I forget.”

1984.

She sat opposite & slowly raised her heels. . . pointed her toes. . .it was a fragile offering, an invitation to soar over the moment into desires released from under the heel of the past. A drop of fire. It touched his heart.

They could talk.

“She was a bait he couldn’t resist. Look at her.” She spun the photo at him, a fag-card twirling towards a stone wall, happy to be rid of it.

“He was entrapped by the obstacles at the beginning of the affair, her not being able to break free from the . . .”

“Who can.”

“. . .past. Not being able to declare her passion about openly. Those difficulties were the line they had to play on.”

“I suppose you’re going to say she used her body as the beguiling bait or the hook.”

“There was no deceit in it. She wanted to ravish him as much as he did her. It never entered her mind to be other than. . .”

“Seductive.”

“The contest was less of a match than the one he’d just lost.”

“What?”

“With some, put another way, phantoms.”

“Put any way, he was scorched.”

“What?”

“Are you saying he formed a relationship with the obstacles, not as the main ties, but as the object of his affection. What the love was? No wonder it was difficult. His protective shell of memory with its consoling chats had been destroyed & grief pulled out like gut sosage is by an Ensor doctor.”

“And with as much delight.”

I keep quiet in a snow delirium.

Here was a chance to repair some damage. So he thought. She presented herself as blameless, just the way he wanted to see her, had to see her.

“After that, she only had to keep quiet. And bite him.”

“It’s incredible the way he took it. Everybody around him couldn’t believe as they watched.”

“They weren’t in bed with her.”

That hook held firm.

I felt the heaviness of her hand on mine. I felt her bandaged wrist under the suede cuff of the old coat she chose to swagger out in red for a last time.

“I’ll sing . . . it helps me control the pain.”

Rocky hilltop . . . sacred hill.

Fesse . . . pale blue colour.

Try somewhere else.

The two smooth hillocks & the hidden ravine wherein Allt Darach rushes down to the sea appear above the mist. A bridge squeezes the road; pinches it over a crevasse. The car stalls on the right turn as my ice covered boot slips off the pedal. I can’t get the shift into first. After several tries I get out & she slips slowly across to try without a word. The gear engages, but she is too weak to drive. We swap seats again. I can tell she is hiding intense pain as she places each step stork-like rigid stiff affecting speed while I, struthious, dismiss what I see. Not.

“Can I do it without your help.”

“You’ll have to soon. . .for a while.”

She hesitantly touched my arm.

A corner, a corner another corner, a corner, a corner another corner. We were on a track, at a gap in the brick wall. I held her, as she spewed up nothing much; & it was like holding a loosely tied bundle of twigs caught by a sudden wind. I wiped her mouth & even in the void of her wintry solitude couldn't tell my care to her. Our comfort lay like a broken cartwheel & with it all fat warm words had collapsed to a scraping thumb (even holding her hurt her). A sighting of the unfillable gap between us all. The bleak wind filed the colour off her skin. The meaningless rutted lane took the last blood from her face & squeezed it in the apple vomit.

“You leave me on the track & step back to take on hopeless fears. A light touch, you say. My face is frozen for a month by your kiss.”

You step out of the bitter wind, your mouth sweet, your body almost gone. I hold back to let you pass for the last time & look down.

“No. Your eyes always met mine.”

He looks at her & she, hunting for the right word, leaves her mouth open as if speech like a serpent will come wriggling out & strike deep into his entrails.

Bone white we went in.

I'm not going to take a paragraph to get through another door, but I should have taken more care. Wait & see. All the rooms we passed through were freezing cold, each with its door carefully opened & locked behind us. The grotesque figures on the pictures, slapped on in black, loomed & leered with big gobs, mounds of flesh, naked, streaked with shit colour.

“So you already knew!” She gasped. Stumbled on the wooden stairs as she said it.

“How did you keep it to yourself. And why?”

“Take care.” I whispered evasively. “It was obvious. But not to me.”

“I find that difficult to believe. You’re so sharp. . . but you wouldn’t want to see it. . .what did you say he had to take ?” She hardly heard his mumble. Cocked her head.

“He took all he wanted.”

He thought about that. Did he? Is that what had made him so angry.

“ You must take care.” She ran past him naked.

“I’ll not take any more. . .”

“Hey! Don’t take too much flesh off that figure on the right-hand side it was just right.”

She drew the towel over her breasts & held it.

“I’ll get it right. This way.”

“Or just after you give up trying.”

The arrows of colour quiver in the eye of the imagination. A tear or a smile, waiting for the strike, change the contour anyway. We must start alone. Give up.

“They will not believe that.”

“Wait. They will have to.”

“For a guess you’re going to take the whole book getting through that door,” she said coolly, indicating two places with two pronging fingers.

“Or getting back out again.” She added after looking steadily at him to see if she could pry something out of him. Guileless.

“Does it matter?” He asked wryly, “Everything that is happening has happened, believe me.”

“So we just take it. Is that it? Stir the mud & out will come the pot. I’m not accepting that.”

“You never want to see evil as it is. You always give it a reason or a cause. That’s worse.”

“I know things don’t turn out better because they ought to. But it depends on exactly what you mean by invitation, doesn’t it? Now some people just invite it. . .”

She disturbs me when she comes not knowing whether to call herself a child or a woman, for obviously she is all woman, her lips & thighs all woman. She throws him a look of reproach over her shoulder when he seems to be trailing behind on purpose but says nothing explicit as if wanting him to catch up on her thoughts.

“What do you need to make you move faster?”

She walks in front of him. Her legs through the slits in her dress invite his glance. He notices but hesitates wondering if he needs to speak & ride in on words.

“This box is too heavy, I can’t move it.”

‘Even between us I fear it would be too heavy,’ she thought, ‘but it’s a chance.’

“Let’s try,” she leaned over & looked up smiling tugging hard on the rope handles, moving outward towards him loose dropping her shoulders thinking. Come on. What looks sheer might be safe, not likely, & not if it really is my pair of legs sheathed in silk & you can see all of them. She hitched her skirt up. Because there must be a purpose behind being shown all of them like this. She sat on the floor beside the box. Because it’s asking for everything & that couldn’t be done anywhere. And only when we are alone I let you . She turned her head. I don’t let you in anywhere but in quick places. She smiled. And if these legs look sheer to you & you like that light they give. She turned her head. It means they are alluring & meant to be attractive. First of all the woman must want to make herself look desirable; where was that voice coming from, she is working on herself, psyching herself up for the part of all-woman, all. . .all. . .all, all sold on uplift. Is she telling the truth, if she describes exactly how she is feeling to someone without troubling to think how he will understand what she is saying?

And. She spoke her thought, “You might as well take your eyes off my legs & look into my eyes as . . .” She returned to her thoughts, they are expecting a particular look so I can give an assent with the slightest flicker narrowing my eyes a split second or with a pull of my lips say come on or. . . He sat on the box.

“Take this,” he said, stretching his hands out to me, “go on, take it.”

The animal moved slowly, its warm snout snuffling & nudging its way between my fingers. There was no danger; its spines lay flat, its tiny claws barely scratching the palms of my hands.

“Try angel’s dust,” she said, twitching up the bristles on the hedgehog’s back. I got a quill message, so I had to let it slither to the ground, where it shuffled around amongst our feet. Its points were up now & sharp as I pushed it towards the doorstep. His whisper flitted across the box,”Are you coming?” I nodded.

He struck a match & said that only then could he be sure as he could see my look.

I nodded again.

“Dust?”

“Dried parsley.”

It is raining.

I’m outside

a doorway with morning glories around it. The first look without a lie.(Searching for Artaud’s cane). How did I get here?

I'll say I cut the cards to decide whether to make a call. I didn't cut cards but actually recording tossing coins which is what I invariably do seemed too close to the action of a play I had recently seen.

Three hearts in a row & I would. I cut three hearts in a row. I still had to know if I could call in the afternoon or evening. For this I spun a coin(I did) heads now tails evening.

Tails. I never made the call.

If I hadn't just visited the theatre perhaps I would have described it as it happened. Who knows.

Three days later I said to myself spin three heads in a row & make a call.

1st. heads.

2nd. tails.

I made the call.

1966.

The door swung inwards, almost soundlessly. She was prepared. She was really natural.

She didn't appear to have stepped out of an underground world. She made sure of that.

She was prepared to participate in my dream. Even as the door swung open she seemed happy standing at the end of the short corridor smiling with the insincerity of innocence as if she had been there waiting for my knock.

She stood, wondering why she felt uneasy. The warm air curled round her legs. She had the wrong side of her body facing out to the street.

“Whoever has that kind of ‘wrong side’?”

“Practically everyone.”

“Bollocks.”

“Mmmm.”

She half hopped back still holding the doorlock, quickly regaining her own pool of silence. Her flat round face was made ready for any expression. The first words are sharp coinciding with the sharp jump back, “What’s your game?”

He looked glum. “Game?”

“You can come in but you’re not getting anything.”

So that’s it. See if you can. Not ‘if’. See how you can get it.

I called many times but always got the answering service. Should I have left a message?

Here I am ready to talk. Cut the price label off Fortune’s chance crossed wings.

She walked in after him.

“Give her a name.”

“I gave her one earlier, she won’t keep it.”

You didn’t know her name.

“So these are the two pictures you’re painting now.” She accused, spinning round. The full moon was rising over Raasay behind her, the beautiful golden moon haunting my world.

I shrugged, “They’re my props, I know, for the illusion. I don’t care. . . do I. I’m on my own.”

She picked up a pot, “Black paste. It stinks.”

“It goes bad very quickly in the heat.”

She pulled a face, “Decay.”

“Just right for this painting.”

From my open door to the glow behind Dun Caan’s volcanic stub is black, nothing less. Blackness revealed. (I am still able to remember the shock as I opened the door).

“Why?”

“The pictures have to be worthless & cost very little to make. On tissue they are thin like skin. Fragile, easy to rip, destroy. They have to be easy to make & take little time. Have the look & feel of bones. (The paste is made from black gesso, flour & water. . . a bit like black semen).”

“More like cheap glue.”

“I want the pictures to be puzzling, & difficult to decipher, to read, to look at, to see. It has to be difficult to make out the figures & problematic what they could be doing.”

“They’ll be making love or dead,” she asserted.

“I like them to become wrinkled & distorted (they do anyway because the hot paste causes this) just as we do with age. The painting requires no special skill & there are no secrets in their production. Tears, creases, holes & folds don’t spoil them. They have to be skin & bones; grey & black. The paper is so thin the gesso soaks straight through it. I’m painting in it not just on it. I use the paste while it’s hot like my body fluids, spunk. Runs, drips, splashes, blotches don’t spoil them. Light comes through the paper, shines through the figures. They can have the appearance of being charred. The past burned away, sacrificed.”

“What else are you describing? “ She asked,” couldn’t this be nearly all your world?”

“Something has changed your view of me. Does that mean you have changed?”

As always when I paint it feels as though I’m dismembering myself in the rain. My umbrella curves into a shield. Somebody calls out. “Run for it.”

Lights go out. I stop.

Painting. . .rain siling down like paint.

“But writing, you are constantly interrupting it so that it doesn’t flow. . .out. . .Staunch.

You are staunching the wound everytime you stop. But it never heals over. Why?”

“I’m aware of that. But it’s also wanting to keep something secret yet not knowing what it is. But knowing it’s vital. Just as necessary to tell it as to keep it hidden.”

“Mmm. Not easy.”

“Easier with a picture, people lose themselves quicker in their search for a story. In the multitude of afterimages.”

“You want them to lose the trail & yet get there (wherever that is)?”

“We don’t know where it is. It’s made on the way. Suddenly you’re there.”

She was further ‘embodied’ in the paintings about her. And her gifts to the love made real in longing. . .represented as if by afterimages.

The same person painted many times on the same picture. A ‘tree burial’ with no decay, no wind to suck the flesh off the bones & polish them, tear the rags, shred the evidence. Writing a book ‘disembodied’ her; took away the space gained in the pictures, laid bare the corpse so grief could be assuaged.

The struggle was shaking her out of the tree. Because your need of her was so important; she was stuck up there, not rotting. Frozen at the moment of death.

“You sensed her departure from my inner life & as the corpse faded a solid form filled her out in our memory (or mine). As this happened so your need to join her in some way became greater, in your dismay at the loss you blamed me for destroying a love (which one?) while also wishing for a potent future. Where? On a grave? Under a tree?”

I get the feeling your vital engagement was with the dead young woman right from the start. That’s what attracted me to you. You knew her story & that pushed you into meeting me. You had been warned off even.”

Derivatives, you’ll think.

Are they? Why was it at the time of year when she died you finally lost your temper. You so rarely do & only with me. You broached the ‘confrontation’ earlier as a symptom leading up to the time of death. . .falling ill, in a sense, at exactly the same time as she did. No sex. . .you knew she lost the feeling in her cunt first of all.

Rubbish you’ll think. Is it? I hear improbable stories from time to time from other people. Added to this, I had to die (only I stubbornly refused) to complete you having, like your mother, three partners. You’ve admitted that. I had to be a threat, I had to embody the violence you grew up with but cannot speak about, cannot bear to taste & yet you gulp it down time after time. You can only be violent towards me & only then in ritualistic safety at necessary intervals. There are the constants breaks to see what it takes to revive a dead passion to wonder if it could have been possible all those years ago. To secretly hate your mother for not doing it for you when you were sure she had the power.(And taking the same path yourself, determined to protect your childhood horror no matter what the cost, no matter what it spoilt).

By childish divination in stubbornly refusing to give up the imaginative life & slough into a sentimental acceptance I luckily survived. And it was luck.

The violence of penetration makes you whole while you hate it for its very necessity. Expressing those feeling in the contrived parentheses of distaste around the act. Licking your wounds for days between.

Advance & enter. “Good.”

Well what next?

Sit.

“Thanks.”

“Can you stay?”

Nodded. “Can’t say for certain how long.”

“Good.” No wrangle.

Grind. Rub. Brandish knife. I’ll make you want to. It ought to be a full moon tonight.

“So this is the pork butcher’s knife. What did she cut with it?”

“What did you cut with that? She inquired as if it were commonplace.

The blood shaped a leaf on the floor.

“The lilac blooms,” She pointed at the table laden with them.

“Why so many questions about the fucking knife? What about me?”

“We’ll get to that . . .soon . . .but the pain can’t be cut out, can it.”

“It can be equalled.” She didn’t look up. Under her jumper she fingered the scar tissue on her belly.

“You mean the flesh can’t be cut off. Can’t be pared down.”

It was a degradation.

It was a consummation.

It was a fulfilment.

It was a violation.

It was a possession.

“She gouged her face with her fingernails.”

“A sexual gouging?”

In mourning because all her childhood had been looted of its significance. Maybe in truth it had been destroyed by a shameful ecstasy.

She remained silent. ‘Possessed too soon & made big ‘ she thought, ‘Too fucking big.’

“It was dehumanizing. It was greedy. Stop trying to be fair & even- handed about it. She should have cut his hands off.”

“How could she. Who else was there. And she had to be there. That’s the point.”

“Head.”

“It is addictive.” He questioned her with a glance. “The gobbling up. Stuffing.”

The head nodded.

“Ravenous?”

“No. Don’t think they can be.”

“But very often it is pressed upon them by someone they cannot refuse, dare not refuse for fear of losing . . .& here you gag on the word . . .love. . .forced into their mouths. . .someone else’s greed.”

“Perhaps they can’t find any food they really like.”

“They found, or were given. . .” And she met his eye & paused. . .” They tasted something they really liked. Stolen fruit.”

“So that kind of food would be forbidden except with special rituals perhaps. . .”

“Unobtainable.”

“The ‘I’ is nothing.”

“The image of the ‘I’ is what counts.”

“Where is it?”

“In the mirror. And the mirror lies!”

Where did he put (them).

Who took it away?

“I took away nothing.”

It shows.

1973.

A deep, deep sleep.

It’s as though there’s no-one there. Letters lying on the floor by the stairs, crossed in the shape of a kiss. The clatter of the letter-box echoes through an empty house, the letters flutter down. Door shut. Faceless windows. Blank walls. All the time I’m reaching out for

someone who isn't there. Arms embrace nothing. Eyes search nothing. Nothing. Then I do not need to understand & that cements the day together again. I emerge out of the dazzle of a dream & bite hard on the light, take a break from memory & roll towards the book. Now where am I? I know the plan will definitely evade me today; it dwindles as I search.

In solitude he lifts the brush. Dully plodding reddish marshy tracts flanked the narrow road. He paints a thin cobalt blue wash & watches as it runs. Beyond the road's containing walls reeds stoutly resist the scythe. And the flail of the wind. He paints a dog of black into a vague animal shape. Then the coastal dunes showed. He paints a white arc over the black raft.

"I'll show you what I want you to do. And I don't want to hate you."

How can you blunt the sharp knife of hatred. He paints five spots of green. All this in a few seconds. Ah! The plan was to live happily ever alphabet. Ah! Yes. The white arc smudges into the black dog & makes two figures if I quickly draw in four eyes.

"How can I be sure that this time the distance isn't fatal?"

"By caring."

He paints six brown lines amongst the greens.

"I find I can't care at a distance."

He paints a squarish vermilion outline under the two figures. They are dancing. They are actually one.

“Close the distance. Keep that thought obstinate.”

He paints more cobalt blue into itself so it trickles slowly around the greens.

“The composure I have felt this time is a new sensation for me. I like it.”

He paints a black line under the vermilion.

“The plan is about vacancy. Now fill it up better?”

He paints six lines of black into a horizontal man beneath the carpet.

“There’s nowhere else to go. Together we felt so unhappy.”

He puts the brush down.

“You revel in an invisible nest of contradictory possibilities to give you your comfort in doing nothing fresh. A constantly returning babble, none of which , if heard clearly & sequentially would have the effect of a soap bubble. . .But by constantly revolving, it gets into a space where you are unable to check yourself or test your feelings.”

He takes a rag & wipes the stick figure off the picture. He paints another green over the smudgy grey.

“It’s a dirty silence. It was a corny time she chose to kill herself off. . .again.”

He paints an ochre shoreline.

“Apart? A constant speculative drone of alternatives that corrode the years gone by until they collapse into a sludge of apt & significant decodings which accumulate into a pile of useless notes. Here they are.”

He paints white dab hands & flicks his fingers over them.

“So it hasn’t changed enough. A partly frozen sea.”

He paints ultramarine over the remaining black & rubs that. He rubs his nose.

“Together not unhappy (never mind the double neg.) but angry at being stuck. . . apart.”

He paints the slightest touch of white into the ultramarine (as usual).

“No. Bored in a fleshless & artificially sustained (echo-like I write & get Narcissus flashing a dazzling reflection into my thoughts). . . pond-like state. . . see how it runs to become a skeleton. . . getting nowhere.”

He paints the stick figure back in over the green.

“. . . skating over the consolation, looking for a few different words, hoping. . . No.

Waiting just to be accepted as clean.”

He paints madder round the black horizontal twig man.

“So a familiar not temporary household, would you call it, without all the intricacy of brooding could be set up.”

He paints three vertical lemon yellow stripes to the right of the dancing figures.

“Oh, it changed her view of you enough to shift her meanness over. And you took it.”

He paints permanent yellow into the stripe nearest the dancers.

“We fling ourselves around & around. We would never talk about money.”

He turns the picture upside-down & paints ceruleum blue into the green around the black angel.

“Rubbish. It hovered around all the time.”

He paints three dots of emerald on the black figure’s spine & then three more on the hips.

“I saw her sitting in the car & I really had to make an effort to speak. After twelve years able to feel a complete stranger.”

He paints a brown line to separate the dancing couple. It looks awful. He scrapes it off with a knife.

“She stopped kissing me. She turned her head or kissed me like a child.”

He paints a tiny permanent red mouth on each head. Dot. Dot. Dot.

“I wondered about it. . .I felt. . .”

He paints nothing.

“Anyway. . .I had to succeed, but how could I when by the act of penetration I fulfilled her need & became her antagonist who had to be repaid by hurt.”

He stirs the brush in a jar of white spirit, touches the terre vert with its tip & floods a third of the picture with an almost transparent green film.

“The conflict grew because she was unable to inflict any telling damage.”

He lays newspaper over the picture & tonks off the excess paint. Mountains appear just like the view east from the top of Glamaig over Alaba except, unfortunately, they were under the carpet on which the couple danced.

“Stop making physical comparisons in your head. . .they don’t exist. . .but. . .ummm. You were hurt but perhaps not harmed.”

The stick figure is cloaked. He paints a line in a grey without a name under the mountains & curves it up to the white arc.

“I’m whistling because I think I can resolve it by kissing each woman as we meet & take it from that.”

He paints short light grey brush strokes between the lemon yellow stripes. The grey marks immediately become blue.

“But what if one of the women, sensing my plan, acts in a way contrary to her heart & succeeds in fooling me?”

She curled over on the bed & screwed the sheet of typescript up & threw it at him.

“Is that possible? He asked.

“You ought to know.” She retorted belligerently. “You were fucking there.”

“You don’t think this is a piece of naturalism, do you. You don’t think. . .”

“Yes. You’d put your tongue in any open mouth. I know you would. It could even be a dog. That’s naturalistic madness. Constantly looking for re-assurance! “

“Ah. Lycanthropia. Thinking I’m a wolf”

“Loosely a beast of any kind ---you’d got it.”

“Well would it work. Could he tell? “

“With your perverse desires chopped” – she hewed with her flat palm – “into a mix with all the old sins. And that dog. I’d say you were in a Nekyia.”

“And.” He looked blank.

“He probably could. You couldn’t. Why would any one of them want to fool him?”

“I don’t know.”

He paints more white under the white arc.

“It’s hardly possible that I would be taken in or that any one of them would want to try that. I don’t know. Would I be taken in? Yes. Absolutely.”

He paints a black mark into the white arc about a quarter of its length in from the left hand side.

“I feel I’ve been deceiving myself. Obviously. I know.”

The moon appears near to what now becomes a tree. He paints a dash-winged bird in burnt sienna in the tree.

“I know how the greetings will go. I can rehearse them now in my head. One will throw her arms around my neck & hug me tight & I do her. The other will coolly present me with closed lips as my left hand is gently posed on her right shoulder.”

He scrapes all the paint on the palette into a pile, lifts the knife & pushes the paint through the thin wash of cobalt blue. There are several uneven streaks of colour.

“It’s been impossible to talk to myself with any sense of satisfaction since insight muddied the water of my conscience.”

“Insight!”

His brush is poised but he hears footsteps & turns to the opening door.

She came in, her blue eyes casting a predatory glance at the desk sweeping its contents through the sieve she usually sailed in, to isolate any coarser references that might be trapped & tossed into use. Any single letter of the alphabet doodled into a corner of a meaningless pattern could cause a gigantic tantrum fuelled by mistrust. While it sharpened her sensual appetite.

The kiss of letters on the floor deform into a pile; accumulate into a heap & are scooped into a box & put away unopened.

1965.

I saw a strangely coloured scruffy crimson bird that evening, which looked as if it had been punk dyed or sprinkled over with powder in its cage. I’m sure it had escaped. I had seen a bird like that before, a reddish one, near a woman crouching on a piece of wasteland by the sea. Next to the bottom of the pole on which it perched was a crushed yellow flower. Another woman came past & level with the pole she pulled a handkerchief

from inside her bag & out dropped a red toy pistol. She didn't notice so it was left nearby the crushed flower. The bird hopped up & down at the top of this green pole until sunset & then flew away, disappearing towards the hills at the back of the city. Then I came inside having decided to telephone a girlfriend in the suburbs. Not knowing her number I asked the exchange operator to put me through to an office where I might be able to find it out or leave a message. After waiting for about two minutes I put the receiver down. I decided to make a call later.

"You said she replied & didn't want to see you."

"I said that? Why wouldn't she want a visit?"

"You lied?"

"I did really forget. If it sticks in your throat. . ."

"No you didn't! You remembered somebody. . . some other. . ." (He couldn't bring himself to say lover).

"That you would like to replace?" She didn't say that scornfully.

"I tried to make it complete."

"I did remember a few names soon after glancing at the note." Then she hesitated, knowing she had gone too far.

"Was mine there?" He asked quick. So quickly that she knew her hesitation had told him the answer & he was trying to conceal his confusion.

“Well, not just then, yours came to mind later.” She lied although she understood he realised the truth & would wring it out of her.

“Much later?” He asked in a completely changed, hard voice.

“Well, not at all that time,” she couldn’t stand the look she had caused.

“But you said me.”

“I said that because I needed to. You never understand.”

“Not mine.” He said, almost to himself.

“I said you because it was easier. . .than telling you outright.”

“I suppose you thought a smile will do for him.”

“That I don’t love you.” She swallowed the words. But said them.

“I don’t want that.”

“Yes, what a loss,” he mimicked, “It was merely description to accompany your action. . .deceiving. . .me.”

“I was trying to look at your face. I’ve tried to explain.”

“If you want to see it, it’s there.” He tapped the side of his head with a finger.

“I didn’t say you saw it anyway.”

“What a loss,” she cracked, “see how a word can shatter it.”

“I never did regret it.”

“So why wait for luck like a fool when there it was just waiting. . .perhaps to be.”

1963.

I might have called you again if I hadn't found a small, red plastic pistol or whatever the toy was that I found at the gate near the post stuck into the garden lawn for birds to perch on. I'd asked for a number & the operator was searching for it when I couldn't make myself wait & so replaced the receiver. I wasn't sure about the date on the card but I did try & get through.

"Only once though." She reminded him, pensively.

Whistlings; sniffs; creaking; scratchings I heard but they didn't help. Sighs; coughs; rubbings; thumps I heard but they didn't help at all. Tickles; itches; cramps; aches I felt but they didn't help. I was waiting for daylight to shift the black shadows out of the corners & change the pile of boxes back from a giant looming up near the window to a pile of tat & boxes. The light came & the luminous whites of the night; the groping hand; the half hidden cheek, became grey patches on the wall & rips in the curtains.

That next morning proved a bleak day beginning with slabs of piss yellow streaking the ceiling & washing over the walls stripping the comforting colours out.

"It would be bleak on your own without the lingering warm touch of lust," I said, with my arms around her legs. Rough & tight over the hard bones. She had risen without a word & unpeeled my fingers one by one off her thighs.

Three days gone. Each subsequent morning made more tense as my thoughts flew away into the clouds like fabulous birds & being was like a sod flung upside-down into the heap of leaves held together with icy streaks.

“Your back is so smooth, your shoulders numb, your neck cold, your lips hard.”

I was falling off my seat with sleep. Holding a sack of stones inside.

“Difficult to do much feeling like that.”

A pink evening haze was erased as the snow came driven by a strong wind.

I must see her again.

I must. I must.

And then he was running.

Turning more tree-like with each step that took him away from her.

“It feels as though some of us are coming back on that ribbon of time while others are only just going. Yet here we are. . .together. . .making love or fucking about. We can either go to the zoo or picnic under a tree.” She shivered all over.

“He couldn’t make his mind up. That was lucky.”

“We can do both.”

“When will he go there? Or are we going there alone?”

“What did you say?”

“He never understands what I say to him. I wonder if he’s listening – ever.”

The green chain-link fence was twenty feet high. I studied it as we strolled past. The tiger emerged from a dugout. The animal rippled power but didn't appear to engage with the world around it. As if it was walking on water. I gauged the fence strong enough to resist a tigerish onslaught unless it became madly enraged.

The blue flame licked under its smoke. Sparks flew about & sizzled. It began to rain. The bear lay with its head resting on a cow's skull. I sat on a low brick wall & fed the sparrows. The wind bit my ears because I had foolishly allowed her to cut my hair short. A cardboard box was thrown over a peacock, the flaps shut, good, we could get rid of it.

Each figure on the picture seemed to be striking a blow.

I sat & wondered why there were no other visitors. Low steel rails formed the elephant pen. These double rows were armed with rings of strong spikes. One elephant mournfully blew dust, touched straws & slowly trampled through other piles of debris it had swept up with its trunk. I blew into my cupped hands & went to have another look at the bear's den. A Gethsemane in light ochred concrete the other side of a sheer banked moat. She came & sat by me resting a hand on my knee. She turned to look in my eyes.

"There's more than a touch of madness in them," she whispered as if her words could harm the beasts. In the dark house all the nocturnals were fidgeting, making short runs, winking. A snake was aimlessly uncoiling.

"There's a bright spark in each eye. . .how long before it's extinguished?"

So we moved.

I was uneasy here & she was uneasy there, the whole place was gloomy. We had been driven to by our longing for change. My head felt like a cold boulder. Needing shelter from the wind we trampled over a flowerbed on a hummock, joined another pathway & round again. It was a dismal maze with animal pens blocking the ways with their occupants joining in a resounding tuneless blowing, sprung by the wind to roll over us a flow of rough sound matching our plaintive mood. A wolf was at the gate. A bear before the passage. A lake with icy water on which bobbed grimy bundles of feathers, turned us. Each isolated beast, claw & hoof, hesitated between hate & catching flies.

“So you don’t think we should talk to them?”

“We shouldn’t miss our chance. If he’s going to let them speak on this page.”

“He’ll probably expect. . .want. . .us to bring back answers.”

“They’ll most likely be a yelling & grunting & snarling etc. . .their minds are elsewhere because they are waiting for brightness to be restored. Waiting for some human love.”

“In this place!” She squeezed his arm. But he felt her full weight.

“What a long wait they have, but they’ll get plenty of chances afterwards. On the ribbon of Time coming back from Hell.”

“Is that where you think it’s going?”

“Where else. Look around you.” He nodded. She was obviously right. He could smell it, it was that close.

“I can imagine the elephant saying, ‘It’ll be just my luck to miss the way & be turned out in a cold, bleak Bedlam, if this isn’t it.’”

“And I can imagine the blind wombat whispering through to the porcupine in the next cage, ‘Is that Christina Rossetti again?’ And the porcupine would have said in a very hostile way, ‘No it ain’t.’ And shook its quills. “1858.

They stopped to take another photograph to complete the concealment of reality. So to be able to shuffle the picture out later & wonder if it really was that sunny.

At a rustic veranda splashed with birdlime we stopped. The tiger rustled through nettles. This is true as the boredom of egg sandwiches. She ravished the daylight.

“Where did Blake see a tiger?” She asked rocking over the rail standing on tiptoe pushing back towards his body. The tiger emerged on a narrow worn track near the edge of it enclosure.

“In children’s books?”

“You wouldn’t think he had seen a real one by the way he drew it.”

The wolves, in their cage beyond, began to howl.

“So how did he get the shape of it & the way it acts to give what the tiger was for him. Look at this one. It’s made a space in me that I need filling. An urge – tingling – you could call it what you like as long as I get penetrated. And feel penetrated.”

“There were two at the Tower of London in his time. And a tiger was exhibited round the corner in Leicester House when he lived in Green St. And he must have seen Stubb’s painting of one when he went to Par’s drawing school.”

“How does ‘In what clay & in what mould

Were thy eyes of fury rolled’ sound?”

“Too much of the same as before,” she replied.

He deleted the whole stanza with vertical strokes of the pen.

“You need the experience of tiger – but not too close – not a lick.” He closed up on her.

She showed her teeth, pulled his hand towards her mouth.

“Now. Tiger loose my dress.”

She bit hard into his warm flesh leaving the signature of her love on his unbroken skin.

“So you don’t think it was a choice of an exotic, unknown beast to represent an instinctual destructive force which proceeds creation. One side the soul. Repugnant, without a plan, a chance. The opposite of lamb.”

“Could be. Tiger fire. Thought of it while warming his hands by himself in front of the glowing coals.”

“No! He didn’t feel alone. It was his sexual energy burning. . . it had to force its way down somewhere. Show its presence. Anyway he changed his mind about it. Couldn’t be sure which side of the soul it was on. This one looks innocently hostile.”

“Cast as a beast of prey! An animal without any consciousness thirsting for blood.”

“The tiger & the lamb are the same being. Succulent tender flesh – gleaming strong teeth.”

The tiger splendidly moved in the nowhere of silence.

Lamming into the wire, the hollow panic, the lamentation of the caged. The worn track like a dry stream bed aching its story back to jungle fuss had a gorgeous stone polished in the dirt; a fortunate leaf posed under the sky & a golden fiction padding millions of times along its narrow corridor.

“Could he hear the sounds of its colours? The poetic exaggeration of black distinct from the harsh crash of yellow drowning out the timid white tinkling stripes of music.”

“No. I don’t think he smoked T. (To give the induced exaggeration or synesthesia you talk of).”

The bread was a light purple colour. He bit & chewed & bit & chewed. He took a sheet of paper; it looked indigo in the emerald half -light. He took a silver steel pen-nib & sucked it. Spat out the iron gob into the golden flames of the fire to rouse its loud & flashy voice. The timbre of coal, wrangling voices.

“It doesn’t ring true.”

“What!”

“The made-up names? The lack of ambition? The cross-fire (did it exist in that time?) of the colours spitting out words & mowing down reason.”

“Cross did. And you propped him up in front of a fire. Cross-eyed was just about in along with cross-hatching (1826). But not cross-fire. That came later (1860).

“Did lawns exist in his time?”

“Yes, they had been growing at least 100 years. Now keep to the point.”

Later he looked at his blackening fingers, they had a shimmering light surrounding them.

They were on fire. The poems were in his hands. The paper browned, curled & burnt.

“What was there to see in Peckam?”

“Angels,” he answered methodically. “And the Slug & Snail Society.”

The pen scratched.

“Did he write it for you? That angel. I don’t see anything here.”

“Look.” The print appeared.

She read. “Imitated pronunciation of new & difficult words. Oh. I see. The angel was starting to learn the language & had come to him for lessons.

1. fah-ser-oo; 2. der-zay-sheer; 3. moo’ing-tersh-vay-sh;

the whole family,” she commented.

“They were. . .”

“Unlike us,” she said mockingly, “you can’t usually take us from just a biological view alone. But now forget the higher consciousness of the poet – transform - fill the pinkish body – push – it’s not 1794. And his tiger was silent.”

“No. He knew the tiger was his truth. It wouldn’t do for me. God’s eye & hand. I like it on & in the flesh not the mind.”

“He did too, & I do.”

“Well that sounds hopeful. Don’t you get it,” she asked emphatically. “I think they are good words – good enough. I want to be fucked.”

Unexpected striking stars of thought.

“Here?”

He looked around. The stinking mattress buzzed. Bees slowly used it. I wanted it. I poked it with a stick – an angry hum. She reached under her dress & pulled her slip down skipping it off & screwing it to a handful in a trice & rammed it in his pocket, she reached again & snaked off her knickers & held them between her teeth. Then leaning against the poles. “Do it.”

Her imperative voice left a void to be filled by the action. The compulsion of a needful whisper, the awkward but open gesture, he could feel her excitement lance into him. He couldn’t see her features but imagined the loose smile, the curl of her lips, the patches of pink appearing high on her cheeks under the wide eyes with their white stars of light following the ravening & ferocious tiger as she shook & waddled in the two contrary states of her soul. And he with her ditto. And following the as above tiger. And keeping a lookout. And enjoying it which didn’t always sharpen the eyesight.

“It got them warm,” she suggested dryly, pointing her pencil at this part of the text.” They interlocked their fingers . . . carry on.”

She clasped his hands in hers. Her tongue shaped from between her teeth as she quickly spat out flowing words almost singing enjoyment, her earrings jingling as she threw her head back. They were in a concealed recess by a little pathway. A straggling rose was tied untidily to a solid plank fence. They still kept watch & turned on all sides, it was part of the fun, wondering if someone would come tramping full into their pleasure. He could see a trace of footsteps in the grass inside the pen. He could see the nook, protected by two rocks, from out of which the tiger had stalked.

“I expect he’ll come first,” she interrupted, “& she’ll be left high & wet listening to him gasping & panting. She’ll be wanting the tigerishness a little bit longer than he can make it.” She closed her eyes & threw her shoulders up in a defiant way.

“No!” He retorted. “She stuffed her hand between her legs before he had come & shouted push hard. Push now. And then went Ahhh.”

“Good . Get that in.”

“Ahh. . .ahh. . .ahh. . .ahh. . .Ahh.” She shuddered to a spine freezing halt.

And then bucked once more.

“I see you’re overdoing it again,” she said quietly & coolly.

“The immense silence of the tiger makes me shiver.”

“Where is the feeling coming from? The past?”

“Out of the imposed silence of all the animals perhaps? She suggested from the bedside.

“If you keep interrupting they’ll be caught nob out knickers down by a party of visitors.

Let it flow a little way before jumping in.” He admonished, exasperated by her interference about the fuck.

“The past depends very much on how far away ‘from’ is. . .” He tried an explanation.

“Given the speed of light, the speed of thought & the speed at which you want to get their clothes back on buttoned up neatly arranged. . .”

“I changed my mind. No clothes came off. No need. Didn’t you noticed the alteration on that page?”

“. . . I’d have her lolling over that veranda rail with. . .”

“You wouldn’t & she didn’t. Now back to the ‘from’ & keep out of it. Please.”

“She didn’t’. Mmm. So we are in the past. I can tell that seeing the tiger is the unalterable armature onto which we are going to pat the clay of all zoo memories.”

“Is that your final comment at this stage? He asked resignedly. Looking through the circle made by finger & thumb, magnifying her as if sighting her for some un-named but violent purpose.

“How much of what happened is left?” She asked in a tender whisper.

“I forget their bodies.”

“So what is left?”

“Lick this fucking text into shape! We’re all getting involved. You’re roping us all in.

And some of us want to stay out. Right out.”

“Stop reading it then.”

“Where is it left? Why is it left? Or is it forgotten?”

“You could put in ‘He forgets that bit, scene, person, quickly once & for all’.”

“I don’t think so. We seem to be able to store everything in an indelible way. Perhaps its there forever – something like light.”

“Light is only here if we are; it’s an interaction.”

“Oh shit,” she said softly, & folded her arms across her ribs just below her breasts, comforting her heart, “Go on.”

“That’s it. It could be shining through you because you’re there, & that is it. If you can pick it out. Or stuffed full of memories & expectations.”

“ . . .nothing but. . .my own experiences. . .”

“Our own experiences.”

“ . . .totally cut off from each other yet luckily in a pre-arranged harmony of events if you can recall them.”

“No. No. Totally one.”

“Worse.”

“Imagination? Thoughts? Images of things. Any room for those?” She puzzled & . . .”
Aren’t they changed by facts? By emotions? Lust? That tiger is mated with my lust & its
fulfilment from now on. . .tiger equals fuck.”

“Who said you were there?”

“I’m taking the part on. I can understand it better that way. Get into it more.”

“Perhaps images of the imagination don’t come from the past & you had to see that tiger
move to get the urge to fuck that time!”

“Not just tigers!” She sat on the bed irresistibly commenting on the papers she held, “It
was her natural disposition. She liked it. Practically anywhere & anyhow.”

“So did you, you say. You dream it up, you act it, then it was never a dream.”

“It was desire.”

“Is it supposed to be as easy as that in a book? I thought it was necessary to go through
all kinds of difficulties or you didn’t appreciate what you got. If you got it at all.”

“You mean ‘not giving in’ .”

“It’s mostly being unfulfilled - literally – we can’t be or we feel we’ve been too lucky.
Can’t bear it.”

“What!”

“Some of us feel that.”

“I wouldn’t call this luck.” She pointed at nothing, but the gesture embraced every object around them.

The bear, in its ochre den, rolled on its back, forepaws dangling like (not quite ripe sunflower heads) limp paws, its muzzle resting on half a cow’s skull covered with red shredded flesh & white fang gashes.

“That’s my pillow,” he agreed, “night after night.”

The bear’s mouth fell open. The bees buzzed about.

“Yes. My thoughts as I look at the scenes as they appear before I fall asleep. Full of Iroquois heads telling me what not to do.”

“They were flying in & out of a lion’s carcass . . .not quite the same . . .on the syrup tin.”

The old green & gold tins were lined up on the shelves full of pigments.

“It’ll do . . .for the sticky treacle . . .”

“. . .of Aloneness,” she added quickly, She’d read the book. “You can forget the rest of that story & carry on from here. In the oily & viscous rumblings of the intestinal maze that slid you back to Dust & Wonder, but usually on the side of Dust turned to a paste by the tears of frustration.”

“Isn’t it that mud we need. All this hygiene, cleaning up . . .what do you call fucking someone so you can put up with another woman’s crazy moaning . . .deceit . . .sunk in

carnal delight. Stop trying to wrap it up nicely. If you can't bear her, leave her. Stop kidding yourself. Fuck off."

"What about love?"

"?"

"I can forget it. I've not imagined it yet!"

(Henry V. 'Foolish curs! That run winking into the mouth of a Russian bear & have their heads crushed like rotten apples!').

1958.

Buffeted black soul & blue beatnik by what's to come. It was the beat side that saved them all. The soul he stored as objects on shelves:

a squat bulbous glass perfume spray two thirds full of amber liquid with a golden tulip top next to a square glass mortar with its glass pestle nestling in a corner near two keys on a ring with a white label (spares for the balcony) touching a white clay pipe unsmoked (bubble blower) separating the first three objects from a fluted pink tinted glass candle holder with a dusty candle stub burnt down to the rim.

a South American (Brazil) figurine earth mother penis surrounded by a tribe of lesser deities in card, paper wax & clay, dabbed with unnatural colour, deformed by clumsy fingers.

a colour photograph of a family complete with dog.

a toy bookshelf about one & a half inches square cast at an angle with a rat & an open book on the top of three shelves; the other two filled with heavy leather-bound toms.
Made in Taiwan.

a deep ultramarine plastic stopperless bottle, a trade sample at an exhibition.

a lumpy dumpy beast made from wood chunks (8) splashed with silver paint, one leg held on with a fencing staple. No eyes, no mouth, no cock.

a shiny clay bear wearing a cap with an owl on its shoulder; a clay bear with a fish? or haunch of meat in red jaws lurking behind the other one.

a hand sized bark doll with lollipop sucker sticks for arms painted loosely in poster red.
Aghast look carved for a face.

a paper cut-out figure with more definite features than her bark friend pencilled in, dressed in colourful snips of paper, saturated in blood.

a plaster & pine wood boat, low in the water, rigid rigging of shavings splashed with green spume white.

a flat red plastic quart bottle type container perforated by six pellet holes. Those lead shots still in it. Found on a beach years & years ago. A rattle.

a bobbin of black cotton (rotten) sold by a poor woman who traipsed all the way up the hill, also years ago. A needle had been stuck into the fibres.

a box of matches; 2 thin white candles lying together waiting for the flame.

a spent match.

four carved & delicately painted creatures, one a parrot, a donkey, tiny tiger untigerlike (smaller than the bird) & a wolfdeer.

an empty perfume bottle, its clear winged stopper larger than the flask.

“Take a wet rag to it. . .leave them in their ultramarine darkness spellbound by the first kiss.”

“I’ll never do it so well.”

When did you see him?

I see him every day.

Do you see what he did?

He tried to help, but felt as if he was taking on a very difficult task.

That morning I had carefully poured glycerine from a warm spoon into her left ear. She winced & cried, “Too fucking hot . . .Ohhh, the spoon was too hot.”

The pain had been so intense she lost her voice.

I could see tears had come to her eyes. She asked me in hoarse whisper to try again & nodded in response to my query. I swilled the spoon under the cold tap, ran a few hot drops from the kettle into it & felt the temperature on the crook of my arm. Poured the glycerine again & touched the bottom of the spoon’s bowl. This time she only shuddered.

“It’s no good, anything hurts.”

I tossed the spoon into the bowl while holding her head gently & firmly. It became very heavy as she relaxed in to the grip.

“No matter,” I said, but my voice felt hard & sharp.

We gave up trying to soothe her earache. This incident was passed over. She did something, I can't remember what, although I can recall the room's detail. I can still feel the coldness of its floor striking up through my boots. I walked along the passage (connecting that room with the rest of the house) there was thick ice on the inside of the door. I struggled it open. A yellow primrose flowered, mid-winter, in the ashes thrown against the wall electrifying the bleached feel of frosty daylight. My head still felt like a cold boulder, its reasonable thoughts freezing any action. That would be a slip; that a cut; that a chip; that a chop. All moves the blows of cold steel. Petrifying. Had the fears entered? How? The daylight turned pink, then velvet purple. So the night came crawling under our noses. The drifting night, past the rifled skip up to our lust.

“The white sheet is up & we are adrift on snowy thighs so hot they only need adornment.”

“The only way to relieve the ache in her hips is to fuck & fuck,” he explained.

“It sounded lame.”

“It sounded lame because she didn't want to hear it.”

“A slip. . .it isn't true. . .not this time.”

He nodded, agreeing. Putting it behind him.

I could see she was upset, thinking I was back there, or really back there all the time – always. But I'm not, a new body took over. A better body. Alive . Not dead. I caress this live body in the past not that body of the past.

“That’s not a dream?”

“No. That is true now. The body has changed. It’s a fact.”

Although there was an extra high chain-link fence around the tiger compound we both felt in danger. Did this add to the sexual charge of those moments. I wonder.

It prowled around.

“It’s at the heart of it. That the body had changed. Forever.”

“I think you need to keep on renewing that body in different shapes as a sacrifice!” She spoke with her head dangling down towards the pillow, her hair just touched it.

“Oh! Have you nicked me?” She tossed her hair back to glance at his face. His hand rubbed up & down, he examined it for blood.

“No.”

“I can see why you wanted to move out of that mess. You never knew who you were waking up beside.” Her hair was on the pillow again. She could never find fault with him for the parts he said he was compelled to take. “What sex they were, even.”

The razor slid into the foam, “This is easy, isn’t it?” She gave him an upside-down grin.

“Don’t take too much off. Just so I can feel more.”

She squatted over the bowl & rinsed her cunt & then churned the scum on the water with a heavy piss. As she poured the slops away she called, "Now we must try your work out."

"Not here."

She frowned.

"At the picnic."

She came back into the room stood leaning forward a white silk gown loosely folding around her body as she twisted sideways from the waist at the same time curving the fingers of both hands into each other as she groped finding it difficult to get the words to fit the memory of a dream. . . "This man was showing me around a house & opening doors but they didn't lead into rooms. . . they exposed cupboards smeared with blood. . . I. . . was fleet. . . it's gone, it was so clear. . . Oh, there was a windmill man sitting on a wooden bench beside the road & nearby was a small blue glass chip."

"Ah. The unconscious is a deep-seated chocolate pudding," he said, "and parts of it are usually furry." They grinned at that.

"Not now it's not," she protested & looked between her legs. He stroked the smooth slit hump.

"Gorgeous."

"I like a tuft left," she mused, "here in front." She caught his eye, "Like a target."

"Not that skimpy fluff, I know." He reached sideways. The fluorescent light tube came on, reflecting in the window, stabbed across the dark sky. She selected a carrot & peeled

it; took a barbecue skewer & deftly drilled the carrot into a pipe. She sucked it a few times, left it on the work-top as she disappeared to get a little marmalade to plug in the end.

“Now off to bed with a chillum,” she tossed a pile of pillows against the head, took a box of matches, the charged carrot & snuggled into bed.

“Coming?”

He put the light out, rolled in beside her as she struck a match & burned the drug inhaling the fumes. She blew the match out & struck another.

“Got a good story coming?” She asked in between sucks.

He rolled over, “This should be a good start,” and neatly shoved a piece of charlie up her bum. They FELL asleep.

1973.

You brought two oysters up from the shore.

“I’ve never tasted one,” I said, rubbing my fingers lightly over their rough surface,” Are they good to eat raw?”

“You prise the two shells open then suck the flesh into your mouth.”

“Raw?”

“I like them raw,” you said. “You can open them with this knife, though it’s quite tricky.

Ease the blade into the gap.” And you stopped to stare at me.

“Perhaps I’ll cook you one.”

The outside of the creature, with its contours of lime & sea debris was rough & sharp. I rubbed my fingers pink & streaked them white with its powder, but didn’t break my skin.

It was like being trundled around in a barrel of salt water. I’d had enough. If there had been fish still floating with me that would have clinched it. But the fish had gone. All seven of them.

“Sins,” he added under his breath, “what a God forsaken dull freezing fog for me to end up in.”

“That one sounds like Pride.”

“No. I’m talking about this moment.”

“The fish belonged more to the marble slab than the sea. So I got spewed out. Was squeezed out floundering. Choking on gulps of air & spoons of food. For what? For a

beginning beyond my control. Forced feeding into life. The endless beating of a heart, that music of creature comfort, rattling my mind.”

“Our mind, I think it was at that stage. And still is as far as I can make out.”

“Hooked.”

“Taken the primitive bait.”

“Enmeshed.”

“I was closely watched. She was waiting for me to start the last flapping floundering about. She wanted to see my frantic last gasp, the dull eye staring out at nothing. To exult & kick the limp body over. To win, but use someone else to take the dirt of death...”

“You were preserved,” she said smiling with her suggestion, “or pickled. So how did you do it?”

“Imagination. . . always seemed to give me an alternative picture from the one described in such seductive detail which would have done for me had I gone for it. I wanted to, but somehow I always made a mistake. . .luckily. . .”

“But you were in some other woman’s arms?”

“No. I know she said I was. But I wasn’t, not then.”

We met. Her palm was clammy as she held my hand.

A threshold.

She appeared, pale-faced struggling to hold back more tears. But the sad white face looked as if it had been a red one roughly dabbed with fine flour so there was a comic touch to the pathetic moon.

“I took a purler,” she turned her head showing the shaved lump above her left ear, “Made me piss myself right there in front of everybody. I’d have been ashamed if I’d known I was doing it.”

“You’d been at the dog’s nose. It was so dark & everybody was sweating they wouldn’t have noticed if you had kept on your feet.”

“?”

“And stopped shrieking,” K. added charily cupping her hands over her mouth as she spoke as if it might temper the fact. They muffled the rest of her sentence.

“What?”

“You finished up sitting like Sheena-na-gog.”

“I didn’t.”

“You were spreading it & yelling for it.”

“I didn’t.”

“You always do.” She muttered into her fist.

“What?”

“You know what. How many times have you said this is the last time? You hear the bell ring & run to open the door.”

“It. You wanted to say. Well you aren’t so fucking slow slipping out of your knickers. In your head or out of it.”

“I stayed on my feet last night & didn’t finish up on my back carrying a stranger to paradise.”

“Who was he?”

“How should I know. You wouldn’t let me near him.”

“You need to be able to go back.”

“What?”

“I want to be able to say some feeling came before the image. But did it?”

“Is it in your control?”

“No. But it is controlling.”

We were down in that un-named time . . .the solitude . . .a landscape scraped down by the glacial forces of instinct . . .one drum beat away from rape.

“Are you ever going to change.” She accused.

He mistakenly took it for a question & started to answer haltingly.

“Er – I – have until . . .”

“You don’t say you’re sorry,” she burst in, but her gaze was steady resting on his face.

“I could never do it, it’s the favourite word for so many deceptions.”

“It’s ready-made to mean nothing now,” she added sadly. He started to stand up. Had already slipped an arm into its coat sleeve.

“Stay,” she said, tugging the green jacket gently, “there’s a lot more to do yet.”

“Of course,” he stopped, without curiosity, “I can’t promise anything.”

“I know. I don’t want . . .”

“Much?” He tried, point blank, with a heavy heart.

“Stop putting excuses in,” Kee advised, “If they take offence, let them.”

“O.K.”

“What was he pointing at?” She also asked. Reading his thoughts.

He pointed to the book. She stooped to read the marked passage in the letter.

‘ . . . if we had but seen the bride. It could be that she is ill (delicate head). So we have not met . . .yet . . .She is constantly ill.’

“And here’s the deceit,” He scowled jabbing his finger onto the page under her gaze.

‘Some years ago I knew her slightly when she was extremely admired for beauty & talent.’” (C.Rossetti, letter to Pauline Trevelyan. Modified.).

“I don’t know how far we are away from them. Are those two people still struggling through the snow?”

“Why cut the letter there?”

“Is that with concern or not?”

“They will be. I’m not sure where they’ll finish up.”

“The snowball is essential. It’s the fruit of the dream.”

“But it happens to have crushed everybody into itself in its roll. Like a soft boulder.”

The snow lightens the space in between the parts of the story. As it rolls the snowball collects up the characters. Takes them out of play.

“Does it take them out gently?”

“It only takes them out for a while. There is a thaw; your heart opens; they appear again as if out of nowhere in the field of actionless play under more lowering clouds.”

He groped around trying to remember what she had said. Was it ‘ It can’t all be black when someone opens their thighs.’ But it could. It could be a despairing embrace; a scissor.

Fat girl.

Thin girl.

It didn’t matter.

With chance. I’ll try again. Don’t go away.

How could she? Bound by the reflection that tormented her made as it was capable of being so perfectly formed except a bit too big where she should have been smaller because her thighs were together to try & squeeze in & lose a bit of flesh but she was still a bit bigger than she felt she should be so she pressed them together more till they sometimes bruised. If they were a bit smaller, she reasoned, it made her altogether smaller or at any rate shine even if it didn’t make her look smaller. Oh. I’m saying it’s too big & not lovely.

He said it was all the same. So I never found out whether he cared. I wouldn’t have believed him; how could he tell out there. Clear?

It never made any difference. It had no effect on me. She’s too much for the mirror anyway.

Always counting.

“It’s like you to try & start with numbers.” Kee added, “I think you’ll start everything that way; adding up the numbers to work out whatever they represent.”

“I do?” He thought they would like to have called it calculating.

“But you’ve started in a cold Hell! She always says that. Nothing else?”

“Always that.”

“Mmm . . . Nothing else,” They both echoed.

“You were rolling in a barrel through a cold Hell. Not many numbers in that. Not many people around to count them.”

“None.”

“She never mentions L.? But he must have been with her. Probably singing some inconsequential, I mean, incomprehensible song over & over.”

“He did I could hear it in the barrel. The words became a childhood memory. A Koan. The icy wing beat.”

“Where did the fish come from?” She asked, plodding through the deep snow, trying to decipher the song. Why does he refuse to give her the simple answer? The snowflakes settled on the paper bag & slowly softened it.

“The sea,” he answered eventually.

“Do you remember it?” She asked. “Is that what you’re saying. You can still feel the slopping sensation. Were you uncomfortable?”

“In a cylinder of salt water! What do you think.”

“I think you were fine.”

The bitter tears. The drum barrel beating with the tempting rhythm of the heart. Cyphers, fleeting figures described by the falling snow, keep at a distance.

“I found that solitude I need in snowstorms.”

8 2 40.

The contained sea in the barrel.

“Of course you miswrote it see.”

“The barrel is very like a seashell. (But not right at one end).”

“Wrong-headed.”

“The mistake of shells. Symmetry. So sure & hard like 8 2 40.”

“Giving us Aphrodite.”

“Not in this case!”

“On ancient gems were carved reliefs of all kinds of animals emerging from shells.

Massive animals & birds coming out of tiny shells. Often mixed up to form freaks with human heads.”

“There’s plenty of those.” She looked over her shoulder.

“But there’s only one way for them – out – they can’t get back in. Like something you’ve blurted out. It’ll never get swallowed back.”

“Birth of the labyrinth out of the guts.”

“From under them really.”

“8 2 40. That’s a terrible number. Oh dear. I see a bad picture here.”

“Of course you miswrote it fear!”

She reported her conversations with a numerologist. It wasn’t until then I thought anything of it. There had been one or two deadly blows connected with the numbers I admit, but I’d never blamed the numbers.

The shell gives us a whirlwind.

“What was the result?”

“The beasts crawling on the earth. Real suffering.”

“And then the zoo to frame them in madness.”

This barrel is a circle that made a mistake while trying to become a square. The circle gave itself volume, a space to engender mischief & kindness. It was a fuck-up & I was in it. 304 days (approx.)

It has proved impossible to pin down or extract when the illuminating, procreational act took place. The barrel could have tried to become a fullsome round shape with no particular name that would have had less bearing on my fate.

From the diamond stone to fire earth air water.

Choosing a sex? Choosing both.

“What did he lose?”

“You can’t have both . . . at the same time.”

“You can have both & you can be both . . .at the same time. It’s just very difficult . . .at times.”

The body complete (dog’s body).

The hero’s vessel. A dangerous place to be. Walking backwards in the thin snow to leave footprints going the wrong way.

“He doesn’t know what he wants.”

“Sure.”

No sunshine filters into the barrel.

“Keep it

Dismal.

Bounded.

Iron hooped.”

“Heavenly barrel? Solid whirlwind?”

“I’m not willing to accept it.”

“It’s already done.”

“It was the first shape.”

“What else comes out of the barrel?”

“More then there could have been inside.” And more animals.

“Not the same person everytime?”

“Yes. The same flesh.”

“Only slightly changed I think?”

“There isn’t that much difference in the actual flesh.”

“What! No big small ugly beautiful . . . Oh I can see where this is taking us.”

“You can add bits on. A beak here. Extra fangs. The similarities are what is extraordinary.

We all come out of the same barrel.”

“Yes. Not from under a steamroller.”

“Guess how you were mixed in there.”

“By chance.”

“But with what?”

“Different voices.”

“But voices.” She blew her nose.

“Different ways of walking.”

“Able to walk.”

She sneezed & had to wipe her nose again.

“Words, words, words.”

“And lots of places to go with them.”

“Corners? Holes? Boxes?”

“The box is an interesting image to choose. Made out of the barrel staves. You could put it on the table & hope it attracts the fire of attention.”

“To distract you?”

“Can’t you remember? She walked in with it.”

“And it was full of – what?”

“I never found out. It was never opened.”

“Are you sure!” Teasingly. “I think you were kept in the dark.”

“So? It’s cruel to keep me hanging.”

He reached up & broke off a dead branch. It was so obvious. I waited with a grin. She asked for the branch. She asked so nicely I felt ashamed at her effort to be friendly. The others came, one dressed up in red, one partially dressed in green. One was carrying a pretty box. I offered them all places at my table.

“You dope,” she said, “It didn’t need that much force.” She held the brooch with its pin bent askew up to the small window-light. The sunshine should have been shinning

through it & made the tip of her nose bluish but it didn't, it couldn't, the window was blocked by the back of a man with his arm round a dog that was sitting with him on the narrow window ledge & fidgeting to keep its seat. The brooch was replaced in a wooden box & just as the lid snapped shut the dog slipped off the sill. The man bent & peered through the black window pane. And saw nothing at first. She leaned over his shoulder to keep the story going. He pushed her back.

"I'm keeping this to myself."

"Is there someone lying inside?"

"Ahh . . . ahh . . . ahh . . . ahh . . . ahha."

"Hu . . . hu . . . hu . . . hu . . . oooo."

"Have I caught them on the job at last?" He whispered as he shaded his eyes to see through the reflecting glass.

They were still at the table. One was wearing ordinary clothes. One was a little bit disarrayed, one white shoe off. One had a top button sprung on her blouse, a touch too small. One had a red skirt riding up her thighs showing flesh above her stockings & a scum of lace. Her head leaned on his shoulder, her lips were next to his ear. There were others. One had a bright acid yellow scarf, a scrap really, round her neck which was just a little longer than she liked so she drew attention to it by cutting it in half.

"One half shilly the other shally."

"Did you say that to her?"

"We were never that intimate."

She wanted more & pressed a particular place that was still sore.

“It was the wrong time?”

The boy, a child, came in blowing a whistle.

“Do it at once. Please. She didn’t mind at all. What should we do first.”

“Wait.” For I had grown sharp in contested feeling.

Should we pack the box. Look round, our hands flew. Mine to her throat to loosen the silk scarf. She stopped me, “The skin of my neck is so rough, nothing helps it, leave it on.”

Now I wonder, did it cover a bruise? A Bite? Bites? A neck as scraggy as a chicken’s?

She had lifted most of her clothes off before I could touch them & they landed neatly somewhere; except the brassiere which she left so she could thrust her breasts into my face deftly click the catch between them & trace each nipple through my lips.

One wore a dark blue suit with plunging shiny lapels over a bare chest, really cheap. A paper bride.

“I like that one she glows with vitality.”

“Now does that mean she was painted silver?”

“She did seduce me in the August heat but I felt it was my casual disorder that made the time.”

“It certainly was not! Although you were easy meat.”

“This could be endless. Do you have to describe them as they come to mind? Can’t it wait till something more can be evoked.”

“No. We want more detail now.”

“Is this what you want? The whole five minute show with her naked pissing into a plate of cold spaghetti? And the other clinging to her back. Another trussed like a turkey & whipped blue & not uttering a sound.

“What’s next?” Outside the woman leaned heavily on his shoulders. He straightened up.

“Nothing doing. It’s a song.”

“What did you think it was?” She inquired nastily, “Leave them to their meal.”

She turned to go, her hand slipped down his arm.

He stood. “That can’t be all.”

“I can’t see anything to look at,” she added to her shrug. And used the branch to feel before her.

“Why?”

“We don’t know where they are.”

“It’s pitch black, give us some light in this box.”

“This darkness is full up, teeming with creatures.”

“Didn’t you expect to meet her at **Sconser**, or her you? Didn’t you ask? I wondered.

And if I had closed my eyes, would I have heard what she said to him out there in the dark evening?”

1980.

Cold threaded in & out each room continually until it had woven them all uncomfortable.

The fog screwed the city lights tightly to the window. Nightmare traffic scrapped the sinew of tarmacadam sharper & sharper until it screamed. Dream vibrations rattled the tall mildewing table mirror so that it tilted forward & blackened reflecting only its laminated brown base & dust & a negligent pile of make-up interspersed with jewellery.

These heaps were repeated in several places on the carpet & on one of the two chairs.

They made her act of dressing impenetrable.

I rolled out of bed from her for the 2,916 time.

Memory isn't misleading. Death always lurks there; its wraith invests each recalled moment with cold deceit. Fear, more than desires, interferes because death is only a few moments away every day.

1986.

I carefully poured olive oil from a warm spoon into her left ear on the head of a different unforgettable body. This body had never been on a picnic to the zoo with me yet.

She wrote, 'tentative physical love didn't satisfy me. There were times when my senses went awash & an ecstasy filled my body, but only when I felt in danger, even if the 'danger' was play-acted. So how often am I going to be sitting in a cold close room, like this one, listening to the low empty sound of the kitchen clock, alone, gazing at the food cupboard like a tiger . . . I wonder.'

Her lips curled red as she stroked her thighs trying to resist then she shouted, "Harder, harder oh harder," as she pulled behind her knees with both hands.

She fondled my curls. The dead bodies lay strewn from hilltop to hilltop. You could walk on them like stepping stones across the valley, never touching the ground.

“Weren’t your boots soaked in blood?”

“Can a thought meet the dream? They were numb. They were solid.”

“They were in a tank!”

“Was it self-mutilation?”

“No. The enemy were dead not me. And there wasn’t any bloodshed.”

“Mmm. No trees, grass, rocks. Mmm. No earth actually by the way you tell it.”

“A jig-saw landscape completed, each piece a body.”

“Each piece fully interlocking. Mmm. All dead. Mmm. Another fuck-up.”

“A normal day on earth, especially in the 20th century.”

“Like this one is going to be?”

“If we can make it . . . everybody says they want to live a dream life. . .”

“Most of them do. Didn’t you leave footprints?”

“We saw nothing. We left nothing.”

“A smudge?”

“No.”

“Hoofprints. Nice slip. Keeping it in?”

“No.”

‘ Goodnite Irene’ rang through my brain. The Korean war. Greasy hair. Childhood. The years hammered & snored by like bullets in a B movie.

“But live in a dream. . .that’s something else.”

“They do that as well.”

“I’m not dead meat. Speak to me.”

She gave him a slap across the face to make him wake-up.

“Better,” he grunted still half asleep. “In my next dream I’ll tie your hands to yourself.”

“And then what happened to make you glad it was over when it was over?”

“Nothing, except the coldness. The coldness later on which I couldn’t understand because I wasn’t so aware of the changes that had taken place. It shows how much you live inside your own dream.”

“Your own dream. Mmm.” She mused.

“I wasn’t glad. I think there was just less expression from her. And because of that I was able to gather more information from the actions going on around us & then surprisingly see more in what had gone.”

Dawn. Red lumps in the sky. The snowy thighs. A song about fog. First thing outside on a bare dug patch of earth I burned five burst cardboard boxes. They roared on fire. When they were charred the wind blew a spark text out of the black contorted leaves that collapsed almost instantaneously into a fine grey blue powder. I copied the text as quickly as I could while we ate. She looked over as I scribbled.

“Did it say anything about fun?”

“It could. I’m making most of it up,” I lied. As the words hopped out of the biro onto the page.

“Are we going out?” She asked, unable to read my writing upside-down, hidden behind my hand.

“Ah. That’s the easy way, a gem.” I thoughtlessly answered .

“What!” She countered, pulling the sheet of paper to her. “Is this scribble about?”

“I read that I wasn’t staying. I didn’t read where I was staying or if I was going to be staying anywhere. Unfortunately I’m still in the wrong house, still in a pattern set in an old dream.”

“I’m trying to write about searching for the right place to settle down.”

“Did you find it? Is it a place you need? Or someone?”

A void fast bound.

“Out there,” she pointed. The dog misunderstood the abstract nature of the sign & shot out from under the table & through the door squealing & snarling with the expectation of a hunt. A sharp whistle brought him slinking back. She fondled its ears, leaned over, “you know,” she patted its head, “ and were just going to sink your teeth into it.”

“It’s coming back in that will prove difficult.”

“We’re only going out of this house . . .not out of the world . . .not out of our shell. Or are the events going to prove so trying that we are . . .changed . . .unable to re-enter our previous life. I mean how we are now?”

“But we don’t want to stay as we are. We agreed on that?”

“Ah. Guided by small voices . . .I see . . .or rather hear.”

“Is that what you want to happen?”

“It could. You’re making most of it up.”

“But you don’t believe it. Very often you say I’m missing lumps of the story out, deliberately shielding you. Or kidding you. Or worse.”

“It sounds real to me. It could have happened. And yet I know you lie & lead me on.”

“I haven’t told you most of it yet.”

“I can anticipate from the little bit you have let out already.”

“That it could be damaging to continue?”

“It could be helpful, get us out of here, even if untrue.”

“O.K. A visit.”

“Nothing innocent. Something attractive?” She hoped for much more. She told me later.

“Something to put the lights out for!”

“Something that springs from longing. . .Yes? Somewhere to go astray.”

Their spoons rubbed the dishes. They sat as if in a trance. Only for a moment.

“Where could we go,” she looked out, “in the sunshine. Does it mention the weather?”

“It never does. But I’ll work in a picnic at the zoo.”

“I’ve always found them deadly boring. Except once.” She lay back, looking at the cherubs banging along the cornice & smiled sweetly.

“Where’s the big hand on the clock now,” she teased, “come here. I’ll cut you’re hair.”

“Still on the clock,” he took her hand.

“And where’s the other hand.”

“On the way to the zoo.”

She grinned back & opened her legs.

“But there’s a lot of jungle to cut through,” he took the scissors. She rolled back. He combed the black curly hair with his fingers & snipped over the back of them blowing away the tiny curls that scattered onto her thighs.

“Not too short. Leave some for later.”

Then she had cut his hair. Too short.

It was a cold day & he didn’t want to go out. He was in a bad temper because of it so he kept closer to the child.

“Do you think she thought that out?”

“Tell me what he said to you.”

“Nothing.”

“That could take an age,” she put both hands over her swollen belly & leaned back in her chair showing she had the time. From longhand bang bang bang to print & back again. Bang bang bang. A foot or hand pushed out from inside her belly. She took mine over to the spot so I could feel it.

“Grasp that fact. Doesn’t it say something to you?”

“Same as you. Birds probably think they were once human.”

“That robin does!”

Their eyes turned to the window. The sunlight was speeding through the holly tree; black & green. The radio crackled into life in the middle of an interview

‘ . . .my mother told me to get a job with food . . .then I’d never be out of work . . .so I became a butcher’s boy . . .’ She switched off as a guitar riff started & said.

“A rabbit went into a butcher’s shop. ‘ Have you any cabbage?’ No said the butcher, try the greengrocer down the road. The next day the rabbit went into the butcher’s shop.’ Have you any cabbage? No. I told you yesterday. Try the greengrocer down the road. The next day the rabbit went into the butcher’s shop. ‘ Have you any cabbage?’ No I told you yesterday & if you come in again I’ll nail your ears to the counter. The next day the rabbit went into the butcher’s shop. ‘ Have you any nails?’ No, said the butcher.

“Any cabbage?” They both shouted together.

The typewriter keys were banged so hard that the letters became perforations. The words were lost like those exquisite sentences you make up at the end of a dream & never get to write down. The paper tore when I tried to take it out.

“Now all my starts aren’t like that,” I pointed out.

“Three quarters are.” She had noticed the slip when I tapped up the mistake $\frac{3}{4}$ in my haste to be finished.

Wrapped up in a white towel she sat on the edge of the bed still holding the sheaf of notes pushed up into a fan shape. “They make more sense read this way.”

She was right.

“And they need some ‘long ago’s’ interspersed with ‘times of day’.”

“I’ll get them in.” It is morning. He wrote looking around. It must be I can see a bed with a woman sitting on it.

“And you must say more about their discomforts . . .as in all proper traveller’s tales. They must lose vital things . . .they all do. Or they get stolen.”

“The woman is yawning, stretching. Feeling the cold, shivering . . .with expectation?”

“Not yet,” she interrupted, “she’s only just got up. They’ve only just had it if I know your writing. More sandstorms, flies & managing with one spoon etc.”

He agreed again. “Although they hardly do one hundred miles.”

“Why was the spoon so important?” She asked, “Do they always . . .” She held one up . . .”give both sides of the story.”

But she had had to lean across the table to get a spoon, the towel had fallen open as she was always negligently seductive when they were alone.

“I never thought about it before but only having one spoon yet carrying all that other kit. Do you believe it?”

She absently placed the spoon bowl over each brown nipple in turn, shuddering slightly at the cold touch. Her nipples hardened. He watched entranced.

“When the story was finished you didn’t know the colour of her hair, nor the colour of her eyes. Nothing. She was vital, yet you weren’t told much. Nothing personal. But you were told only one spoon.”

She saw him watching her play.

“I can see how it would touch you. I was so surprised when I discovered that whom had the big spoon meant so much to you.”

I determined to contradict that at some future time.

“Nice to know. You need a bigger one for those breasts.”

She smiled, provocative because she was pressing one breast with the spoon still. I kissed another & passed it to her. She pressed both breasts hard over the nipples holding the spoons in the way that a child clutches toy flags.

The middle of the morning found them still at the table.

“You may be wanted? No? I have a plan.”

At that moment a dog came flying down past the kitchen window. It had jumped out of a bedroom window at the sound of their raised voices. She went to the door & clapped her hands, but the dog had bolted out of the garden. She sat & gave him a lob-sided smile.

“Gone again.”

Her face lost its roundness as she expressed her concern. I was still writing at the table.

“Correct, we’ll see him at the zoo no doubt,” & nodded brusquely. “Call a dog Crab.

What do you expect.”

The fire had been meticulous about its instructions for the day. It was now 10 o’ clock.

“No,” she corrected, “it’s 9: 57.” She pointedly waved towards the clock. (10 would be Richard III).

“When are we going?”

“There are yards of this to copy out yet. And then there’s the space in between words & the lines.”

“The blank spaces?” She gave him that same look she gave the dog, nearly, but expressing a more resigned concern.

“AND THE SPACES IN THE WORDS.” (He was pleased to have come to that by himself as you can see). “In which we fly like birds or swim like fish.”

“Are the birds intellect?” She asked, “And the fish passions? No?”

“We’ll check at the zoo. Remember all those owls; thinkers, everyone of them.”

“Or worriers. Wondering when a man might come along looking for words & chop off their heads trying to find them.”

“Doesn’t pay to look wise!” They pulled silly faces at each other.

“We’ll tell the owls . . .hoot stupidly no need to freeze your prey with learning they could die laughing & put this poet god off the scent. He could go & strangle swans or swallows.”

“What would he get out of a swan? They’re taciturn. And swallows twitter.”

“Back to owls then.”

“Now, because of our warning, we will find them pretending to be brainless with everything switched off but their eyes. Indifferent to our gazes. Yet while perching always suggesting by slight rolls of their eyes you could screw their heads off easily.”

“And shake the words out.”

“Without killing them.” They spoke together.

“I could pick fault with them anytime.” She poured herself a cup of tea. “Because the words are ours . . .they make us human.” She spoke to the teapot holding it level with her face.

“With our voice.” She made the teapot answer. Its lid fell out.

“The god is poking around,” she laughed, “reading the tea-leaves.”

They were quiet for a time.

“Not fish. They wouldn’t do for feelings. People couldn’t have habitually seen that many fish.”

“Negative emotions, perhaps.”

“Animal passions . . . forgetting we are one.”

“Oh! They did. Some people saw nothing but fish; practically lived on them. Shellfish.

They used the limpet. The cockle shell.”

“As vindictive as a cod! Doesn’t sound right. But as vindictive as what?”

“A neighbour.”

“What?”

“I know that’s a strange animal,” she said through her teeth, puffing out her chest & making stroking signs over her breasts, “what always talks with her tits . . .when you’re around at least.”

“As vitriolic as a hake? No. Not right either.” He persisted grimly.

“As a neighbour!” She laboured him.

“As vengeful as a shark. That’s about right. And there aren’t any animals for these words.”

“Snake?”

“Wrong shape.”

“No. Rapacious as a shark, I’d say,” she put in, “you know that strange animal with a big smile.”

“And big tits,” he interjected. Lighting the fuse. Fed up with the slow burn.

“Except!” She interrupted & poked him lightly in the belly. But couldn’t finish. Her eyes took a faraway look & her mouth became tight.

“As manipulative as an octopus . . . or a “ & then he saw from her face she had stopped the game.

“Easy on, it’s not that serious.”

But the boat had capsized.

“You’re avoiding my question & you know it.” She snapped, “You always do.”

“No matter what I say you still won’t believe it. You’ve made your mind up that the way you tell your story describes the correct way everything happened & you interpret every action from it . . . mostly wrongly . . . I would say.”

“That’s a mistaken impression. I want something other than vague allusions. Lies really.”

“You’re feeling daring.”

“Give me the true story then.”

“There isn’t anything to tell. Ask her yourself.”

“She wouldn’t talk about her feeling to me. I’m just in her way.”

“You say she’s vindictive, then I’m sure she’d jump at a chance to hurt you if she was given one but you’d sooner listen to some idiotic voice from the past.”

“That’s not true. It happened often enough in the past.”

“Try her,” he said, “she can’t be all stone.”

“Try what,” she blurted out, “to crack that armour. She doesn’t even know she’s in it.”

Fault. A crack. A slide. A truth of appearances wasn’t the point.

“Has anything taken place?” He wanted to know.

“You obviously know more than I do, tell me.” She stuffed a cushion under her feet.

“It was love. The only feasible answer. Do you want to hear ALL about it?”

“Come on you know why I ask it. Get it out of our life,” she stormed angrily.

“What can I say about it? When it’s an event that has been made almost totally by your imagination & now you claim it as a permanent & real part of your life.”

“It must be engendered by some of your actions!”

“We saw a woman passing us briefly on a street corner the other night & you said, ‘Ah! I know who that was.’ Well I didn’t. But I know who you thought it was.”

“That proves my point.”

“I said I didn’t know who it was & that was true. The woman you thought it was had been faraway for several months but I didn’t tell you.”

“There you are you must see. You knew but didn’t tell me.”

“If I told you . What would it do? What difference would it have made? You have persuaded yourself something definitely happened. Why are these thoughts always harmful? Why don’t you put this vivid imagination to some good use . . .construct happy events that didn’t happen. Perhaps that would give them a chance to happen.”

The morning sun was warming the room as they left it. The teapot was cold. The spoons were in the drawer. Her tits were tingling as they had from time to time while she had been pregnant. He had asked for a fuck before they left & she’d agreed saying she was surprised there was any room up there because the baby was bearing down so heavily at

this late stage. It had been O.K. Kneeling down resting her belly on two cushions pulled off the big arm chair, sinking her head into the soft base smelling of worn leatherette & old dog, while pulling her knees towards the front rollers to open herself up more. But not really taking part, she couldn't help her lack of interest, she was too big for a romp & wanted a piss. Then she had seen the blue slip of paper that took her mind completely off the fuck.

It sent me off in a trance, she said later, that note in the chair. It was nothing I'd done or even thought about. Like it was left in advance. He would have been able to tell so it was probably at that point he gave up, saying he was worried in case he made her feel uncomfortable, putting it over on her, & she had looked sideways out of the chair saying it was O.K. she didn't mind but she really had lost the urge just lately. She could feel some juice running down the inside of her left thigh & the usual acrid smell joined the rest & hit the back of her nose. She sneezed & that squeezed his cock out. There had been a white gummy kind of discharge to wash out of her pubic hairs that she hadn't had before & then she was ready to go, the note tucked into her bra.

They were at the outside door with its coloured glass & lead scenes of flower-beds.

He took a few steps down.

"You must say it," a voice said behind her.

"I will not accept it," another voice (not hers) replied.

"We rarely do," she said half aloud.

"What?" He asked turning to her, putting his hand on her hip.

Her hand slipped up to touch the note. “Are we going alone?” The hidden note was written on the back of a photograph.

She stood on the top step out of the door & as a gob of cum settled into her gusset a sharp pain cut across her middle & up to her ribs. She spread the fingers of her right hand out in front & pushed them into the air as she breathed down the pain. It subsided. A woman came out of a door across the road & made towards them, but as if surprised in going somewhere else. She was involuntarily opening the neck button of her blouse as she came closer to them. The couple moved down the rest of the steps hand in hand.

“I saw you leaving as I came out,” she eyed him staring straight past her, “I wondered if I could talk to you tomorrow afternoon. Did you get my note?”

“Yes,” he said. “What note?”

The sunlight caught the fluffy down-like hair of her cheeks & coarsened the look of her face. She wasn’t so beguiling in full sunlight. No wave of treacherous sexual feeling washed over them but there was a current, an eddy of resentment.

“As callous as a mackerel,” she said pointedly, “we were playing this game trying different fish names for feelings. Which one would you put up for callousness?”

The woman didn’t turn a hair that was visible. It was miles off her track. She undid another button. “I’m no good at that sort of thing.” She turned & slightly adjusted her collar, “It’s so hot this morning, such a change. I wasn’t prepared for it. The only one I know is. . . cold as a fish. I would have thought you would feel at home there the state you’re in . . . you know not being able to . . .” And then she smiled serenely as if there wasn’t an inch of clutter bothering her life.

“There is . . . drinks like a fish . . .you know,” she retorted with a studied disdain,
“everyone knows that one. I’m surprised we forgot it. Perhaps we needed reminding.”
She jerked, jolted by an effort of control & put both hands over her lower abdomen
hoisting the foetus up. “I’ve got other fish to fry. . .you’ve heard of that one.” The pain hit
again & this time she gasped, so he knew.

“Perhaps we should put it off this trip to the zoo? You seem to be hurting.”

“A spasm . . .it will go . . .but I think I’ll stay home . . .does it matter?”

“No. Any day will do for the visit.”

“Shall we picnic instead this afternoon in our garden?” They asked the woman.

“And miss the zoo. We’ll have to see what we can do.” She laughed in reply & searched
to catch his eye in a way as if they were alone sharing a secret.

“I’ll have to rush now. What time shall I come . . .if I can make it.”

“Late. About 4 if that’s O.K.”

“It’s a good time. I’m free.” And she hurried away.

“Did they turn back through the door into the warm house?”

“No. But they should have.”

Once inside she stamped her boot, saying that she certainly wasn’t going to be on that
picnic if Mrs. Six came. She hoped he got a good look, he was meant to that was obvious,
the tart. I would have called that smug considering the way things were for her.

“Did you know?”

“No. But they were fucked up even if we didn’t know.”

“So what was she up to?”

“Fishing, seeing what she could trawl up.” She put her hand under his chin. “Plenty to catch round here – nothing easier – it was embarrassing.”

He still looked straight at her.

She pursed her lips, “What note?”

“It was a letter she wanted me to read. To help her reply to.”

“You hadn’t mentioned it. But I’m not surprised.” Then she kicked me on the outside of my right leg (about five inches down from the kneecap) with such force that I found my leg was grazed when I ruefully pulled up my trouser to rub it. Through the window behind her were five long concrete steps leading up to a row of black iron railings with a padlock & a chain securing the gate. She stamped her foot again, so I stepped back.

“We no longer know where we are going.”

“It’s not important.”

1978.

A light white zinc chimney shaped like a bloated cobra dominated the alley skyline that she glanced down & then stopped to look intently. A confused image cleared as the clouds broke & bright sunshine glossed a broken beige umbrella crumpled against a wooden fence three broken spokes stuck out like a bust wing, its fabric smeared with red. Behind a dirty pane a man’s head, a gargoyle, stared out through cobwebs. All the stonework beyond the iron railings was crumbling, ragwort grew in between the flags. Further on there was a yawning space under the bell tower, a half fallen wall blocked in by a slat barrier & over this could be seen a pile of broken chairs. Above the wall another

hole gaped in the ceiling from which lathes & straw straggled out. An electric cable ran through this hole into a studio. She leaned over & stroked the dog that had one paw lightly touching the first step. It cocked its head as if anticipating her words. To the left side of the long steps another short flight ran at right angles up to a door.

“There were two doors.”

She looked over to the woman standing in the middle of the narrow alley, but in shadow. Her dress tight round her belly. A fair-haired woman opened the door & cocked her head out.

The dog was back, under the apple tree. An incomplete plastic chandelier hanging off one of the lower branches caught the early afternoon sun so that the milky drops nearly resembled ice haphazardly tossed up into the black twigs. The blossom buds were still tight, red.

She spread the tartan blanket (off the shoulders of the poet, she mused) noted the feathers but didn't shake it. Why was she doing all this? It was a set-up & she knew it.

“This is awful,” she said aloud. But ignored herself & pulled the cloth roughly into shape, then found four clean house bricks to keep the thing spread.

“The zoo would have been easier, though it'll be like one here, I should think.”

The blanket ballooned between the bricks & sagged as quickly.

“Why am I doing it. I want it out in the open. Actually. Shed some light on them. Watch her in action. She likes that & so do I. Gives me a chance to kill it off.”

Did she care? She felt the weight of her belly & she did.

She left it at that. After she had gone inside the dog slunk out of the brambles & sat in the middle of the tartan spread. An hour or two passed although it didn't know it. Insulated by a dumb perception although the dog could see the grey figures intertwining in the space around it there was nothing the dog could have sunk its fangs in. His tail swept the blanket occasionally & each paw at the end of a stiff outthrust leg twitched but the dog never raised its head, nor had to lope for cover to avoid being trampled. One eye open, the other shut it lay in wait.

"It was in that hour the picnic was supposed to have taken place."

"Did it? But the dog was there. And what about him?"

"He never sees it! He never comes back in time. He was supposed to & stories told about him later say he did. But he didn't."

"I can't understand you. Why did you insist on waiting?"

"I expected it to take place. We had agreed."

"You were in love, I think."

"The picnic was put together out of different times. A naked body here. A distant figure there. That's my guess. A deep pool; a meaningless place; a cloth thrown down on which to fix the party."

"Did they eat?"

"Some did."

"It didn't take place at all!"

"How do you know? It could have."

“I know everybody thinks it took place. They are meant to. And they needed the image of it to look back on . . . join in the talk. . . but most of all . . . “

“ . . . most of all keep it the silent picnic of memory.”

“To fuck & fuck to relieve who’s pain now?”

“Leave me alone.”

The young woman on entering the house immediately felt its emptiness so walked out through the front, down the steps & crossed over to her neighbour’s door. Perhaps she was back. Perhaps she could glean a clue to satisfy her gnawing doubts without having to entertain her. She rang the bell.

The woman peered at her before inviting her in. She touched the top button of her dress.

“Did you tell him what you want?”

“First tell me how much you paid.”

“What do you mean? What do you wish me to say? Something you can twist & use against me?”

“Either tell me or I’m off & I’ll make him tell.” She tossed her head. The other woman was distracted by the blue larkspur showing through her flying hair & hesitated, unable to be angry.

She heard the doorbell buzz as she stood at the top of the stair waiting. At its sound she ducked back into her bedroom, took a twist of paper out of a small enamelled box, emptied the contents into a tumbler, pulled the coke can open, swirled a little over the white powder & swallowed it. She screwed her nose up at the bitter taste, rinsed the glass

around with another splash of coke & gulped that down. She licked the rim. It set her teeth on edge. She rubbed her lips over again with the red lipstick & stood the gold & black cylinder back in front of the mirror. She didn't check her lips. Poked a lozenge of gum into her mouth. Eased the rush chewing & smiling. Her stomach tightened. She could hear her brain starting to jabber euphoric shit behind her flushed cheeks as she regained the stair. Did she care that much?

“You're liked when you're on drugs,” said K adjusting her bra strap from the back with her thumb. “You know it's a waste of time – even with that stuff inside you- you can't make him stick – but it's nice to be liked.”

The other girl grunted total disapproval, flicked a fingernail clean, & listened with her head cocked indicating futility.

“I'm sure I'm fooling myself but it's worth a few more tries.”

“How many are you going to give him? He's had more than I would.” The white strap cut across a large mark on her shoulder that looked as if tea had been spilt on the skin. It was a scar of a childhood burn she had been told, though she always felt some confusion if she stared in the mirror & tried to remember the incident she had been told was connected with this patch. It was barely visible & not at all disfiguring but if asked about it always caught her breath in an inexplicable way.

“Until a better fuck turns up.”

The other woman straightened her head approvingly.

“Let's hope for one for you later tonight & one for me as well.”

The door lock was released by the remote switch. She felt the down draught of hot musty air as she stepped into the hallway. The walls shook as the door closed. She heard her giggle, “You can leave now.”

“I’m staying,” came the quick retort of their obscure humour.

The decaying floor creaked.

She was standing on one leg, bent over carefully pulling a stocking off a foot, slightly impatiently shooing a fly. K brushed past her, “It’s too hot for these,” she grinned. They nodded silently in time. Her mouth was working the gum vigorously; eyes bright & watery stared past the small plain face of her companion whose cheeks were becoming flushed while her neck stayed pale. She stuffed the stockings in a drawer taking out a scarf at the same time. Its yellow cut the white skin. She made a heavy rasping sound in her throat & her face became fierce & intent. At that moment she became aware of a trickle of moisture from under her breasts & blew down behind the fabric of her dress. At the same time she accompanied this by slowly raising herself on tiptoe.

“Soon strip this off,” she grinned.

“Too eager. Too eager.” Cautioned K.

“At least I’m starting off with it on.”

“How are you going to get rid of K,” she wondered, “so they could be alone. Wasn’t it time for her to go back to the zoo?”

“Get the facts right! She was hopping around with her panties caught on the heel of one shoe saying it was too hot to wear them & she had no intention of going anywhere.”

“And you said, you should shave some of that muff off. And offered to do it.”

“I did?” Let’s go back & get this straight.”

“Half on.”

“No time,” she replied, untangling the lace from the shoe she had taken off.

“Wait. You have got him at the bottom of the stairwell, before K was able to say goodbye to her friend & because she was delaying her leaving to try something as yet not said.

Now they will have to meet. That’s the last thing she wanted. But I suspect you planned it with K?”

She made quite clear she was pissed off, hardly acknowledged their company after a curt ‘Hello’ to him. But they stuck at it. All three in their way urging the work along.

“There must be something in it.”

She sucked her upper lip & released it with a smack leaning towards him very, very slightly. “It’s not you,” she smiled & then gave a hard stare at the other woman & after a long pause said, “All silence is musical.”

“Yes. It’s not absence of noise. But absence of voice. And the one in your head is seldom quiet.”

“That would be bliss.” She held her head but not mocking herself.

“That’s not going to happen. If it shut up you’d have nothing in the background constantly influencing what was adding to it.”

“So he thought silence could just be silence?”

“Yes. Not carry anything. Not be a part of someone’s imagination.”

“Can you get such a silence? Name one?”

“I don’t have one – not that I can perceive – as soon as it exists in that way in the life of somebody, it has something other . . . “

“Joy. Fear?”

“There are those silences that have happened. Perhaps those are the ones without any content. The ones you can only remember.”

In the chair she sat as the chair, she even took up a cushion & put it in her lap.

The dog’s bark is silence.

“Does it change much?” He reached over & stroked the cushion. She threw the cushion down.

“Try again.”

Her knees parted . This was not chance. This was expression.

“I’ll try again.”

“Was it really as crude as that.” She asked, masking, she thought, her expression of contempt & disbelief.

(‘If you can’t find a partner use a wooden chair’, Jailhouse Rock).

The other woman had slipped out into a darker room. They could hardly see her as the angle of their sight made the doorway a slit . She dropped something & swore.

“Fuck it, that’s all I had.”

She was darting across the opening in a rapid mime, trying to do something but not let them feel alone & unobserved. She’d learned the names of some of the fish before they came, but could she use them, could she Hell. You always catch the kind you know

nothing about & it's always one that looks as though it might have a razor sharp fin or a poisonous spine which you catch that turns out like these two, & most fish, to be harmless & edible & fuckable; if she would only go & you can stomach it & you can & like most fish might at some point stick in your throat, no chance, but if you get two of them together – not these two. . .

“Coming.” But she saw nothing was happening so turned back into the dark room. They started up startled by her brief irruption through the doorway. As if caught in the act of their thoughts.

Rochet, the red gurnard. Black goby. They would. Wrasse. A rock fish. They would if she gave them an opportunity. But . . .by careful observation . . .if you have nothing else to eat but fish you get sick of them & if they don't make you sick they make you sleepy because they are so heavy . . .one I caught I couldn't eat although I should have done . . .it was so hard on the head that you could knock it & it didn't blink even though it sounded like someone at the door . . .

“Are you going to answer that?”

“But is it anyone?”

“Something is making that racket.”

“Describe some fish carefully. Look at them on the slab. And it's a good idea to bury a fish under where you are going to plant a vine. Can you use that?”

“They look pretty on the slab.”

The bell rang again. All three looked surprised.

“Hell. Someone else & I’ve got to get ready to go out soon. Picnicking. But you know that.” She glanced at K. & winked a pretence complicity covering her disquiet at having forgotten the reason for her presence. Unable to completely conceal that this caller may well give a new & unwelcome turn to the story, one she hadn’t planned.

“Don’t piss me off. Let me in on the plot now & again!”

“I’m sorry. You didn’t know I was there. I didn’t want you to walk right in on us unprepared but I took your advice. I slipped this visit in to try & find out what was going on between you two.”

“Well?”

“If anything,” she offered, “you’ll get your fantasy from my imagination. Something completely without substance could cause substantial dismay.”

“You keep on saying that. I makes me suspect more & more that I’m on the right track.”

“Because it hooks into a real feeling. You don’t get it do you?” She swung round to them.

“I don’t want to admit that something that never happened can cause me so much pain.”

“But it usually does,” another ventured. “I only have to read a story in the paper, feel it could be happening to me & . . . make it happen to me.”

“You see . . .you agree with me. . .”

“Yes. But we don’t like it. So we call it fantastic & say you’re stuck on a mistake while harbouring our own doubts so we don’t descend into a furious cataract of feeling we can’t swim in. We get fucked up & put up with it & call it caring.”

“Care!” She almost fell off her chair with anger, “Who cares?”

“You do. You’re trying to make it come true. You’ll blunder about & create openings & opportunities that never existed before. You’ll open up a door that really stayed shut, so that a glance that never entered an eye at all, now is seen; the desire that really faded very quickly is fanned by your questioning full flamed . . .the shade of pain . . .the sounds you are making shouldn’t have been heard. They should have expanded out to nowhere. The breath forming the words should have been strangled, choked back. They formed a knot of interest out of nothing, a bud where there was a break, a hook where the coat fell abandoned to the floor. You are illuminating a lie. Breathing blood out over it. Why?”

“Don’t we all do this? We feel paralysed if we don’t. We don’t want that feeling to win over us, an atrocious cold. Faults.”

“Picking faults with ourselves, not knowing what we feel in our belly has its roots there, or in the body blows we save up.”

“Words. Fuck them.”

“We do.”

They questioned her more, a raised eyebrow, a slight nod, all indicating their dubious feelings about the event coming off.

“Where are you going?”

“Just nearby,” was as specific as she was going to be, “business really . . .”

Now they knew they were being fooled with.

“I’ll let whoever it is, in.”

They sat around & to try & smooth things over talked about work at the zoo. The sun went down till the light became faintly greenish.

“I hope you’ve remembered that you have to get at least two of them to a picnic in the late afternoon. O.K. Careful with that light.” She helpfully suggested.

“There’s a spare cage between the cranes & a duckpond,” she said, “The pond’s the sort you can hang out to dry.”

“About right,” she agreed & handed her a card.

“Do I take a card?”

“No. You’re fixed up.”

“I’d still like to take one. I don’t feel at all fixed up. I don’t know what it would feel like.”

They looked back at her knowing she wanted re-assuring but not knowing how to do it.

Not wanting to do it.

“Will the card settle it?”

“I’ll take the risk,” she smiled.

“Remember someone else comes in.”

“Although the bell ringing means someone at the door; it doesn’t mean someone is at the door.”

“Well that’s handy trickery. Makes it very easy to slip people in & out when you want to. And, I’m sure, when they don’t want to.”

“How often do you find someone at the door you want to see?”

“I’ve had enough of that start somewhere else. You can easily do it.”

She slid over his knees at this point because she knew from previous conversations that he would fuck her friend without the least encouragement, & this slide over him denoted

her possession. Its intimacy pushed her friend's challenge away (in her mind). It also gave her a chance to show him that she was naked under her skirt, she expected that would arouse him, blunt his drive to engage K. in prolonged conversation.

"Whose fixed up," he asked as she finished up sitting on a cushion beside the wooden chair he was slotted in, its arms protecting his sides. He saw she was cross-legged, entirely covered for K's view, but as he glanced down she pulled the skirt from under her body at the back. The folds exposed her buttocks.

"She is." Said K.

"I'm not." She said.

They all stared reflectively around.

"I'm not having much luck there either," K. sat straighter, but was still passive. She raised her glass & sipped staring at her knees.

"We could try & . . ." He was stopped as she stood up & put her hand over his mouth, jabbing her fingers in, angry & desperate. K. stiffened as she watched & suddenly needed to pee.

"Someone will get hurt," she said as K. went through the doorway, "And I don't intend being the victim."

She hooked her arm through his yanking him up from the seat flattening against him & dropping away again almost as fast while shouting through to K. "Hurry up." She deliberately met her in the corridor with the urgent whisper, "Please go soon." It was the first hint K. recognised that she had a chance, it had hardly occurred to her. She sat & filled her glass. Spread her legs.

“Take no notice, she’s on speed you know.”

Slipped her feet out of her shoes, balancing them both on her toes with her legs thrust straight out. As they spread she noticed his attention & flicked both shoes off.

“That’s a start.”

Leaves began to fall off the creeper entwined on the wall. There was no wind. They twirled down quickly as if aimed.

“We could play it to a conclusion.”

“With all the intricacies wired in, wrapped in. . .shush she’s coming back . . .“

“I heard you whispering! What did you say,” she accused the wall not being able to meet their eyes.

She rubbed her bare hips & proudly stretched, as she lay, then rolled over on her back opening her legs wide holding each foot in a hand pulling her legs in bent to show him what she’d got. Felt her lips part & so put her tongue out through a smile. She half stood half crouched by his side expecting him to explore her. She had to pull his hand in by the wrist. He pushed her back down. She tossed her black mane of hair everywhere as she lay in front of the sofa. More black hair curled down her thighs & whorled up her belly from the dense heart of it concealing her cunt. He pulled her up again with the delicate presence of his fingers guiding her movements. She poised her hands daintily on his shoulders, her eyes glistened, his right hand was between her legs where she wanted it;

with the forefinger stroking her clit & the thumb pushed up her bum anchoring the action.

She opened her lips as she eased her head down over his shoulder.

“Do it quickly. I want you up me.”

She swivelled round lifting her shoulders & buttocks while pushing her belly down giving a deep curve to her back. Although they had rubbed lots of oil in it there was still a struggle to penetrate her anus, when she jerked away & clawed the cover & had to be handled back on by levering her arms from the wrists so she couldn't scramble away.

“Quick! She screamed. “It hurts. That's what you like. I know.”

She buried her face & bit the pillow & screwed its fabric up in her hands. Trying to scabble away but pinioned in a rough unwelcoming void.

“You bastard. It's rough in there isn't it!

Is that what you like?” And she groaned as he slowed his thrusts.

“It makes me want to shit! I'm . . .”

Her cheeks were flushed, her neck usually so pale was red & the patch on her shoulder blade inflamed. He held her waist, then pushed down on her spine dribbling oil at its base so that it splashed between her buttocks with the action. She was kneading her pussy now, mixing the oil into the honey with her fingers.

“I'm going to come.” And she bucked back shaking her hair so fiercely that he was rolled onto his back. She sat on him still arching her back rubbing her guts whispering. “ I can feel it right up here. Right up here.” And rubbing more slowly spun, her legs rigid, until she faced him & then splayed them, leaning over to bite his face. Her hands covered his lips; smelled of shrimp. Her breasts, so small, their ends the colour of fresh meat that

when held tight held her thoughts like a wire fuse to her cunt. A thought holding her spine rigid. Her body began to slide, thoughtlessly but mindfully into. . .

“Now where are you going to put her? You asshole! I’m going to put a stop to this. Get them out to that picnic. Get their clothes back on.”

“There are a few difficulties about that.”

“What? It’s in the plan & you’re going to keep to it. Keep it in. Get on with it.”

“There were several fucks specified & I’ve got to fit them in.”

“You could mention them in passing we don’t have to have every limb movement described. Every grunt every groan. Did they ever look each other in the eye?”

“You know they did.”

“They were all at the picnic. Look at the photograph. They are all there.”

“I don’t believe they were all there together. The shot was faked. It’s a device to attract attention. Some were inside all the time, never found their way to the garden.”

“I don’t believe you . . . “

“It’s easy to prove. You’ll have to believe me.”

She pulled a face.

“One of the men wasn’t there. Wasn’t in the city.”

She fished out the photo from a pile of papers in front of them & examined it.

“Take a magnifying glass to it,” he said. “Look at the half-tone dots. They are the give-away.”

She pursed her lips & drew several lines on the picture.

“Right?”

His query was unanswered as she snipped, the scissors clattered to the floor as she tossed them down in anger.

“It’s possible,” she conceded between her teeth. “So why are you putting them all together?”

“Fun.”

“None of them were funny,” she retorted. “How can you overlook that?”

“Malice then. I wanted to see how it goes.”

“You’ll make it go badly?”

“I might – not.”

“I think their relationship was pasted together as crudely as that photo. The parts must have been taken several years apart.”

“At least two.”

“You can tell that?”

“Look at her hair.”

“How did they strike you?”

“Like a two-headed monster. What a couple.”

“What! You cunning fox, you’ve pulled us right into the story.”

Funambulant : a rope walker.

“And I hope I’m going to get some new insights on my feeling about it.”

“Are you?”

“Yes. Naturally. There’s a hoax in it & a score to settle with you.”

“Me! You never said that before. It’s made my heart . . . “

“Not turn cold to stone. It couldn’t. It has always been stone.”

“ . . .race . . .”

“You haven’t the heart of a horseshoe. That’s why you have to stay in your head.”

“I know where I am there.”

“You think you know where you are. But you’re still in the same mess as the rest of us.”

“We need that soul stuff to see. To see anything at all.”

In the wink of an eye.

She was naked splashing in the blood sucked out under the tree light.

“Here come the shadows again,” she sighed.

“No, I’ll have the sun beating down on the corrugated iron sheeting roof of a little garden shelter concealing them, “ he explained, “to stifle the anguish of waiting for a reason.”

It was hot, sweat ran down his sides, she could smell the delight coming. Tepid crab.

“More ardent than that, I can tell you, wait a bit,” he answered her unspoken thought.

He leaned towards her.

“Wet enough to be thawing? Mr. Snowman. I know your history.” She said

“If I was that fragile I wouldn’t have lasted this long with you, would I?”

“Lusted! I thought I saw you put it in. Why correct it?”

“Gesture towards imitation, like the look of surprise you were taught to wear even when consenting to . . . “

“Mad. Bad. Things. I know.”

“ . . .to be what you wanted to be.”

“And while getting what I knew was coming for sure!”

They tried the words out. “Nothing doing?”

“You think. Or is it nostalgia . . .”

“Make him resist the way the conversation is going. You should. I think.” She suggested softly.

“I’m trying to, but their tongues seem to run away with it,” he whispered.

“No, it’s foxy imagination, scattering a rubbish of doubts out of the dustbin.”

She guffawed, elegantly executing that direction of thought. A curt cut.

“Too fragile to be pursued perhaps?” She laid a finger on his shoulder, “you feel I’m stealing your thought. Don’t you?” She rubbed his neck.

“It feels like more than that.”

“Where is my parcel? Is it under the table?” She glanced around expecting him to know about it.

“Parcel?” He was puzzled. “There was a massive crate delivered.”

The snow drifted down he said step by step he said dusting down he said until it had passed each bricked-up arrow slot he said piled high in the moat he said & filled his eyes so again he said he had to listen to the gasps & sighs & screeches of his soul he said owl he said spinning amongst the few words it can use he said hoot he said unable to pick one that fitted he said.

“Get on with it!”

“Ahhh . . . I think.”

Snowy sighs.

1973.

She had knelt in front of the dead fire knees apart not thinking she said he had taken her right hand she said flattened it with his she said & gently placed the palm on her hump of Venus she said. His fingers pushed her fingers she said into place to feel her own lips she said & tongue she said & clitoris. Lightly they stroked down. Snowdrifts undulated over every sharp thing in their world, pushed by a rushing wind. She had leaned back into his arms & played with herself.

We stepped into a snow filled whirl but we could see well enough through the fine horizontal slits in the tin eye-pieces of our home-made goggles. I pissed up a frosty Xmas card hedge. Spelled out a name with the yellow jet. She read it & grinned. Squatted down, hands on knees, black slip hanging from her teeth as she hopped frantically trying to keep the piss off her feet & spell at the same time.

“A puddle doesn’t spell anything!” I objected.

“Next time I’ll get you down & piss in your eye,” she jibed, “that’ll give you a name!”

“No. Try again.”

Fix a face on that puddle. Touch the edge. Watch the ripples change your face. In the stillness once again watch the changes in the face, the twitches, the grimaces. The smiles are hidden below the surface.

An effigy behind which the emptiness swallowed up the sing-song of doubt & chewed it over & spat out a sure (but artificial) plan.

He stared into the steaming patch quite seriously, she said.

They did eventually agree on a name.

1995.

There was the name Anne, twig drawn in the concrete a lamppost had been embedded in, along with lattice scratches & handprints straight off the cave wall. A name breathed down the milleniums until fixed by its most recent owner. She stood by me . . .as if in the singing darkness of the cave . . .

“It was the difficulties that made the bond between us so strong. Perhaps they were the tie.”

“Am I hearing that right?”

A shake-down.

“Listen. Less obstacles or better still, none at all, would have made it Oh so easy. Can’t you see that?”

I saw him first down the far end of the street, with a friend who seemed, by the turn of her head, to want to monopolise his attention but didn’t know how. She was frowning & had a hand on his arm. Her long coat flowed open as they strolled.

“Who’s that?” He asked, nodding with his head.

“I don’t know.” She couldn’t be bothered to turn & look. Just kept staring through the trees down to the square where the stalls were being set up & a crowd forming.

“Perhaps I’m wrong about this. I think I am, but you can never be sure. Is that woman,” & she pointed, “kissing behind that tree?”

Her head hung pensively to one side, while her free hand slowly ran over the rough stone of the wall & her lips opened.

He looked but said nothing. ‘I wonder is the simple way to decide how they feel about me to see how they kiss me when we next meet?’ He still kept quiet.

“There will have to be a discussion some time,” she put in, “we have to confront the way we are feeling about each other.”

“You must know there are other ways of doing this & you mean . . .” There was a bitter note in his voice, “somewhere it touches you & you want to see if you can be free of your dependence, don’t you, away from this uncertainty & love. And cause harm. I think that’s the fact you’re unable to get . . .you need to hurt me.”

She was tugging at his sleeve & the turning wind blew her hair across her eyes.

“Does it look that way.”

She seemed to have nothing more to think about, dropped her hand from his arm & stumbled at the same time. He stayed without a word.

‘Yes, it’s a good idea to judge them by their kisses. It’s a test where you can’t be fooled with a serious mouth.’

(A cuckoo flew into a rowan growing out of a ruin).

The wind whispered in the tree – vee-oo-ver-rah.

She threw her arms around my neck, her gold bracelets on each wrist caught the sunlight.

Clouds swam in her eyes.

Under the bed there were two 56 lbs weights with handles that had been used as ballast in the boat. The wool rug had rucked up against them, she straightened it as she bent down to plug the Roland in. The keyboard's amp hummed, a red light winked, she put on the headphones & grimaced. She felt in the righthand pocket of her red coat & took out a lipstick, pouted at the mirror, slid the red stub over her lips which she then pursed & flicked with an index finger in one quick action; ran her tongue over each lip & smiled. The ends of her mouth curled up. The amp ceased humming as she clicked several switches & her fingers picked out the silent melody. She rocked oblivious of the slowly filling room, people shuffling & blowing their fingers.

They will take care. This is what I think. Can you understand me. They heard nothing.

Nothing. But they will take care.

Well, that's silence if there ever is silence. For a few seconds there wasn't even the mental turnover of a thought. Nothing light-hearted.

You'd start with your hand on my knee if you were here now. I would be standing or more likely kneeling next to you & touching your cock to make it hard to fill the gap that is itching in me at this very moment. And we'd slip into bed where I wouldn't feel the empty ceiling crowding down on me, & none of the blankness that these last few nights have been full of. You'd be there, warm & solid to my hands & maybe love me fiercely as though you'd been away for days somewhere unreachable, away in the cold.

I wonder if you are as serene as you looked when I last saw you waiting for the train to pull out. Sometimes when you are relaxed & thinking & especially when you're on your own in a strange place, your face seems to lose all its lines & creases. Perhaps it's the smoothness of self-absorption. I'd pick you out from a crowd because of that look. Just to see it releases my adrenalin starts my blood racing & my belly glows.

It had been snowing like in Hell for six weeks.

'And what did she mean by that,' he wondered as she told him.

Drifts were piled high by the roadside. A young woman wearing a floral dress under her large grey coat lurched & skidded through the blizzard by the side of a man who always wanted yesterday tomorrow.

It was ten in the morning.

"That's not a very good number! Use your imagination," she advised, "it'll seem truer.

Play around with the numbers a bit."

"Wasn't it Richard III?"

"It comes round every day."

It was 9:57 in the morning & I'll freeze it there. She was as big as a barrel again & Nightingale house loomed in front of her through the bright yellow glow surrounding each snowflake. He was trailing along clutching a paper bag tightly in his gloved hand. A few woollen fingers stuck out through the sheepskin mitts because the dog had had them, worried them, slyly chewed them.

There were two cobs in the bag. Each one had three rectangular slices of stoned dates in it, the dense dark brown difficult to cut stuff, sold in thin cellophane wrapping which very often was already sticky on the outside before it was opened.

I never remember a word expressing joy at the event!

Why?

There never was one.

I've got this letter to a lover. I know I can't send it to you because you may have already left the big city. It isn't like having you close to talk to, not a lascivious word leaks out of the biro but they're the only thoughts bouncing around in my head. How tired I am.

Strange nights of not wanting to sleep because I might miss out on knowing something about you. What? I don't know what. How am I going to find out lying awake without you. Putting a few events through finer & finer sieves.

I'm lying half across your side of the bed with my eyes wide open in the darkness.

How uneasy my mind is. (My left cheek bone. I hesitate. It didn't ache, did it?)

1980.

There was blood everywhere. Thin stuff mixed with water, jelly, soap, piss, saliva, snot, tears. The two nurses mopped it up. Glanced briefly over at the couple with their newborn child. Then left.

She sat in the snow, in a spasm hunched up, set, grim. Now, as all her bones ached stiff, she spun over & over hearing a voice far away calling, "Do you remember?"

Or was she spinning round & round, tugged & tightened, her wrists & ankles raw & bleeding & someone saying, “she won’t tell she never does – she knows what she’ll get.”

The bitterness of her need rubbed in but unfulfilled. The gap spreading wider than her knees as they stung & grazed, bashing & bumping on the iron rails. Every needed touch hurt. Every thrust needed hurt. So near not with her. Just what she needed she was told. She needed something near, something she could hug & crush. Something to fill up that wild space.

Her mother scrambled to her & smacked her face before pulling her free, wrestling her up off the slush.

“Don’t waste my time. Why do you come here?”

“You know why.”

Or was she twirling round & round spreading a new frock, her hands scrubbed clean, her face a white plate of innocence within its dark curls. Not a hair nor paint on her body.

No, she was staring at the round bottom of a spinning metal bucket vomiting out something she really wanted to keep.

“Really, really. I want to keep it.” Bubbled out of her mouth while her nose dribbled hot stinging clear liquid. Her lips were cracked & bitten.

“Keep what?” Came the puzzled query, “You’re being sick again.”

“Yes, but in one of the cosmic buckets.” She was drunk. Her face lit up.

“More buckets!” She cried.

“Was she tormented by . . .” she stopped to consider . . .”herself?” Her face fell. She swallowed.

“I can’t find any. The moon’s full, could that be it?” He was truly puzzled.

“They are under the stairs. Lots of them. Twelve buckets.”

She was drunkenly precise.

There weren’t any.

A. wrote 28 days before she died:

‘My room in the hospital is spinning round & round. Dark storm clouds are whirling around outside, tugging me round & round. I feel an undertow from it all, being dragged down.’

“That doesn’t read like a start,” she looked up, “try again,”

“Why should I? That was it.” He brushed an insect off his arm.

We had entered the half barrel bridge vault, wandering to miss the streams of water. Two men lurked by the brick sides in the half light, sitting close together on open-slatted crates, each clutching a bottle. Empty beer cans blew noisily from them. I patted my grey worm-eaten hat on firmer against the tug of the wind for the end of the tunnel was curtained by a slanting veil of fine snow.

We stepped out into the whitish mess of flakes & emptiness(the cold dessicated coconut that stung our eyes) took each others hand & set out by the skin of our teeth for a different page.

The men threw their empty cans after them & shouted abuse.

“I never smoke,” said one, “but he smokes too much.” He poked at his companion.

“We only smoke cigarettes,” they shouted together.

“I will not begin without you. You must wait here.”

“He can come with you this time.”

“My friend can’t come.”

“Can you come later?” I called over her shoulder.

“Yes.”

I was pleased to hear that but didn’t expect her to come.

“You were. You were. Stop trying to hide it. You wanted her to come more than anyone.

You were actually waiting on the doorstep.”

She came. I couldn’t refuse to be lead on but he had to change. I had to go through with it to find out. I had to. He had changed a little. I hope this time he will come out with it in plain words & tell me he loves me. Should I tell him?

There was a sharp rap on the door. “Open it! How many times do you need telling. I can’t stand the hesitation.”

“Will you invite him in? Can’t you do it?”

“You know I can but why should I for you . . .for you . . .nothing for me . . .nothing.”

Red & black flashes. Lovely was the right word. I believed it because I wanted to; nothing else. There was just this between us & nothing else. Long ago now. We might never have spoken a word. How could it last so long . . .mute. The afterimage was pale green against the white bed sheet.

She lay back feeling warmth again at the base of her spine where the numbness had been.

“Where had you gone off to? I felt your body go light.” He asked.

“For an instant I was back in that desolate womb. It was snowing as it usually is when I go there. Earth made ice, air made ice . . .trying to start again but without the fire of feeling this time.”

“Always trying. Do you think you’ll ever make it?”

“If I’m lucky. But can I be? Look at the numbers . . .I’ll avoid . . .” She stopped to think about it.

And he said. “It doesn’t have a shape, that early fear – does it”

“You got so tangled up writing ‘doesn’t’ I’m sure you think it has a shape.”

“But it haunts you until you give it one. You are forced to name it.”

“A fountain.”

“Or?”

“A merry- go-round.”

“They are hardly frightening. You’ve obviously put them in so that you can later bring in a weird association or twist. Dig up a real devil. What about that monster who’s always in the doorway?”

“Can’t use it. Like you say.”

“Still trying for coherence. It’s a pity, it spoils the story.”

“It’s there. We feel uneasy. How do we know that?”

“How do we know what looks red is red? Knowing that must be easier to unravel than that feeling of anguish, but we haven’t managed that task yet.”

The angels wink at us with precision & generosity but we ignore them. Some one decides to cut half your face away & sends a letter to that effect asking for a photograph to give them a few clues when they have to rebuild it after the operation. Touching care. Luckily you vacillate or don't know about it, so you do nothing. Then someone decides they are not going to cut half your face away & sends a letter saying that. And all the time I'm worrying about your beauty as if it belonged to me & resided in your looks.

She sat in the sharp angle of pain on ice while they tried to come to a decision. She rubbed her hips, rubbed her thighs, rubbed her shoulders, and rubbed her belly creating more space around her body while it craved the squeezing tightness of an unconsidered embrace. They left her forlorn, with nothing. The pain gave her nothing.

'Wednesday 5th.

Painkillers: 7pm.

11.30pm.

7.30am.

12am.

4pm.

Everything's dark side. (Full moon last night?) So much is out of my control.'

It was all over her. The spine lit up the scan sheet with unalterable flecks of yellow frost-like specks showing cancer in the bones. That instant opened up a new position.

Hopelessness. I didn't know. All the way through I could identify the denials as they were formed & felt them dissolve.

“We’re more used to choices between things we don’t want to do anyway. Two ways neither of which we want to go. And that negative is as bad as the lack of choice,” she grumbled as if it wasn’t all over for her.

A vertical column of possible actions, vertebrae, each one with a label fluttering under the breath of burnt chocolate.

“We didn’t want to know. He couldn’t bear to say it.”

“That’s the animal bear,” she advised, “not the naked one.”

“We don’t want to be where we are.”

The doctor made a useless hesitant kindly meant wave of the hand towards the centre of the bare room where she sat isolated.

“Yes, draw your chair up,” he stuttered as my chair scraped under my stooping slide to join her. All the girls glanced over at us. He welcomed the sound, swallowing hard. One girl squeezed her features to denote mock anguish at the squealing legs. She looked at the chart. She’d seen them before. She looked back at me, a penetrating stare, warily trying to size up what I knew, puzzled by my lack of response. She made what was perhaps the beginning of an impatient sigh. Her evasive answers, questions to my questions, had told me enough although I still thought I knew nothing. There was something to conceal. And in A.’s silence I blundered on up & down the scale of disbelief in my head for none of the thoughts were choices I wanted to accept. She huddled in a chair, ignored. Shrinking by the hour. She was rigid with pain.

“You know where the door is!” She gestured with brittle precision.

“I can’t leave you.”

“Don’t say that. Use it. Unlike it. Tease it out. Defy it. Enter the word of it.”

“Rot it from the inside.”

She touched his knee lightly, “Forget it.” Her voice was hoarse, constrained, “There’s another agenda.”

She had waylaid him. Her body slumped as if her legs had been cut from under her as they closed together. He felt the bigness of her bones.

“We can’t wait here. They are not going to mend this.”

“It could only be mended in a fairy-tale & you’re not writing one of those. It’s dragging on too long.”

“That can’t be right. Look again.”

They did. The screen was covered with more dots than an unfilled embroidery template.

“Pull the sheet up higher.”

The same spots.

I stare at it long enough for you to turn & speak.

“It’s too painful to bear a gentle caress.”

“What can you do?”

“Start again.”

With the 2nd. shape a BOAT.

“We’re adrift.”

“Pull the sheet up . . .higher . . .”

UNDER

the cover of darkness the boat slipped into its haven on the back of a lorry as the embers still smoked where the buildings had stood.

“That can’t be right. Start again. Get them in the house before all that. You could miss that out altogether.”

The white sheet is up & we’re adrift on snowy thighs staring at the whitish pillow & contemplating the same ceiling for as long as it takes to turn & speak our parts. It’s so hot we have no need of our ordinary clothes, only adornment. Embroidered Greenlander thigh boots & the shell-like cache-sex they also wore. Nothing else. Yes. A strong leather collar with steel jewels.

And he thought, at first glance, it must be dried sweat, or where the dog had snuffled snot onto his wrist, or a frozen flake of snow, or sugar grains, or a slug trail, or mica . . .that sparkles nicely, or mmmm she thought & yawned as she joined him in the pointless search. She held his fingers & rubbed the flakes of skin off. Snow. The box bobbed as the river swept it away.

She slept. It was a cold night & he couldn’t make a mistake asleep.

Certainly she was stopped. And that was a grave mistake. Some body came. Having returned left again. That was a mistake & it was missing in her dreams.

“You could turn the plot. You could deceive us.”

“When I thought I hadn’t made a mistake, but had & knew it, plainly knowing it was also a thought & had nothing to do with it. And although I had made a mistake & knew it, at

the same time I couldn't bring myself to really think of it as a mistake although it was in the same thought." He looked down the list.

"You did deceive us."

"It was the first thing I thought of after being told I was sure to go away. I had just been going to explain when the wind dropped in an extraordinary way. I hadn't until that moment even dreamed of going away. I know what you're going to ask, but don't think about the wind. Where was it years & years ago? It was by that thought. Where did the first gentle puff start from? That wall."

The keel of the boat is like a massive icicle. The cold of it strikes up at us. The daylight passes through every raindrop.

"I don't see my place anywhere." I shouted with a heavy heart. She opened the curtains fully & flooded me out of bed into my clothes & out. But I was still in the pattern set by habit & was sticking to it like a dog to its vomit. I swung the axe, watched a winter lake dwindle to a marsh as I sped up & down the wrong road. We were lovers on a pink & grey sheet. We were lovers when the round moon & the stubble covered field were the same colour at evening. We were lovers as I drew the shadow of the skull on the pillows. And felt.

"Does it matter?" The trailing man asked her. "Couldn't we live anywhere?"

She stooped rounder in the sheet. Her body opening up.

“I had often said that to myself. Why did you take such & such action, thinking I had been, as always, too careful . . .but now.”

She rolled over.

“Are you asking me or talking to yourself.” It wasn’t a question. “Yourself. I know.

Didn’t you see you had grabbed my hair? Had tugged it so hard strands came out!”

“It was a nightmare, the hillside was covered with cherry-like globules of blood.”

A few wisps of reddish-gold threads trailed out of his trembling fist.

He threw the brush on the fire.

“You looked wide awake.”

“Were my eyes open?” He asked incredulously. Not believing. She nodded slowly.

“You think I was seeing with those open eyes. Pulled your hair knowingly. What a drop it is into the night! What a wilderness!”

“You think that’s a nightmare. You’re out of it now.” She left complaint of her waking horror unuttered although it held her like a vise.

“I bring out of it the same companions over whom I have no control. I negotiate with them very night . . .& tire myself out.”

“But they aren’t an implacable obstacle to life,” she had to say it, immobilising him with a look. “One that is going to separate us finally.”

She is angry.

Why doesn’t he agree?

“ . . .they immobilise any fucking actions.”

“But when you’re in one deep deep deep it’s not like a dream that you somehow know is a puppet show with ready made speeches & your own part like quicksilver.”

“I’ve been surprised in my dreams. I don’t think they are so organised.”

“There’s a difference when you are completely swamped by fear in a nightmare.”

“I only have the sort where you don’t know you’re in a dream. I’m always totally in them every night.”

“Not frightened of them though. . .”

“Some times abandoned. Full of regret.”

“That’s nowhere near the deadly fear of my nights.”

“He constantly lost what he found. That was the feeling. He must not wait. But can’t start.”

“So this is the knife.” She looked at attentively. “What are you going to cut with it?”

“The head off. And leave the heart to make the moves alone.”

1973.

A bumble bee hurries over the sea an inch above the waves as I tow the cow's carcass behind my boat. We plough slowly through the calm water to the head of loch Ainort where dream valley begins.

"She wants to be sure?"

So so sure it's granite.

"Wrong."

"She wants to be unsure?"

Never ever ever know if.

"Wrong."

"It's more than being certain?"

Dead, you know where you are there.

"Wrong."

"Her world has no edges? Wrong?"

(It's a gas)

"Wrong."

"Her world is bounded so tightly not even the smallest anxiety can get in?"

Tight-arsed.

"Wrong."

"There was no room to put a step right?"

Always tripping me up.

“Right, but badly put.”

He smiled to himself & took out a yellow sheet of paper, calculating aloud.

“Is it really so difficult to work out when to telephone her?”

A string of black beads threading through the years.

“It has become extremely difficult,” he answered himself aloud. The waves slapped against the prow. He shifted his weight & the boat came back on line with the mountain peaks.

“She’s a parrot?”

“Right.”

“I’m getting the hang of this. She isn’t ever going to be sure because that’s not what she wants, despite her . . . have I said that already?”

He nodded.

“Boring. So wrong anyway.”

“Who acts as though if people say nothing they feel nothing?”

“Right . . . Oh yes . . . she does.”

“Caught you!”

“She’ll turn the suggestion down. ‘ Can’t just do it like that.’ She’ll say it’s manipulative, just satisfying myself not hearing what she needs . . . doesn’t she need one . . . I know I haven’t said what the whole plan was. Well naturally. I know it”

“You haven’t said what any of the plan was!”

“First. Getting the sex right . . . again. How can you pull anything out of chaos if the only thing in your mind is a hump, that you know she’s determined not to give you. You’re kidding yourself. Get that fixed first I said.”

“She told you to fuck off.”

1973.

It took ages to get the cow to sink. The farmers had to slit its belly & fill it full of boulders. It took lots of them & then they had to rope it up to keep them in.

“Now that sounds like filling it full of money.”

“I don’t know why?”

All she talked about was how much easier it could have been for her if I’d given her more money. But not how in order for that to have been possible she would have had to have changed some of her ways. All I thought about was fucking her. She said it showed.

It’s as if I support being with her by amalgamating, when I think of her, the hallucinations from sexual acts with some other woman to the emptiness of the reality with her. It gives a picture of her body which it never had & doesn’t have; it gives a presence now to actions that have long ceased to happen & creates acts that have never happened & never will; it gives a skeleton to shadows so they can walk out of the shade into view & dance.

But all only because I enjoy another woman.

“Well what was the answer?”

“No. I’m bleeding. And if I wasn’t bleeding it would still be no.”

“Is the frustration tantalizing?”

“It’s not sexual frustration. I’m fucking someone else. It’s to do with not being able to get something done in the past & so sticking there.”

“But what?”

“Get past. That’s it.”

“Why didn’t they tie the boulders to the cow?”

“Ever tried that?”

The sea foam spattered & swirled in the blue plastic bowl as she peed into the slops.

“I’m going to open her legs wide,” he said. “You can’t stay here.”

Her belly tightened she wanted to watch. There was a smile of anticipation on her lips, her cheeks burned, she lifted a hand to feel her ear, it was icy, She nodded, but stood her ground. Would they trick her? Oh! Make her. Or would they turn on me if I stay.

Looking into the mirror behind the door she could see the three of them sitting cross-legged neatly positioned in a triangle with the other girl flat on her belly on the carpet.

Her arms stretched out right to the fingertips, her eyes tightly shut, she had her legs crossed at the ankles. It seemed a fragile lock.

“That’s not a plan. It’s gratification. Trying to reward yourself for doing sweet nothing.

I’m worth more than that. But we could try. You . . . I . . . We.”

“It was sweet fuck all before anyway. She knew that.”

“What did you expect when you asked. This.” And she lifted up her skirt.

1978.

The room was stiflingly hot. Clouds of flies were turning madly over the traces of fish scales mixed with breadcrumbs on the table. They buzzed under the dirty knife trapping themselves with greed. Our mouths were dry, there had been nothing to drink with the meal.

“I’d say the devil woman is powerful because she calls up irresistible sexual forces in the man. She carries a small bell loose in her pocket so that she is followed by a thin tinkling sound which sinks into his mind without him being aware of it.”

We hung our heads concentrating, on not grinning.

“I’d say she could make him do anything . . .”

“It was the other way round, I think,” interrupted K., “those feelings turned her inside out. Turned her desire to envy.”

The keys jingled in his pocket as he ran upstairs. The smell of the crushed leaves of the creeper covering the outside wall permeated the stairwell. She stood on the landing propped against the wall like a filmstar. He threw the card at her & she caught it in front of her breast & pretended to crumple over it as if hit by a bullet.

“I used to sleep with that dog after I’d just been kicked out again & needed the comfort of another head on the pillow. Every night it got between me & the wall & slowly straightened its legs through the night until they were long & rigid. Then when the mutt arched its back at dawn it shoved me out of bed.”

She finished her fall delivering herself half into his arms.

“You have to hand it to them, mad people have a lot to put up with; dogs; the nonsense of reason. Who are these people?” She gestured at the card abandoned on the carpet. He held her wrist so she could bend & pick it up. He pointed.

“That’s the one we called the ‘crystal virgin’ & I never knew why.”

The sun touched what had been the topmost twigs of the tree. Lit up branches & two hands clutching a bough. The tree had fallen west to east across the ravine, its roots heaving up enough earth to keep it alive. The crash of its fall chasing down the river bed to the sea & upstream up to the mountain. Breaking the arrow of river sound for a split second. And in that moment came the dream.

The tree had been there all my childhood, had become a bridge, saving the longer trip to the iron-sided road bridge by the sea-shore. It was a horizontal threshold traversed either way, poking into a different well of space & experience.

One side, the root side, masculine; the canopy feminine.

She cannot begin now & I cannot understand.

He cannot start yet. He cannot do it.

“When will you do it?” She asked many times.

“You let go! Dropped from the tree & landed in the boulder strewn bed of a river.”

“Actually it looked more like a desolate moorland waste than a river bed. The space changed in the fall. The sheer ravine walls disappeared, became a silvery mist.”

“But you had to say goodbye to her. Didn’t you. Why?”

“Yes. It took me a long time to find her to say it. But if I hadn’t? Well, I think I would have always been expecting to take my leave of someone before I could say . . .for . . .”

“I love you? Is that what you can’t say? Your farewell didn’t change that.”

“I said I did it.”

“Did you though.”

“Yes.”

“You’ve found the other woman now. If you can leave that place you must have said goodbye. We’ll see.”

“I found her . . .who else. And said goodbye.”

Is he telling the truth? Will she believe him anyway?

He will certainly believe what he sees, because he only has to get hold of her & run his hands over her to know whether her looks are a lie. If she stiffens, & not with excitement (he can tell from a pinched look on her face if she’s angry) then he has lost her, & should leave her for someone else.

Her head shot out of the winged collars of her black lambswool coat. How dare he suggest she only wanted money. He must be able to see. . .

A face contorted, shrunk to a turtle head, snapping . . .

If she responds against his hands & this corresponds to his image of her in love . . .will he believe himself . . .he surely must. Is she telling the truth if she responds exactly the way she is feeling, without stopping to consider how he will understand her behaviour . . .then they may find . . .

“Find what. You were wrong. Hopelessly out in your calculation. She didn’t know what she wanted herself. How could she. Being that close to you.”

In the hollow left where the roots had ripped out of the earth they sang & slashed & felt their bodies grow.

“The closer I was the better it was. She thought you could find that round any corner.”

Until the shadow falls the ground doesn’t exist.

“And you think you can live with it, get rid of it” Try again!”

Get ready for a shock.

“And?”

“Will you look for it? Bring it?”

“Hush.” She said, “They’re here.” She had seen their shadows pass yet still heard nothing.

She was like a star, waiting for the night to show her light.

Her lips had disappeared into the gash of her mouth.

And that’s not all.

“It is,” sobbed the girl, “It is all I have.” She spread her hands, but quickly brought them back protectively across her belly. There was a damp patch beneath each breast on the floral dress as she sweated.

“We took no notice. We were unaware . . .that’s right . . .I think.”

She was puzzled, she felt as though something was to come & yet had gone. She couldn't explain . . .but would. She felt like a sieve. But what was the secret? Was she speaking from the future beyond an event she had been through? She could see the step-like formation of the hillside with a man climbing up on them. He passed into a wood. "And that was it," she murmured, her head down now. As if disbelief was a powerful enough solvent to dissolve the emotion she felt.

Her arms were criss-crossed with fine white lines.

He picked up the grey hat. A fat white maggot dropped out of it. A bright yellow door closed behind him.

Much earlier.

The round-a-bout at the bottom of the playing field was spinning with a white shape spread over it. A horizontal crucifix.

"Bent at the knees."

"Awkwardly?"

"Difficult to describe."

"Available?"

"Sillily."

"Spread?"

"Ditto."

The figure lay still, a few rags fluttering. Her body smelling of piss, rancid fat, sherbert, cum. Yellowish. The round-a-bout was still turning wildly trying to regain the circle- the roundness. As it slowly stopped his eyes focused. The young woman was naked. What

had appeared to be rags were the loose ends of rope which held her spread-eagled over the ride.

Trussed.

Stuffed once.

Stuffed twice.

Stuffed thrice.

Taken like medicine.

A big woman was charging down the gravel track leading to the swings waving a dish-cloth that she had forgotten to put down. Her hands were wet, suds still clinging to her fingers. 'Why is this girl so easy to lead on.' She pulled at her apron strings as she ran. It was loose when she reached her daughter & she threw it over her. The girl was still giggling. Her face dirty, with cleaner lines where the tears had run.(The noise disconcerted her mother who had kept watch but always missed the times her daughter was raped).

The wooden barrel of the merry-go-round was painted green, where this had chipped the slatted pine was blackened by damp. The square of tarmac it was set in had been worn away by the scuffling of players' feet leaving an uneven gravelly surface with two or three deeper holes usually puddles. Tufts of grass growing where it couldn't be worn away completed the untidy complex.

The ride was divided into eight segments by iron tubes, which curved over its cake shape & were bolted into the narrow foot platform that closely skimmed the ground as it spun.

She was roped on her back in a segment so that her toes just touched this step, each ankle tied, her knees were loose, her wrists tied together so with her arms pulled straight & fastened to the central pivot she was bent like a bow with her buttocks flat on the rim & her quim perfectly positioned for the rider standing on the step holding the tubes either side of her & leaning in, to penetrate.

Her yellow dress came off easily, slipped off, the button holes too big for the buttons; the cotton shrunk too small for the burgeoning body. the body eager simply wanting to be possessed.

“Why are you so stupid & easy?”

“I like it.”

“You like it. And give it away.”

“Yes.”

“Why don’t you save it?”

“Save it? It isn’t anything until I do it.”

“ . . .for later.”

“When?”

“When you’re fixed up . . .you know . . .”

“Like you!”

“No. Not like me. You know full well I got knocked up before I knew it & you’re going to do the same. So easy. You hang around waiting for it.”

“Never had a ‘morning after’ pill in your day. Didn’t you ;like it then?”

“Like it! That’s not the point . . .giving it away . . .that’s what I’m on about. You’d need a bucket of those pills.”

“Alright if I sell it? Is that what you’re getting at?”

“No I’m not. And I didn’t like it. Still don’t.”

“Hard luck.” The girl bent trying to avoid the clap that caught the side of her face. One of her cheap gilt earrings flew off.

“Ouch. Fuck it. You’ve lost it.”

And she ducked lower to comb through the grass tufts.

“Haven’t you forgotten she’s all but naked,” she asked him. Looking at him hard, he thought.

“She was used to it, believe me,” he offered.

“You were there? Wait a minute. I think I’m owed an explanation.”

“You are here now. It doesn’t exist until now, this minute.”

“It’s a trick?”

“What the fuck did you think it was?”

“I thought it took place.”

“It did.”

“And I’m sure you were there. When was it?”

“When?”

“Yes. When?”

“Just a minute ago.”

Silence.

“Two minutes now.”

Silence.

“That is cheap, isn’t it.”

She had pulled & shoved the girl halfway & been pulled & shoved the rest back to the house as snow began to fall. By evening the round-a -bout was iced like a cake.(I should have left the figure on there to freeze & whiten into a fairy). And as the snow thickened into a dome on top of the ride it became a half -buried snowball.

A few hours after conception.

“Did they all do it? Who did it?”

“You mean who’s going to do it.”

“What.”

“Why don’t you listen.”

“I am.”

“What happens now? I can’t forget I like it. So I’ll know what I’m missing. And I’ll know what I’ve missed later on when I’m enjoying it again. If I give it up. Then I’ll think what a waste it was as I could have been having it all the time . . .when later becomes now . . .of course.”

“But you’d be fixed up by then, wouldn’t you?”

“Perhaps not . . .how do you know . . .I might be fixed up like you were . . .I don’t think.”

“I didn’t hang around doing anything to get it.”

“I don’t either.”

“Oh.”

“They just come.”

“And take it.”

“Not quite. I struggle a bit.”

“They’ll like that as well. I didn’t hear you squealing or shout out for help.”

“What? Shouting out when I know I’m all right. One call & they’d all run off.”

“Couldn’t have that could we. You’d miss your fun. I don’t believe it . . .you’ll turn out .”

“Like you!”

“Could be worse.”

“As if I’ve got a choice now or had one then with you around from the word go. Or what word was it?”

“It wasn’t easy . . .the word about me wasn’t ‘easy’ or ‘dirty’.”

That exchange got them half way up the field where they stumbled to a halt. From a distance you would have taken them to be in an embrace or wrestling.

“Why have you been crying then if it’s so good?”

“Happy.”

“About what?”

“Being loved of course.”

And now it’s the daughter trying to drag her mother home.

“Come on.”

“Being what! Why is your lip bleeding? Love bite!”

“Mind your own business.”

“One of them knock you about. They’re all the same.”

“It wasn’t his fault . . . couldn’t get it . . . in.”

“Up . . . Eh . . . So the bastard gave you one.”

“It was my fault really . . . it was hurting so I . . .”

“It’s not supposed to hurt. He wasn’t supposed to be doing it.”

“So I groaned. I only groaned. But it put him off he said & he swiped me across the face.

Then the others ran off & left him.”

“What was his name?”

“ . . . I don’t know . . .”

“You never do. And no-one would believe you if you told.”

She was resigned now. They linked arms & trundled the last yards of the field together.

They locked the hands that felt out at nothing, that seized only trouble(walking with Snow White). Hands that could count up to ten. Why more. The snow started to stick.

They were at the gate, propped open, it had fallen off its hinges. The woman propelled the girl in front of her up to the yellow door where she turned with her head lowered.

“Don’t go on anymore.”

“Who could I tell. I’m so ashamed.”

“I’ll clean myself up.”

“They won’t let you. Now they know what they can get they’ll keep coming. I know.

Until you get a man who’ll take you on & keep them off . . . Well not all I don’t suppose . . . They all take the piss.”

“Where have you been?”

“I fetched her in. It’s started to snow.”

“Couldn’t she find her own way? The dog does. What’s up with her face?”

“And that’s not all your dog does. . . mind your own business . . .And keep that dog in.”

“Touchy.”

“Like men.”

“Oh. I see she’s been knocking about again with the wrong sort. Must be from around here.”

“Same as you.”

“Fuck off. And leave my dog out of it.”

“It knows every dustbin in the area . . .like its owner.”

“You punk slut. Look at your hair . . .worse than the colour of the front door.”

“Shut up! And if you want to kick out, kick that dirty dog of yours . . .out.”

He fondled the dog provocatively.

“That mongrel should be shot. It’s mad.”

“Like me you mean. Made in Hong Kong.”

“Pity we haven’t got a gun.”

“Don’t be stupid. Take them both to the vets & have them put down.” She took out some change & threw it on the table. Here’s your bus fare.”

He picked it up. “I’ll drink to that.” They eyed each other.

“And get another woman while your there.”

“I’ve got one. I don’t need one. But they wouldn’t hold it against me if I got rid of you.”

“You’re right. They think more of dogs in this place than women. But that doesn’t change it. Still get lost.”

“What are you going to give him?”

“Sweet F.A.”

“I know how much he paid. Give me that money.”

“It’s mine.”

“I’m going there tomorrow. I’ll find out.”

“I know what you’re going for.”

She turned & hurried into the kitchen agitatedly rattling some pots as if it was a hot summer’s day.

An old woman with short grey hair ruffled by the wind was standing by a narrow stone bridge with her arms held tensely by her sides. She was shouting at a couple as they dawdled over the span.

“You bloody bastards. If you think you can come to me after you’ve thrown me over & can wheedle some more money out of me you can think bloody twice.” Her eye twitched.

“As for you, why are you smiling, you good for nothing but fucking bastard. Take him away with you like you did. You can bloody well live on the street for all I care. You fucking bitch. Think I’m going to bring you up all over again, just because you’ve slipped up. I told you before how it would work out & you didn’t want to know Miss fucking know all. Knew it fucking all, didn’t you you little fucker. Well you can get on with it on your fucking own now. He won’t stay. You pair of bastards.

The youth was the first over to the other side.

“We should have kept our mouths shut. I knew how she would be, the old bitch.”

“She’ll come round. I’d have been worried if she’d kept quiet.”

1966.

When I came back I found a stack of books I was sure had been displaced because I couldn't remember leaving them piled together. I kept denying it could have happened as I picked them up. It was like running into a false memory more tangible than what had happened; something that I experience unexpectedly from time to time. I can't give you a list of each one. I never catalogued this sort of chance. It seemed an unlucky thing to do. "But you never forget them!"

I opened the books one by one. Walt Whitman's 'Leaves of Grass' fell open at the poem 'Of him I love day & night', as I read I felt the book. Its spine was broken as if it had been pushed flat-faced down at that page under a pillow & slept on.

1983.

Their eyes must have followed me as I spread jam on the bread, because when I look back I can see their glances(between each other) in a way that would have been impossible in fact. Now I can feel their concern that I might miss her dying moments; but then, in the bleached pipe of shock, I had no sense of urgency.

Driven to shelter by harsh weather lines of sheep had begun to trot up & down the carpetless stair mechanically leaving their crottels piled in the wooden corners skipping over fallen shelves pattering putting to sleep the last ghosts . . .bleeting . . .

They couldn't wake me yet I didn't sleep at all.

No, in the raw & desolate land of grief where wolves came right to the door but turn tail & run at the sound of a voice, I was unaware of the delicate voice protecting my sleep, perhaps with a song.

There in the nightmare winter under sleep, beyond repose, when bears break in, ravening determined on their fill, with ill will they thump & split the dreams to splinters when they can't find the honey to run off with. And leave you standing sweating & jabbering by the bedside, shouting, "It's not fair."

And as the wind groans through skull pipes its music limps like a maimed bird peeping, 'He doesn't know my name,' repeating repeating trapped by the hollow sound to go shooing & howling at the gutters & corners of the blue house. I should have known then that she had been invited out of the forest night each time we met. For as I stood waiting in twilight, suddenly she appeared; if I mentioned the mouldy smell of raw meat & earth she dismissed it with a sideways look.

Can't you believe what you see?

And if the woman had been left deep in the green of the forest, sinking into a dark bogmass, up to the white silk, what brought her out?

You stretch out a hand to her, but she shakes her head.

Did you invite her?

Once we were left by a line of cart horses turned to misshapen sausages by war's bombardment. Their stinking bodies formed a bridge from that fire to your darkness.

My feet sank into each carcass as I stepped to reach you; while knowing it's a mistake but having to follow. So down & down I go searching the debris reaching out & turning every putrid fragment of the wreckage over & over.

She stripped the bush of all its white flowers.

‘A place to lie’, she thought as she glanced through the narrow gate to a patch of green.

The wind whipped up the snow like dust.

“IN”, somebody shouted over the wall, “IN,IN,IN,IN,” they were hysterical. She looked uneasily around. What kind of a fix was this? A few leaves scattered underfoot on the turf between the humps. A place guarded by fools? There was another clatter of pebbles, or a stick rattling pailings.

“IN,IN,IN,IN.” Wailed pitifully on & on. The long cold calling could not flesh out the sorrow of the word. No arms to lie in. No body to cradle. IN.IN.IN.IN.

I said we ought to get out & move while there was still time. I felt we were already too late.

Earlier on that same winter day I had found the simple grave of a man who died the day I was born. Just a hummock with a carved stone surrounded by piles of slate & rubble & bare stones. And evergreen trees creaking over the low grassy banks.

A young woman in an iron grey coat swept past the gateway in a flurry of fine sleet & leaves. She waved.

“Turn here. Turn here.”

I had to see the Blue house built of wood with vertical white straps from the eaves to the black concrete foundations. Set next to the side road after the river bridge, mauve, crimson & blue lupins were just beginning to show against the orange gravelly chunks of earth in its garden. Across the neat straight raked ash path was a shed with its door open. Inside a man was hammering a crate into a cage.

The next time I saw this house it looked as if it had been nudged by a clumsy giant's elbow which sheared away one corner & showed the green bedroom in disarray . . .

“500 feet away a sheet of flame scorched up the forest & that was followed by a short shower of tiny glass fragments hurtling through the foliage shredding the trees bare.”

He picked up a tin & shook it under my gaze.

“And then the real bang.”

He led me round a corner, “This apple tree had small fruit forming . . . everything was blasted off, leaves the lot.”

It was still partially uprooted.

“A week later it was filled with spring blossom. The same thing happened with a white lilac bush.”

I felt the tree trunk, its bark impearled by glass shards, rough like a cow's tongue.

No apples fall from the tree. Yet she throws her hands out to you when you turn to walk away & she calls you almost silently to take notice. Come closer . . . take time to find out . . . it could be worth something to you . . . come closer . . . it isn't a trap. The girl was in the green room, searching for a book to anchor her away from the mirror.

‘What is he holding’, she wonders.

The slit in the curtain shivers as her fingers widen it.

‘He said nothing’.

Her mind clicked back as if only able to read what was written in the dust under the table, instead of looking at what was on the table.

“He didn't say anything?” She asked in astonishment, “About the present.”

She pinched the curtain shut as she turned to the voice. She hadn't spoken her thought out loud.

"Who told you that?"

"What did you say to him?" She asked brushing away the question.

"Nothing directly . . . I told him it looked as if after all this waiting I couldn't do it . . . we didn't want to do it . . . be together . . . our future had always been a destructive yardstick."

"But you gave him a present . . . you didn't say what it was . . . did you?"

"No. I said I had one."

"You didn't give it to him?"

"No."

"What will you do with it? It's too late."

"Is it? I think it was already too late or we would have been together ."

"He asked if his calls were intrusive . . ."

"And I never said they were. But I never called him."

"You were frozen. Too cold . . ."

"To care. I know what you think."

At a guess the main mill-house had been burnt out; only blackened ragged walls still stood. The ship that was propped upright on a long flat trailer in amongst the rickety sheds & ruined barns must have been brought there after the fire for the family to live in. Most of its paint had weathered off leaving grey boards as yet unrotted. Patches & flakes of white were left, here & there, under the gunwale, but there were no scorch marks.

Gloomed in its hollow the ship lamented the sea on flat black tyres.

We circled round. An unbarred doorway had a surprise sheer drop just beyond its threshold. Twelve feet below, a double grave depth, the earth floor had been methodically & completely layered with small pieces of scrap silver foil, the wrappings off sweets & chocolate.

“A tinsel floor. An eccentric grandiose intention . . .for?”

“An answer that could plunge you into a sea of evasions.”

“A four that’s really a three. Why have you got that in?” She looked at the heading of the note. She sat down, but stood up again immediately. The seat didn’t feel right. She pushed a cushion in it & tried again. Then bobbed out to search for a board to harden it up. She found a chessboard. Perfect.

“But it doesn’t. I’ll tell you that picture of the floor cuts off all other memories. Shorts them back to it so that I’m always staring at that floor & can’t get out of the loop wondering whom it was placing each piece year after year. I can’t remember leaving the place.”

“Did you leave? It must have been a consuming fire to have destroyed the mill so completely; to have fused the stones & left no cinders.”

“It was an allotted place of limitation. She was drawing back. Pulling back into a snail shell, pulling in all her animal desires, squeezing the blood out of them.

She wanted to go over once & once over to stay there without looking back. It was the ship she found attractive about the situation, she forgot all else when she described it.

Even that we were looking for somewhere to live.”

“So?”

“She felt unable to cross. Falsely positioned. Still with a crude link to another spot. That’s why she had to move but found it difficult to choose.

“I think she was there already, sucking the chocolate, laying the tinsel. It was her farewell task to accompany you . . .”

“ . . .and find the wrong place!”

“I know it was uncomfortable, raw, derelict, layered with unhappy memories . . .you said you always felt them. But they are the places you choose as well.”

Porcelain feet slopping in mud.

By the cut. By the drop. What would you lose by the fall? The colour in your face.

Into the pallor.

In a fog you would collide with the teeming hoards of others going your way. You would pass through it. Emerge. Spinning.

“Now where the fuck are they?” Then she groaned. “I wish I hadn’t asked that.”

“Spinning in the cardboard room of lovers, in the blast of loss. Taken; turned to suicide by a negligible flash of a thought.”

“I don’t like that.”

“Caused by the afterimage of an event; wrong colours; not the colours themselves. Not the happening; wrong shape in the wrong space; not the people nor the place.”

“But each thought hurting; actually hurting!”

The destroyed room of the lovers held up on the shaking fist. The explosion puncturing the flimsy card walls with savage jabs.

“I can’t stay here.I can’t go there.”

She saw the lilac bowing heavily under their load of raindrops through the slashes she had made.

“They are mine.” She took the knife to gather them.

The mist deceived crowd were by the upturned tower, a masterstroke of disguise, but the man cannot find cover.

I lurch past strange animals to try & take your hand. The earth shines under my feet. I talk to your lovers & children from earlier lives. You are there smiling. They all smile at me as we sit on a mossy bank.

Your smile lasts a thousand years & at each pass finds true love. And why did we come here? Who saw us & decided they wanted you back? We did! I know. But why so soon?

Her swinging torso bumps me out of the way, swings back on her spindly legs & bumps my thigh again so I would give ground but she came towards me. I pummelled her chest.

She gave ground curving her body to protect her breasts.

Like a bridge in chains lit from the side to show the armed men lurking along & under its span she lay.

“Perhaps they had used Roburite, a flameless explosive with very high power.

Chlorinated dinitrobenzene mixed with sufficient ammonium nitrate to completely oxidize it. Bang.”

“No. More likely to have used fuel oil with the nitrate. Less easy to trace.”

And we’re in the dust of it.

Five to five (or six to six) on that evening. There was a dense column of black smoke.

Gouts of flame spurting up, a sudden surge, one small explosion & then up it all went, a fireball. Cellophane was born. The mill disappeared.

The grandfather clock was embedded in the wall still ticking tocking lifeing deathing. But not cuckooing. It was 7 past 5. The blast cut a swathe exactly a foot high through the cornfield on the slope behind the house & then sucked back. The intense heat caused ‘firestorm’ conditions. Two people working behind an embankment were badly injured when the blast which hugged the ground funnelled through a bridge arch & curled round whipping their bodies against the trees by which they crouched taking cover. A shovel was seen skimming through the woods taking out branch after branch until it disintegrated. The things of everyday life were embedded in the walls that bulged & cracked from top to bottom. Many objects were shredded by glass. Yet our dinner still lay untouched on the table amidst the debris. The places set; napkins erect & unfolded. The glass water jug not cracked but empty.

The fires burned for days. No one could venture near the tangled wreckage. In the middle of it, where the hoses were still playing, I thought I could see a huge mound, a gigantic whale-like lump. It was a shimmery greeny grey apparition tapering from its greatest

width at the centre until one end finished bluntly; the other was hidden. The centre portion had superstructures of trelliswork & pipes that were all linked by a light metallic decking & a larger bulging black pipeline. There were hatches & weld marks but also well defined evenly spaced scratch marks as if a very big bear had taken a few swipes at it haphazardly. My gaze kept on returning to these lacerations for they seemed to form a fan that pulsed very slowly as if the monstrous phenomenon was breathing through a gill, but I thought something might burst out from that spot. Lower down there emerged a thin hose with shining bands at intervals coiling around until it was buried in the earth. All behind the huge mound of welded garbage there lay tangled & mashed stuff in such a state it was impossible to distinguish what had been its original form. Two large bent tubes stuck above this like dull antennae. I wondered if they belonged to the animal craft because of their size. The devastation & wreckage must have been caused by the blasting forces of the creature crashing into land; for it resembled a stranded whale not a spaceship.

A vibration, a drone like big blue bars of sky pulsed over me in short waves. I gritted my teeth. If I had to eat the whole monster then I had to eat it & there was nothing to be done except transmute it by noise into an edible colour & cut it down to a digestible size by tricky perception. Click! The huge heap of assembled space flotsam was frozen in a snap(colour, B&W can be monotonous on the palette & just as false). It trembled & convulsed very gently. When the ripples died down a faint light pink glow shone under its lower parts.

This glow expanded, & soon thin edges began to shrivel. A luminous golden flame fanned out for a second . . .

She mused upon my unfortunate affection . . .

I sat bareback in the hot sun very near to the evergreen bay tree from which he had broken that branch.

She said she hadn't changed, didn't feel any different from three years ago.

“Was it three years?”

“Where do you think I was? I was waiting.”

My chin touched the cold rim of the mirror as I stared in it with her.

“Your eyes seem to have sunk deeper. You must have changed since then.”

“Since when?” Innocently. “I didn't like to look in mirrors. I used to go to parts of the city where I wasn't known. I liked to walk down streets & feel a complete stranger.

Because I was really ugly.”

“Did anyone ever stop & talk to you?”

“Only you!”

“Oh.”

“My eyes were always changing colour. My face is long. One ear sticks out at the top.”

“And your nose, don't forget your nose & the blebs on your jawline.”

A warm dusty breeze puthered across the garden. This dry air wrapped around them & she felt something had been silently opened between them; picking up two long loaves & walking to the table sheltered by a trellis covered in sweetpea flowers she wedged the

bread one on top of the other against a large pot, then unfolded a newspaper with an action more like shaking a tablecloth, pointed to a headline & sat to read it.

The table set. I'll pull her arms back to me. Embrace before we eat. Fire the wound. Lick her lips. Open her thighs.

Four steps down & then another four steps down & then one step down.

And then the whirlwind.

'Will you awake with my memory? If you do you weren't here at all'.

Off to find shelter in sleep; but dreams pound the flesh, torment the inner spy with that conundrum which is trapped by its own camouflaged net that left no outline to be warmly stroked, held, hugged in the morning.

Passed by.

Flashed by so quickly why do we wait so eagerly for the lips to press against ours.

"To wake you up."

Three steep steps led up to a door behind the table. It had been painted grey long ago & was now scorched & faded by the sun. It had two keyholes; the top one is the right one. She was poring over my roughly laid out plan of action as the dusk settled into the garden where patches of white blossom shone in the last rays of daylight. I tried to get her attention, to explain my rapid scribble, if it was proving illegible.

She read, " 1st part

2 together

3 together

Who & what are they? Members of the human race or molluscs?

2 together, 1 away

2 together, 1 away

If there's a clue in this I certainly can't get it.

4 together

3 together, 1 away

2 together, 2 away

Is it some kind of dance?

She scratched her neck before continuing,

2nd part

2 together

3 but 2 together

She looked up & grinned

3 together

2 together, 1 dreamer

Mmmmm

2 together alone, but bringing in a third

Getting complicated

1 here, 1 there

Mmm, everything the same in the end.

"Not illegible. Incomprehensible. Unless it's an outline of a week in the modern family structure. In that case you missed out, 1 alone."

“What is it? The perfect plan again? Just right for lead soldiers in a cardboard castle or animals in a zoo. Where there can be no one to blame when something goes wrong, as it always does.”

“But this . . .”

“It’s a farce! The tail wagging the dog again. You say it has been the most important relationship of your life. Yet make it look as though it will only need a shallow grave. Not even a bed to lie on together, doesn’t that say it all.”

1969.

I stood on a bridge. The first word I heard was DONKEY. I split that up into two words.

The water below was cut by a rock.

“I’ve got that. If you would keep it at that level . . . It’s a landscape I can see & believe in.”

“You were there. You slipped on that rock & hurt your thigh.”

She rubbed the blue bruise with pink ointment.

Two animals coming out of their shells, a hand delivers the thinnest slap to push us together.

Massive baulks of timber for the new pier had been dumped by the road in the night & lay jumbled on the embankment, a fortress plucked from a whirlwind, angular tons. You danced on one.

Then, remember, we had been stopped by seeing the remains of a young heron snagged on a wire fence. You took out an old knife shaped like a fish & sawed off the skull with its six inch beak, & left it on the stone wall next to the bridge because you couldn’t decide whether to keep it. There were some stooping figures on the corran over the sea channel of the loch; you stared at them for a long while. I stripped naked, sat in ferns on the bank finding a steady footing on the boulders, entered the water, beyond the daylight, in one swift dive.

I know. A few wild splashes & you emerged from the river pool shaking & jumping & quickly pulling on your clothes.

1973.

The grey-green door was gently pushed open, she glided into the room; & as the old floorboards sagged all the empty steel hangers in the rickety brown wardrobe shook & clinked softly. The whole room was suffused by a greenish light, split in one place on the wall by a bar of yellow. The colours were the same every morning of this book.

“You had just about time to look into the clear pool above that bridge & then I came.”

She passed through the ray of sunlight. The dog’s teeth snapped, a fly fatly dropped on the carpet.

“There! All of us are pulling our weight but one.”

As I sat in my corner I realised she was going to go for me, so I picked up a newspaper & half hid my face. It was a blue-green sheet & I couldn’t read the words first of all for they were like black dashes. And when they began to resolve became like herds of animals scurrying across a plain & not until my name was called across the green gloom did I pick out one or two words.

I turned my head, her body slid over, she moved quickly & freed her right arm. Her eyes were like that clear water, I saw clouds swim in them but nothing else.

“I’ve come to make you pull your weight.”

I pulled out a notebook. My finger scratched over the paper. I shuddered.

“Protects the skin,” I read above the picture of a lion.

I stood up but held back from crossing into the other room. I rubbed the words, they were on a printed label peeled off a black & lilac basque discovered in a battered suitcase along with a card from the French Riviera & a flimsy rag of a garment what was difficult to figure out how anybody could wear it or where. I took the fish knife & cut the padded

breast cups from off the corset leaving the boned rim & fragments of lace. She pulled it against her body effortlessly shivering to test the fit. I felt the waste of it.

The dog was still nosing the fly on the carpet. There was a cube shaped fragment of blue glass next to it. I knew that although her talons might sink into my flesh I wouldn't feel any pain, they would only pull at the skin slightly. But they would turn the abstract impersonable handling of my body to gain a convenient position for mounting me into the deadly play of compulsion. A solitary act upon me & yet with me. A ride through the soft flesh to a split bone, a savage charming hollow brim full of entrails.

“This is called the drill. Can you come this way?”

The wardrobe reverberations still tinkled as if the angels were gathering, she laid a hand for me to hold.

“On bad days I can't bring myself to paint them,” The nails glistened red.

The touch took. Desire thrown. The kiss transfers a potion.

“What's that I can taste in your mouth?” She licked her lips.

“I don't know but you can share it again.”

Turquoise desire, a barricade against anything sensible like Sh! hare or Sh! Are you listening. She touched my arm to make me turn to her lips. My feeling was remembering the moon with the sea lapping at the boat. In that moment I decided.

“It would be better to put a few dots . . . & I decided,” she advised. “And you could tell us what!”

“The decision on which one was going to fall in love was made because of an imaginary moment lying in a boat.”

“No it wasn’t,” she retorted. “It was made because of a lascivious kiss. Something else going on as well that you aren’t telling.”

“I’ll get on with it . . .” But he trailed off lamely again unable to answer her anger. The decision was made on how he had been greeted. He had made that clear. With a simple kiss. Or not.

“I said it was decided by a kiss. Can you think of a better way?”

I have an insatiable desire for making love, touching & kissing you . . . I think it’s a bit hysterical at times. It is something that comes very very strongly; it surges & when we have made love I am calmed, released from these conceits which push me on in search of signs of your affection. The reassurance that comes from love-making is so important to me. It has to be rough, this physical loving; & when it is, it becomes the . . . what can you call the ‘time’ you spend doing something when it loses all temporal significance because of what you’re doing? . . . it is the none-time of penetration. A time when I can say I am. I hate it as well. It feels like an evasion, an easy matter to stop thinking. I don’t know what really happens when I feel closest to you . . . your honesty has given me more confidence in myself as a warm lover than any well meant flattery could ever have done. I feel at my strongest when we are making love & because of that I think I weigh it even more. It comes naturally, so easily, so pleurably, it makes me feel I have something worthwhile to give. Why do I have to be so wide open to feel complete? To feel I am valuable.

My back is against the wall now & I’m looking hard at my part in our love. Quite often there is a slight feeling of panic in me . . . am I capable of stopping it all slipping? Or

more accurately can I beat the lethargy, the comfiness . . .it's the first move that would put me up in the firing line of reality which is so sticky . . .alone . . .closed.

Part of me would relish working at anything, for a while, the other part is lazy . . .no not lazy, entangled . . .hunting for some insoluble crystalline desire that can withstand the blues that darken & drift in.

“Go on.”

The palms of my hands were hot.

I lie there & think about reaching for the lacquer. I go through all the actions in my mind & finish with the nails sparkling brighter than they ever do really.

She turned a page. A small blue sheet dropped out, it was turning brown at the edges. She glanced at it; covered in a dense text of signs, scribbles, underlinings, even a rough diagram or map.

“This doesn't look like an ordinary letter.” She feigned not to suspect anything.

He felt as transparent as glass.

“Read it aloud.”

“It's not possible. It isn't coherent.” She pored over the text & then folded the note & pushed it behind a cushion of the straw divan.

A pink pencil thin aircraft roared above the pale green roof board. She flicked her eyelids to capture the blue afterimage but it was lost against the sky. After she had blinked the afterimage, now grey, danced around on the roof boards.

“Remember those people trying to pay the date on the Chinese restaurant bill? Well that tiny note will get us in more trouble than that mistake did them. And was there a scene!”

“You think there’s something to go on?”

“No. It looks like a plea from someone abandoned on purpose but who hasn’t cottoned on to that yet, or perhaps never will . . . You could take the scribble to be the shape of a hand held up trying to attract somebody’s attention.”

“And failing?”

“And not even being aware that they are trying to do it.”

“Or to stop something happening.”

“Come. Come. Come. Come. Come. Come. Come. Until you go beyond the words to her heart.”

1940.

A man & a woman passed by heading for the pontoon bridge built along side the sagging flood damaged road bridge, the man trailing behind the woman slightly. Her grey coat being lightly covered with snow was changing her into a snowman; as the pattern of the coat was slowly obliterated new shapes came to life on its surface. A figure appeared between them, a conjunction of the white drawing on their coats, a body born out of swirling flakes & the receptive grey colour. Staggering & stooping, ripe with overfull undulations, swooping to take wings into the world.

Snow helped the shattered trees & crowds to form themselves again but upside-down like the broken night sky over her last dream.

1947.

“These are your gloves, aren’t they?” She opened her legs into the wide stride necessary to be able to lean & pick them up out of the slush.

“Put them on quickly before you freeze.”

The warm fur gloves were misshapen & soggy. The child grimaced as several fingers appeared.

She sucked them.

So still was the day, I remembered. It was marking time, leaving words on our lips, the mouthing of sweet fantasies. And you said, ‘But only on the blind side of the face’. It was not a clear day & I was uneasy.

I had been almost the last to arrive & the waxy-faced dancer already waited. And the other two. They stood by a carpet bag still patterned but faded & worn thin in patches, & missing the head of the dancing girl in the design. It still had her body down to the hem of her flying skirt & tapping slippers. The head of the faun was gone as well & part of the flowering bush. Outside, grass on an embankment blazed, dense smoke poured onto the street. The cinder covered slope glowed yellow & black & red. Shunting trains clanked ceaselessly until all the doors were shut. Grey gloom. I wondered how they would block out all the noises of the neighbourhood, but the shrieks of the dancer’s music did that. At dusk a black, thin plane thundered across the sky flashing red & white lights & at that the dancer signalled for us to be quiet.

“And here you can describe a miss. And stick with the truth for a change.”

She leaned against me offering mutely the fold of flesh at the end of an unfinished caress. Walking on slats still dusty it peeped from white satin fishing for the soft song of her cunt. Sinking over complicated embraces sucking in the somewhere aura I unroll a gaudy scarf & two golden pigtails drop out, each with a neat bow of pink ribbon at the unsnipped end.

“That wasn’t what you told me.”

He rattled the metal latch. A face appeared briefly at a side window, fractured by reflections.

“I wanted to leave . . .” His lips almost brushed the door.

“ . . .but you couldn’t,” rasped a frosty voice behind the wood, “well try again, now.”

A full silence.

He pulled his collar up, “I wish it was that simple.”

“Just go!”

“I need something to numb the pain.” He rubbed his shanks.

“We all do.”

“Is that all?” False note of indignation.

“Fuck & fuck & fuck & fuck.” Came the reply. “Try that.”

Pause.

Shriller. “Somewhere else. With somebody else.”

The silence could have split a rock.

She sat on the edge of the bed, the flaps of her black shirt tied loosely under her breasts. She stared at the door. She would not open it. Nothing would move her. She would bury it. Gawkily she stretched her arms & legs, a cross on her space. A bee bumped up & down a half pineapple on a large white plate.

“Was it pain or longing?”

She would answer him jokingly, agreeably; she had lost her way but now could regain . .

“What did you say?”

“Was there the undertow of need pulling the clear outline of insurmountable obstacles down into a tangled current where they become, again, mixed with the feelings of hope & create . . .pain . . .longing & anger?”

I didn't think I was the type to be lonely, but lonely I am & longing for you . . .that presence you radiate so strongly . . .you never smile much on photos . . .I wonder why not . . .

That little 'enchantress' print is me . . .she glowers. But underneath the black is the magic she's brewing . . .

I'm really quite unutterably lonely, but I no longer feel that I'm mad or a bit unhinged. I'm back in touch with myself & I no longer fear that black night out there, what it might hold, invisible to me. And I no longer feel that I have to say 'yes' to a question asked by someone who wants that answer.

1982.

As we drove over the pontoon I reckoned the black swirling water between the pillars & the cliff face would take her life quickly if she were thrown in.

“If you threw her in. Make it quite clear the desperate thought was yours.”

Girders appeared. Mist hung around them. I couldn't see the broad river for the wild snowstorm made a veil cutting out half the world. We stopped in a lull & I climbed out of the car into the drifts, the snow growling underfoot. Although utterly tired after the long drive I realised what a grim contrast my lumbering body made with the delicate frostwork tracery of all the twigs & grass stalks now being dusted with new flakes. The storm blew up again. I was angry & stayed by the cold in the intimate space that a blizzard blowing & twisting about makes around you. Listening to the river rushing close by I felt its pull. It tugged at my guts. Why? Should something happen? Or was that space dancing amongst the eddies of time as the snowflakes whirled confusing the dry brush stroke of white into the future blobs of green giving Spring before its time, in Winter; giving me the fact that I could only call a premonition.

The road followed the river for miles up into the mountains skidded over the watershed & followed another torrent down the other side.

She would be giddy, understanding, sublime

She would be vile, treacherous, intoxicating

She would be sober, solemn, killing

He would have to hunt for years for understanding

She would be vulgar, delirious, essential

She would be shrewd, limpid, erotic

He would have to haunt silent spaces under bridges for the melody . . .

. . .merely living distantly tottering about on the skyline brought nothing.

The floor was dusty under the bed, he could see that & the cheap mattress with rust marks bulging through the diamond shaped springs & the burlap sack left with its mouth open.

“One more fuck & this bed has had it,” he muttered over his shoulder.

“O.K.” She agreed, “Let’s bust it.”

They emptied out the sack onto the floor in front of him. A pile consisting of a dark greyish-green, much shrivelled & twisted mass of leaves, flowers, fruits & slender stems.

“It’s in here?” He looked at the contents quizzically before squatting down to comb through what looked like a random sample from the bottom of a dry ditch. He glanced up at them, said nothing, but wondered how they had gathered such a mixed bag full.

‘What are they going to ask me to pay,’ he wondered.

Many of the shrunken stems were tightly curved & twisted as if cut from climbing plants, grooved & marked with wrinklins from the bark they had clung to.

“There’s not much in this trash that’s any use here,” he said, slowly brushing leaves into a pile.

“You always say that.”

“It’s always true. You bring such rubbish. How much did you pay? Tell me.”

“You’ll say we were robbed.”

“You always are.”

He absently picked a piece from out of the debris & rubbed off the dirt. The plant's withered stalk was about a foot long with a few leaves still attached. He cut it off the root, saved that & threw the stalk back into the pile. Then he shaved the small rootlets off the dried rhizome leaving a curved almost cylindrical torturous blackish-brown stump about three inches long. There were large depressed stem scars closely set on its upper side surface which were lighter brown than the surrounding blackish-grey rhizome skin. He snapped it; it fractured sharply & cleanly showing a yellowish-white bark around the pale brown corking layer. He lifted the short broken edge to his nose – scarcely any odour. He poked the central pith – horny & he scrapped it with his nail & sucked the finger . . . sweet . . . ish & then he spat out the fragment as it turned his mouth bitter & acrid.

“Yes. That's Scopola.” He said huskily as his throat became dry.

A bag of weeds. Betrayal.

NOT BIKH or NABEE. TOO POISONOUS.

So she steps out of the river naked onto the moonshelves.

Syncope – failure of heart's action – loss of consciousness – death.

The child hopped, shouting, “Kiss again! Kiss again!”

The couple walked by in an embrace, smiling.

He looked deep into her eyes & thought he could see her . . . toes.

“Soul. You bastard. Listen again. Haven't you got a heart?”

“No question.” He pulled her arm towards his chest. She opened her eyes.

“I didn’t ask you to prove it. You’ve got to show me. I can feel the rhythm of your heartbeat but it falls way short of making me feel safe & . . .happy.”

A camera could catch the poison in the look.

“You feel cheated.”

“Contact but no communication.” Yet spoken in a very agreeable voice as if out of the touch of pain.

“The heart would have to be silent for you to be able to see the soul.”

He nodded.

“And you must not look.”

They passed a man sitting on a green metal box. He was holding a toy giraffe, turning it over & over in his fingers. Windmilling it. All that was left of the zoo animals.

“Do you understand? It’s pain I feel. I lie in bed & it hurts so much to be alone.”

“Then why do you make the price so high. Perfection. What is it?”

“A cage. My head.”

“I can’t get in there. I thought I had an answer. Answers. Each one swept away.”

“I know.”

“I can never believe those unhappy fears last more than a few moments. They seem an easy dungeon to quit, you’re in & out of it like a sparrow in a garden shed. And with about as much thought as well.”

“Flitting in front of the mirror?”

She frantically chewed the leaf fronds while trying not to swallow & hastily spat the mushy green ball into the open mouth.

Her tongue grew swollen. Her throat contracted. Her lips froze.

Scopolamine plus morphine produces anaesthesia, in large doses loss of memory including pain. It was introduced as

TWILIGHT SLEEP. Between darkness & blackness.

Wherein

a small door opened & a big door opened & a shadow stretched & stretched

“She asked, “How long?” Got up & perched on the back of an armchair. It began to tip.

And tipped for a long long time. It was engulfed by its own shadow.

“How did you make it out? Can you read a book in a dream?”

Elbows on the table he glared across at her as she slipped into the cushions.

“Have you just had a part of a dream like that?”

“No.” And she wasn’t going to share.

“What are you doing here then?”

She came across the room accompanied by the gentle sound of a fairy bell. They kissed.

“I can taste . . . is it the dental injection in your mouth?”

Their mouths parted; came together again still open. Their lips were cold. The lights went out. There was a soft greenish glow through the curtains.

RAUWOLFIA. CHOOTACHAND. SARPAGANDHA.

“I sleep but don’t remember a dream from these nights. I haven’t done for years. I wish I could recall one or two now & again.”

“Leave them alone. And anyway, what in trying to fish them out of freezing darkness would you use as bait? And what is it? Curiosity, to see if they were still there. They are, through three doors. And nothing, but nothing, would tempt them.”

Before getting into bed they stuffed the duvet through the slit in its cover.

“Stuffing the guts back into the donkey.”

“It’s the quilt you stuff in this,” he cautiously stroked her finger, as his hand met hers as he felt to help he found her helping herself.

“I know. But I like this.”

Ruby sparks of light reflected from the glass fragments embedded in the flesh of her forearms. Luckily she had inadvertently caught the edge of the blast as she turned a brick corner of the blue house only with her arms as she lifted them to protect her face.

“Tell me . . . why.” I urged.

And reluctantly you described what you could feel.

“Someone is always trying to put me in a box,” she said, “because when I told them I lived at number 4 & had never wanted to live there, they said. ‘Oh yes. That’s a boxed in number.’”

“Why have you stayed so long?”

She gave him a contemptuous look as a reply.

We were crammed in a car, like a cran of herrings in a barrel, going as fast as we could to get married.

“A cran is just over 37 gallons, about 750 fish!”

We were following a large box van. What was stencilled on it in black?

Was it rainbow something? No.

Was it wedding something? No.

Was it Horses? No.

Was it Hurry up? No.

The door creaked open; a chill draft of night air wafted in with the dark shape of a woman. Her legs were bare. She started speaking nervously.

“I seem to hear more when my eyes are open; even in the dark I pick out more sounds than when my eyes are shut.”

The silence could have split a river.

“I never knew & didn’t know . . .”

The dead shoal of thoughts decayed so fast.

“ . . .with you fading. Me struggling to stay alive. One slip, I knew it would be my last.”

Actions hatched like fires in Hell.

“You had to lead me there. Made me go along.”

“Each time we made love it snowed,” she said, “forgetting they were dangerous places.”

“Was it to temper me?”

“We played waist deep in seaswell on the boulders, felt the undertow tug at us. Lay on thrift to dry,” she added ignoring his question.

Pestilencia. Three syllables according to Jacme d’Agramont.

Pes : tempesta ‘storm’ ‘tempest’

Te : temps ‘time’

Lencia : clardat 'brightness' 'light'

Hence. Plague in the time of tempest caused by light from the stars.

The two of them were walking round a pole/tree.

"Horse," said he.

"Ass," replied she.

Horse reply Ass reply Horse reply Ass reply Horse reply Ass reply Horse reply Ass reply

Horse reply Ass reply Horse reply Ass reply Horse reply Ass reply. . .

"It was a donkey's leg. That's what I said at first," came a small voice well away from the scene of action.

"You don't know that yet."

"What did he say?"

"You swapped a coat for a shag?"

"No. She gave me a coat for a shag." She cannot understand that.

"One cannot believe in this," she giggled.

"Yes, I've still got it."

"Did I see her?" He asked eagerly. "Was she the one who came through the door?"

The others looked at him, "we didn't see anything," they smiled.

Why did he ask it like that 'through the door', I wondered. 'And not through his dreams where she should have appeared', of course that was it. A mind stain shaped like a woman or a door become fused in that incredulous moment. The deepness of it taking

away the colour. The very innermost secret he felt he had been excluded from, now partially spoken. He grinned with the rest.

“You never know, they could have been coming in & out of the window knowing him,” & he pointed directly at me.

The disorder of the exchange had added a little to his story. He longed for exact detail.

With yet another scrap he felt the complete picture could be realised . . . sometime.

“It happened after her death,” I explained apologetically as if it needed to be made clear.

“The sun won’t shine on that.” And they agreed.

“What are you going to do?”

“He’s not going to swim through shit for it if some bird will give him a jacket to get it up!”

“Was she crazy?”

“No. Full of compassion. Thought of my comfort.”

“She was a hot-water bottle with tits,” rasped the woman in the red dress. Her make-up was sloppily done, unconvincing . . . rarely bothered with by the loose look of it. Not subtle erotic but acid as if put on in hate to clatter the touch of the eye.

She burst into the room, “I’ve just seen you.”

“Was he horizontal? Having a wank?” They sat with hunched puzzled body language.

“?”

“Couldn’t be him then,” they chuckled.

“That is impossible, isn’t it?”

And they laughed at her seriousness.

“No. He never does it.”

“Who did I see, then?”

You saw her coming through the door. And it made you shiver. A cold disorder getting you nowhere. She is a phantom. She was as if absent sometimes, paid so little attention, that while others were torn by passion she was still trying for the grammar of it.

Knocking out a tune, more a noise, that has meaning but not at this time any rhythm to accompany her permanent dream – a clear assent.

“I will not invite him, then?”

They said nothing.

“We shall be able to do it alone?”

Why were they grinning?

“I will not pay so –“

“A bag of old clothes should do you,” jeered the woman in red, “And get some on your own back.”

“But the box?” She all but ignored the jibe, she merely slanted her body the tiniest sliver away from the woman. “If I will not pay?”

He was staring back at the door, his eyes narrowed, his face tense & drawn. At the other end of the couch the woman with the straight nose & smooth dark hair sat pulling on a cigarette, smudged red lips relaxed & blowing smoke, red sleeved arm resting on a red covered leg. Her dark eyes were fixed thoughtfully on the man & she seemed unconcerned about what was going on outside. The man crouched over himself. The

smoke blew in a blue string across the room. Her fingers on the free hand signalled – scoop – anemone – lightly working the smoke in front of her body.

“She tells you she would like to see you. If she had really wanted to see you, wouldn’t she have told you that she never wanted to see you again, so that you would have had to respond to show her that you thought a lot of her.”

“I did. Many times. I was a fool.”

“I’m sure she knows how to play the game, & how in playing the game she may say what she wants to without staying.”

“To get the return fire . . . Oh no. But she simply refused. I wasn’t sure where to go from there.”

“What was the purpose behind her desire to see you again. Do you know?”

From out of a small leather bag she took a mushroom-shaped blue mirror & a stick of black eye-liner. She slowly drew in lines around her eyes, then darkened the lashes with mascara, while I watched her intently. A touch of shadow. A smear of rouge. She moved her lips over each other smoothly as a signal.

“Move over! Looking for what it used to be is a waste of time.”

“I want the keys. I want them now.”

Only the tip of politeness beneath which she struggled to control the consuming anger.

“And then when you did call she said it was out of concern for the money & not her. But when you didn’t call she said you didn’t care because you knew the money was safe.”

‘?’

“Did she have to be injured?”

‘?’

“Did she have to torture?”

“She needs to place the violence somewhere else; it’s like a poison to her clean self image.”

“It has been difficult. Wanting support that can’t be given . . . isn’t seen to be needed.”

“Throw away the definitions. You’ll feel better playing your own game. You. The rules are easier.”

“We need a song.”

‘mumble mumble’ “Couldn’t quite catch the words. Was it, ‘the dust never stirred me none’? I don’t know but the next line turned me on.”

‘He liked my shoes I kept them on’ (Tori Amos song, Honey)

Out she went.

“Below sounds to our imagination,” she mused. Her hips swaying as she sloped along the road holding her elbows close in to her ribs, while her hand waved to & fro, from her face out, occasionally flicking the curls back from her cheeks.

“I’m not down in that sludge nor am I caught in the whirl & eddies of passion. In the main I’m unconcerned & that just spells out ‘danger’. Is it danger? I’m listening on my tiptoes as I so often did as a child by the door jamb in the inky darkness of the stairwell. A hail of rocks hit my tensed muscles. I groan. The rubble fills an immense hall of my childhood & the sounds of it falling echoes through caverns brought from my dreams & I

wonder . . .how closely can reality follow fantasy & when it exactly copies it what is happening.”

“It’s a wish coming true . . .you know you’ve got two more & will probably fuck it up.”

Clang!

A pebble bounced off a pile of dark blue oil drums stacked in a secure compound behind wire. A bird flew off making more noise than the stone.

She called out, “Who threw that? I’ll kill you!”

Kill you.

Clang!

“What was that? Fuck it!” She shouted.

Fuck it. Resounded around the hollow drums.

“Why don’t you cut it out,” she murmured, as she bent to pick up a piece of blue glass that had caught her eye.

“Cut it,” was whispered back from the hidden side of the store. And she smiled. So it wasn’t Echo. Fine, coarse, what matter to the bent body now. Here was an opportunity for skin & disorder to knock despair for six back into its cerebral hell & keep it firmly differentiated from desire. She stroked a loose curl of hair from her left cheek & used the moment to peer intently beyond the stacks. Her left foot came up onto its toes. She was ready for flight while figuring out if there was someone in the shadow under the overhanging tree. It would be a rencounter like nose & post if she could but see & catch them.

A hand lightly touched her shoulder. She started. Their faces were so close she couldn't help but see the faint blush.

I can see the ridges & hollows of your cheek. You come right up to my face, your tongue slips out over your lips . . .it touches my lips . . .

Dreaming like a butterfly (letters written unevenly on purpose).

My nipples hardened, not with fright, they needed to be plucked.

You must lift your legs higher if you want to draw me in. Those blue shadows disappear when the low light catches my stockings & I feel as though I'm walking over a swaying rope bridge above a deep ravine. Every pebble I drop falls for years before setting up a hundred echoes. And the colour down below is blue (shadowing time) call it & you will see how much is frozen still when you have blue on your side. I roll over & you are by my side, as I feel you there . . .I see . . .

The wolf in a rochet. (illustration)

. . .Him walking like an out at elbow robot in a cloak of greyish confusion, soft swirling snow changing to sleet beside her as those grey knickers drop down & she blithely steps out of them so the dog can pounce & worry their stuff as my mind shakes up rats of memory trying to fill in lost days & give reasons for the gaps that ache for repair.

I know they were a little out of their direct way but didn't notice because the quarrel was going like a team of horses curving their swollen words & sneers out of the beheaded past full tilt into the unanswerable proof which would be produced from that tangle of memories if they could be found. Signs seemed to flag his mind in the search but they

were like sandbanks covered at the flood while his thoughts could only sail in on a full tide. It's not that they were unforeseen. It's as if they were devoured as rations on the search.

Who was he beside at that point? He asked himself. A grey elusive fragment half moved towards him becoming a full bimbo of imagination, & yet it was tinged with real voluptuousness, so sudden that he felt over all the years something actual must have intoxicated the memory.

Was it June? With shady chemical sex. Plunging jet-like (with fever) into the high water. In a vaporous grove coloured by inept greyless greens.

The incessant snow of the page between each letter obliterating the message & its exhilaration as completely as a charmless winter blanket enveloped them now. The dog fight stirred a loud voice within, unfortunately it was shredded & incoherent, words still blowing over a cliff & maddeningly lost in the fog before their expression could be registered, or a few phrases noted down. He hadn't thought of it.

Erratic thoughts, memories etc., silent with indefiniteness, tenaciously sieved giving finer & finer nothingness.

A fume, a melted down limbo wherein an absurd spring bled out; saliva from a mouth under a savage kiss.

Nymphs dance in the head; raindrops on the puddle. Pinkish stuff.

'Who dressed in pink? Not her surely. I didn't know anyone who dressed like that.'

The garbage was raked into the shape of a woman's body, greyish-pink, drunk, wrapped under hard bone when I stretched my hand to hold it. A counter thrust of fabric. Her flesh didn't register it. Her eyes betrayed no touch as yet.

The blue smoke curled out of her mouth.

“Did I feel anything? What do you think. I'd have been at you like a shot. You didn't say anything to me.”

She liked to crawl onto his knees as he loafed in the armchair & pin him with her knees, outside his thighs, constricted by the arms of the chair. Lick his face bite his lip & tell him to put it up. Then she would clench her buttocks & suck his cock up with her cunt in such a needy way. And as he slid lower she rose higher from right in to when the tip just kissed . . .

‘Who was that?’ The thought flickered out under the density of the writing. A slave girl from the Ananga Ranga. The name failed to reach form, though it was despatched; you could feel it cleaving tepid detail & casual impulses as it cleverly avoided breaching consciousness. The disorder is secrecy.

The amusing box lit only by a guttering candle of fact, not enough to bare the heart's bone but enough to foil the daily bread of blockheads, to ferment dissembling guesswork to keep alive that wishful landscape.

And the tugs, the tugs. The tugs vaginal, of fantasy & fact.

Almost imperceptibly snow dust so fine defined the treetops turned the black forest gloom into tar made the couple sink together to shelter under a larch in a soft cushion of needles.

It wasn't a solitary figure of the past nor was the other creature suddenly there, dressing chestnut hair to the wind, hitching a stocking plumply ready for a denunciation to carry on outrageously & gain ritualistic sex; she'd been more than there already & longer. tyrannical, generating the forcible emotions felt when near to her. Something shared by all our senses.

“Didn't I open my mouth? All these allurements before the picnic & I declined?”

The equivocation stirs up a sullen choice. Was it a struggle? No.

“No.”

That night will remain a vast disordered jigsaw puzzle its pieces loosely scattered all over the place with characters shuffling over them unaware. Grinding them into the tarmac. Her innuendoes each evaded the uncertainty of fact with its possible betrayal. The need wasn't there, not even the slightest pinch of it. There was more to tell but I wasn't going to hear it.

One voice enthusiastic: one disparaging.

“You wouldn't hear it. I couldn't bear to tell it. Look I'm crying. How can I deny it now?”

The two masked figures standing in the shadow of the bridge were there to impede her journey. Their knives slit her thin black dress & the silk sagged off her breasts & belly

like a dead flag on a pole. The shorter of the two edged forward & put out a hand to lift a strand of material, but the tall man pushed him roughly aside, shouting, “Clown, do you want to lose your hand? Can’t you see she’s on fire?” They moved back slightly, coughing hoarsely in the fumes, but unwilling to leave before her whole figure went up in smoke.

The woman grinned as the handle came off the violin the man had picked up out of the junk.

“Now it’s only two quid because you can’t hit anyone over the head with it.”

The man fumbled with a wooden box. He grinned back. The lid came off.

“Breaking up the whole fucking stall, I see.”

She held the wooden box up & admired the intricate carving on its sides.

You need to know the scales refer to the mermaid, not yet seen. To the multitude portrayed like dabs of light on the side of a fish, any fish.

The flies were spinning crazily over a dead fish on the broken concrete bank.

What would she do without him? She was very taken but unsure.

It was a rainbow bridge & seemed endless. Like the river you have to pass under it. It is the divide, the point where you are looking forward as you look back. There you are, the tambourine gently jingling to start the song. Hotting up.

”There is the dark side, the wastage, the bewilderment & from out of it you describe me.

You take parts & roughly knock them together into an awkward construction & say there you are. I can feel it.”

“You’ll be saying I nail you to the cross next.”

1978.

It was the same key for the house as for the cellar but it had to be put in upside-down & turned the wrong way.

The rest happened quickly as I passed by but not quickly enough so I was drawn into the story again by a tortured note I found stuffed under the cushion. Crossed out, blotted, scrawled on, torn; not a coherent sentence in it.

Three bridges side by side.

One Roman old; a thin high rubble delicate half round span.

Two. A Bailey quickly run up on sandbags & poured concrete. Lattice steel girders jacked tight with a smear of tarmac over the perforated steel sheet road.

By the third, a collapsed concrete flop swept away at its two piers like a piece of cake, lying in the swift river below a pool with a yellow excavating dumper sitting on its debris in the bed.

Wild spate: quick demolition.

The cherry blossom was over but it was easy enough to pick out the trees by the beautiful old bridge.

A few sprats were coming up out of the depths of a murky peaty pool just under its span.

The water was very deep to the side of a shelf of white rock & the fish made plopping

sounds breaking the surface. The bridge, although sagging & bulging, never made a murmur. I watched a fish in a shallow part taken by the blue & red tinged flash of a kingfisher.

And then we began to sink, so slowly, I didn't believe it. Bump. I was in the rocky bed of the river & the new Bailey bridge was twenty feet above me.

Mixed colours of the rainbow sped past me disappearing into the reeds against the harrowing blue sky.

“Why did you pick it, the life you lead, was it for colours?” No answer. Then. Your eyes staring into the depths watching her plunge.

“I caught a fish.”

“I saw you. You usually do don't you!”

“So.”

“Tell me about the fish.”

“That one I just caught.” The bird pushes forward, pause, “I think it was a bream sprat.

What is important is that it was fat . . .big. I usually catch tiddlers.”

I came to. The icy water had soaked me blue & rust. Arms entangled me like elephant's trunks, hoisting me into the bucket of the dumper truck.

“Why did I pick it? Choice! What choice!”

A tartan blanket was tossed over me. I became invisible on the embankment as I melted into the autumnal greys, fawns & umbers of stick & stubble rubbish.

(Concealed in the fog of grass I cannot be discovered on the photograph).

“Is it a calling?”

By the third bridge I heard you calling my name but the red match flared as the faceless clock coldly struck. My bones ached so much I could not move. In my anger I heard the song tip its words away as I tried to sing out & get clear.

I could not touch you. My heart.

The drum-beat could not reach into you, my heart.

This last bridge gone, my words drum past the remnant of the flag. Its flutters cease as the wind drops. No longer made audible by the flag flaps the wind cannot tot up its all pervading solitude & I am gratefully lulled by the silence.

Then the material world in the morning in the now was torpedoed by an hallucination in which the moon had no face & animals dispersed to make the corners known. In the heavenly zoo a cobra was seen slyly creeping in to intimidate the lovers.

“Is that the way to get the facts?”

The concrete mind, soft as cheese, was the first to go; even with its steel skeleton & steel corset it crumbled under the frosty interrogation like a fruit cake in the rain. The heart, ever elusive, bounced the questions back as they were unrelentingly & stonily pumped at it by a questing lover, never forgetting to squeeze another meaning out of the used up blood to confuse us all & smear enamelled shells with a likeable acceptable pink.

“You’ll never remember the sexual hunger from this time,” she cried out angrily, “until you . . .”

“What? Get fucked. Don’t be sentimental. I need that that that. . .”

“Touch! No you need crushing you scorpion.”

Banal box.

Brown colour.

Cardboard with something printed on its wrapping paper in crude black stencil lettering.

Reinforced with ramon that has poisonous splinters which always turn septic no matter how hard you suck the wound.

“If I get closer I should be able to read it.”

“A box to begin it in. O.K.”

“No to begin on. Come on.”

“The Unconscious a

Box saved by large animals?”

“Boxed in by animal passions.”

“Better than drowned in reason.”

A box on the ear.

Box car,

becomes . . .

Grey wagonlit shunting into platform seven of the Gare de Lyon, evening. August.

Bee

Dee

Kee

Vee

“Select any two to go with him & the kid.”

“Did they do it?”

“Shouldn’t think so, would you. Look at their work & the savage hollows in it.”

“Do what?”

“Celebrate the closed present (represented as a box) by cutting the string & opening it.

Ignoring the wrapping. The hot, overfull, ripe sin spills over ready to be acted out.”

“You can wear it like a skin.”

“I cut the strings of her bikini; even though it was so tiny, as if it could have stayed up round nipping in on such breasts for ever. And I snipped the slip, close over her cunt, & pulled it round such a pair of thighs.”

His hand passed up her legs & caught between her tight pressed knees that gave a little, & the hand turned itself inside out. That smoothness couldn’t have been wasted as a shine & never been stroked & found to be smooth & soft. Those patterns couldn’t disguise the thighs & bum being a bit bigger than she thought was right. So it was better to get the jazzy colours off & show the muff to the world.

Eventually the train lumbered in pulling its large grey sleeping carriages. We each picked up our water bottle & then swung our heavy packs over one shoulder. Top, middle & bottom bunk but who was to sleep with the child. Me. Flashes of light at each station. The two women asleep purring softly. The child sleeping silently close by my arm & shivering as I slipped out from under the coarse blanket. I stood on the bunk side to reach right to the top sleeper. She smiled in her sleep as I gently parted her lips. The middle

sleeper stirred & negligently threw her arms out one hand palm up over the edge of her bunk. Her thumb & forefinger curled round my cock & began to twist & tighten. I had to go on tiptoe to lean in. Her free hand pinched the end of my cock. The woman in the top bunk didn't open her eyes but slowly sat up & turned her buttocks to face me. Her cunt spread over my mouth. She placed my hands on her breasts & held my hair with both hands pulling my head in & then relaxing it. She brushed my hands off, rolled onto her back & took hold of them again, & slid to the edge. Her knees locked behind my shoulders. The woman in the middle bunk was still, her lips gently tight on my cock; one hand twisting tight on my balls. The thumb on her free hand found my asshole & gaffed it. She let my cock slide a little guiding all the movement with pressure from the thumb thrust firmly up & held by the weight of my body. She licked & made a smacking sound with her lips so the woman on top could hear, who replied with a short whinny of pleasure. I rubbed each nipple, pushing with my thumb & slowly increasing the pressure. She tightened her legs. I pushed. She buried my face between her legs.

1978.

Lying awake on the top bunk in the train I felt once again the strange sensation of standing still, Of having caught up with my time & being suspended in an unrelated space waiting for where I was going or had been to relate to me again. Anything I knew seemed thrown in doubt.

The little fan set in the low compartment ceiling whirled.

What happened to the first glass beaker I can't remember, but there was one & it was broken. The second glass was thrown down the stairs by the child. It bounced off a couple of wooden step edges & then hit the stone slab in the doorway & exploded into cubed fragments. These pieces took on a much deeper blue colour than the whole glass had been. They flew everywhere; behind the door & the refrigerator, under the stone sink, up the stairs, through the open kitchen door & under the table that the cooker stood on, around the bowls & the rubbish bag & in a random scatter all over the open floor space. They also went through the hole in the stairs & down to the flight below & the space behind the front door & up the one step & slid into the downstairs room. The green room. That was the second glass. The third was scattered all upstairs. This glass was a jam-jar, half filled with water & holding five stalks of prickly leaves & blue thistle heads. It was thrown at the tiled floor of the downstairs room with considerable determination & the splinters of glass shot right across to the far side of the room, skidding under three chairs & a table, around the big blue-grey tub, behind the piano & into the bathroom.

“Pah!”

(We couldn't get away quick enough).

“What kind of a meal is this? Black rice?” Asked the girl partly in green. Her breasts riding out of her blouse now as she nodded to the music & held a full fork of black grains in front of her face.

“It's rustic black risotto,” suggested the girl in red, idly trying to shuffle her chair nearer the table & at the same time getting closer to me. I could see that the red skirt was shot

through by a golden yellow sheen, the cloth so filmy . . . a gossamer beside the heavy white tablecloth dazzling in the dim light.

She took my hand, leaned against my shoulder, “I’ve been told being by me is like being by a fire.”

What did she say? Has anyone ever said that to me? To anyone?

Her red skirt shone like a river at sunrise, intense dapples of white under-run by a crimson & grey current, as she raised a heel to cross her legs. She followed my eyes, she caught my shifting glance.

“Is it true?”

A flash of flame. For a few moments all that you’ve thought you would say flares up but then fades away. A crumpled black wafer of tissue left as a visible secret. A throat too dry to reply.

What part of me was this? These women at the table: was each one to be some voice made visible becoming available? And if so was it going to cause difficulties? Harm? Hurt?

“Shit! I’m easy to get on with.”

Who wouldn’t say that?.

I wouldn’t.

Figures haphazardly joined together over a meal each slowly becoming someone in your imagination & someone else in my memory & actually growing older somewhere else (with more clothes on). So your heart thumps as we say her breast peeps over a rim of

gold & black as she turns to speak & reaches towards my hand. Because it did. My heart stops. But she is cold.

I stroke the side of my nose as I look at the picture. You look at the page number, 39.

Who are the others? They too guide their presence to us from nowhere. Out of the blue incandescence of need. The tall seemingly ordinary one takes off her spectacles & gains a faraway look above a delicate enticing smile & stretches one side of her body. The one nearest to you & becomes spectacular. The flesh, ripples in your pond, is eased as her ache goes. You hear a sound like the first raindrops rustling through a tree. You realise she is whispering to you.

“The keel was like a massive icicle. It’s cold burned up through me . . .the pain choked me.”

Your heart stops as you hold her hand. It’s as if made of lead but more like a heavy cold liquid. You can’t hold the feeling. You are so shocked.

“Would you like to kiss me? Now!”

Your lips close. Your tongues penetrate & thrust & weld the folly. You slide together over a snowwhite bed for the first feeling time. (3,584th time). You gouge out a layer. in between the manipulations of lust, of permanence. A well-being. A picture of the soul painted on its own cave wall. A fan slowly opening & at the last flick its pattern making sense because it slowly waves & only having its achievement in that action.

The other figures move. Glide in between the unresolved furniture shapes that limit the room. Taking their places slowly. Forming a crowd knot around a table. Unconcerned that

the suggestive penumbra has started to divide & multiply the assembling intimate throng.

They know they have their turn. Seem assured of it.

“She says she feels so bereft. And will never find anyone to be happy with.”

“Until next time,” the listener adjures, “then whoosh!”

They mingle.

Adure.

Hazard a shape. A dark shadow forms a shoulder, a breast, a jowl. The space is stitched together by the play of flickering light. All the movements that had taken place in the room were now available for his imagination. A cluster of dishes & hands underpinned by a slowly shifting grey sheen silhouette hovered over the white table centrepiece.

“She doesn’t mention L. but she must be with him still.”

“He doesn’t count.”

“He would if he wasn’t there.”

He hopped on each foot. Turned, the keys were still jingling in her pocket as she found them.

“Did you say that?” He asked her.

“What? I haven’t spoken a word.”

He could see her hand slowly withdrawing from the outside coat pocket. Her face betrayed no contradiction, no raised eyebrow posing a query. She saw his look.

“I’ve never known such a quiet night in the countryside . . .no owl hunting, nothing rustling . . .certainly no voices,” she said defensively as she faded into the darkness. The fine crescent moon shone clearly now between the long drawn tufts of the clouds.

He turned right. A cry pulled his eyes back to the window.

“Hell, that’s too much. Come on . . .how much more?” Obdurate she knelt. But ruthlessly they drew her towards a chair & shook her into a bag which they tied at her neck. Cat in a bag.

“I can’t get anything in here.”

“What do you want?” They taunted. “You can wait.”

“I don’t want to. I want my share of the fun now.”

“Is it fun?”

“YES.YES.YES.”

“We know where you are. Take your clothes off.”

She gave a look at the ceiling telling it all & the bag was elbowed & kneed & bummed from the inside as she stripped.

“I want it now. I’ve done as you asked. I’ll play my part.” She smiled, her lips reddened.

“You can wait.” Three women chorused, pulling the bag full of woman into the centre of the room. One of them produced a knife out of her stocking.

“A stab in the dark . . .eh . . .” She started to slit open the sack.

There is the sound of torrential rain beating through tree foliage. The others gasp their pleasure. Their lips curl, waiting. The man in the window pulls the hood of his coat over his head, an abrupt movement, now he is alone in the shadow. Puzzled by the interior light he stays. He watches them eat. He doesn’t move away, the glimmer through the

window doesn't catch on his flesh. Brighter & brighter flashes of light dart around the room, flickering dots which become a steady luminous glow. The brilliance absorbs him. She looked over at him staring into the dark window. A break in the clouds, out raced the moon eager to be with us. His face seemed to be illuminated for a second. She called to him, "Come on it was abandoned years ago. I'm surprised its roof is still on."

Did he hear her?

But inside the room hardly a mouthful has been eaten since his first glance.

"Would this be possible," he thought aloud, "they look as though they feel nothing . . .but they do. I'm sure they do."

Their bodies showed it as they smiled at each other sitting with their legs well underneath the heavy table. The body of the woman in green & white is shaken like a wild horse as she grips the arms of her chair trying to maintain herself upright. The soft touch she feels on her ankle becomes a burn as the cord around it is pulled tight slowly raising that leg levering her back & pivoting her on one buttock. Her left hand searches for the cord as she shouts, "What's your game. That's my shoe off."

Then before she has really regained balance her other ankle is fastened & that leg raised.

Her legs apart the knees press up hard wide open against the underside of the table.

"This is a fuck up." She screams.

But although the other know something is happening they do nothing to help the victim.

She shook her head as she watched him, "It's like preaching to the birds. Come away."

Just his eyes shine under the hood as he shakes his head to her.

"Stay then," she snapped, "It won't get any better for her."

Did she know?

“You must all stay!”

You look at page number, 39. I look at the rings on my left hand. She impatiently reaches into her pocket for the keys.

A finger hooks her green knicker crutch down & a jet of oil rushes into her pubic hair, trickles down the fold where the thigh joins trunk. The lips of her cunt part slightly involuntarily as the green panties are pulled until they tear. She slips with them. It's as if he has an eye in the palm of his hand. He sees the ordinary girl slip over her friends torso. Her mouth forms an O as she holds the girl in the green & white blouse close in the chair. She fingers a zip. Kneeing her, making her comply, the girl jerks forward screwing her eyes shut, a hand over each breast protecting them.

“No. That's wrong. Not yet.” He shouted. “She couldn't have moved.”

All their ankles were tied. They were loosely linked criss-cross in a web. The only way out was under the table, but they were too late.

“Who held the girl half-dressed in green?”

“No-one.”

“As she slid on the oil her hands grasped the chair arms to save herself from slipping under the table, didn't she?”

Only you could ask that. She didn't want to leave.”

“No?”

“She lifted herself to relieve the pressure on her knees. “ They snapped in unison.

The one with the green & gold encrusted belt with its rim now frayed raises herself just a little. Her tongue sticks out as a finger rubs the rim of her asshole oiling it before slowly working its way in & out until it's right up. And as the finger thrusts up a mouth closes over her cunt its tongue & lips suck & lick & kiss. She throws her head back & shakes her hair her eyes open her mouth wide open the teeth bared. But she also winks at the woman to her left. "You try," she gasps between sharp intakes of breath.

"I never get a chance," This woman with liquid blue eyes replies.

"And if you did?" Challenges the other.

"I can manage my own affairs," answers the girl with a defiant laugh that was cut short by a finger curling into her mouth from the side. She bit down on it & found it was protected by thick leather. Her hands came up making an eloquent gesture of defence & were frozen there in the photograph.

They could go no further.

"So you're proving her point! She never gets a chance. That's unfair. Carry on. Keep the snap as a record, but develop the scene."

She made it sound a reasonable request.

"She what! Make your chance." She rocked hard back against him shaking her head violently.

The fat one at the table. Beautiful. Who we haven't met till now, groaned when she felt her ankles were being tied up to the side of her chair.

"Me!" She said in surprise, "I never . . .get . . .it . . .get stuffed . . .Ahh."

Her bulging black corset flap was cut as she spoke, a wisp of nylon divided her slit. She felt a cool touch as her cunt was released gaping open & a big cold peeled cucumber shoved up just up with cream & out & in with cream & out right out & up & out. The tip touched. She pushed down on it so hungrily he felt envious. It was engulfed right up to the edge of where it had been peeled. He felt alarmed & disheartened. She was urging him to give her more & give it harder. She rested her elbows on the table & rode the air as the cucumber impaled as she rose & sank looking directly into the eyes of the woman opposite, mouthing “Fuck you!” At her, “Fuck you!”

She felt her cunt frozen by the cucumber & needed something more to warm it. It felt empty. She felt empty. Her buttocks contracted expelling it. He felt her with his palm. It all felt numb. Her ankles were loosed. She stood up.

“Was she the one who mounted the other girl? Is . . .”

“No.”

She pushes the chair back, kneels to look under the white cut of the cloth.

“She goes under?”

“She could.”

But two girls take an arm each & pull her back. “Sit down.”

“Wait . . .”

“I know what you’re going to ask. They were close enough to grab her. And his view through the window distorted the perspective of the room so any distances were difficult to be exact about.”

He rubbed his left eye under the hood. Blinked. Another woman had appeared through a doorway beyond the table carrying a tray of steaming dishes & gleaming silver.

“But they didn’t exist in real space. Did they?” She wondered, looking up at the ceiling, trying to figure the cracks into bird shapes.

“How did he know that?”

“She told him later.”

She remembered the time precisely because of the way her mind had wandered trying for a cuckoo . . . you know, that tail. The way they were stuttering to sum up the day’s visit.

The text she was working on with a shag, not the bird, they had had to try out.

“It would be . . .”

“Had been a crazy stunt, the foolishness of the lasso, the fake but implacable ploughing of emotion into playing out a worn-out scenario.”

“Too strong the ‘worn-out’. How can something as necessary as that ever be played out?

It’s got to happen no matter what anybody wants.”

“Outdated?”

(Both were exasperated by this, they felt it as a challenge).

“I’m not accepting that,” she said emphasizing the not in an unconvivial way. So he kept his mouth shut. Not ‘quiet’. That word would have been lacking the control he exercised. The ‘not’ had carried the sliver of a taunt.

“We’re going to make him wade up to his neck through a river of shit. You know they’ll all do it for a touch of pussy. And he’s got such a hankering, such an obsession he’ll go every time. Snot; gob; shit. Through anything most of them.”

She laughed.

“You’re there waiting when they crawl out . . .aren’t you! With your own pathetic insecurities. Paying shame & guilt off with cunt!”

“Are you saying I’m fucked up by it . . .you’re right . . .I take them with me naked . . . but they have to pay.”

“You go along with it . . . it’s more than that. You depend on it, Don’t you.”

It might have been a question.

“You need it up & you take shit for it . . .just as much as you give . . .”

Through the window the figures of the room started to fuzz, to slip, to jerk, to elbow, to writhe & blur all as though nailed by time to the cross. Wanting to fade but unable to leave. Memory turned to a rock hard phantasy. To cold hard . . .

And the fat woman. Beautiful. Stiffened & asked.

“What page is it?”

“Page 39.”

“39. That’s a fuck awful number.”

“Yes. Worrying about nothing else but where the next fuck is coming from.”

The pain in his cheek intensified. He felt inside his mouth. Start again. Count the teeth.

Try each one to see if it wobbles. They all feel firm. Yet each one could have moved slightly. Press the gum. By now the gums felt sore. Leave the mouth alone. Keep the tongue still. Swallow & forget it.

“Will they do it this evening?”

“No. They decided against cutting half her face away.”

“They took the photos?”

“Yes.”

All the images of the women in the pictures had had their legs drawn in every position possible. They had been cartwheeled across the surface. They would float a leg up sideways in response to the slightest touch. The circle of availability.

(They needed anchoring like the fingers of a stopped clock).

Side stepping, pain for pain. Kicking out for pleasure.

“Do you know what time it is? I’m going (temporarily).” She pulled out a jack.

A red light went out.

“Is it time to leave?”

“Don’t be silly. Sit down!” She cried to everyone.

Someone started to fool around with the chiming clock in the other room, I could hear them giggling & flipping the little striking hammer. The light grew dimmer & in a rage at this foolishness I started up to fly out of the room but clumsily knocked against a chair on which all the visitors had flung their coats & I became entangled, almost engulfed by hats & scarves. They seemed to form into a wild animal springing out. I stopped, knowing at once I was in a dream & so did the panther for it had succeeded in escaping & skidded down the snow covered slope of reverie roughly bumping me out of the way.

“You think you know most about the past,” It growled. “Remember me?”

“You certainly haven’t accrued wisdom through years of storage,” I replied evasively.

And it was certainly serious. Where had it come from? A Stubbs painting? It must have floated in from somewhere.

“Can we start again. Oh please.” And she sank on the cold hard blade.

And screamed.

“Turn back, turn back . . . please turn back.”

Some of the other women looked at the food as if they could neither see nor hear her.

“Oh Christ. It wasn’t a knife before. Where did it come from?”

“They must know. They must be able to see her,” she nudged him, “They must be able to, it’s impossible to be that close & ignore someone. Send help in.”

“She doesn’t want it.”

“She fucking well does. You don’t care.”

“She asked for it.”

One, under a shadow, held a dripping knife shape in her right fist streaked with clots of dark crimson. Her left hand held up what looked like the cucumber tinged pink.

“It’s my blood.”

“It’s our blood,” The woman in red emphasized, pushing the fat woman down on her chair.

“Give that back to me, it’s mine,” rasped the enraged fat woman, her right hand grasped at the wrist of the woman holding the cucumber. But that woman cut her with the knife.

The fat woman howled, “Oh why have you done this,” as she bled profusely.

“You did it yourself.” They mocked.

And she felt as though she had.

“Then it’s your cut, your wound as well,” she spoke through her teeth.

They fell back. Were redrawn by the shapes & shadows of the plate. She narrowed her eyes, focusing beyond the confused gathering around the table, & saw a cross between a bed & stage made over with black velvet cloth being wheeled into an open space. A girl with spiked white hair was pushing it. She wore a black bolero top spangled with stars; her lower body & legs were naked & painted silver.

* * *

A large tear welled out of her right eye, dissolved a little mascara from the eye-liner, rolled to the top of her cheekbone & hung there with the bluish tinge unevenly distributed in its globule. His cheeks were wet. He brushed the tear away with his fingertips & lightly tweaked her ear.

* * *

The stranger came back from the banging. Two new sticks at hand.

* * *

The drums thumped & she pumped up & down.

* * *

They WOKE up with a START.

NOW YOU HAVE HAD THE SPINE OF A LOVE'S HISTORY. And its spaces.

Here, at last, a list of contents.

1. Put among the noise with a golden tiger, "Divide," he said.

The tiger laid him low first for smelling, then for not.

2. At last the games Stop. The rotten pipe stuck up & the lake gurgled down it to Hell.

3. This care & many other confusions at their feet they trip. Knowing nothing they balanced the snow with elephantine confidence.
4. “Share the spoil ‘it’” she said. Tu veux. I love myself in gold, said the advert.
5. The donkey bridge placed the gas piping at his feet & begged himself. The money flapped slowly to its perch.
6. Then the legs moved as the whip drove. She rushed past & knocked t . . . dead with a mighty paw.
7. The cunning bow at once-----let fly out of the barrel into the blue.
- 7a. The kite touches ice near your lips.

“The trouble is Peter that arrow doesn’t point to an imaginary land,” she said, “to me at least.”

And that summed it up so well. The sorrowful tremor had gone from her voice.

“Does it hit the heart?”

BARREL SNOW TIGER

“You’ve got barrel; snow; tiger now you need to get zoo & picnic in.”

“Zoo? Visit the zoo! We’re in the middle of the fucker. And it’s no picnic. There you are, both words.”

In the city posters on the walls talked of my lost love.

**As I picked a flower a blue diamond was cut in the sea by morning sunshine
pointing out the shoals.**

The tide ripped yet again & your golden hair became a dark flag under icy waves.

**We ran crouching naked clutching each other fighting the intense cold & sowed
drops of light around us for a few seconds & then were gone.**

In the earth, a footprint.

In the sky the wind dusting your cheek, an empty banner.

Our last kiss tells her shadow the way.

Behind the wall I pull her onto my back like a fool

Hoping to bag her for myself. She gives

A wave through leaves as she whispers a few magic words

A stranger now

Ugly

Belonging to others.

1983.

She slumped against the cold hard stone. On the walls the words **ADAPT** and **IMPROVISE** glowed dimly white. She wished he could warm her up. He leaned down to tussle clumsily with his child, a sleeve tore off the old coat. They stood back. The boy took the sleeve & held it over his face & became an ELEPHANT. They giggled. All the time the child held onto the buttercup.

When I say I love you the words are lost in the chasm between the heart & the limelight with the stalking eye turning everything upside-down, deriving colour from some unknown source & pasting our affection's experience up like a piecemeal poster. No wonder we wonder 'who is that' & say 'That's not me' in front of clear likenesses.

I like to finish with a true story.

1974.

When the dog came bouncing back to me I pointed down again at the dumbbell bone drawing on the cracked green lino. It swiped my hand away with a paw & seized my coat cuff growling through his jaws & wildly shaking his head, setting all its body to tug me into a game. And try as I might the dog never saw the charcoal drawn bone again.

The fire was blackening the bridge

But she crossed

A spark, a gentle touch she left

To roar through my heart every day.

