

THE WASTED DAY.

....."whenever you like & the place will be just where you & I are"

ONE.

The first thing I saw was a neon sign 'WASTED' slapped together ad hoc in mixed letters & colours: a green W, yellow ASTE, the S flickering constantly, a red D & a blue full stop, with just enough greylight of night for the word to glow. It was wired above the balcony jutting out over a piece of wasteland just across the road from an alley I emerged from at full speed early, barely after dawn. A spindly girl with a russet duffel coat worn with its hood over her head & billowing around her like a cloak of leaves stood next to another girl in a tight black bomber jacket smoking & jeering at the few passers-by. They posed as if guarding the morning although to them it was the end of the night. The girl with the darkly made-up eyes dressed as a fighter for some Baroque dream drew a line in the air with a finger obviously, I now know, emphasising a point to her companion, but at that time I mistook it for a sign of recognition partly because I thought she resembled a friend & I didn't want to seem to dismiss the greeting & more urgently because I needed somewhere to slink into. To lick my wounds. I half waved back. Not hopeful.

"Who are you? Scarface." She called in a classy voice, "Is that the best you can do? Is your arm still asleep? Shin up the drainpipe, Romeo." They hugged each other. "We're fed up with each other here."

A garland of flowers lay at their feet on the cast-iron grille & low in the window behind them some candles' blue-flamed flickering reflections danced & wavered in the draughts.

"Let your hair down." I ventured. I could see the rest of the neon sign was dead. It was the number ten 10. A crow landed heavily on a pile of rubbish in the open lot.

"We haven't been here that long." Offered the tall girl in a hoarse but pleasant voice showing a shot silk dress ripped to tatters under the protective coat she now unaffectedly threw back to lean her elbows on the rail engagingly. Her grey eyes flicked up & down the man & came to rest on his lips then moved up to his eyes & stopped to take in his full look.

"We've just got back. And don't know where we are anyway." Her friend uneasily tossed off a round woollen hat behind into the room & ploughed her fingers through her short black hair, unzipped the jacket to its waist buckle, adding, "I need to come up for air."

"Listen. I'm stretched out." I could still see the crow out of the corner of my eye attacking a lump of garbage with its head on one side. "Is there room for one more for breakfast?" I watched the puzzled grimace pass between them change to curiosity as my guts lurched & contracted as they always did when I tried for a pass. "In bed. As usual." I quickly finished.

"Close your eyes & you wish, said the witch, you've got three." Said the vampire girl.

"Start counting & tell us about it." Rejoined her friend, "And they'd better be good numbers."

"Obscene she means." And her black-meshed knees gave the start of a suggestive wriggle which didn't quite make it up to her breasts so she irresolutely shuffled towards the lanky girl now composed & entwined along the balcony rail who held up a finger & grinned.

"I wish for one stuffed," I slowly began, "Chocolate roll for breakfast in bed"

They visibly relaxed. A normal reply. Squealed. And shook their heads. "No."

"I . . . wish . . . for . . . Two stuffed rolls. Is that enough?"

"No." They said with mock chagrin & the dark girl's hands tightened on her tiny waist as she tossed her head challengingly, "There are three of us & you make four."

"That should do then."

"No."

"You chose?"

"Your wish is granted." They looked sideways simultaneously at the silent figure who nodded but didn't show a glimmer of interest.

The crow hopped nearer a mattress on which now I could see a large bundle of rags & plastic sacks surrounded by cans.

"Go round the side down the steps through the railings & let yourself in then follow the dirty footprints." They were pointing in the direction & hitting themselves & each other all at the same time.

"My name's Margarita & mine's Astarte," they yelled in unison as I ducked round the corner. "What's yours?"

As I entered a swarthy figure pushed past me going out shrouded in smoke, saying nothing, keeping strictly to the part now after having attained the perfect (more or less) state & was fully supplied, off to work a good pitch having been saved by two well endowed angels.

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"I suppose you want me to flush out those two girls like ptarmigan below the snowline so you can take pot shots at them?"

"Where the name of Hell did you find them? Get on with it." Rosine menaced his ear with two fingers held like a gun barrel. "You haven't said a word about the third person on the balcony that morning. It's no good trying to build up the picture of him by little pieces tossed to us by the others. You've got to get it over in one go. Do you agree with that? Discover his character with one defining action."

"I didn't meet anyone who was one-dimensional." He was annoyed he'd mentioned his mistake in seeking refuge thus giving Rosine a chance to grill him.

"I'm saying that deliberation now is futile, they've gone, two or three words will do. You can't change anything."

"Things happen you think are impossible."

"Things are planted."

"Must every word be bitten down on like a miser with each shilling testing if it's genuine? Rosine. To see every time if it can carry the true weight of its meaning for you. Rosine. It might cause you to bite your tongue & draw blood. I know you'd like that. Rosine. Why this fear that a counterfeit figure might be slipped past your guard? Would it matter if their face seemed to fit? Would anyone know? Why the dissatisfaction with a finely detailed exposition when possible? Seems fairer to me. Gives him a chance to redeem some mistakes. I think you just want it turned over quickly leaving him pinned down, flattening the story from a particular angle easier to take. Another specimen for that drawer where the proofs of inevitable infidelity are kept. I might uncover facts you don't want to know with a gentle touch"

By now the crow must have been tussling with a string of offal. If I've got the time right.

"Shut up & give me a list of any words & I'll sketch her picture to start with anyway. She was a . . . ?"

"Frog."

". . . because she passively held her buttocks & kicked both legs out like a swimmer when being fucked on her back. And made such an effort she had her eyes bulging out of their sockets while her lips became distorted triangular, pecking & sucking . . ."

"You seem to have access to a few intimate pieces of information there," he noted dourly.

"She was a . . . ?"

"Lap Dog."

". . .because when she snarled out the juicy bit of gossip she showed all her teeth top & bottom & the gums . . ."

"You must have been on the receiving end like me," he said sourly.

"No. I was better than the mirror for her. I inveigled & prompted with additional material. She liked that even when it was untrue."

"Before we continue. Is this true?"

"You'll have to guess. You're giving me the nouns (so far) chosen completely at random without any collaboration from me. What do you think?" Rosine wasn't truly coy.

"But is she acting in its (the frog's) name then? Truly?"

"Well, she never gets really cold while performing, quite the opposite she says; & she hasn't (so far) turned speckled & blotched green although I could ask but I've heard she does croak in a diabolically interesting way some times. And she may oblige."

"Feigning orgasms?"

"No. Nor by turning green, but being green as a ploy before she gets going. Slow, fumbling & hesitant, if that's what she estimates is needed to arouse you. Or coming over a bit reluctant, although that's more difficult for her to fake."

"Why?"

"No real reason except I've heard she enjoys joining in nicely & diversifying the action. What everyone would call . . . a good stuff . . . accommodating." And deliberately lamely, "A bit of a duvet."

"But surely out of necessity?"

"You could never make her act that way. And although it did appear arbitrary according to her mood & she did seem to have to want to become it, but if she did . . . Lo & behold." Quite fulsome for Rosine.

"An internal need? Involuntary perhaps?" He persisted.

"Why is it you don't want her to have made a decision to get on with it herself? Why do you want her to be forced to comply then & there by an unnamed & irresistible urge to do or have done what your word now throws up . . . O.K." (& Rosine's difficulty & apprehension showed in that she was unable to explain clearly her reluctance to divulge what he only had a glimmer of. Her thoughts on the arbitrariness of the playful but intentionally damaging judgement of the character were still nebulous.). "She can mix it. But there is the question of . . . retrospective timing."

"You sense that is an impediment? Oh. It's not allowed?" He was surprised.

"I suppose we've already been through this mix-up & yet I can't remember any of it until you say a word. She was a . . .?"

"Warthog."

"No that's you. She hadn't a blemish anywhere. To begin with. She had the nose of an arrogant woman according to the diagrammatic drawing by Joannes ab Indagine (1537) but I paid no mind to that."

"Is this the emotional zodiac you promised? If so you can't pick & chose."

"And you can cut out the rhyming." Said Rosine emphatically. "Next will be Magog & Gog."

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Now I think I know who the third silent bystander was on the balcony. Should I follow in their footsteps?

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TWO.

Beyond the trunk full of rags & lingerie lying just as she'd left them years ago, the bed was a confection starting to glow yellow as the morning light streamed in the slots of a grille catching her face on the pillow where it concentrated the girl's beauty into the slash of her open mouth.

Why are cheap tricks theatrical? Because they are soon discovered? I wonder. If never, or only later uncovered, they are passed off as strategy or guile. Any way round I was had. But a little helping of self-deception each day is necessary. Had I let myself be aware, had the obvious discrepancies in the mode & order of appearances triggered caution I would have stopped, turned & tiptoed stealthily out of the room leaving my hopes behind. Slapped down by reason. This trap was hinted at. The book was open. A place indicated.

At the sight of the sleeper my steps became noiseless.

You go ahead & picture her as you like. I'm stuck with the image I saw.

"So you know what she was really like?" She whispered, "And are going to tell me?"

"No more than you. So how can I tell? You couldn't go on her looks."

"She changed?"

"Never as far as I know."

I reached for the book under her hand with a coolheadedness necessary, in my perception of the situation, for the stealth required for stealing. Before I touched the book she pulled her hand away in a natural sleepy motion.

"Careful before you pick up that book. It might contain the plot. That costs. It could block out the chance of staying on the light side & leave you scratching around in the dark with barely enough scraps to keep you going then what will you have left to pay the ransom? Better crawl under the bed. Hide & wait. Keep low."

"It's easy to know what to avoid . . . "

"And you're looking at it."

"But I want to know who & what to embrace."

"I've told you. Get under the bed. Do one of your lists under there."

"Do I get to call her bluff?"

"If you like. I'll look up that other silent one to help."

Either I pretend to forget or have to explain why you need illusions. Mainly the delusion of usefulness.

I smile at the wall & then piss up it. Who knows? Who cares?

Tangible acts: you know & care.

We could try this in slow-motion focusing on the lurid details of what's happening. While it's impossible for you, hidden but present, to be oblivious because their voices will carry.

At least you'll miss their scornful looks that way.

And hear scorn in every word.

Their exchange would have been galling, I know, but I'm sure I would have consoled myself by saying it was banal yet still had a gnawing anxiety that I could have found something attractive in their language & been seduced.

Anyway get under the bed, she urged, you can lie safely there & think till they come.

Listen before you decide on any action.

At the point when they micturate in flight crows glide. Watch out for that momentary glide.

I was expected to slide under the bed like a wraith & commune with dust & cobwebs by Rosine if I took her capricious advice.

"I said 'sneak' under. And I didn't want to get involved in this tangle. You were out on your own, so you said, I didn't anticipate having to hang around giving you an alibi. Since I only get a dislocated & fragmentary story to fit in with I never really know if I'm wanted just to carry the can."

"Feeling raw. Eh?"

"Fragile. I don't know if I can handle this next scene." Rosine sighed. "If we get it, because it looks as though it's boiled down to that pair of freaks larking about." (Rosine made it obvious that she didn't believe they were old enough to put any real feeling into whatever they got up to).

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As soon as he slipped out of sight Isabella sat up in bed & as the two girls crept in the room rolled onto the cover & lay like a shower of gold. She indicated with a spade-like movement of a hand, a puzzled frown & a conspiratorial smile that she thought he was under the bed. It was a coercive pose she adopted but not seductive.

Margarita shed her rags, she was bandaged on one thigh so she was slow as she went to kneel but lithely started to ease under the drape with serpentine undulations of her back.

Her head emerged almost immediately, red-faced she screamed, "The cupboard's bare. No one. What's the game?"

Astarte slapped both knees with her hands in delight as she crouched to check & head butted Margarita's arse as she pivoted to get up. "Now the old woman's dog won't get its bone," she guffawed.

Isabella sat on the edge of the bed & yawned, "Must have been a dream. Cut it out you two," she added languidly. Knowing any interference was pointless she began to shift through the bed getting more agitated as the object she sought didn't turn up, "Missing," she said wryly without a hint of how she felt. Her hand slipped under the pillows & she yelped withdrawing it & watched aghast at the cut bleed.

By now the two girls had silently squared up heads down like rams & were waiting to charge into the scuffle of fore-play & lock shoulders. Astarte had zipped up her jacket front & buttoned its cuffs. Margarita was stark naked, her clothes had had to last a long, long time & she wasn't going to pull them on for the fray.

The fights between Margarita & Astarte were frequent, short & always looked as though they were filmed in slow-motion. And Margarita always won. And she finished up with all the bite marks as Astarte fought dirty.

"Cut yourself?" Margarita threw a disparaging glance at Isabella nursing her hand. This move distracted Astarte for a second when Margarita grabbed one of her arms pulled it up knocking her off balance & twisted Astarte completely flat on her back. Astarte's teeth locked on Margarita's wrist.

"That's as far as you go," instructed Isabella.

"Pass me my knife & keep out of it," ordered Margarita.

Isabella handed it over warily with a querying look as Margarita balanced her knees on Astarte's arms who began to struggle violently for the first time as their scuffles usually didn't go this far. Astarte struggled more & thrashed her legs up & down but was unable to dislodge the limpet Margarita.

She slit the sleeves.

She slit the chest.

And cut the belt.

"Jacket off," she grinned, "Pass the rope."

Isabella seemed more reluctant still but did toss the rope into Margarita's hand who executed several fast figures-of-eight around Astarte's wrists & bit the loose end between her teeth. She half sat Astarte up who had now completely surrendered.

She slit the elastic joining the two cups of Astarte's bra.

She slit the straps.

"Breast's bare," she smiled & pinched the rosy nipples hard taking her time.

While indicating, with a flick of the knife, to Isabella who caught the bottom of Astarte's pants & tugged. They slipped off. Isabella got back into bed looking ruffled.

Margarita jerked Astarte onto her back again & slid the flat of the dagger down her victim's belly into her pants & kept thrusting until the blade slashed through the gusset.

She yanked the blade up & gashed a slit in the lace.

"Open," she laughed. "And available. Now where is he." And she stared at Isabella who recoiled slightly & shook her head.

So Margarita crouched low over Astarte's eyes keeping her cunt out of danger from her rival's teeth with her feet on Astarte's upper arms pinning her down hard while grasping the rope end pulling it up she pissed into her face in revenge for the torment & impotence she had felt when Astarte stole her lover.

Astarte saw a rim of dry juice between Margarita's thighs encircling a frill of damp pink flesh. She saw the droplets of glutinous honey hanging on the hair like dew. She saw the delicate shudder open up a pulsating hole beside the tiny lizard's back before a jet of narcotic piss hit her face. Astarte breathed in the liquid as she buckled her legs apart in a last desperate attempt to gain enough purchase to kick herself free under Margarita's body.

At that instant the fire hit her guts as her cunt scorched.

She smelled the burnt feathers from a thousand feet up.

She smelled the scorched fur from a thousand feet down.

As death penetrated her brain & a foolish voice weakly cried, "Let go. Let go."

Somewhere beyond. The agony corkscrewed her into a realm of the most lucid sensual objectivity. A heaven where she'd always wanted to be.

She found she had been tethered to a post like a wild Mongolian bitch left to be ravaged by wolves. Here she was, on heat, howling, arms & legs rigid, breasts hard & spurting milk unable to contain her cries for more, more pleasure.

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"Harder. Get it right up. Whip her through the crack & make her squeal. There's no tenderness in Hell." Margarita spat in his ear. Pleading.

He decided to keep Margarita for later & manacled her wrist to her ankle & told her so. Then flitted in the wink of an eye.

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Margarita lay crab-wise cursing the tight ratchet pinching her flesh while Isabella, now with her black boots on with the golden snake down each seam glinting as a foot dangled next to Margarita's long body prodded her backbone lightly but menacingly with the toe-end. She felt safe & off guard now Margarita was disabled & began to wonder if she dared hit or cut her. Why did she want to torment her? At that thought Isabella found herself stretching out involuntarily on the bed & shivered under the cold touch of the steel darting between her boots before she could gasp No. And up the glassy skin of her legs to rest its sharpness on the over-heated swell of her cunt that bulged as she arched her back trying to get swallowed into safety by the bed. She felt helpless; horrible; she whimpered, even though she noticed in the crazy way sometimes a thought has no notion of appropriateness, she wasn't real fearful, she just wanted it to last forever. A word choked on her dry bulging lips as the blade cut into the fat lump (& the thought) so in a trice her torso became as if boned & her breasts slopped over her hands as she opened herself up offering & wanting to burst over her assailant like a bubble.

As the cut deepened Isabella thrust a hand either side of the rent & pulled it apart holding tightly to the seams of the cat suit on her thighs as she jerked time after time to force her pussy out. Her face became misshapen with the strain of all the weight on her neck. Her eyes sickle-shaped. Her mouth another wound.

Margarita half leaned half stood beside her & said, "Are you sure? You weren't when you first came here. I saw that. Shall I call him?" Margarita swung the dagger by its pommel slowly inching Isabella over as she flinched to avoid a cut until she was on her belly still splaying her legs. Margarita put the dagger handle in her mouth to hold its point steadily intimidating on Isabella's back. With her free hand she reached in between her legs & tugged out from a secret place, a delicately carved piece of wood, a little figure with an hourglass body finely lined to show the smile & eyes. She pushed it head first up Isabella's bum & chuckled, "That'll stop you filling up with water from the bottom & he doesn't want to see what's next." Margarita rose onto her toes of the free foot to give herself the extra clearance for a swinging cutting blow. She could feel the damp planks & heard them creak with her concentrated weight.

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Isabella had been rubbed with castor oil & a mix of chalk & sulphur thrown against her till she was coated pale yellow. It was to keep the sharks away.

As an extra safeguard a piece of ginger had been placed between her teeth as she knelt on the gunwale making ready to dive. She bit hard into it releasing the oil onto her lips.

Seaweed fronds curling under the bow & along the keel were speckled with tiny blood red dots.

As Margarita's animosity dug in the dagger up to its hilt the force thrust Isabella into the black seawater, a splash of blood & bubbles. The salt cut like a thousand razor blades.

She still dreamed she was returning for the beautiful scallop glimpsed on her last deep dive. Closing her eyes while surrounded by the intricate waves of the blue abyss Isabella

didn't see the inky cloud within the crimson seaweed fronds as she swam to the spot to begin her plunge. Her ivory skin was stained purple as she struck through this patch. An octopus tendril fine & almost invisible twined round her ankle to be followed immediately by a coarse tentacle with a rougher grip that stopped Isabella's downward glide abruptly. She pulled her short knife slashing the octopus arm off with a quick blow but another took its place & another so she was easily captured & held face up on the surface of the ocean, arms & legs entwined & splayed, to float like a enchanting bait. Drifting, veiling with a beautiful semblance, the seamonster that lurked, a horrid mass, just below her body. With a noxious hidden cargo of horror comic evil the octopus held her completely helpless, its beak pushing & rasping her skin as it inched along her back, down her spine to the little figure hiding its face by plugging her anus. Here the octopus stopped its probing.

"This image of the woman as a piece of flotsam is another swindle."

"Wait. I was just going to slide its beak into her cunt to complete the frivolous allegorical union."

"She's there to dazzle the eyes of the poor fuckers following this with their fingers & noses. The cephalopod is the wreckage of an ego held together by your voluptuousness. You are enthralled by the obvious erotic enslavement."

"I was going to have its big round eye lodged near the little wooden man stuck up her bum & give a description of the octopus's thoughts & feelings about it."

"Trying not to tarnish your image? Giving the 'ogdoad' the load." Said a muffled voice.

The ink of the octopus is a sweet poison, it covers up, it keeps out & it blots out what light makes possible.

The octopus is dissatisfaction. Its eye is mechanical only viewing phantoms.

The octopus is the night. We all feel that, but it is masculine. And that complicates matters.

The octopus is anonymous. No one in their right mind would give one a name & yet we can feel its need to caress to embrace to squeeze to possess something other than seawater.

The octopus is an expert at duplicity; it can't help it having so many members.

The octopus is very good at grasping things. It is lucky to be so versatile.

"I'm really worried about you, little man, with your head stuffed up an arsehole. I don't suppose you were asked permission?"

"One sphincter is much the same as another to be shoved up against your will," came the muffled response.

"That was really unkind, although it did help me decide what to do with my beak, where to put it & give the body a thrill. By the way, are you the muffled voice we've been hearing at times?"

The little wooden toes wriggled.

"That explains it. And the shit you've been shouting." The octopus looked thoughtful,

"I'm keeping her flesh hostage as disclosing flesh for me."

"Sounds reasonable," came the expected muffled agreement, "Although you put it a bit woodenly."

"That's your way of thinking, not mine," The octopus retorted, two or three of its tentacles, feeling slightly put out, their elasticity of cogitation being questioned, nudged each other & one carefully placed a sucker on the feet of the stopper & popped it out.

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Startled, Isabella gasped as she woke & shot upright in an orgasm swinging her boots wildly as if caught up in an orgy & resisting blindly wanting to be alone, not knowing she was alone. Wanting to be elusive. To hold her body for herself. To prevent its flesh from being engulfed, from dissolution into a writhing mass. Flailing, fighting off the phantasmagoric groping hands caressing her breasts with cold hard touches she became, by their groping, instantly covered in gooseflesh that shattered the sensations with a quiver. Isabella was awake & tangled up in a sheet drenched in sweat & blood.

Isabella knew she looked good with the burning colour of the wedding robe reflecting off her stained body showering iridescent droplets of light like inextinguishable molten steel sparks.

But inside, which is the same, she felt bad despite the frenetic juggling of her spirit. She had not been reached, taken.

She touched the pillow & it fell apart in countless feathers.

There was a clatter as she freed herself from the bed.

She opened the window.

She watched for him to come. How did she feel? Why didn't you say she was waiting expectantly? She didn't know for she hadn't had the unseen kiss yet. She would observe his approach she decided & then decide. And what could happen to dim the fire, to distort

her response? Wait & see. Will she be moved by the sight of him? Touched? Will a doubt corrupt the joy she might be determining to take up, just because she can forget? Must she forget so many things to be happy? If she does she will be unhappy.

He appeared on the pavement below the steps. Isabella saw him halt & take out a crumpled fistful of white fivers & use this bunch of money to wipe his brow with an expression as if distracted by some momentous thought. A woman brushed past & nearly into him, a ravishing girl, a cruiser, who had just happened to lean in his way as he stopped.

"Fanny," Isabella choked on the word. And seethed as she saw her bend sinuously low to move the box with which he had barred her way. After a short conversation the girl lightly touched him on the chest with the back of her hand & looked down. It was an uncalculated gesture but affirming like a smile. A few moments later she repeated the tap, again with the same delicate stoop accompanying it.

"Fanny. A cheap piece of fanny," Isabella fumed as she hastily belted a coat over her naked body & slipped into the first pair of shoes she found. But she still had time to think it was a mistake to utter those words trying to make out his pick-up was a no-body. How could she have passed him by when it was written large in his very look that he was a ready roll & could be taken in for a big reward. Three taps & he'll hold her hand.

"Very ready. Shit." If she didn't part them in time he could kiss that entire stake goodbye (& my arse) & so could she.

Grabbing an essential bag containing a rough sketch on several sheets of what she hoped they could start to do, the door slammed behind her & a pair of green shoes flew to the

self-interested task of carrying their mistress with the speed of love light out to prevent a chance meeting becoming a beguiling tryst. Overlapping her powerful feeling that she had to get between them in haste was another, no less intense: that she would like to see what happened if their meeting took its course without her arriving to break it up. This venture was of course, a dare accompanied in the thought by an instant switchback to square one as usual if she didn't like the way things went.

'I could saunter past & stop as if surprised & invite them both to join me.' Her shoes pinched at the thought & took her a quick but dangerous way hopping over the electrified lines on the elevated track & up along the platform to a gap leading down a ramshackle set of steps into the busy street.

"So that was it? The passing of a former life. Gone with barely a trace left. All that it was worth over in a few seconds of miscalculation. By a silly unspoken dare? Can't you say she had stumbled, say the shoe heel caught in a crack & delayed her? Wouldn't that have been better?"

"If only she had stopped to pull a few clothes on? If, if, if. Where would it end? What do you want? The scene captured forever until granite turns liquid in a general meltdown?"

Isabella had lost sight of the couple, blocked by the turns in the stairway, before she hit the throng on the pavement & at ground level she would need a happy chance to catch them if they had moved. She stopped as if purposeful but her desire to confront them was withering away as the falseness of her anger & a natural easiness took hold in her.

Precisely at this moment I saw the two figures she had lost & took them to be lovers posed in a dark green shadow as if carved in Agillite, close by the spot I had arranged to

meet Rosine. The man had his left hand clenched above the girl's head holding her blue ponytail like the tufts of a rare turnip. She defiantly but in disarray clutched a wad of papers close to her waist in her left hand while her right one hung onto the arm holding her hair. In his right hand close to the belt buckle he held a pistol. She had blood running from her nose.

And at that I moved to rescue the girl.

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Rosine smirked, "Possibly only you could have called that a lover's tiff. She was a hostage."

"Each was touching the other tenderly as I observed them . . . from close proximity."

"No." Suggested Isabella. "She was a thief."

"Rubbish." Rosine insisted, "She was a victim."

"Wasn't she stealing him away . . . from . . ." Isabella gave up, unsure how to put what she felt.

"Why did they kiss?" I enquired, "To fool me?"

"You didn't mention that." Rosine snorted, "Trying to pull a fast one."

"Hadn't they seen you?" Isabella wondered, "And hadn't the other one pulled a gun, Rosine? Couldn't it have been a ploy?"

"How did you envisage accomplishing her 'rescue'? What was so different about her?"

Rosine had paused to glare at Isabella demanding her silence, "That made you want to act?"

"Oh you can answer that jibe yourself Rosine . . . or ask Isabella . . . she's got the answer on the tip of her tongue."

"But she . . ." Isabella began after her usual delay from the cue, "Wasn't supposed to be there. I was."

"You?" Rosine & I said with wary astonishment.

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THREE.

Here we have the raw essence of the fragility of fate. Anticipate nothing except a tangle.

Or to be nabbed by caprice.

On an absolutely unnecessary tube journey I was reading the words of a book published in THE HAGUE. I had taken to opening this book at random hoping that way to light on a page the substance of which would make sense to me.

"You need order." Said a sweet low voice into my ear. DUTCHY. I never did learn how to spell her name because I couldn't spell when we met. (Much later she said you can call me Margarita. It's a name I go by).

Had she seen me scribble a note in a margin.

"I never do that," she pointed out.

"I need inner seeing," I quickly noted from the page.

"You need to ascend from the natural position . . ." she started seriously.

"To the Dutch?" I guessed.

She turned to me, her full lips distended as if permanently smiling or questioning.

Ready to go one step further, but that is the way with some human beings, perhaps that is all they are.

"I'm acting at the moment. I've started on joy & pain. Good. No?"

I nodded thinking whatever I said would be the wrong way of speaking. To someone so intense.

"Perhaps a more casual start would have been acceptable? No?"

I shook my head. She regarded me thoughtfully.

"I have an impulse," she confessed, "It must be evident. No?"

"You name it," I encouraged her. I twisted towards her.

"If I clarify it I will be embarrassed."

"No." We said together.

"If we sleep together that is going too far first time out? No?"

The twine was unwinding in my head. I'm sure I looked blank.

"What do you do? Exchange views. Nothing too abstract? Should there be any touching.

Yes? She asked pensively.

"Whatever you anticipate . . . will . . . perhaps." I tried. It seems it sounded O.K.

"I anticipate getting it on. Over? Soon. But not too soon. Yes. Have I got the right meaning with anticipate. But I don't get it, do I? Because anticipate doesn't come up with the goods does it. No?"

"Not very often. There's no hard & fast rule but I think the word you wanted was 'desire'.

You . . ."

"Yes. Desire." She exclaimed with joy. "Are you allowed to say that so soon?"

"I think so."

"You think so. How does that go with saying it?"

"It goes rather well. And with other things, as well."

"Other things?"

"You know . . . caresses."

"So the first time out you can have desire & caresses?"

"Well most of the time . . . possibly."

"And then bed two," she held a finger up. "Three," she held two fingers up. "How many times do you have to wait?"

"If you fancy it so much you don't have to wait."

"But if I show what I want doesn't that mean I'm not imagining it any more? If the backwards comes forward the fancy has gone? Yes?"

"Only if it's a blatant come on . . . I think." The thread was running out.

"Ah. A little thrust to one side is O.K. that preserves the fancy, but overdone, a big wriggle kills the fancy?"

"Sometimes the imagination needs a big shake up."

"Toss up? Is that what you mean? So if I spin a coin now I can chose? Quickly she pulled open her crocodile skin handbag, an incongruous accessory, a red purse, then three coins shone between finger & thumb. "All three the same & you can have me." Her eyes became saturnine, "If you want me."

"You're missing out belonging. People usually like that. Even if they have to pay for it."

"Are you serious. Paying money for it? No." She slipped the coins onto her lap.

"Anything that grants them possession. I mean even temporarily."

"That deranges me. Is that right?"

"Switches you off. Do you mean?"

"Cuts off the impulse. I think." She was learning fast.

There were three heads. "You have full possession, temporarily, if you have the impulse."

She looked hopeful (I thought).

"Save the impulse for later, we'll talk about items of interest over a coffee." I said casually.

(Dutchy's face drained to ghastly white in the way I knew showed dangerous, murderous anger & her arms stiffened as if made of marble in an instant. Then it was gone. And in that hoarse voice she used when not speaking in her mother tongue told me what sounded so innocent to me translated back to horror in her head.)

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"Oh you fell for it," Rosine sniffed, "Dutch. The nearest she'd been to Amsterdam was Holland Park selling a bag of tulips. Nice pull though. I hope you wrote that down Isabella.

"She was." Isabella conjectured, "She looked it."

"How do they look? Don't tell me." Cut in Rosine.

"Why would she want to be Dutch if she wasn't? I asked. "I can't think of anything useful she gained in the lie."

"Useful? What a typical reply." Rosine took his sleeves folded their arms pulling her face up to his, "You said it. That was enough. She didn't know where she was from."

"She did have that guttural . . . Isabella tried a last straw.

"And so will you with a thick lip." Rosine threatened.

"What were those 'items'? By the way." Isabella avidly gathered 'topics' just in case.

Rosine had a far-away look, "Her family I expect."

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We can construe what happened we don't have to know.

She was tossed away like that plaything, that silver spoon, that . . . who was it?

I doubt that.

She was the impetus for the drop.

She was always inciting waywardness.

She was shafted for an acorn.

She was rampant.

Was that the actual expression?

"That's right," Rosine condemned, "She was an expert in dropping her knickers, if she had any on."

"That's a slur, Rosine, there was a lot of pressure on us all at that time," Isabella protested, even though, much to her chagrin, there had never been any on her.

"Or was it at a hat? Very often all she'd got on. She was always scantily dressed," Rosine didn't object but it was a carefully selected comment.

Those eyes.

She rode to the last.

"She was riding some hobbyhorse."

Up a phantom road.

"She was certainly stimulating, Rosine." Isabella couldn't fathom why. But then the line in a song comes & goes.

"Up an old track. We thought we recognised the landscape as it unfolded but we were mistaken." Rosine sounded bitter about that more than you'd expect. "Yet again."

"She got there?"

"She had been there."

"I didn't see her waiting," Isabella wondered & bit her lip.

"She was insightful about men & no mistake," Rosine congratulated her own perspicacity.

"She made one though, Rosine," Isabella pointed to the door, "Remember?"

"She escaped." Rosine was thoughtful. "That was enough."

She was good at subterfuge.

She was too tall.

She was a foot-note.

She wore organdie once.

"When?"

She was rapid.

Those teeth.

She wove a spider's web of deference around him & he never knew.

She made the feeblest shots at being nice to us.

"She didn't have to." Isabella pointed to the door. "I wonder if she was ever bashful."

"I wonder where she learned to pronounce my name?"

"That was unnecessarily frosty Rosine, I liked the way she said it."

"It's the only time it sounded like asinine."

She wanted to obliterate something.

She wanted to obliterate someone.

Herself?

In a way?

"She lost her chance, she was one heartbeat away." Isabella warbled.

That smile.

"She knew about amplitude." Rosine magnanimously adjured. "I'll give her that."

Isabella grinned. She had always known Rosine was jealous of Margarita's figure.

She missed that wink.

So did you.

She missed the luxury of a pointless errand.

Oh. The one you went on. You didn't say.

She wasn't pretty or keen.

She didn't have to be. Not that honey.

"Close up she had skin like old oil paint." Agreed Isabella. "But like satin too."

"She never admitted she was ungainly, but I thought so." Pondered Rosine. "And she didn't skidaddle soon enough for me either."

"Yes. She had the temerity to hang about way past her welcome." Isabella agreed again.

"But I miss her."

She evaded.

She swerved.

She severed.

She invited trouble heedless of the pain.

But she almost, almost made it.

Rosine was dubious about that, "I always felt she wanted to be close but never actually wanted to finish it."

I couldn't say that. I saw how she turned out later. I couldn't tell Rosine she finished it.

"In the end she had to crash down into her own disgust." Rosine was emphatic. "She had to otherwise." And she gave a full frontal look with hand gestures meaning total disintegration etc.

I frowned & looked down. I couldn't meet her eyes when she tried such drivel on.

"I always felt she could have spared a bit more effort," Isabella blew on her fingernails & I wondered where she learned that.

"We never got a real look in." Was all I could think to say to defend her.

She was overextended.

"I always felt she never thought about the consequences even when it was obvious they could well be devastating & horrible. I wonder if she liked that outcome?"

Wrong, totally wrong, Rosine. That's why she always tried to say what was actually happening.

"I always think she overheard something but kept it from us."

"No."

She over explained.

She overexploited.

"Thanks."

"Well she never said that much, it was always the minor details, the ones I tripped over, that came out so we never got anywhere near the heart." Rosine dismissed the subject.

"She was never given a proper chance to embrace the opportunities."

"Which ones were they?" Isabella asked candidly. "Because I would have liked a go as well."

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Plucked out of a song.

A Punk.

A face so white it was expressionless.

"It could have been me."

"Could have been you?"

Incredulity.

"It couldn't have been you in a hundred years."

"Nearer three or four thousand. It propounds to resemble a ghost."

"It?"

"You didn't . . . you didn't . . . you weren't that desperate . . . "at that they burst in to peals of laughter . . . "Couldn't you tell?" They were delighted, so delighted.

"In some states you could give him an inflated rubber dolly & he wouldn't know as long as you'd greased the orifices. All of them." Rosine rubbed it in.

"'It' lights up another facet."

"Mere semblance is shite & expressionless. It cheapens what it shows." Rosine declared.

"These are all part of your evasions, Rosine, she was enchanting."

"And you think you can see through what you call my evasions. What if it was you who was spellbound by an irrational moment of chance desire or need. What if a stray

molecule from an unconnected chemical process engendered a certain perception of longing & presented its fulfilment at that instant when she lightly leaned against your elbow to peek coyly at what you'd underlined. What if it's your evasion? What if someone else had stopped & their shadow had interrupted your train of thoughts at that critical time. Could it have been them? Yes?"

"I can see you think so but it was more than that Rosine. You met her you . . . "

"Know?" Rosine turned to Isabella made a swift arabesque sign with her hand, "I wasn't taken in by a shape. I heard what she said."

"I saw what she did," Isabella shivered involuntarily & became subdued. Rosine had never believed her. But a considered lie from Isabella she knew would have been as transparent as water. And that unselfconscious retort again made Rosine feel insecure at first then consternation crept in. She became fiercer.

"Your story was insubstantial & innocent. You are an innocent Isabella you believe anything you're told. It was someone's dream."

Isabella pointed at her own eyes from each side. It also implied Rosine was mad.

"Don't look sullen Isabella," Rosine replied to the taunt. "You know you were overstepping the limit of credibility . . . & yet I'm beginning to believe you."

"You're groping around Rosine."

"But she's hoping to be on to something."

"Some item is lacking. Motive?"

"Revenge?"

The next clue is in a song.

There was a snake.

There was blood.

There was the princess.

"Who? " Rosine almost stumbled as she moved towards the door. She stopped & turned to me, "When I hear that I get a craving. It must be engendered by all this emptiness. Here." And she put a hand on her heart & the other simultaneously between her legs & grinned.

There was a smell of burning.

"Shall we stop everything & investigate?"

Perhaps this is the time to narrow & harden the line of advance, set her in a ready loose-limbed stance, & tell her to fix her lips in a rigid grin as she points a finger at a faint word not completely erased that seems to contradict the rest of the sense. Perhaps by this, expose her heart to the minuteness of an unneeded scrutiny given the tranquillity of its desire. Perhaps these strictures are to rob this heart of its secret hopes before they can be seized & unscrupulously used to fabricate a dangerous key.

"You know they'll do it no matter what you say to try & stop them. No matter which way you put it. Especially Isabella. Once on the loose."

Perhaps the key could be used to lock . . . to shut . . .

"Perhaps," Rosine interrupted, "You've just stumbled straight into it. Lock? Who says they wanted it opened up? Perhaps they need some protection. From you. No need to investigate anything. We know the facts. It's why, after knowing them, what happened happened. And that was up to you."

Rosine could always slew things round on the thinnest shred of an idea from an idle word dropped by chance.

"From nothing you could see." She suggested.

"What?"

"You are the sleuth." Her derisory look of doubt was unmistakable. "You went back to take a look & counted the steps." She had a broad smile by now, "Even the metaphorical ones." Rosine stood by the open door. "You dipped your finger in the mud & tasted it. Ogled at the tarts. What do you expect."

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FOUR.

Made fast in safe haven by cables to fifty-eight standing stones the cargo ship 'KAASEBERGA' lay in dry dock behind me. The disembarkation seemed to have taken a lifetime. I had been paid off. Eventually the swing bridge, adorned with flapping bunting all colours of the rainbow, clanked shut & I was able to cross from the port to the city. In a red kiosk the three big copper coins I had loaded into a slot dropped noisily as I pushed a button; the call was connected. It was awkward committing myself to act. Set in the edge of a black shelf under the telephone was a nicotine-stained chrome grate only big enough to lay one cigarette in which it always quickly extinguished; the half-wasted butt in this nickel trap was a black Sobranie. 'And you're thinking there has to be a reason', I said to myself as the telephone rang interminably at the other end. 'Like a ray of light fingering an object.'

At last her faltering voice answered, "I hope this isn't part of the nightmare I'm having. Are you human." And she waited for a reply, "And not an insect."

"I'm the one with horns that rolls that ball of dung everywhere, remember me."

"So you finally." She blurted out but then paused quickly gathering her wits out of the dream, "Are you anywhere near?"

"That's what I hoped you would say." And I did in a roundabout way.

Is this dawn light going to be the sort that inaugurates love? Let's see. It's not too far to walk to find out in X or Y or Zeeborg by the sea.

The Dogstar had lost another window in the night, again. Except it was called the Polestar when I left, "bolted" I corrected myself aloud as I, more my boots, crunched

through the plate glass splinters scattered like the reflections from a crystal candelabra over the greasy pavement. Archaeologists will have to be wary as they sift the shards & dust when excavating CRUCUNO. And it's the same for me here. I must be careful & accurate making a quick sketch to take us along, to get the picture right. (That's why I kept on going back to the place). Because this street is on the route I took to the rendezvous.

"Bolted?" The pretty girl said colliding with my box under my arm. "Are you safe with that."

"Safe. Oh if that's what you want." I placed the box at her feet & pulled out a wad of paper to mop my brow, "You try."

With a movement both expected & unexpected, like quicksilver she folded & grasped the sisal round the box & unfolded as she lifted it. The intensity of her action disturbed me for it showed without question that she intended to put herself into my life.

* * *

Ten Years Ago.

She had called me but at the same time was so vague, she gave nothing away beforehand, so we were both early . . . & late. It was always one-sided in her games.

I hobbled UP. Counting the massive wooden steps constructed from old railway sleepers while flanked & hidden by grey steel plates with domed rivets picked out in the colour of an old bitch's dugs. Thirty-one not counting the earth. And reached the open stage where the stairway gave onto a gap made out of girders in the protective wall. Pitch oozed from the creosote stained wood. One of my boots had come apart.

She met me coming DOWN. We stopped. (I would love to have been able to say dallied but it was brief moment on this turn high above the city).

Then she went back UP.

And I descended into the narrow winding streets. Her blue-print folded in my pocket. I turned. Before disappearing into the gap of serene blue sky she stopped, stooped & threw a shower of gravel to catch my attention, shook a paint can & sprayed the girder with her signature in white - ZOMBY-.

I call it a blue-print but it could have been written in cuneiform or machine code. I couldn't make head nor tail of it . . . to begin with & realised I needed an expert to interpret the cryptic instructions.

The heading was clear enough in her bold felt-pen capitals:

BLUE PRINT FOR A BLOW BY BLOW RECKONING OF THE GUILLE NEEDED IN
THE LAST RUN TO STEAL THE GOLDEN FLEECE.

There was a list of names stapled to the first sheet. I'll come to that later. Each name had a sign beside it. That should yield something.

And the Argonauts?

To my right the choir (three) of the Angelic Mission in blue cloaks plus gold piping were ranting off their box at the road barrier about 'six'. Family concerns of overstanding (not 'understanding' mark it). "You're thinking too much about it, the evil 'six'; not paying enough heed to." And Capt. Marvel on the box pointed at his lieutenant holding a book who also pointed at the book. "This Book." They almost said in unison.

To my left. Lone megaphone (electronic) man with an electrified blond crew-cut prowled the tube entrance, a black coat slung over his left arm, blowing, I think, long evangelical diatribes down the arcade beside his stand. His barking & hectoring keeping a wide space in front of his pitch clear, fringed with wary onlookers.

"There will be a sudden destruction. Who will be ready?"

"Of the fuzz," Grunted a bystander, "I'm ready."

"Not me." A challenging cry came from a middle-aged well-dressed woman in a blue suit & kite nest hat ready for combat.

"Who will be left behind?" Asked the megaphone.

"Not me. Lord." She came charging through the sightseers, towing her shopping trolley like an ammunition wagon, proclaiming the Kingdom of Jesus Christ to all. Elbowing aside the thin Bangladeshi youth helping by handing out leaflets, a scroll hanging from his bony shoulder with a message for the literate populace.

ALL WE
ARE LIKE SHEEP
THAT HAVE GONE
ASTRAY
WE HAVE TURNED
EVERYONE
TO HIS OWN WAY
AND THE **LORD**
HATH LAID ON HIM

THE INIQUITIES OF
US ALL.

"The wrath of . . ." The megaphone blurted over our heads.

A good plot at last, I thought, putting the camera down & pulling out a sheet of paper.

"He will pay . . ."

"For those badly put together," grunted the same man.

Beside me Gertrude whispered to Ophelia, "I'm glad that his destruction isn't complete."

"You would so like another go at cleaning up the mess," agreed Ophelia, "I understand."

Can I ask them, I wondered; I took a snap in case.

While Ho Chi Min kindly drew their regard to his cardboard notice (impeccable English)

outlining the state of his finances as he sat bare-foot & cross-legged in the way of the queue. This was not the usual two-word plea but a detailed well-argued case for help.

'Biggy' man was warbling erotic prose in answer to the earnest prophet & prosaic poetry to the lovers greeting one another as he had since the first tube. Beside him squatted a comb-blowing crone shaking a tin. They were gathering. A plastic bag full of orange prawns was starting to stink on top of a midnight blue street control box. This is the snack of a maniac who was at that moment cavorting in front of a double-decker while the driver patiently tapped the ash off her fag & waited with a bored expression for the possessed man to stop reeling & bugger off. She leaned back, took out a hand mirror, adjusted a wisp of hair, rubbed out a smudge of lipstick & wound down the window to shout at a bloke, "Pull that traffic cone from under the front bumper it's been stuck there since fuck knows when." He stuffed his mobile phone & time sheet into a voluminous

pocket of a navy-blue coat & booted the large cone while leaning on the vibrating mudguard chatting to the driver.

Two young women entirely draped in grey blankets & wearing nothing else, except shoes & socks (it's not that bad in Noah's Ark Parish), although not many of us caught on, drifted past a fruit & veg stall & left it lighter by two apples. They arrived home fully dressed. The shopkeeper sighed, sitting on a drum & plank below the bridge notice, peering from under the spiky Aloe Vera hanging on seven hooks sticking in the girder, he knew. He also knew the bridge strike telephone number by heart:

If you witness a vehicle strike this railway bridge (in red)

Please contact Railtrack using (in black)

Telephone no: and he repeated the number. (in red)

AND STATE (in black)

"BRIDGE STRIKE AT" (still in black).

One day he would make that call from bridge no: 24 VIII.

A man slowed down to catch the eye of a girl wrapped round by a thousand beads. His mind slipped back to the quasi death in meditation he had experienced many times as the beads slid off his knees & scattered with the rush of a storm bringing him back to the clatter of his everyday thoughts. So another man stumbled on his heels & vowed in a low voice that he would cut him as he nimbly & wisely veered into the sanctuary of the closed market mall, under the sign of a pheasant with golden feet. The first man stopped to dust his pants & nestled the blade in his pocket & grinned as he spat in the gutter.

The other man soon re-appeared on another street hurrying out of an entrance under the sign of the blind fish. So we had him exactly. I studied the plaque as I watched this man. It is a hooked fish, green with gold piping, caught on a real wire by two fishermen. Actually only the heads of a Red Indian & an old Caucasian show over the side of a red canoe made from reeds in Egypt.

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A notice is propped up on the pavement edge: CURSES BROKEN: Destroying the power of witchcraft, black magic, voodoo, ju ju, obeah, bad luck & envy. Fri. Only. And this could take place at the sign of the white dove enclosed in a red valentine heart. No fees charged.

A transparent inflated acid green large sausage shape hung with open double flapped cardboard bomb doors above a record shop from which at ten times the beat of a heart issued Gabba music. The balloon was a seat kept high on the rave vibrations. A tired man in a trance in a doorway is skinning up under the wise eye of a man with a cudgel in front of a pink building. They have been nodding at each other for some time, but neither is going to admit it.

Somebody looked busy. That made everybody around uneasy.

Gertrude & Ophelia (to name but two) thought they should have been able to make it here, O.K. They might find time, yet, tonight. Crawling out from under a heap of love & peace in the shrubbery on the common. The man had been repatriated. His goodbye message scrawled on the cream wall below the sculptured sign of a black angel on a red stretcher. This woman's rigid head on an overlong neck emerges out of a cone of dark

green, a triangular dress that allowed for no arms, nor feet. Her eyes kept watch on oblivion from on high. On the Dogstar door, so was a bouncer; he was also reflecting on the end of a matchstick adorning the corner of his mouth, waiting patiently for it to blossom. Which it did, of course, as he scratched it head against the wall to light his spliff. The scarlet tongue of the match darted a tiny flick of light into the eye of a stricken lover.

On the wall beside his head there was a peeling poster,

REMEMBER . . . the . . . & the rest was blank torn away. This message in big lettering was over a picture of a woman with squiggles in her eyes sitting at a table with an open paper before her & a cup of coffee. In the bubble floating over her head she was giving away very little -- Hmn? Let me see . . . uhh yeh . . . oh no . . . NOPE. -- by the look of it she could have been reading Rosine's menu of how she wanted sex each day of the week. Behind her other figures are seated at round tables, four of them, & a waiter hovers right at the back.

By the door bell sign:

-----'S PRESS BELL arrow.

She rang the doorbell. And yelled before it was hardly open.

"What makes you think you can beat me up when you want to?" Immediately a twirling fight went down the steps & a desperate tussle up them. Two long-legged women dressed to kill, came out of the door & pulled the couple apart. "Not here. This is very bad for business."

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On a corner nearby, just out of the red route dust, one side adorned with a massive empty black advertising hoarding, locked into but not part of a high tidal wave of municipal housing, stood a Dumpling house (N. Chinese chop). The special object, black & heart-shaped, nestling in the U is about to be lifted by two sticks held by a hand on which there was a silver ring out of which, at night, glowed a neon moonstone.

Isabella sat over her plate of horse mussels (Mathi, she named them) elbows on the paper tablecloth waiting for Rosine to show up.

The blue-black shells of night from the shore opened out into two spoons. Isabella prised the heart loose with the sticks & sucked it in with the black bean sauce.

Prince Chi (as he thought of himself, not least because he was mad while equally quite able to act sane easily) pulled the awning over a solitary customer lost in her thoughts.

"I'm still working like a slave for Uncle Chou," he told her. "He's a tyrant."

She felt his shadow.

"Draw me the sign for Dumpling."

"Depend."

"Any. Just give me an idea."

He worked the pole in a dust patch. Shuffling round to observe as she skilfully copied his drawing into a small notebook. The character resembled the picture of a bird's clawed foot over a fledgling protecting it.

"Think about this today." Prince Chi offered as he stared at the cloudy sky looking for a dragon. The sign was, in fact, *fu* ('truth') but Prince Chi had thought it was a permissible

move to make. One could equate an egg & a dumpling if one had the need to speculate.

And this girl did. That he could plainly see.

"Impossible to influence a fish, even a big beautiful one," Prince Chi commented enigmatically. "Very difficult the big one," He spread his hands & made the sinuous shape of a woman. A swirling whirlpool wind blew his image back to dust.

A flatback truck pulled up. They watched as two uniformed workmen lugged off a couple of large metal sandwich boards & erected them to face the traffic going both ways.

WITNESS APPEAL

SHOOTING

On Thurs. 8.2.83. approx. 11: 50 p.m. a man was shot
in his red Peugeot vehicle by the occupants of a blue
Vauxhall cavalier xxx xxx x at the junction of Leek lane
& Dogstar road.

Did you see or hear anything?

CAN YOU HELP.

Prince Chi started away. Isabella asked, "You still working for Uncle Chou?"

"I heard nothing." He kept moving, "He's called Wu Ming."

"Who were they looking for?"

"They got a wrong bloke. In the first place."

"Why?"

"Clever. Stayed with his poor brother." He held up three fingers & looked at them as if making sure he'd got the number right, "Nothing to eat for three days in the cellar in the darkness."

Isabella shifted round to square the space between them, "There were others?"

"No plan." Said Prince Chi.

"Somebody is going to need one," Isabella offered.

"Already got a ticket."

"For where?"

"Yes." Prince Chi nodded, "Good place to go."

"Where to?" Isabella persisted.

"Yes." Prince Chi nodded, "Good place to go." And sidled through the door beads off the street. The cook watched him slouch in & shook a fist at his head, angrily tapping the wok with a spoon.

'Is that three or four of them.' Isabella wondered, drawing stick figures in her book. One holding a dagger, another showing a heart, another with a question mark & the last with speed dashes at its heels. A waitress emerged from the chiming kitchen, to bring the bowl of dumplings she hadn't asked for. So Isabella reluctantly unwrapped a paper napkin off the sticks glancing up at the girl who came lightly tripping over & lifted the bowl away.

"Wrong order." She smiled, & waved a free hand at the napkin, "Don't need it back."

Isabella said, "No? But." And hesitated. (Not sure how long a discreet wait was).

The girl stopped & put a hand on the top of her own head & inquired, "Yes." She stood & stared wide-eyed, looked like a sepia Daguerreotype of a fatal beauty at your service.

Then with the exact expression of Rejane in Copenhagen, caught unaware eyeing some interesting backside, she lifted a table & swivelled it round a foot. A hole was revealed in the parquet floor under one leg into which she reached & pulled out a packet.

"Lamb's bread. What you waiting for? Prince Chi told me."

So she called him Prince. The rendezvous was sliding out of Isabella's depth, she glanced down at the paper not knowing what else to do.

The sign was clear enough she'd seen it sprayed on the walls in many places. The slashed donut. The primal incision. A man inside a woman. The number 10.

"You available," asked the girl. "To talk? Prince Chi said you said you got the ticket."

Stealthily (she didn't know why there was barely a yard between them) Isabella dialled Rosine on the mobile. The answer-phone began Rosine's monotonous excuse so Isabella cut the call & looked quizzically at the girl. "She must be on her way. We'll have to be quick."

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The girl was on her like a cat at a rat (page one). The rat flew/was tossed/jumped in the air & dropped/fell down dead as a doornail, its neck broken. She underlined flew & fell. And darted an enquiring glance at her companion. "Door nail?" She wondered aloud. Instead of an explanation the dark-haired girl gave the other fair girl a big kiss on the mouth. Their lips were open.

The fair girl stood up & asked, "Excuse me. Is that right?" It was not a misprint. (Page two the polite way to act when you accidentally knock into somebody). Then sat down giggling. Try, try, try again, she read & looked up ready to give up.

The dark-haired girl's head slowly lowered towards the light as she reached for the knife. W.M.(also called Prince Chi) watched the two girls through a partially bricked-up grille. His eye blinking with delight. Hopping on one foot like a dancing bear in painful expectation while holding a book open & taking quick glances at it as if following a score. He was singing low in a strange warbling voice when the cook came in & caught him by the neck.

"Stop. Fucker. I know that crane song means something. What you up to?" Then squinted through the grille & saw two young women sitting at a table, each with a glass of wine.

"What you fabricating now? You stop it."

"Can't."

"Won't?" The cook was leaning arms akimbo on a greasy lintel, head cocked on one side, fixing him as a thrush sizes up a snail before rapping its shell to pieces on a stone.

"No. Can't. She wants it too bad." Prince Chi gave a prayer-like gesture & the cook frowned, black bird eyes hardening, mistakenly thinking he had learned to be rude & was practising.

"What?"

"Skin."

"Skin?"

"Yes. You deaf?" Prince Chi asked sticking a finger in his ear

"I'll box you black & blue, Fucker, I'll marmalade you." The cook threatened as if suddenly bewitched. "You come here." And made towards him, "No more cat or snake dishes. Too many rats around."

"The girl wants a new skin to give her desire the right thought. To make her irresistible,"

Pleaded Prince Chi, "Some hopes."

"Everybody's hope." Said the cook, mollified & a little sad.

Prince Chi took her in his arms & she relented, tilting her head back. Swallowing the snail in the blink of an eye.

The kiss ends the discussion. It surprisingly conceals secret designs. It's sign X was placed against a name.

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With an unspoken refusal to continue & taking about as long as a lightening flash to accomplish; she vanished into thin air.

OR

She stabbed thin air trying to get the feel of it.

&

Then Rosine hurriedly quit the room with its enormous grey flowers splashed over a green background on the cheap wallpaper. All the drawers were pulled open. Ransacked.

Her (magic) necklace broke, the one she had scratched a cross on every soft bead. Its fragments bounced into the chaos of the room. The ringing stopped.

She carefully concealed the knife in her hair as she walked down the corridor while swinging her arm & wondering about the material resistance of flesh. She pinched herself. Much much worse. Good.

Rightly unable to make the connection between a pinch & pain.

The door slammed loudly behind her & the notice, hung over the doorknocker, bobbed on its string.

LOCK BROKEN: WALK UP.

They say Rosine had barely taken three steps when she turned abruptly & took the short-cut over the waste lot beside the tower blocks. Everything the poor couldn't use finished

up as debris on this ground a few hundred yards, but well hidden, from mansions of the rich.

Rosine shooed away a crow hopping in her path as she threaded through the dump. It greedily struggled dragging a string of gut while trying to be warily smart & take off from under the feet of the beautiful but forgetful fugitive two-legged beast before one of its wings was pinned by a stride. Overtaken, the bird reluctantly dropped its lump of entrail & glided a few yards alighting on a mattress its beak probing the heap of refuse.

"Is the crow to be taken, like thunder & lightening, as foreboding some obviously dark & corny events; lovers meeting by chance; a marauder on the stairs; or both, with unrequited passions, mixing it? And like these atmospheric signs crackling out of the sky, a prophetic voice, but only having in this case, unfortunately, the one note of amazement to play with?"

"The occult didn't always bode trouble, mishaps & such. You could get, from a dull spectre if you had the persuasive means, sometimes, a message of glad tidings, a win, or a sign of something decent a death perhaps etc. especially if you passed over a suitable bribe & cunningly insinuated that a bucket of water was available if."

"And remembered that the magic word 'enormous' must not be altered. At all."

"So at the moment it's an ordinary crow flapping about doing what they do best. But it is handy to have a significant animal ready in reserve for a dirty job if one comes up." I lied.

"But don't they always turn out to be a hoax?"

"Not this crow in this connection."

"Vital?"

"What do you want, something from the Greek for this price? It's a moving piece of scenery. It could easily have been a Herring gull. There were scores flying around giving the crow a lot of bother only I wasn't going to mention it."

"Speed? Flow? Wrong colour?"

"Rosine was crossing over to meet somebody stumbling & booting the cans out of her way & down came the bird."

"Unnecessary."

"Not at all. The locale demands a diversion. She's crossing an urban tip not the Champs de Ulysses. Generally everyone hopes to find, at least, a trinket."

"Not a hypo."

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Rosine raged repeating her litany, 'when you get there don't say a word', & each time she kicked out she shouted, "Kiss him" making a wild stabbing action with her fist. "With steel."

'I want to be the Alabaster scorpion woman (not with goose feet) with that sting.' Rosine thought as she dropped onto the concrete slabs in a gully beside the lot. Hidden she squatted down, pulling up her skirt, balancing on her toes & thrusting her muff down in relief, "Oops. Miss the boots," slashed a shower of piss & blood between her heels while unsteadily rocking to keep her balance. Then Rosine froze with a hand held to her throat as it crackled before she was sick & the other flailing around as if the pain was manifest. Her lungs ached afterwards as she spat out an acrid juice. To her unfocused gaze it

seemed as if columns of stone rose out of the yard, behind the shadows surrounding her, on which danced tiny figures. A brutal sketch of her intimate hopes. 'Why didn't you tell him?' A gross hoop of envy into which she was locked. 'Why?' The faces on the shadows were engraved with her emotion as she watched on her knees, with her fingers in her ears, the seventh dance begin.

* * *

Rosine was pinioned.

The figures advanced barking & howling.

"All this action is far too early. You've skipped dances one to six. Why? What are you up to? There's no short-cut."

Out of the corner of her eye Rosine saw Isabella accusingly point to her.

"She wants to cut me out of my share of it."

Astarte, by the pole, saw Rosine was taken & slipped into a shadow to watch.

Isabella saw her slink away.

"And she's after her cut as well." She waved wildly.

But they ignored her.

The weight of disapproval almost too hard to bear caused Rosine to gasp out 'please' as her face lay in a slick of vomit. The voices faded. The figures became the thin shadows cast from the drying clothes by early morning light. They flapped a limp rebuke to her imagination.

* * *

FIVE.

(FEELING GRACE DIEU). When sipping a spoon of GREY STEW.

Now.

Do you always feel as if hemmed in by a hostile mob?

Did she give a significant sideways glance at Rosine here? He certainly leaned over & stroked her neck to feel if she was warm.

Awake, she feigned sleep, but went rigid under his touch. What did he want? Hadn't he had his money's worth? More than mere money could buy. Her flesh. The folded in all of her flesh. Undoing her to leave his inner life intact. His inner life? Her magical flesh. The gift.

I'm having to work backwards. But not on my back. I'm bolt upright, or have been up to now, keeping strictly on a line to clarify the remaining traces of this mime, to tell you how I felt when I'm not feeling it. And wonder if I ever did. To give you the chance to picture what we have never seen up till now because essential detail is suppressed or said to be missing. Bound up in what we assume.

"We took up with who we could. No more than that. We couldn't do more than that."

"Does that matter?" Rosine yawned, "You proposed & chose. And a lot of the illicit stuff you purloined has stayed under the counter. While you poked about I worried for years hoping those fools had been left behind for good. Not knowing if they were as close as shadows or forever shaking their fists having missed the ride. Are you trying to say they were within a hairsbreadth of finding me & you forgot to tell it? What a sham." She said this with her eyes screwed tightly shut.

"I was there on the steps. Wasn't I? And I didn't hear a whisper."

"It's getting light."

She rubbed her eyes. "So soon." And looked at him. "What a sham."

Like my memory of a tramp that retains all the sharpness of delight in his pride as I saw him carefully wipe his hands after rummaging through a dustbin for food, it has lost his expression.

"Try to have the same delicacy with the pilfered language you seem to have acquired recently. As you say it's the only way possible to fill me in about them."

"I promised to clean up the look of it for Redemption, later."

"You'll murder it first." She closed her eyes. "And lick your fingers after."

So she was there. I thought I could smell her.

She's bound to be." Rosine spoke with obvious disgust. You couldn't let her miss any of this sequential betrayal you call intimate revelation. She would have insinuated herself in between like a viper without any encouragement & taken a rebuff for welcome.

"We are close." He leaned across to kiss her cheek, "Stay cool," but she sighed & swayed a fraction disguising the movement as if going with the truck's motion & his lips kissed air. "I can smell the sea." Her lips curled but didn't break into a smile. She warily hunched nearer the wheel over the dashboard & flicked the radio dial. We caught the tail end of a number being spoken (by Jimi Hendrix) through the beautiful music . . . 'Yeah. I'll just be fightin' this war against hatred. It's kinda hard.' After the riff the next song we can hear is Patti Smith singing 'Easter'

. 'Easter Sunday we are talking'

So you have the day & the year.

. 'We two are one'

Now you know what I hoped we were supposed to be doing.

"Dancing. We were always dancing." Rosine whispered.

. 'Time has come' . . . sound of bells

While listening you could guess how we were feeling.

As you get her name.

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A buoy bell chimes a deadened tolling out of a wall of sea-mist which has snaked in so fast & low to form an eerie backdrop. The black rock slap in the centre is the A of obstruction for around it dark water ripples in a continual popple. From this destruction of the wave springs a turbulent rock song. Enigmatic words come shaking & spluttering out of the violent raking of shingle & crashing boulders, seeming to promise Temptation: Redemption: Transfiguration with the beauty of their unformed mysterious sounds. Then the tide, after sucking its promises back with moaning denials, roars up to break its words on the rock again. One or two of these tortured words, if we could catch them in our mould, should dispel the void caused by . . . Sweeping desires?

"I'll try temptation."

"No." She said in mock disbelief. Trying very hard to keep any hint of relief or jubilation out of the tone but unable to resist, "I don't think you dare." Adding, as she wound the window down, "You can't be tempted & consider it at the same time. I hope you know that. And you'll have to play it out to the end without being able to decide first whether

you are going to feel right. Not like you." She impaled each word as a shrike loads thorns with its live insect morsels for later.

All or nothing. I know that. The future swapped for a lump of stinking flesh. Mine.

Nothing. I'll take it. If I am able call up the fool to do the deal with. It's done. This place looks like the agreed rendezvous. Then I'll cheat him. Simple. She doesn't get it.

"I'd have thought you'd have chosen privation." Rosine shook her head, the dangling earrings tinkled. "In fact, I would have staked my life on it."

His silence was reply enough.

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"First. How did they get there?"

"By road, they hauled their gear in a truck. It was possible to drive on the sands at low tide."

"There you are. Now where did they leave the truck?"

"Behind a clump of tamarisk. So it was hidden."

"We can't see that." He hesitated, waiting for something.

"No."

* * *

A voluminous cloud of dust thrown up by the spluttering exhaust from the unmetalled track to the dunes started to settle as the faltering truck engine was cut. A man & a woman climb out. She swings lightly on the opening door, her blue skirt billowing full, as she jumps onto the sand absorbing the impact with an acrobatic twist. Dark glasses placed on the man's knees, in the moment of relaxation after stopping the lorry, fly out the

door unnoticed as he almost falls tumbling from the step of the cab. He waves his hand in front of his mouth before sucking on a plastic water bottle pulled from behind the seat & with a grimace blows a warm jet of liquid into the air & stands under the spray. He checks. The box hasn't moved an inch.

"Please." The remaining words were lost, muffled as if the speaker was holding a glove or something over their mouth.

"Or speaking with their mouth full."

"Either way we don't get to hear the rest."

"And we don't get a good look at them. Pity."

"A glance is enough."

"And her legs, surely we saw those? No?"

"If you catch sight of them I know you'll fancy her."

"You prefer it to be pure fancy."

"Just an attempt to curb your fascination with fleeting appearances."

"And you with your inner man, safely tucked up, under control, don't you realize the rottenness shows a mile away."

"Yes. But I leave that for you to revel in."

As gentle waves were lapping up over sparkling sands to the slabs of the destroyed Guen passage by the powdery dunes on which grew the tamarisk & delicate sea-holly, the sweeping sea also rushed swirling into the belly of a gully below the tiny rock shelter the two friends sat in. And pounded the heart out of the craggy shore with a heart's rhythm booming, & told them why they were there. But they still didn't know.

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Wrong language

"With ten 'the's you're certainly trying to pick that scene out & fix it hard & fast."

"Not really."

"And such a pristine landscape."

"No. No. It looked like that."

"Without car tracks, cans, paper blowing? And what about that concrete bunker used as a shit house? Is that what they're in? And I can remember there were horses being galloped on the sand flats & dogs scavenging around."

"Do I have to put those in? I can ignore them."

"And by the same token prevent the scene from carving itself to pieces which I think you clearly knew was starting to happen. Despite your definite attempt to cover up with a pretty landscape."

"What? I could only repeat what I heard."

"That nasty tear in the fabric became apparent so soon after you began because you didn't report truthfully. Revealingly, the first move you make is to scotch an attempt by someone not yet named to show their feelings. Would they have given too much away?"

"No. No. We know her name. We were given that."

"Still haven't even met. And we didn't get the feelings."

"I had met her. I was getting round to the rest."

"With a scenic description that belies the 'please'? A crude wink from behind a partially lifted veil. No legs." He raised his shoulders. "If you'd met her what was so fugitive about

the friendship? Were you helping her? And there must be something to tell us about the choked response? Was it at that moment on the dunes when they realized their relationship was breaking up? I think she had it sewn up before you began. And she had told you. Did he decide to cut her in or out? What was going on?"

"Nothing. Nothing."

"Never so definite & evasive. Though they sounded miles apart, there you go again. All those 'nos'. One nothing would have been enough. Nothing in it? Sure?"

"Nothing. I merely wanted to start with a description of a tranquil spot. You seem to be the one wanting to force all the social realism in. And will that kitchen sink stuff be accurate? Any nearer what was felt?"

At last we were getting him to touch on it. Anyway.

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You weren't saying much either.

You were no where near. Did you count the bodies?

What? He blurted out. Then he nodded but I didn't believe him.

How many did it come to? Taunting him with the childish question. Two? Is that what you made it. I held up two fingers. Three? I added the third indecent finger.

He furtively looked about as if checking to see if a reader was within earshot, but I could tell from the way the light shone in his eyes, they were as blank as a book page, that he was looking at nothing. O.K. He said. And the seductive interplay we're going to get. He was whispering now. How do you explain all that if things were up the chute from page one. (I noted chute).

I don't have to yet, I replied. I've got time. You haven't. Get on saying what you swear you're not going to say.

Oh, right. You'd like that. Hoping maybe to make my already dicey position untenable.

That's not true, I cut in, your place is as safe as the shit of Midas. (A good blow). It's Rosine's performance on the heavy table that is precariousness herself. She's the one on call at all the risky connections making sure we don't blow it. And I didn't like his leer there, as if he'd got a sub-plot ready to slip between the sheets of a straight chapter & get his name under the title. So I dug in. Just by hanging around waiting you're asking me to approve, I snapped. And I don't. I'm not going to say so.

What? He said. You use me all over the fucking place like Johnny Funny when there's some shit piece of dialogue to clean up. Or a situation has developed out of hand that you can't manage. You want me to rub it out & fill in. Plenty of times you'd call me & ask for me to take an hour out with so & so some pain in the arse. It was as if you pushed her my way. A shadow slipped across his eyes, you could almost read the name of the girl in it as his lips trembled.

That wasn't my fault, I said softly, she took that step herself.

You provided all, all the circumstances & the opportunity.

I had taken that accusation plenty of times but it still kept coming & it always felt wrong.

She would have found a way. There's plenty of leeway in a lot of the words we used that time & you know it. We chose together. That was important to us, remember, I tried to ignite a wet fuse. We did discuss whether to tighten them up.(Screw them up we always

thought). And we said we reckoned they would soak up some of the difficult (you know) meanings & then swell & shut out the rest of the shit. Well it stayed a bit leaky.

And you bailed out leaving the worst lines imaginable. He accused.

(Bad as that mmm).

I wouldn't have uttered one of them if you hadn't asked me. Pled with me. They were scribbles; filched out of the back pockets of poets. He spat out.

Most days you couldn't remember where you had been propped up the night before. So how do you know what I said. The 'pledged' had made me feel touchy, & as for the lines you made all of them up. Practically spewed them out. It caused plenty of aggro, that unconcerned callous ad-libbing. Which I had to clean up, to eviscerate you said (I know, wearily as if I heard it before) & cut in the links. Or else leave everybody stranded with their mouths open when they turned, expecting a lead, & getting a guffaw from some bastard loafing around, spying & being where they shouldn't be. You with your nose under the door like a rat scuttling after her every step. That hit.

And what a shoal of whales you were. Too fucked up to avoid being washed up. Those links were toffee & treacle. They locked the teeth of the action into one inextricable sweet mire; a grimace so superficial it never got to stick in the gullet.

I'd put it differently I countered. I'd say to be so stony-hearted meant it became like a dialogue with the stars in a long past sky. They were too far away for us to catch more than a few words hissed in a strange tongue so we were left with a lump in our throats as we contemplated (In awe, you might add, he jeered, so he was still following it)from behind the golden mask of imagination as some of the most enigmatic figures rolled by.

We knew they would help if they could be made aware we were waiting, but we couldn't call out or touch them because we had lost the essential key to know them. We could do no more than watch as if frozen on the black grass of night while a snowstorm solidified into the figure of a woman.

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SIX.

"You got here." He kissed her welcome. "At last."

He glanced sharply over her shoulder with a look as if he had seen the desires he hoped she cherished about him, escaping like stick men in a naïve picture dodging off to work, thankfully infiltrating the anonymous throng of thoughts crowding the street, before he had a chance to separately prise them out. Box them up for later perusal & analysis. (How was he going to be able to catch them. Keep some intact. Before all the vital part he wanted fled, if they never got together except mixing it on that street of acquaintance).

This surely was the way he would have described a feeling of inadequacy, which possessed him at that greeting, & nimbly transferred into the stare, if he had cared to.

Devoid of his spectres she didn't return the kiss, but the smile had at least one open thought in its delicious curve.

"Is there something over there?" She followed his look. And he recovered but had missed the offer.

She paused to re-read the notes she had first taken quickly, then copied, to construct a plan in her own way. The two rough sketches made a clearer focused picture when combined although the result was almost coded.

Started completely out of the blue.

"The first night of our marriage we had to sleep head to toe (spoons) the bed was so narrow (we said)." His hands showed a space. (He had stopped & her facial expression moved him on). "I think we tried the usual way." (Reluctantly).

"People usually remember that. And so you didn't . . . & it was . . . devoid of . . ."

"No." Anxious not to divulge another fact he eagerly brought the shutter down; but it clearly wasn't closing time. (It jammed).

That tells me nothing. Why? She thought (Impatient to disclose something), & yet. "Is that a significant image to describe the marriage?"

"Yes. At odds. But happy."

"Happy but . . . devoid of . . ."

"Happiness. Yes."

Dextrous & manipulative, she thought, doodling a few balls over the word. No. Hardly that. She crossed out manipulative & scribbled 'one is enough'. Acting like a juggler tossing yes & no & maybe into a fancy but cumbersome trajectory, yet leaving him empty-handed most of the time. So freed from the responsibility of having to make a decision. Which one to chose. Miss Either or Miss Neither. As long as he didn't miss catch (mismatch obviously) in the juggling. Hence the inept delivery of his fragment, perhaps. But she murmured aloud, "The hands? In a straight-jacket? Opening the door; the shutter slightly?" (Camera. Ask about that.) Then she tapped the table, pleased. The clue was 'sleeping spoons' the sign of the I Ching. She circled it. The wrong way round, she mused, a slight lift in her body showed her pleasure as she reached for the books, knowing it could also mean this was an interesting but futile diversion, the contrary tack. The pages rippled under her thumb, which she noticed thoughtfully, now when did I ever search in such a clumsy way. She stopped & tapped the pencil along the lines of her notes. Ha. 36 words. Let's see. Perhaps I ought to peel this very carefully. She turned the

pages & finished by choosing 149 or was it 209, I only had the briefest look as I entered before her hand came to rest over the number.

Wound. Wound. Wound.

The knife had entered the left side of the belly & penetrated the heart.

He had held his hands this far apart. She measured it. I need another number.

She craned her head over a shoulder to greet my approach, "Any news from the other side?"

"Seem to be a lot of messengers being sent the other way, at the moment."

"Oh." She exclaimed, brightening up, "I hope they were happy to be going?"

"Certainly not the ones I've heard about."

"Very stiff & formal, Eh. Boxed in." She rejoined, still preoccupied.

I made the size sign with my hands, "Is that how big it was?"

?

"The fish."

"I'm trying to establish contact . . . gain control . . . & I think the door has been opened . . . a little . . . but it feels dangerous."

"I take it you want to see the sighting of the box as the half-way stage?"

"I think so, more or less. It's not decided solely by me. Some one was arguing for it to be the beginning. Depends on what's gone, forcing into the open what's to come. And the issue of that depends entirely on what things are put in it & which people get in it."

" Nobody. Nothing. I expect they'll say. Although that's inconsistent as he did throw the box overboard when the ship iced up."

"Something for the future, you think?"

"Why? I Ask. Because he must have expected it to sink?"

"There were two or three onlookers?"

"I counted three of them; four if we are asked to include the silent one again."

"Don't count on him." And with a big grin, "Or her."

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The telephone beeped stridently, a woman's voice crackled out, 'I'm calling when you're out so you can decide whether to take up the offer, or not, without being caught on the hop. Am I right, was that a wave you gave me on the Dogstar road on Friday or did you throw your arm up in horror at the sight. Or dismay, of course. I know I had overdone the white make-up under the black spikes. Never mind. Oh. I've just thought. Was it dismissive? Your expression (I did catch one) seemed pleasant. I need a model & you're the only one who can do it. Before you ask. It's the kind of work you take down when certain visitors are on the way. So I suppose you're secretly proud of the results or have been so far. Well let me know . . .the voice trailed off . . . sweetie.'

"Doesn't want to get off on the wrong foot again." Isabella offered. Wishing she'd switched the machine off. Feeling exposed.

"Will you do it? There's something else in it?"

"Perhaps. I'd be surprised if it was money."

The machine gave out a scraping noise, iron on concrete, & a faraway sounding voice saying . . .please . . . floated through the room.

A voice in the air. Was that her? I was wondering how soon I could slip out.

"I get the feeling I shouldn't be here. Have I walked in on some private delight, a thought you can't share?"

"That's one of the commonest feelings declared. Surely you know I would tell you directly. Sit down." She smiled wondering why he was unusually uneasy & noted the frown, as he felt impelled to sit.

"Obviously I expect you to be frank but sometimes some things are delicate."

"Ah. You're hoping for a revelation?"

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SEVEN.

The first step back is always a long one it takes me to GWIMILO.

I can see a child being tugged reluctantly along by a young woman up the back bork through the narrow twists of this path beside St. Werburg's church & out under the massive spread of an old graveyard elm.

"'Where angels fear to tread' starts off like an Enid Blyton," said Rosine, "So a certain audience is immediately captivated." She returned the book to a pile on the table & rolled her eyes at him. "One that believes a fragrance of a landscape can become the smell of the future, if it holds out long enough."

"I've got it. Thanks for the tip." I smiled. Because that was the part.

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With an unusual excess of zeal & thinness of intent on the part of the girl, we were now in a low bare room which served as a shop. No more than a box, really. In it there was a very large heap of cabbages against one wall spilling into a corner & that was all.

Through an open door I could see another back-shop room its floor entirely covered & piled high with potatoes. Totally obstructing my view of the yard in which I could hear a gruff man berating a child, "You break everything, everything". And the child piping lies to defend itself.

"Torn to pieces. Torn to pieces." He shouted at the thin voice, which sounded as though the head producing it was being buffeted.

"I didn't pinch it," wailed the child.

"So it flew here, did it. Is that what you're claiming?"

Behind the makeshift counter was a narrow alley & above it a stuffed crocodile was fixed to a beam by two iron rods. The keeper, in fingerless mittens, as if a wary dealer in rare objects, hovered in front of the bright viridian light of an obtrusively modern fly-killer. I had never dared come into this shop alone. She pointed up. "This is what your mermaid was. Take a good look at her. Nice skin."

With the accuracy of this opening sally it was as if she had been lurking observing in one of the shadows of his dream & had stolen an object he was sure had been concealed perfectly, by listening in. Making him feel that any hiding place was entirely inadequate. It was a loss that felt like theft.

She flicked the banana advert dangling from the crocodile's tail.

"Wouldn't want to kiss this in the morning? Eh."

The child held his mother's hand. He could feel the contempt & was puzzled by the taunt as they had never entered the place before. His grip tightened, tugging her back.

"Love to get a nibble on the ear from them gnashers? Eh." She planted her arms on the bare counter & blew a few thin wisps out of her eyes.

"That would be a bloody good way to be woken up. Better than next to that old fucker & his glue," & she jerked a thumb over her shoulder at a dark green wall. Outside a heavy lorry changed gear on the steep hill & as they crashed the labouring engine's vibration swallowed up the sound of her laughter. And so as the petrified child stared at a silent gaping red bird mouth with fluttering lip wings, the woman's head seemed to transform into that of a pig, while the nondescript jaws & jagged brown stumps of the crocodile's teeth shook above her.

"Now you know what contempt is. It's a crocodile." Shouted the old woman with red-rimmed eyes. "I've told you."

"Spoken by a woman waiting for the man she really loves," muttered the young woman as she was dragged out of the low door, invisible in rejection, by the child's hand. "Who is dead." She added loud enough for the old woman to hear.

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"You should use an ancient Egyptian spell to fight off the curse of crocodiles. Get one from the 'Book of the Dead'. You see the dead & crocs have always been a problem."

Isabella suggested, clumsily barring my way by thrusting a leg forward (as if about to skate?).

"Can't stop. I'm just going out." I stooped, ready to start a dash, although above there was clearance for a top hat on my bare head & a white rabbit on that. But it would have needed more than a slight of hand to get over her leg & get away without having got my leg over. So I bent lower & she pulled me down beside her.

"Well wait. I need you for a little while." She pushed closer. "Tell me again."

"I've told you."

I looked at her mouth as she spoke. Glistening red lips were pulled back from her teeth stained black by the blackberries she had mixed with brandy to kill the pain. As she was so young & repugnantly thin I wondered if her sharp pointed breasts were 'real'. Did she pad out a bra? I gave her the once over as I moved past her quickly, goaded by the stab of the thought into the perception. And she fell back at that instant dragging the leg in a very awkward way I can't describe except it was as if she was unpractised in the art of moving

seductively & was starting to try it out. Her knees spread under my gaze as her elbow gave way inviting me to sit by her. Or did I think that because I had just stared so pointedly at her breasts & was wondering how, if I should offer to caress them to reassure her they looked 'real', making amends for the unspoken critical appraisal, I was going to be able to pull it off. While not getting involved, or being obliged to keep up the play-acting.

"That comes later. It's easier when she's laid out." Rosine said nonchalantly massaging her own thighs sure of their appeal. "And you can shag her as well. You don't seem to mind humping frozen meat," & she grinned at Isabella. "Even a bean pole."

Isabella having waited to see if he would react to her mime, now unhappily added, "You just don't get it." Another pause as she shot a disparaging look at Rosine. "At least you could pretend to have understood & made a move on me without forcing me to ask for it so openly." She looked even less attractive. "And why that convoluted excuse? You could have just pinched me. I as good as asked you."

"And left myself in a difficult position." When I described that later as inscrutable they guffawed.

"That's ripe. Wasn't it obvious to you who she was copying?" Rosine interrupted. Pulling my sleeve. "Doesn't she want to be degraded? Doesn't she want to whine about it?"

"I didn't ask." I said, not sure that the questions had been intended for me.

"How can you say that? You were always begging for it as well. Always have." Rosine baulked. "In front of me." She shook her head.

"I was going to pay you back another way, this time." Isabella volunteered. "I wish, I really wish I could get inside her skin. That would fool you." Then added, "It might please you?" With that look.

"Now I think you mean," I replied, "I am asking? Because if you are the answer is no on every count."

"Does that count mean me?" Rosine scowled impatiently & turned her back feeling she had intervened decisively but missed the chance. She didn't know why & said. "Frozen out," To no one. "I'd have to find out that first, but how do you do that. And keep quiet?"

"Back out," I said quietly.

"Give me the book." Isabella opened it at random & started to gabble away. "Got it now?" She mocked, as she read the text to me in a strangely accented voice that was also, I suppose, intended as a clue.

"What really do you want me to do now?" I asked at a loss.

"With that gibberish. Got it yet?" Rosine pushed a thumb in my lips onto my teeth trying to force my mouth open. "Some other way." She seemed more alive on saying this.

"Was she from somewhere else?" I said this disingenuously & meant it.

"Are you asking me. You've put so many lame twists in that tale I can't recognise it as the one you first told me." (Squeezed out of him she would say next time).

"Well she grabbed the book so quickly & was gone. I couldn't tell what she thought of what I suggested. The swishing sound of her skirt brushing the wall was all that was left on the air."

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For relief I began to think of the carvings & the way they had laid out a path to a spellbound place & drawn me in. This led me to wonder, 'If I always let her trample around in my head like a wild horse in a box & abuse the space of the rest of the nice thoughts she will become intractable. I'd better stop it. It's like the constant refurbishing of a shop window dummy, while completely transforming the basic unresponsive form with glamorous trappings, obviously never getting any thanks. But with Asatarte we needed more than superficial emotional change.'

"How do I stop having to do that repetitive work chucking her image out of my head every time it pops up & still get the stones polished to razor sharp edges so true to the numbers?" I asked them both.

"If my imagination came up with rough nuggets like that I'd take something for it," said Rosine. "Anandamide, perhaps."

"What is he talking about?" Isabella wondered. "And, come to think of it, you?"

"Don't interrupt. He'll be back with us soon."

"Spell it out, She had said firmly, I can take it. She had bragged. Then she was gone. And it took me a while to believe it." I said.

"We could re-enact what happened." Isabella volunteered, "I'll be her. What did you do? I can't wait."

"You will," murmured Rosine.

"We couldn't get it. Not by using an inert mathematical copy as our guide. Something else has been hammered in by the mistakes & although that is probably an arithmetical fault as well we can't simply take it away. It's necessary. It's probably the vital part."

"He means it doesn't add up." Rosine offered. "We know an exact copy would be absurd, like you trying to obtain perfect emotional responses by rules given to a plastic dummy."

"I'd have had a better chance with that than with her."

"She knew what you were up to."

"I'd have thought you'd have wanted to construe her as some Josie Bliss . . . too dangerous a muse (so the story would go) to hang around (& fuck) & that would be your excuse for beating it."

"Any heart searching moment shared & the knickers are off."

"Don't you mean gloves?"

"Oh. She can keep the gloves on."

"She would go along with that. It was nothing to her. She could enjoy any kind of sex & stay untouched paradoxically. I'm like that. I know."

"Think back to the outing." Isabella said darkly, uncomfortable the way the conversation was being directed because she sensed the objective aimed at by Rosine, "Did I want to go to the rocky coast? No. And I said so. Why did you have to go then? For you it signified nothing either. Is that it?"

"He went . . ." Rosine started to blurt out. Then shut up. She had never done that before.

And I couldn't answer because I didn't realize until then it had belonged so much to

Isabella's past. (Had I somewhere nearly said the wrong thing?)

"Not at the time." I told her unkindly.

There had not been a clash or hint of dispute in any of the quiet exchanges. Nothing candid either. And that was it. Upon reflection the most banal comment seems to become

filled with derision. And every (cross-referenced) word had by then been made to perform exotic tricks of inference giving expectations far beyond possibility. The ingenuity of the deformations made long shots look more accurate than identical meaning.

"So why were you there, you never said?"

"It came out of a desire to be close to someone." Rosine was blocking & vague enough to sound false as intended, yet give an unsettling hint. "To touch & yet . . ."

"Who? From where? Say it." Isabella demanded. She pressed her heart. Giving a broad clue to her hope. She felt a breast slide out of its cup as a strap gave under the pressure & smiled despite her feeling. She ignored the puzzled scrutiny this engendered as he uneasily searched for a way to cut short the developing intimacy as Isabella used her bewilderment as a tool.

"From what has happened to me. If that's a place which exists. Some forsaken hole. The way you speak of it now makes me wonder if I was there." I said evasively.

"Without the interfering delusion of your interpretation turning wonderful to woeful with one stroke. It was said because it happened." Rosine countered. "But I'm saying nothing more."

"Just like that?"

"You're trying to put your foot on it. Why? Ask yourself. Why are you seething? Why do you feel wronged? If you're going to take that boxed in feeling apart why don't you do it? Pull it to pieces." Rosine countered.

"Break it apart?" Isabella asked disengagingly. "And show us the contents. Give us the bitter intimate revelation" She added expectantly (but feeling lop-sided).

"We must hurry, they are waiting." I interjected abruptly, as if they hadn't touched on anything to concern me. And I thankfully made off.

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EIGHT.

It was cool in the shadows thrown by tall houses squeezing a narrow gap bricked off from the pavement where I lingered before the MEETING peeing against a wall, staring idly over it across the sunny street at a crowd of pilgrims milling around a Calvary in an enclave between the empty ossuary & the dry fountain.

These strangers formed a loose-knit queue while ogling at the soldiers' ugly rape & murder of a siren cut in pale green stone. From this, by virtue of their shuffling ribbon of flesh they roughly linked that horror round to a group of soft white granite virgins supporting a frail baby spotted by golden lichen.

After waiting at the iron gate guarded by two old stiff saints mounted on carthorses, the two women gave up & went to the café.

Nearly finished, feeling vulnerable only when I let go of my dick, leaving it to dangle, as a jet of warm yellow urine bounced off the black cement & gurgled down the colander drain. I raised the camera to snap, to gobble that throng onto film, then I took to the street, edging passed the low building buttressed with black refuse bags, a defunct garage, next to the Celestial Church of Christ: Noah's Ark Parish. With its eye, crown & cross icons stacked vertically under the arch of light blue lettering in broad strokes on a white façade & a direct telephone link on high by the look of all the wires. A stride takes me out of the shadows so now I can see the two women deep in conversation oblivious to an amber washed awning lifting & flapping over their heads.

I didn't know both the girls were pissed off. They didn't show it as their tilted faces were caught smiling at each other across the café table as I stopped to consider their intimacy

& took a photograph; letting my hands feel the wind's tugs, measuring my heart's dreams but aiming at a desire that was slipping away. I didn't know that either.

Their voices came on the air in bribes & orts.

" . . . it didn't do you any good . . . what you saw . . . so I referred him to the fact that he had nothing to give me I wanted." After an instant. " . . . pointing to a the sign, a grim joke, hanging on the door I had shut behind me."

She drew on the table with her finger. "If you want it that way pay for it . . . made me hungry for excesses . . . perverse . . . "

Rosine, after a moment of hesitation, took Isabella's hand, "I can't tell you what to do . . .

But you have to feel right about who is at the centre?"

Did she want to hold hands? She felt the grip tighten before it was released.

"When I ask that I get two silly answers." (A glove fell off the top of her handbag). "You know who those are from."

"Well, if it's who I think it is not a knife blade could have been slipped between them.

Both shits then & they still are." Eager to cut in, Rosine's hand divided an imaginary being with her spoon. Then patted & stroked her abundant hair.

Isabella stared at the brown leatherette wall covering, the yellow & cream paint work & smiled wanly. It made her lips look as if she was blowing a match out. And was just as brief. "What does that make me!" Half rising as if uncomfortable. "I'd sooner eat my feet than talk so much about it." She settled back. Touched an earring. She had seen a sliver of silver in Rosine's hair & it made her wonder if she had lost hers.

"We should bite together." Rosine showed her teeth. It looked like a snarl on film.

"We could. If you got between them." Isabella paused as they both smiled. "Big, big mouthfuls." She mimed it.

'Uncharacteristically explicit', Rosine thought. 'What has she been doing?' But said, "What is there to gobble up? I don't envy them. Do you?" And rudely made a sucking fish mouth shape with her tongue pushing in & out of her lips.

"Does it look like that?"

"Does it look like what?" Said Rosine stingingly & stared hard at her. "Haven't you ever looked?"

"You do say, quite often, that when events are taking a funny turn you're better off alone. But that wouldn't do for me. I have to admit I'd feel incomplete."

"Events? Did I say I knew better than you how to get out of love & feel O.K.?" Rosine tacked. "Were you happy?"

"Glad to get out?" Isabella was unsure. "I often find you irritate me when you tackle this." Shifting on her chair again she cupped a hand over her eyes.

"It's better if we act together. Or was your angling for a showdown temporarily suspended while you waited to see what I did? If I would take him on?"

"I wasn't that concerned." Isabella shrugged. "I pay. My choice." But it sounded as if Isabella had learned it & sounded unconvincing to Rosine & she showed it.

"Did you ever choose. I don't think they gave you the space. The events are too stark; too obviously hateful." Rosine taunted. "And you can't say that now, can you?"

"I felt touched." Dissuasively.

"They guessed you would." Slowly, "They counted on it. And you knew."

"You realize how close it was to my own story. And the connection intrigued me so much I was inevitably drawn in. I lost my voice while talking about it."

"I would have been more open." Rosine tried to start a mock confession.

"Again." Now Isabella's derision was unmasked.

"If it's too hard to bear why accept this blurred foreground to live in & constantly be assailed from a focused background of disdain (it's more than obliqueness). It's unforgiving. Drag it up & take a look." Loud music from café interior.

"You're not doing this right." Isabella taps her arm to emphasize the change in direction.

"You have to be more persuasive in trying to get us back together. When I object, you must counter with a positive attribute."

"Hardly."

"It takes patience."

"It would take a fantastical imagination to cook up."

Isabella just sighed.

"Arrange them: eat them." Rosine said matter-of-fact. "This randomness of happenings like pigs in knickers around every crack & a crash at every corner is a nuisance but you must have been being told this at the very moment you connived with her to cheat him, by the look on your face."

She held up the snap, offering it in a way.

Isabella brushed it away. "Snow or sunshine; it doesn't make a lot of difference on a photograph."

"You could try & pull off seducing him." Rosine's eyes became dark but glittery.

"Although you didn't seem to have been much good at it the first time."

"I don't know whether I could put my heart into it again." Isabella considered, "If I dare expose it."

"Heart in it." Uncomprehendingly at first, Rosine watched the awning flap, then shyly,

"Bad as that."

Isabella made an open-handed gesture as if receiving a penny. "It's difficult territory."

"Your heart's in your body. It's your lookout." Said Rosine turning the spoon over with an abrupt gesture of capitulation.

"Look out here he comes."

Winding between the tables he stooped picking up the glove & meticulously tucked it onto the bag. 'This thing is on its beam end,' he thought. 'Why am I still turning up to meet them? Yet, although my experience tells me to keep my nose out of it & my knowledge warns me I'll get my fingers burnt . . . here I am . . . again. That rough looking one has murder in her eye. And that vulnerable looking one, compliant & piteous though she seems, has already killed or I'm not not a fool.'

The crowd bowed their heads, glancing slyly to one side, as if trooping to the Last

Judgement past a blockhead having cunnilingus with the devil on a joist.

They gulped on the roller-coaster taking in the stone scenes. Searching for rejoicing. No luck. The joy-ride ran out at the ramshackle booth where it started.

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NINE.

In the land of ANDROPHAGOI. (Man-eaters)

Head under feet.

Hand on heart.

Would you want to eat up your loved one?

Fed acrobatic lies that defy the eye to what could I turn?

Temptation.

Was it because I was hemmed in by such a press gawping in front of the two Goya maja pictures that my eyes were tugged sideways over their heads to see a worm nailed to the cross. I was as surprised as you when I later found it illustrated in an alchemical book although the snake in that picture was nailed the other way across the cross & rather limp. I started to shove my way through the crush towards Golgotha. To rise. To begin. And in the triangle of my wake appeared a young woman following me with upraised hands. I stopped. Stooped as if to receive her blessing. The long fingers of her left hand tangled into my hair. I saw the anguish flooding her eyes.

Rosine butted in, "Sorry to break the flow, but doesn't it go . . . And the mocking lips twist into a forced serenity. Not wanting to inform him of her desire." She cocked her head sagely. "But hardly able to contain . . .oh . . .you can finish it."

"No. You carry on," He said grimly, "While I juggle the time. Put the reefs in to keep everyone happy, otherwise because of the slapdash way you go about, it means some people are going to meet who should not. And others are going to see things they don't like. Although you seem to think you know the story."

"And then she struck?" Rosine asked, wide-eyed, "Rather early for the murder or had you a rape in mind?"

"Don't forever contradict & twist & turn what I'm talking about. Belittling it before you hear the good bit." To put her down I could write here that Rosine snorted or did something of that kind for effect but she didn't. "I saw this scene while in Madrid it's not going in a book." A lie they both thought. "I never get a chance to reach the end & justify a little episode of dreaming."

"Exaggeration." Countered Rosine, "Effortlessly produced. It needs questioning."

"If you're looking for authenticity allow some self-esteem to creep in."

He thought 'now she'll take the snake vision for a lie, but that was true.'

"It sounds just like an illustration in a comic strip. Did she have the appearance of a grown-up toy doll with her pent up emotion etched into the vacant, or was it vapid, look on her face? And why is it just the one state, her physical desire, that you seemed to recognise so easily? When you want to." Said Rosine contemptuously.

"I did?"

"I think you missed it completely." Rosine bitterly added.

"Who says so? You just said I got it."

"That was caught in the wonderful soft brushing of the body colours . . . not by you."

"Too soft a touch."

"Of your or her hand? Yours." Rosine prompted.

" . . . of the slick paint."

"She was so easy to spot? Waiting with a label hanging round her neck?" Rosine taunted.

"In front of that sign-post you saw."

"The worm." He stopped. He'd caught on, "was it a vision conjured up to thwart this angel planning my fall from grace?" He wondered. "A warning?" (Take heed, looking back).

"A Self-portrait?"

The worm was a vertical slimy sinuous body. An undulating greeny grey six-foot slug of hatred that shone as though it had licked itself to slide up the cross.

"Hideous. What kept the worm up on the cross for that instant? Was it the Saviour's out thrown arms?"

"No. He'd gone. They looked clumsy anyway as if the artist had been painting with lead piping & would have broken if they moved."

"Or her arms stretching to touch your head & pull it into an embrace as she huskily whispered my name." Rosine continued, "That's where you got it, isn't it?"

Her fingernails bit into the soft flesh at the nape of my neck. As the serpent vanished & the tortured man swam back into focus she asked. "Are we going to get out of here? It's a Hell of a place."

"To do what?"

"Put the worm up."

Later she certainly seemed to fly through the Chinese screen, star enchanted, & resolutely leaned into the first kiss of the day with an open mouth. This was the moment. But it didn't belong to me. Something might be going to happen if I could get to it without

sifting through a pile of illusions to try & secure the story, but this moment of acquisition when I could deftly add the necessary touch of fantasy to plump out the bare facts was lost. She had gone before I could hold her. It's never enough to gently place both your hands either side of the rib cage & feel for an instant the warm curves of her breasts on the heel of each thumb & plant a delicate kiss on one lip of an open mouth. I know at that moment I should have slipped my right hand to the small of her back & eased myself over the withholding thoughts & past the uneasy barrier & not allowed my fingers to slide off from the careful grasp.

"You didn't. And that's not the first time." Rosine said scornfully. "Remember I've seen you in action."

And as she arched her back out of the embrace her teeth bared having sensed rejection in the slight stiffness seizing his arms; so again the insubstantiality that always pervaded this act in the glowing light each morning swam into their hearts.

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I swing my shoulder bag onto a bare little table. It is searched; a spade hand flaps every compartment wide. He sees nothing. I place the plastic carrier bulging with a large earthenware pot next to it. He ignores that: leaves it to the machine, which scans the pot as empty. The monkey wrench versus the silicon chip.

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I did whistle in the mornings as she came through the gap in the screen holding a voluminous flannel nightdress tightly around her thin body. Don't hold your piss while waiting for the Himalaya of seductions, I would need to compress all my adventures into

one to get even a foothold on the slope. Fantasy is inextricably & unavoidably bound up in the unending echoes of memory. It is made potent but tainted by imagination. With this amalgam I could perhaps be able to sublimely drive home the point that for the recollection of desires to be spontaneous they would also have to be miraculous. So as I whistled a miracle appeared, a blank shape of a person to fill with imaginative doodles. What might have been or was.

"Yes." Rosine threw in, "After trying to get to know you I can see why you want to obliterate the real people with fancy scribbles. They would want to know how you got to the Angel & what happened on the way to delay you, if you were. They are bony, angular, talk back, work underground, have sharp contrasting expressions & fall apart, toss the useful aside triumphantly & nurture the useless gladly with a surfeit of care & are clever." "Well fuck you too." He snarled back. "And thank fuck it was a picture book I was trying to make & not some heavy tome that you bury your nose in or one of your dissenting tracts full of big words meaning to make me worry or feel inadequate or worse, worthless. I went straight there. I told you."

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I turned the corner with Astarte. Before us lay a short tunnel arched over with corrugated iron its entire surface saturated by weirdly shaped graffiti signatures as if all the emotional disturbance of the inhabitants of the surrounding blocks had been soaked into these jagged signs. This blaze of hostility linked the barren walk to the grim steps leading out of a yard we had cut through, giving on to a bomb-site.

Innocently horsing about, no where to go, we were taking our time. To my complete surprise, in the shelter of this derelict tunnel Astarte slipped out of her jacket dropped it at my feet & started to pull her sweater over her head. As it was rucked up by the violence of her action she unclipped her bra, which dangled loose on her shoulders as she bent forward to free her head & out spilled a number of screwed up paper pads.

At the same time as Astarte threw out her arms to pull me close, with her head turned to one side, I enveloped her with my coat & it was while in this rough embrace that I realized she was oblivious to my presence.

She would not move.

I fled the spot.

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TEN.

TUNNEL OF L.

Astarte fought to get out of the suffocating embrace. She sensed the hostility in his blanketing her with a coat when she wanted to dance. She would dance if she wanted. She writhed & struggled.

A twig rippling along the corrugated roof sheets rattled her out of the stupor. She was struggling alone. Stripped to the criss-cross scars on her chest. To the silver ring in her belly. To the shaved cream cake between her thighs. To the black toe nails. To the bare neck with its ugly scar behind the ear. Even her green shoes had gone.

'Be careful whom you claim to speak for you evil half-faced paralyzed fucker. And what you say Mr. Folly. Just because you can say what you like about that boiled horse mussel you were clapped together with until she fucking ditched you doesn't mean the same rule applies to our precious Judy,' she thought. 'Don't borrow me into one of your omnipotent fantasies where some fucking sky spirit gives you messages to pass on about what's what to all those stupid fuckers so desperate for a touch. Well I'm not'

"Why the ferocity of the hug with the coat? That hurt." She whispered to the wall.

Astarte felt more crushed inside than bruised (her surface had gone anyway so why give a fuck about the look of that). She felt the same now as she did when that other creep tried to appropriate her, by letter to someone else the cold fucker, into his . . . what's the equivalent collective for new age fairies of 'a murder of crows'? A quick shag/sniff of posies? Who, he wrote, were happy where they were hovering just out of eyeshot above the celestial dump he operated from mainly inducing bad dreams but tossed in bad faith

as well, at a cost. If I'd taken the trouble to contact him why hadn't the ones I really care for heard from me? And they hadn't. What could she say? It's lovely, I've got a new job confiding visionary cures to that half-paralyzed impotent jerk who hasn't the imagination of a horseshoe. And a tongue that had greased the cat's arse. You know. The one you never ever heard from. The dainty eater. The one who looked like Bael after a haircut. That connoisseur.

Astarte emphatically slapped her knees & stood up & shouted. "Stop." Into the neon-lit dusk. Then spat a big lump of black blood. She didn't look at it recognizing the taste & ache in her mouth. 'If I get a chance I'll kill that ugly fucker who killed me & see my pals again & have some fun.'

She knew where the rendezvous was. She knew the time. She would be there. If they could see her?

'Somebody should have fucking told me. In my lips the poison. In my cunt the antidote. Any takers?'

"He tried to take me . . . for . . . a ride . . . Amuse himself & leave my side . . . "

Astarte mouthed the words of a banal song to see if she had retained her skill to parody emotional integrity, it didn't sound great but she could still speed up out of tune at the right places. 'No fucking loss if it had gone.'

Her seven pieces of clothing were scattered around in the darkening tunnel. She counted as she stooped to collect them over her arm. Some were wet through as she pegged them out. 'I must have flung them, torn them, kicked them all over the place as part of the dance, why else?' She surmised. 'No shoes?' She scanned the ground down the gully &

over her shoulder took in the length of the tunnel. She looked down. They were at her feet. Astarte gladly slipped her toes into the green crocodile skin shoes & stood for a moment with her left hand poised over the line, completely naked, tapping her right toecap lightly against the heel of the other, seemingly unaware of the red & rust blotched underwear flapping gently on her arm.

Oblivious to the city sounds; caught up in an inner music Astarte had the desire to dance again. Perilous as it might prove to be. And this time we can watch, as if there was a compulsion in her that the earlier enactment must be witnessed. She started to mime the terror, construed as passion, delivered by the sweet annihilating angel's embrace she had been playfully consorting with a moment before. Spinning round her spine, she imagined, but really, as we saw, folded up. Frozen in her memory of that agony of being pinned hard against the sharp risers of the steps, with her head loosely hanging back & her mouth growing wider & wider. With her knees beside her ears as her shoulders cracked while her arms tried to lift the body up & away from the pain. She jerked & shuddered as she felt the steel blade being hammered by her heart & the first dance began.

"With scudding clouds only briefly revealing the moon & this allowing in the rapid changes of light that mottle the pearly reflections on her body we have to work with speed & virtually everything goes badly."

Another hefty man appeared out of the shadows.

To help? to grab.

To help? to snatch.

To help? to grapple.

To help? to slit.

To help? to cut.

To help? to rip.

To help? to loose his grasp.

To help? to pull & pull & pull.

To help? to hold.

To help? to roll.

To help? to stuff.

Why has this other man emerged? How can he help in this dance?

He grabs the flailing arms & pulls them up hard to unbend her body out of its protective curl.

He snatches off the tatters still covering her.

He grapples with the other man & kills to be the first to mount & penetrate her.

He slits her skin from the base of her spine to her neck.

He cuts here & there to facilitate the skinning.

He rips with expert ease & the body tumbles out of his grasp.

He pulls & the breasts are free.

He pulls & an arm is free, & again & so is the other.

He pulls & a leg is free, & again & so is the other.

He holds it up with his fingers through the slit.

He rolls the carcass over & over & leaves it to lie by the other body.

He stuffs the skin in a sack.

She felt the cold grip of steel before swooning. Then swayed & collapsed into his arms to begin the second dance.

"In the neon light of the tunnel her body was suffused with a golden red-edged glow & with this dim but constant light we could take our time & things could hardly have gone better."

Another flashily dressed woman appeared down the steep steps in the ill-lit spot, black slash on her face, red talons on her fingertips.

Rushing to join in.

Pushing to join in.

Shoving to join in.

Stripping to join in.

Inveigling to join in.

Cavorting to join in.

Enticing to join in.

Beguiling to join in.

Raking to join in.

Will he let her?

Why has this punk arrived? Can she dance? No. What is she going to do?

She rushes up to the man.

She pushes the drab girl out of his embrace.

She shoves herself between them.

She strips off every stitch.

She inveigles him.

She cavorts in time to some unearthly beat.

She entices him away from the fallen girl.

She beguiles him into a sexual torpor.

She rakes him with her talons.

She lets him bleed over her lower body & legs rubbing the blood up over the scars on her breast as he dives & reels away forgetting the dumb woman crouching chained to the shadows as if transfixed.

"Carry nothing with you. Empty every last drop of blood out of yourself before . . . before . . ." His white face shone. "You follow . . ."

"What?" She screeched. "Do you think there was the sliver of a chance for that. . . you blind fucker . . ."

Astarte trembled at the icy burn of the frozen rope about her waist as she was captured out of the gloom & hoisted into the brilliantly light-flooded area before the tunnel entrance. She tried to twist her flanks & flail her way to escape. But the whip cut deep so she furiously kicked off her shoes to do the third dance.

No one came. She waited expectantly, poised, one leg thrust out, one hand on the rope.

Who was she waiting for? Who knew where she was? Who was there to wonder?

No one to avoid.

No one to cajole.

No one to allure.

No one to ensnare.

No one to entangle.

No one to denounce.

Why hasn't someone turned up? We still have the dumb character up our sleeve, no? The hero doesn't always have to be a speaking part, does it?

She avoids the man. That doesn't work. The whip reaches her.

She cajoles the man. Asking if there is any way that she could please him. It doesn't quite work.

She allures the man by divining the fetish of his desire & becoming it.

She ensnares him by making him feel there is more he can get to fulfil his need.

She entangles him by feeding this hope.

She denounces him, telling it's an unashamed sham & puts the worm in his heart.

The bright lights crack out. The strange indecipherable sprayed signatures on the tunnel walls loose their incoherent power to affront. The third dance peters out.

Astarte slashed her way through the dangling entwining sheet. She brandished a razor sharp dagger & lightly drew the point across her belly below the silver ring. Ruby droplets of blood rose up on a thin pink line. An icy fear paralysed her spine & locked her legs at hip & cunt the gasp of pain squeezing out any chance to plead for mercy.

Her body has a veil, a greenish phosphorescent glow so we trace her fourth dance by this.

Not a soul could be seen in the pitch-black tunnel. Astarte thought she heard someone enter on tiptoe. Yes. She tilts her nose in the air blindly & smells raw meat. Coming nearer.

Who is that fool blundering about in the darkness? What good is that? Getting in the way.

None. Get back.

It is coming nearer.

Stumbling nearer.

Tripping nearer.

Fluttering nearer

Floating nearer.

Falling nearer.

Colliding nearby.

Brushing near.

Throwing her.

Trembling near.

Rubbing near.

Is it the same one? We can't make it out. We see her glowing body sprawling & bucking.

Is it ecstasy? Are those cries of passion?

But it goes stumbling over her feet causing her to whine in anguish.

Then it goes tripping about her heels bruising her ankles causing her to wail.

Then it goes fluttering around her body making her flesh creep.

Then it goes floating away with a chill draught freezing her blood.

Then it falls in the distant shadow & loneliness wells up in her heart.

Then it collides against a nearby wall & she catches her breath expectantly.

Then it brushes close to her breasts & lips getting & giving an undeniable sexual frisson.

Then it throws her down overpowering her instantly.

Then it trembles over her body forcing her to spread her legs & roll back crying.

Then it rubs between her thighs & she feels the ache ease as she is penetrated.

Astarte rolls sideways & kneels, sees the thin blade under her claws & leans down to lick the steel with her thick tongue. The touch sets her mouth on fire. Her lips are red.

To dash.

To rush.

To sweep.

To hesitate.

To strike.

To plunge.

She sees the fifth dance in this instant vision.

She dashes out & distracts him.

Then dodges his rush.

She exploits a curve to sweep him into confusion.

Then as he hesitates she would hesitate a languid fraction less.

She strikes then.

And plunges the dagger into his heart.

All hers.

And she glances craftily around warily checking as if her thoughts were being spoken.

A whiff of petrol announces a surprise, as she is drenched. A spark flickers into bloom. Astonished, with the piteous eyes of a forlorn lover, she raises an arm as the flames explode. Astarte did the sixth dance inside the fire.

"Don't try & foist any fucking sparks fly flames shoot smoke drifts stuff on us. None of those fireworks. A livid orange inferno will do. That was enough freak sunlight to fry your prick off. It was blinding in there."

So that's how she could have missed these spooks now hopping out of their hiding places in the smoke. Taken by surprise she is. They came unwanted.

Out of the fire Astarte glared.

Cracking.

Searing.

Melting.

Charring.

Shrivelling

To a crisp.

What. Don't we need her still? Rescue her. Save her somebody for us. I looked around wildly. Not one of the craven shits would meet my eye, they were stuck staring down at their boots. Too late.

The crackling embers had rendered her incapable of evaluating other people's feelings, while she was, thereafter, never able to mistake the emotion she was feeling but could act horrified when overjoyed & dribbling with delight & expectation.

The searing heat had destroyed the authority of her conscience & its power to side-step errors or avoid tripping into the shitpit of desire. (Excellent good: excellent evil we all need it).

The melting flames had rid her of kindliness. Balancing on a stump of slag, rising out of the ashes she saw nothing through the smoke but inexplicable mistakes & heard nothing but exaggeration.

Her charring flanks had been branded red hot with the mark of Cain. Looking a bit like the old utility stamp, the same old con to sell matchwood goods in hard times (War).

The shrivelling fire had finally eaten up her heart.

A scorching draught then slashed her gut as she screwed her fists in rage at the stupidity of it. And blew red-hot ashes into Artarte eyes.

And she pounded her fists shouting, "You give me the words."

Tears flooded her cheeks as she heard yelled back.

"What about dance number seven? Lost the urge?"

Astarte said nothing. And shrugged. She would dance only if she wanted to. She wasn't a dog, didn't work to a whistle, but her reluctance was deeper for she intuitively understood that this time wherever she got to she stayed. And how she would be she didn't know. So

Astarte sat on the cold concrete & patted the paper balls into a pile as she pondered.

Behind her the entire wall by the step was plastered with small salacious posters offering sexual services. One caught her eye: Ritual stoning of the Devil.

She stood up to get the details. One step. And luckily Astarte guessed it was the first of the seventh dance & froze.

Now if she proceeded she would have to knuckle down &

Show what exalted freedom.

And give the right context of that choice.

Show how she had been exploited & broke those bonds to express an existence distinctly human.

Get the measure of that in a dance? Some hopes.

Better turn to stone.

And hope the expression of the above mental state, with its hopes, will dangle from the freezing body. (And trust you're able to keep still long enough for this to happen with felicity & be in a decent pose not too difficult to hold).

Better not.

Some others came in at this point carrying flares & hurricane lamps cutting an extravagant swathe of warm light through the blackout.

They looked the same yet different at the same time. She asked herself how she knew but couldn't tell. I'll show them. How to be.

Direction less on a tightrope.

Now. How to take the chill off to get something done?

"Leave me on the tightrope & get out of the picture. Do the list."

Dying swan. Why didn't I think of that earlier?

"Mesmerised by Zen?"

The good words have been preening themselves on a twig in the harsh landscape of his meditation.

The bad words hiss into their minds as the beads scatter off his lap.

The words flap onto his tongue & he spits them out:

Malicious.

Celestial.

Mischievous.

Egregious.

Mendacious.

Guileless.

Crafty.

"I can't do anything with those nasty words." She pouted. "Are you sure it's the correct list? Has it been mixed up or swapped? Perhaps maliciously substituted?"

"They're not all horrible. That one was useful. And I didn't give you spiteful."

"They're lousy & you know it."

"If you're getting temperamental we'll have to drop it. So I'll have to go back & say then after the first step of the seventh dance she faltered? Couldn't get it together?"

"Say she became a Zombie. What you like. Those words are going to make trouble for me. And you know that." She barked.

"But it's got to happen. Everybody's waiting. It gets hot after the last dance. That should be when things fall apart. They want to see it."

"It started to crack up long before that. You & I know it could get nasty. That's why I'm reluctant to push on through & dance unless I can sort out some of the contradictions with you. I need one or two nice words."

"Why?"

"Somebody has to be let down gently . . . perhaps Rosine."

"Rosine? Was she still there? I thought . . ."

"No. It wasn't her. I told you. She was too clever for us all. How do you think she kept herself together dogged by an asshole like you? Look at the words you hand out. They stink & they're free."

"She didn't say that, she agreed."

"To do your dirty work & . . . what's the euphemism . . . take over from where Isabella left off. Would anybody agree to that? In their right mind?"

"Fuck off. She was the sanest of us all."

"Coming from your position with your angle. But from over here."

"Was it Isabella? No she'd got out of it long before." He looked at her but she wasn't saying anything. "It wasn't?"

Astarte shook her head. "How could it be."

(Astarte was malicious about people who believed in a celestial being & mischievously suggested that Margarita wasn't up to it & a liar & stupid & not to be trusted. There we had Astarte in one).

"No good? I thought so."

"Can you make it dance or do we have to pack it in?" He asked quietly.

"If you're prepared to risk it." She replied just as softly, "Because you are coming too."

There was a din. The shriek of metal on stone.

"There is an easier way."

She came very close to him, put her face up to his & spat in his eyes, "Nobody else."

As most of this takes place at dusk with characters of dubious integrity vaguely drawn, don't expect me to know why she was so vehement at that moment. If Astarte had fallen in love I certainly hadn't anything to do with it. So don't think I am able to give a clear description of this strip this time or that it was purposely out-of-focus. It happened that way.

"Fudging it. That's how you intend to excuse his shabby actions. He cuts & runs, Yes?"

"Do you hope this last dance will do it?"

"What."

"Bring us together."

"I'm not quite able to say that. It's hardly knocking on Heaven's door. I think I'm listing everything & linking them correctly but things do slip, get forgotten."

"Get censored."

"Why would I want to deprive you of a small piece of actuality?"

"Peace. Greed."

"Some of them were only footnotes. Here they get more than their normal share of the pickings."

"You use them."

"They don't have to walk on. There was plenty of space to remain anonymous. But it's always crowded at places like the gates of Hell. You should know."

Astarte sat back down on the black stone step holding the scrap of paper, "What happened then to make you so unsure?"

"I'll give you the words."

Irksome.

Dextrous.

Lament.

"No. I asked you & I want to know what was happening to me as well."

"It seems you fell in love."

Astarte put her head between her hands & laughed, "Finish the list."

She looked up. There were only the flames giving light.

Three words. Is that it?

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She was told she would find life irksome on her own. It made her dizzy to have to believe that crap. And naturally he would always disappear when she needed him most. No. Not quite right. Too obvious & an oversimplification. But as she wasn't even going to consider whether it was valid, better get the feel of freedom first, gain confidence & take advantage, as there wasn't an alternative. You can't go back where you haven't come from. She tried out a few sentences to escape from the painful constraints imposed by her last encounter. Here goes.

I will dextrously & breathtakingly slip into a sheath of gold, shiny & slim, my true self, & slip out into the world & gobble up all there is to experience, everything. That's better.

Which shows it was irksome to have to exaggerate fake pleasure every time he put a hand on me (that was scribbled on the screwed up paper she still held).

I was dextrous, nimble even, at getting out of the way (adaptable you mean & swift in the face of violence) but I still felt as though I was having to dash up flights of stairs & dodge into handy nooks to deny my true feeling & not be swamped by his hatred. (Scared. Very useful for self-preservation). I learned not to despair. To be tenacious.

She had pointed out what she found loathsome (lies) & they agreed to struggle to change them to fibs.

When dancing her part she had to be nimble on her feet (metaphorically speaking) most of the time because having no measurable result at the end of it, somehow her effort was made to seem that it counted for nothing (after a few seconds applause) after all. It was a dodge. Very nicely done but only really suitable for the depraved section of the masses (those with imagination).

She found it exciting to invent new ways of showing the space her body made (cut) around it. Was that vain? Should anybody else be interested?

Those are questions you shouldn't ask.

What do you think I'm trying to resolve here?

A choice between two ways of going about things, No?

I live in my own head. I'm trying to decide where else to live. Not how or even who with.

But first do you have to describe it so you recognise it? Surely a feeling will reveal the spot? And don't take too long trying to get the shape & look of it.

She tried out some curt phrases as an antidote for her shame.

I'm tired of having to dance your tune - it's irksome.

I'm bored with listening to your monologue - I find it wearisome.

I loath your repeated unsuccessful attempts to interpret my feelings - I find them tedious.

I'm disgusted by your harassing sexual jibes - I find them burdensome.

She adroitly changed her tune (imperceptibly) & questioned his effectiveness.

She craftily shut up, held her peace, bit her tongue & somehow kept quiet. Difficult that one. Luckily it didn't hold.

She dreamed that some word right at the edge of the page needed to be rubbed out.

"It was the 'I' I was trying to rub off the edge of a page."

"What was missing?"

"The shit on the finger eagerly, industriously rubbing away."

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Next. Not, at last. I got to the elegiac. Not much left to work on there. Can't be trivial so we might have to imitate T. Gericault's ' portrait of a man suffering from delusions of military rank' in a suitable precarious way. An interpretation full of vigour & bullshit, brass-up the ones with the worst prejudices (the restrictors) by asking them for directions to the exit.

"And then heading through it in an unerring somnambulistic way."

What is precarious? The next word.

For the dirge it looks as if I will have to walk around blindfolded to ensure I kick the habit of knowing where I'm going & what I'm doing. That way I can be completely deceived. Better still, consult the blue print.

On the one hand we have the complete (whole) picture heading through the same door to infinity. But can we see something we are leaving as? It travels fast.

On the other hand we have the puzzling fact that we are left behind with an incomplete (but whole) picture that would like a completion.

"Try a poem."

"And prove the entire procedure so far has been mistaken. Melancholy even."

"For what?"

"Better drift."

Near & low into the molten blue. I paused. She placed a finger on her lips but smiled behind it.

"Listen." She made a swift arm gesture that reminded him of an attack by a swan. "And you might get it."

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ELEVEN.

AMBS-ACE. (Snake eyes)

As Rosine strolled on the thinly scattered gravel under the roadside trees she was blasted by a chaotic rush of sound, by the remorseless drop of horseshoes into an iron bucket shaken & banged by a steel tipped boot to form the music that flushed out from the debris of fears it was buried under a clear picture of the very news shot he had been showing to Isabella at the moment she first caught them alone. With a clarity that gave its separation into consciousness the force of a punch. She felt a physical relief given by this unexpected lifting of an obtuse burden that had been made more painful by its uncompromising but hidden outline than by its weight. She stopped. Mute with gratitude for an unambiguous image at last that smashed the disorganising thought she had returned to so often of someone looking remarkably like her, trampled flat, cut out & rolled up to be put away like a stolen canvas. (Plus the more disquieting agenda of it being hidden in a rich man's airless vault to be raked periodically by an avaricious but sterile look).

'And nothing else?' She wondered. "Why?"

In the picture taken at a festival a woman crouched, dressed as a siren, her eyes closed to slits by the flash & her tongue shooting out of her tight lips. She was holding a banner half protectively half mockingly up to the camera leaving herself exposed, showing no surprise, the blatant juxtaposition of raw cunt & poetic words of female desire in an emblem resembling a fish mouth gobbling up a stick figure made female by two attached O's. Behind this divinity stood a familiar youth wearing a big grin.

Although Rosine was in a hurry to meet Isabella she needed to go back & search for that picture to check the detail just starkly dragged up. Eager really to see if it did exist like that. She turned through a gap in the park railings onto the road. To her left was a short cut, a dyke sunk between two blocks of flats, forsythia hanging over the wall to the left & a slope of concrete to the right topped by a green fence. In the sunken space posts had been set to carry washing lines. Rosine caught sight of two figures zigzagging between the flapping sheets, pushing & brushing against each other suggestively, heading towards the corner steps out beyond the garden. This show of affection glimpsed by accident decided her against the short cut although it was never framed as part of the decision. Rosine's head dropped slightly as she just carried on back again into the pounding beat emitted from a speaker nestling in the branches of a stag-headed tree, its branches below in disarray & the leaves fluttering (because of the revelatory music Rosine thought). But this time the relentless cacophony acted as a wall & changed her mind. She spun round once more & taking time to check the space was empty descended the steps into the gully of the drying yard. At the archway beyond the corner where she had observed the couple's intimate play she saw a neat circle of screwed up paper balls. Selecting one & flattening it she took a sharp look & was astonished by the volume of spidery writing filling the fragment. Gathering the rest surreptitiously she stowed them in her shoulder bag. "Why?" She wondered.

Naturally she failed to note the items pegged on the line.

"No. She couldn't have missed the clothes. Go back. You'll have to correct that. They had only just been hung up & were still sopping wet. They will have been dripping. She must have seen that?"

"I can't return." He shook his head. "It was too late before we even got there."

"And the colour & state of them. Was she to ignore that?"

"You want it to add up. Well it can't. She knew that & accepted it."

They held hands under the table.

"In the end."

"Why have you got them holding hands? Stop that. It's a big full stop to any sort of real action. What are you afraid they'll get up to?"

"I thought they should conceal themselves & watch."

"Might learn a trick or two? Well they'll need both hands free to keep their balance if she's as good at dancing as she used to be."

I wanted to watch her putting lipstick on first before we got going, so I asked her to slow this down while I took it in.

She thought she heard words, a sound like whispering; it was a bare hand rubbing the skin of her arm (to make her pay attention) her own.

"I'll mark my eyebrows in." She painted big arches over her grey eyes.

This is the place I bring some extraneous characters in for moment, striding confidently across the street at the snap of my fingers.

"Or strangers barging into the room unwelcome."

"We were utterly alone?"

"No. Too stark. Anyway it was untrue."

"At last we were alone?"

"You were all alone." The finality of it in her voice rang true.

"She sat there. Candlelight?"

"You should know. It's all yours to embroider. Perhaps this time they got lost. And the moon is so low it's down behind the tunnel. Or have you done the piece about the light? Have you ever had the place shrouded in mist?"

"It is mist . . . incarnate. But it's also the toxic gleam of decay which crushes the familiar area we work in."

"I think it would have to be stronger than 'gleams' to crush that box."

She shuddered, stamping the floor, fastening the cold silver belt around her hips before she sat & took out the lipstick. She turned to me as if dividing off another part of herself for safety before pushing a jewelled hand between her legs & scratching the red azalea (as she called it).

"You want the laughter echoing endlessly, according to the list. And. " She checked, "The sound of a rat?" She stroked the paper, dubious of its contents.

She glanced from her lips reflecting in the mirror to him, her mouth opening in amusement. "Where have you been cocooned these last thirty years?" Sliding the red stump back in then aiming the two halves back together fiercely & continuing brusquely, "You're not fucking around with poetry again are you? She demanded, dropping the lipstick blindly into a bag. "You are." She accused, "I can always tell . . . although it's indefinable it stinks rancid."

"Sticks out you mean."

"Corrections. That's it. They're the indicators. Corrections poorly disguised as sexual innuendo. You haven't the least . . . slightest intention of doing it, but never miss a chance when taken . . ." She corrected herself quickly, "To take the first . . ."

"Last. I'd have said." (And ducked to avoid the vanity bag tossed at his head). "Animal."

"Which one?" Seeing an opportunity she lost her anger in a second."

* * *

"When you two can spare a moment." A disdainful voice cut them apart. "I need that list completing. Then I'll have to force myself to peruse the description of your actions if you volunteer to be the others." The voice sighed, "Disgusting. It's certain to be Pussy." And barely seemed able to carry on. "Then you give me the exposition of that list if things haven't, by then, got too much out of hand." There was a rustling of paper as she screwed up the list. "She'll have to improvise."

* * *

Rosine kicked the notebook away under the dresser with a stealthy flick disguised as straightening her stocking seam & held her breath. Hoping he hadn't seen it. She didn't want him finding out that she kept a detailed account of each night's dream raking & left it lying around.

* * *

TWELVE.

At my count of 9 going up the ANGEL escalator it becomes vertical. After this magical number the down horde are dropping like half-baked fiends into my field of vision, not a liturgical animal amongst them. This is not a winding stair of excuses, this is the sheer drop to absolution the place to hand in petitions or elicit an erotic stare. A place to invoke with all the power of derided mind, while poised on the brink of salvation, the arrival of a new amour. So if this angelic bastard's grip on reality can be subverted & we are able to slip into the tight space of her imagination without being denounced. We might get it. Without her being aware of our presence. Anything could happen. Even consummation. "You can forget that kind of anticipation & all those rich promises you're making yourself. She'll slip out of sight as soon as she sees what a rough-cast grind you'll turn out to be."

One brief touch.

One venture towards the slit.

One dizzy loss of touch.

One obsessive piece of dickering about.

One slight mistake in that horizon line.

One night of graft.

(And the same plus relief of everything to do with oneself).

Once out of yourself . . .

Wait a minute.

Is that a princess the shaft of light strikes from the door chink beam? A comic zap.

Is that the character I've been searching for to love?

The calm dwarf. Can we take her with us? And the massive dog. Will it ever shift? Lying there like abundant stone.

By premonition.

Beyond the dimension of similarity

Margarita again stands off the painting waiting for any stranger. Determined as usual she would have the first that happened along.

Margarita was posed by a fallen flower, a rare blue rose underscored with carmine tints & stood expecting, with a lack of normal concern, to exchange secret glances with an innocent stroller & lead him into danger.

Margarita seemed to lurk, developing a full-lipped pout & painting it with crimson. No longer a child. Rounding her firm breasts & hips. Her grey eyes scintillating in the shadow of the alcove were rapaciously narrowed & questing a mirror while her hands lightly dabbed onto her dress as if stencilling a gloss with which she hoped to enhance her egregious appeal.

Margarita was ready to take on, to enjoy this spectral existence.

Margarita was again submerged in a personal night.

A long, long faint shadow dimmed the gleams on the corridor floor & Margarita's fingers flew to a pocket. She picked out a plastic phial, cracked it deftly & held the glutinous pessary under her nose to savour its acrid & corrupt odour; then opening her legs wide slipped it into her split, closed her legs & gasped as it was sucked up & burned the delicate flesh.

From cover she flagrantly watched the man she intended to defile approach; her look, if he engaged it, would swathe & engulf him in a feeling of anguish impossible to ignore. The compelling gaze she fixed on the distant face was that of a waif, lost & utterly alone. And she knew it would conjure up in him the idea she was so unloved & vulnerable that it would be impossible to resist. Who would want to deny her the pleasure of a touch a caress a kiss?

I approach. She only sees me when I'm near & hurriedly takes a decisive step out of the alcove into the light as I saunter down the corridor drawn to finger the golden stitches of her richly embroidered dress. Surprised, she lets my hand linger. Her waist is barely the width of my hand. Encouraged by her smile, not knowing she can't feel the touch, I grope deeper into the layers of succulent colour. She is still. She wonders.

What stiff stuff to caress. Now I wonder. Can she feel my hands? I get invited inside the bodice as it pops open & find two peaches that I grasp by their pink ends & pinch tight & shuffle backwards over onto the canape still holding her, pulling her with me to swing into the soft cushions. She lifts up the frock whale hoops exposing her sex as she sinks in a swirl of rough dabbed lace. With flecks of foam bubbling out of the slit & speckling the oyster as we hastily scramble together there are highlights crackling like frost over a pink grey frill & the shimmering lining under colour, too hastily slapped on, became transparent in the exertion like grilled bacon fat. The crimson slash becomes rusty with heat & the skin around takes on the sweat rainbow of petroleum.

"Keep going she demanded. And at that I always failed. I can't forget her look of disappointment seeming to accuse me of betrayal as if the orgasm would release her." I glanced over at Rosine. She gave me an absent look back, "You misunderstood her." Margarita lifted herself off. Felt briefly an immense yearning yawning gap open up in her heart then snap shut as tight-lipped she walked back, as if on a tight-rope, to the alcove. As later x-rays of the ageing layers revealed, many more hand positions had been tried. One daintily was pulling down the satin pants with a provocative exactitude. Another was fingering apart the line which gives the lay to left & right & opens slightly blood coloured. Pubic hair like fluttering eyelashes she starts once more. Her thighs tightly wrapped in cling film down to the knee to cover blue-black bruises, showing the wear of successive attempts at satisfaction. She stands poised on a single house brick. Ready on tiptoe. The light of the bright flash boldly splashing out from the invisible reflecting wrapping in the photograph gives the gloss & denies the wear & tear. And gives her by that instant the shimmering skin she never had but longed to possess, forever.

Or was she simply my chance record become a simulacrum of an impossible desire? He had made more changes to this figure since that day than any ever, but dare not place her now in the centre. She was laid under the melancholy shadow of a tree like thistledown caught in the grass her hair floating in gentle waves on the green pillow. Her unusually large hands resting like abandoned spades, beside the torn sheets. Instead the hard favoured siren occupied the chosen spot. Standing, legs apart, in the bare, wooden-walled box-like hut; her eyes glittering as if reviewing a succession of priceless jewels, or fixed on a fabulous scintillating robe, weighing up what flesh they would trade for. Had she at

last come to believe she had the right to do what she liked with her own body? (So the former beautiful slot with a plenitude of intricately incised pubic hair was denied a look in: it had now become unacceptable & replaced by a smooth & impenetrable sweep of pink barbie plastic).

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The brool of the throng envelops our meditation: you in the funnel, the vortex of effortless rustles, are unaware of their presence. Although you sense a force pushing, impelling you, ruffling the strata of explanations laid down to enable your completion & then forgotten. You are invisible to them yet know it blinds them. You assume a playful look of contempt watching the people stroll by. You are the axe: they the block. You will chop in two their beguiling glances & smiles at each other. You will take the hammer off the cross & drive a steel wedge into their cracks & split them. You want to warn them but you want to kill them.

We are caught in the Y of temptation. The fork stick making a comeback. A divining rod strapped on under the belt. The damned, but unexplained phenomenon. And one which works with a kick from the invisible trove. I cover my treasure & with a heart hammering on the carpet of waves spurting under the gaping mouth that widens & widens I rise & fall with the swell of your discontent. An apparition of a disembodied gullet appears, a sea monster, inhabited by a soul lost into perdition & thankful of dangerous sanctuary sucks its warm lips on my flanks as the fool inside stares out at me when she should have cast a loving look to her side. I reach out to warn her. The monster's tongue stabs my

throat. I fall. The crowd comes between us pushing, shoving, tearing . . . a suffocating & foul breath blinds me.

Where are you . . . aaah . . . I feel you. The fish mouth threatens to engulf you. We clasp hands. They are stone cold.

* * *

In this assignation decided by alphabetical proximity I have to wash over the inert picturesque story with one block of colour & smoothly finger the body scars to get on the crunode of it. The colourless stink given off by an A B C of nihilism.

"Is that all she left you?"

"It was a generous error, I believe."

"Are you mad?" He said with real irritation & somewhat confrontational with a smack of . . . "It was all she had."

"Oh. Shut up." Rosine snapped in genuine anger. "Simple as A B C means work it out yourself. And is said to put you off when what you're after is unfathomable."

He picked up the toy flag she had laid aside after the play; a rectangular scrap of white paper, glued to a stick, with a red & gold design crudely brushed on it. Red dots around the edges & a blob of gold at the centre.

"A gift of colour from Veronese."

(The obsessional rhythmic sound of a flag flapping in the wind caught in the slapping of thighs against buttocks in the thrusts as she held the flag between her teeth.)

The wonderful loop of infinity with the knot to tie the mob pulled tight at the crux.

Infinity the teardrop. The teardrop gathers all the sombre & extravagant colours of the

smile it slides past on the cheek & becomes a woman. Her clothes fall with surprising loud sounds as we rush together. And then we make louder sounds as if they were being amplified in a box.

"No tinselly pomp cutting us off from our dreams," She pretended to dance.

"No. We're lucid enough to do that to ourselves without any ballroom props."

* * *

Then where did you take him?

For a ride.

* * *

THIRTEEN.

On the morning when a cement lorry crashed with a lorry carrying chicken legs, they walked down the gentle slope from the Crucuno dolmen into a field. She pointed at a whale of a boulder, 'I haven't seen that before.' Then forged across the stubble to an oblong area of gorse & bramble scrub marked out by tall but fallen stones & started looking for the flat central slab.

Here is the simplest map of the universe.

A Box.

"It was on the day we went from KERZERHA to CRUCUNO that I felt I understood."

Isabella declared to no one.

Personal memory penetrated by other space, not difficult things. Enough forgotten to enable her to remember the sweetness.

First we take a crude rock fall turned into long cold lines.

To be sure we calibrate them by the stars.

Naked.

We have to call up Astral spirits. And here we are spun right up against the wall. Their name list stretches beyond remoter luck to places now inundated by the sea.

"How shall we try it?"

"Magic?"

We look out for a telltale cascade of clues to flood our imagination already fed to a constricting rush.

& from the abundant crowds of goddesses on transparent museum shelves

Choose ASTARTE.

For her Curses.

To lay the pain all bare.

You do it: blood-raw.

No. Pay me first. She said. You'll get that only for money up front.

(Written in blood in complicated language so they think they're getting something extra.

She scribbled a note. Sign here).

He had asked, 'Did you get it?' She had given him an angry unsympathetic look.

"We searched the bodies first! We rolled them over & over in our greed until they were flayed raw by the rushes. And so our hands were covered in blood."

It could be called a contract born out of a superstitious need for reconciliation. But we were cooking the answer while devouring the reply. So I'm writing this backwards. My elbows planted either side of a thick wad of paper turned over like an empty platter discarded by a dog. I paid & she took the money & kept it. But she came up with the goods. Scribbled in drivel to keep the curse secret. As she handed it to me I said I was hoping this would be the blank page which makes its spell effective. A litany of leaden garbled twaddle that should inflict the most damage when tossed into the white water of a fountain.

"On yourself?"

"On the chorus, I hope."

If the pewter doesn't dissolve into an acid sludge before it does the trick the words will make them afraid of everything. They will look down what is made to seem endless

straight lines of stone & see disaster. It was at KERZERHA, at the change of the angle of the alignments, where Astarte agreed to a tight swathe of cling film at least a foot wide being wrapped round her high narrow waist of alabaster. Below it the silver ring with a ruby heart flashed in her navel. She also allowed a swathe to be woven over her breasts although it flattened them. It hid nothing & they shone. She raised her arms as each of her marble thighs was tightly but invisibly covered. The breasts thrust free.

"She came on strong & to our delight she was . . . she looked bare to the waist?"

"No. That's masculine. You'll have the puritanical watch-dogs in."

"Almost naked. Half dressed?"

"No. That could be pornographic. You'll get the same lot in only they'll pay for it."

"Who?"

"Ask that later, if you need to."

"Totally naked?" Then thinking of an aesthetic appeal. "In a tub?"

"Cold but cuts out a lot of guessing & speculation about it." Provokingly, "Takes a bit of pulling off."

"And padding."

"They like it nicely wrapped, a special gift from you know who (absolutely blank uncomprehending expression). But magnificently given." He looked puzzled. "I never seemed to have got one."

"You didn't solicit the right figure out of the drum of imagination."

"He was standing at the wrong window." Provoking pointed tone.

"You use to be able to pick one up on any Sunday afternoon at the National Gallery & probably still can. They don't move that fast."

"They were very feeling very fast in the 'sixties'."

An angel of no-man's-land; pale, angular & delicately worn out. In clay or marble depending just how the light caught her. With grey eyes watching for that false step to be taken as she stood. She waited looking through the closed window over the shoulder of her friend. It was time to dress.

"Oh. Here she comes."

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She leaned into her part, shivering, pretending to be cool when she was boiling with rage. Recalcitrant, stuffed up with curiosity, an interesting Eve & a puzzle, she was ready, in silver shoes. He haunted the spot as if he didn't know; but he knew, with different expectations. This wasn't his first time slipping under a stone.

"Did they need to know all that? I think we agreed we knew previously where they were & I haven't forgotten. Do we know now?"

Was it simulated anger? Difficult to tell.

"We knew what?" The genuine incredulity was so crossed with a play of exaggerated perplexity it was difficult to believe blah blah blah "When I tried to bring their love into focus it was like contemplating that whirlpool entrance to Hell with every erotic scene played out on diagrammatic lines of water by robots. No. It was worse than that . . ."

He shuffled his cold feet, cramped & uncomfortable, banging his heels against the rock-like bench.

". . .it was " She stood up sharply in exasperation forgetting the low roof of the booth as he put out his hand to clutch her arm & said, "Don't budge."

Thump.

She ruefully rubbed her head. "It was like getting a knock on the head every time you were foolish enough to think about it. And getting a real whack, it appears, when likely to reveal by intricate deductions, the deliberate & wounding lunacy of being anywhere near them."

"So we never had a clue where they were."

"They were always in bed. We never knew where the bed was." Icily.

"Oh you knew well enough." Tauntingly.

"I knew nothing. How do you know if I know?" Shaking her head while knowing the denial had been too emphatic. "Leave that to me."

"How?" He produced a thin folder from behind his knees. "Shall we try?"

She nodded. "Let's see."

"Look at the first illustration."

"I know. I know. I know." Was murmured softly by her throughout the description. The portfolio's brown dimpled covers flapped up & down over her knees as she alternately raised her feet on tiptoe & then heeled them again.

"I took a sketch, three children on a see-saw, drawn years ago & I pasted this above a newspaper photo of a high & round brick tower being scaled by a single figure, a steeplejack."

"Oh you've included the photo you took of the goddess."

"I know. And stitched them up. Look at it."

"You discarded the first image & used another drawing you made of a small stage crowded with spooks from a production we saw of Faust (Goethe. I mention that because it's rarely put on & you may think I'm referring to Marlowe or even Busoni but not the two versions from the Mann's. . .)."

"Do they look as though they are see-sawing?"

"They mimed an orgy of sadistic sex. There was a bunch of figures tied to a rope swing in that scene. And you feverishly scribbled down a few sketches of their lascivious cavorting in a notebook on your knee. It looked as though you were masturbating. Some of the audience glared."

"We were cool about it. Said it took us back to the 60's & was a K.O."

&.

"Took me back to that tart in 'The Balcony'. The moment when she tucked her tits back into the cups of the cherry basque to take a bow." He reflects. "Rosine mmmm. Where did that name come from?"

"She should have left them out." Dryly.

"I think the actress appeared back on the stage with her breasts covered, having pulled the cups over them backstage. Mmmm. No I think the actress pulled the cups over her breasts on stage as she appeared to take the final bow." He reflects.

"As an afterthought." Dryly.

"They had been out for all the play."

"And the others?"

"What others? No, she definitely flicked the cups up over her breasts when the players were in the line up at the final curtain."

"She stole the show."

?

"Like this!" She pulled the blood red cups down & took each long pink nipple between her thumb & forefinger & squeezed them out bigger.

There was a sharp series of taps on the roof of the shelter. A man's head peered out of the sky over the rim & the roof began to sag with his weight.

She nestled her breasts back in the basque & smoothed its lace with a stroke.

"Because of the provocative immediacy of her action I know you're going to question here if it really is necessary that she uncovers her breasts. I think if she ever did take the lead; try to have it her way; work it powerfully sexually the way she wanted, I have to put in some of the things that happened. I'm not going to leave them out & try & convince you with fiction. How could I? This is just a fleeting page full of it. Do you think she was always elsewhere at those times? Just for him? A still-life only composed of two passion fruit & a juicy slice of peach?"

"That was yesterday." The girl said, cupping her breasts in each hand & mouthing something silently at her partner in the shadows. Proffering them to him with an index finger under their tips. He bowed into the kisses.

"These days they can take it or leave it if it's not going the way they want it. So she shrugged. Implying, do I have to spell it out, if he doesn't come on she'll go elsewhere."

"No. Don't spell it." Muffled response.

"You must remember she shrugged. So tell it. Appreciatively." The roof creaked back into shape, relieved of the intruder's body.

"I'll do it. It looks better." Shrugs. "Did you like that?"

"Not bad," came the faint reply from way off.

"A little more squeezing in at the elbows might help . . .you know." He tried to be encouragingly sprightly.

Her head sank between her shoulders as she growled. "How do you know? You weren't there. And none of that lot was either. We were alone."

"I was there. Alone"

"That doesn't make sense. Where was I?"

"Gone." Laconic. Final. "Pleasure-seeking."

Her tongue flicked her top lip. "You felt that loss even in my presence. You never used your eyes."

"I did. I saw them. I was there."

"I know what you saw. I'm talking about this." She bumped him sideways as they sat.

"Name them!" She urged using the soft flesh as a goad.

"Why do you always ask if they have names? Don't you believe they could be imaginary fragments. You give them bodies. I don't."

"You give them a special place to haunt."

"I know & here it is." He took the illustrated sheet & flattened it over her knees.

And he names them (or does he?) He has to. That's his job. Like ejaculation. The names lift away the grey set & open the space up gracefully.

&.

"Where were his thoughts? Or are you saying he had already sold out."

His mind was not with him. And hers? How would I know? You could see the legs of those out gathering fancies, here & there on the rock steps, composing & sketching.

Putting the movements of the horseplay together.

"Why was there room for two to sit together? After all he was a hermit."

"He liked to share the time he imagined with another shape. And how did he make it visible. He carved a shambles of people & animals on the shore-line, all very similar; chipping an empty armchair out of the rock to slip on to as he laid aside his mallet & chisels & joined stone men glaring or snoring away to the horizon. His sensuality was expressed with hammer blows. By repetition. Every blow was immediate magic (like a word) spat out. Because feeling was so fleeting he wanted it hard & fixed around him. However, each grotesque manifestation unhappily showed & furthered his alienation."

"But language isn't so difficult to make, words spring up like weeds, why take . . ."

The sea boomed in the cleft below them.

"So much trouble to cut it all out." She or he raised an arm like an axe.

"Cut right out." They agreed.

"And why was he bound in this tight space between sea & land?"

"Because (unknowingly I think) he was caught up in an impossible dialogue that gave him the feeling he certainly had no chance of gaining sanctuary beyond this no-man's land. His one-sidedness was clearly the result of bewitchment, his fears were conjured out, made visible by the thin air cut into the stone, air made so solid."

"It sounds as though you could have thrown a white sheet over any of the figures & felt you had done the right thing. They seemed laid to rest."

"But not for him. He cut them out but kept them in."

"Out of his mind?" She raised her hand as if shielding her eyes, "Something was still too hidden."

"Not by the look of it."

"So it was a way of vetting the fears? As they ranged through his . . . heart? Couldn't he have prayed?"

"By the time he had cast this spell his time was up. It was less trouble than having to work agreeably with the others & more fun although it took twenty-four years to do."

"More fun? I'm puzzled by that."

"Puzzled. Spelled less trouble." Intransigently sticking to the question.

"As the result looks more like a ferocious nightmare with extreme hallucinations visited on him & ground out of the stone by his very resistance to the manifestations . . . 'more fun' seems to close off his feeling & under estimate the cost."

"You think he was desperate for all those years, don't you? That he lived believing if he gave in to his craving for love, gratified his desires he would be lost. Having utterly lost hope. But was it such a comfortless solution? Didn't he grasp the deeper layer of fears in the hammering?"

"No . . . It was an emotional incantation he opened out, arrayed in solid form while hiding under the spell of solitariness to preserve an essential inner picture & constrain his reckless (he felt) passions. He can't call out to invite a lover to come & so to keep order

in his heart he smoothes the rough granite day after day, there has to be this orgy of stone because he feels compelled to declare his love from which he can't escape."

"Well what it showed was almost inhuman, because the impossible secret of his activity was contained in childlike forms; compressed by childish longing. The serious application was disguised as playfulness. The rapture enveloped by a cloak of drudgery to disguise it. If, by chance, he was observed he thought nothing would be really given away."

"But with it gave vent to the phantoms. And gave the game away."

"Much more than that."

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The light in a cloud filled sky changes from pale ochre to glimmer dim red before the sun rises. A bell stirs everyone. I scribble two rough notes as we sit it out till dawn, telling one of them I miss her very much & the same to the other. The dust isn't kicked up. The mud isn't squeezed under a boot because the rock is washed clean each tide. Every cranny packed with soil grows a shore plant. In the distance a man starts working on the flat concrete roof of his house with a pneumatic drill.

"So it was with a silent, immobile congregation hacked out towards nakedness in bold lumps of kersanton without the miseries of the flesh (except the jarred hand & bruised fingers of sculpting) that he spent much of his time."

"Until?"

"It all culminated as an obsessional domestic Guimiliau scattered on the shore with, for an exquisite start, a splattered jellyfish cut out around the most natural mouth crack cunt

left in the granite slab smiling all you could have wished for: its eyes blank but full blank."

"Were you wishing?"

"There was a merman roughly hacked out suckling, with its half flared scales chaining down this full-grown man in a hat. The imagined Lover? I suppose."

"Were you out of reach?" That's all she was interested in finding out, "Why? Couldn't you be touched? Tempted?" That's all she wanted to know. "Wasn't there something you found irresistible? Tell me. Was it an inviting look?"

When daybreak came & the tide was out over her coral they went up the shallow steps meandering towards the groves worn in a stone by the regular sharpening of his chisels.

"Were you wishing?" She insisted. He pushed her away. Didn't answer. If he keeps on acting like this there'll be no chance of anything.

Why doesn't he want her near him?

Anger.

"All you could have wished for? Stones?" And she put a finger across his lips.

Does she want us to keep quiet because she senses something hidden, uncanny behind these fragments of monsters; the lonely ecstasy that drove him in his silence we should not disturb.

&. Don't forget. He knows.

She only needs him once or twice to make sure she's still got sensations in the right places & after that it's complaints or downright refusals for ages. Taking up any whimsical strategy to brush him off until she feels dead again. Perhaps thinking he sees

her as the last player in a game of sardines. The desperate one who knows that because of her superb hiding place she will never be discovered & caught . . . that the others are home. She's left out.

He was drawing.

And with the bluey-black dye from the spilled ink on his fingers they merged into her dyed mane as he stroked her head tenderly. "I'm glad I found you."

"They didn't. They stroked through the black hair feeling for her cunt."

"She gave me a big bunch of flowers the last time I saw her & told me about the blue stains she had to wash off after modelling for you. And the black marks on her legs that took weeks to disappear."

I turned. An older woman stood back from the doorway rubbing a wrist. She had observed the metamorphosis.

"Everybody wants you tonight. Worse luck. Nothing left for me."

"You'd put it to the right use then?"

"Undeniably." But she didn't meet his look.

"Come up when you're ready." Was that shouted by a disembodied voice?

"I'm always ready." She looked right through him yet took his stained hand. Heehaw. Was she mimicking a video scene in which innocence is feigned over a crude stumbling beautiful brazen temptation?

"She hadn't got the 'brazen' attitude worked out."

"Makes you haggard & careworn. Had she got the action of that?"

"No."

"Then I'll take a piece of it."

"It's celluloid."

"Must be good then."

"Better."

"2 D."

That gives us the satisfaction of implementing a minimum need . . . pair . . . to secure physical existence. The start & a nice one, of transfiguration from a seeming flat 2D to a becoming rotund 3D.

"Impossible."

"We know it's not out there," She leaned forward & pointed up. "I know it's useless, a waste of time to complain at this early stage, but we could have a bit more movement in this. And yet I know we're lucky to have got this far."

She turned her head towards the Calvary. On the third finger of her left hand the two silver & gold rings she always wore had been taped secure although they were always the devil to get off. On the third finger of her right hand a silver ring with a milky moonstone had also been taped with white sticky gauze. That took the Devil to get it off as well.

A black dog with no concept of 'enemy' as a plural abstract noun crouched amongst the kex in the wet ditch hunting.

The car started on a curveswerve.

"Ah movement. So the story is starting." She dropped the wad of paper. "I wondered if I would be able to tell. You were never one to skimp an introduction."

I lobbed a ball of paper out of the window, the remains of a sketch made at the Tronoën Calvary. I pulled a heavy blue book onto my knees opening it at random. The left page had sketches of wayside crosses completely covering it. The right was a mix of text & photographs. The butterflies of stone.

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FOURTEEN.

From the KITCHEN door I could see a false wall had been built on the side of the house very close, almost touching the stones of the dolmen. And a rough hole had been knocked in this wall at head height. Through the gap I could see there had been a doorway in the original house opening right close to the dolmen chamber, surely too close to use. Also the concealed wall's foundation was several feet lower than the curtain structure & because of this I could see no way that any one could have passed through a half-buried door.

"Now that's completely blocked in. How are you going to get them in & out of there?"

We are invited to sit at the kitchen table. It is laid as an elaborate statement of loneliness.

A half-opened tin of sardines, its scrolled lid had clumsily jammed the tool preventing the top coming clean off, spilt on a spread newspaper as we both squeezed our knees under the table. Her thighs brushed it. I heard their cry of nylon on wood. A slice of bread being roughly cut as we entered has left a scattering of large crumbs over the plate. I see a crowd scene rudimentarily mapped in their pattern. A fork, clean but dull, rests by its tines on the edge of the tin. Keeping guard. A glossy magazine covers two potatoes in the orange plastic rack. Two onions lodge it in. (Like little breasts comes later). I gaze at her red lips & lick mine. She is on the front cover & I think her solo until made aware of his cheeks by the two onions he kisses off the page like breasts. We can hear what they said.

"There are no heads on the sardines in the tin."

?

"They are without intellect. Just a total slit from gorge to tail." She tossed her head.

I think the offence had been caused by a simple act, not being able to prevent myself, I let my eyes wander over the necessarily conventional pale pink expanse of bare flesh she had exposed in bulk, before chancing a complimentary word on how well the colour of her eyes matched the colour of her nipples.

"Perhaps you found that moment when Rosine flicked up the top of her corset to cover her breasts fascinating (she quite unconsciously pulled her hands up to hers at this word) because it was natural & provocative. That action released the actress from a constraining purposeful duality, from the apprehension of dread in her part & its binding transforming role, giving her alone back in the body fresh at that instant she covered up the flesh. It was the single chance given the tight configuration of the play when there was the possibility to exploit feeling Lust . . . instead of Power. . ."

"My lust I think you want to say." He spoke towards the grey ceiling.

" . . . & then only fleetingly the second the acting was over."

"Yes. She was up on her feet & off in a flash."

"She acted as if she had forgotten she was naked, was that what made it appealing. As Rosine joined the line glancing to either side at the giant figures she gave herself back seductively." She rubbed the top of her head as if the thought hurt, "It was the absurd moment of fidelity when she became herself again."

Was it like that?

He shifts uneasily. Or did he? Even set against a draughty window in that bare & lean kitchen was more comfortable than being stuck in a cold & constraining shoddily pre-fabricated rickety imitation rock cell trying to get Isabella to see reason.

"So you think an obsessive hatred is formed in that kind of instant?" He thought she'd already got it. And then wondered 'which moment'.

"It could happen that a potential stalker hears a couple making love & is so tormented that he (She pointed down & pulled a face) torments . . . torments . . . So in the end you are compelled to escape by . . ."

"Killing them."

He kept his hands firmly placed on his knees & straightened his arms stiffly. The irresistible inexpressiveness of the gesture contracted the space about him, "How difficult it is, how difficult . . ."

"To act against an unhinged criminal, encroaching by fear on my mind for power over my body?"

"It shows it was a play about the void of power. A loveless stake-out."

"I know that those who hold power can't face the shadows of its terror in action. They build a barricade of luxury around themselves . . ."

The bare light bulb dimmed.

"So they don't have to . . ." He grunted to bring the pig into it. "Face it."

"Power's off! Second drawer down you'll find some candles."

" . . . they can cover up. . .like she did."

"That's not it. Hers was a natural action."

"They can cut off the juice."

"You say the fulfillment of the play was meticulously given at that spot, on the very divide between the action & its end." Their astonishment showed they were wondering if

it could fit in. The candle flames spluttered & dipped, nearly gutted, then took up again burning brightly blue. "Knocking off. Sounds about it for him."

"It was the only moment that wasn't perverse."

"She was standing half naked & in that split second you reckon there was an intellectual thickening . . ."

"She was hopping around a bit. You mean, I hope, deepening."

" . . . & underlying your feeling constructed during that illuminated second. . . was?"

"A flash. As we say."

"Desire." He answered decisively.

"What we have to decide is whether the suspended reality . . . of that instant was a trick devised purposely to catch you in . . . a foolish moment & employed to ransack your heart . . . temporarily."

"Did I?" He pretended to think. "Wait!" He interrupted with a chaotic crackling voice.

"I've got a sneaking feeling I was wrong. Was it the horse? But she was in black. Now my thoughts are getting tangled up like sheep in barbed wire."

" . . . you gave way. . . "

"Gave way?"

"Collapsed, no caved in."

"What" (nothing sagged in that show). He stood up. "Such an entanglement. Now I'm wondering." He looked at the floor. Loosely screwed up balls of soiled newspaper had been kicked under the table. He looked at the ceiling, patches of mustard coloured damp

clouded the ropy grey whitewash. "If that's what it's really about." He prodded the rubbish down in the waste bin with a broom.

A lump of coffee sludge banged out of a sieve perched on the rim of a greasy bowl in the sink like dog shit on a pavement edge. The bare floorboards were spattered with grease spots. The T.V. screen flickered, momentarily illuminating the drab corner with a picture of a snow covered ship on a black ocean; a sealed box bobbed in sight of a lone man guarding the frost-thickened bulkheads. We can see images of his thoughts playing on the snowy deck.

"The description of those thoughts, for what it is, doesn't dwell on my lips anymore than kisses do, or lie in my fingers with all their caresses. Nor perch on my shoulder trying to crack a chip or jostle the monkey hanging on my back. It isn't forever banging around down in my boots (where I hide some bank-notes under my foot) although my socks are. Yet it is always here, somewhere, like those phantoms in the shadows on that snow swept deck."

"Arseing around?"

Doubts cast a shadow. Are two more figures appearing? A man joining a woman. Not actors, though it's not easy to tell with them in that position.

"You can tell if you've seen a bad one."

?

"I don't think the actress who played the prostitute who played the wild horse was bare breasted intentionally. Have you seen the play? That was a poorly fitted costume."

"I'm beginning to think I have."

"But I'm beginning to worry that I'm not remembering the right tart."

"Three times, three times & still you . . . Ah." She whispered & then stronger. "Right tart.

Can't you give them a name? Make it sound better." Her voice rested on the word tart.

"I'm trying to remember which one it was that sparked off the reaction. The name will come later. If she had a name."

"Well . . . she was eventually called something. Surely the horse . . . girl . . . was dressed in a skimpy shiny black plastic outfit on very high heels."

"But did she show her breasts?"

"Couldn't help it. You seem to have the memory span of an angel & view the world with the same open heart." She caught her breath, trying to keep the word but swallow it.

"Perhaps she got caught up in the wire & her costume, what there was of it, ripped to shreds. You'd have liked that. You like modern fashions."

"You know." Pensively. "Now I'm sure it was the horse." Pleased.

"You fancy black & very high heels?"

"The one with barbed wire?"

"No. There wasn't any in this production. That was last night!"

Silence.

"No that was the other tar . . . girl. Could she have been the one? Or was it the other tartgirl (I give up) adorned in rags & tatters . . . no she couldn't have flicked those anywhere, not enough of them."

"Give up?"

"Are you crazy. I haven't started the elaboration yet. (The door isn't ever shut, the bolt slides but never locks & the hinges have a strange geometry that belongs to Malfi)."

"Elaboration. Bollocks. You mean oscillation & delusion. You pick one & it seems settled. Just then you start to wonder about the alternative & haver; doubts crowd in & you change your choice. But never never choose. Were you hurt so much?"

"For a while." Absently.

"Can you only add up how you feel by juggling figures? And how clever of you not to remember. You never get a total."

?

"And then off we go again."

?

"Stick & we can move on."

&

She smacked her lips. "So it's true. When I lick my lips my tongue does help make me think of eating the plate of . . ." She looked down, grimaced, "Sardines in front of me."

He ironed the crumpled illustration over her bony knees, rubbing out the creases. Feeling Isabella's legs . . . all skinny was hopeless there's only one thing for it, but she's got big hands cupped at this moment over herself. "Oh shit, I forgot my nose & eyes."

"Fucked again by theory. But close."

Look here is Rosine (a figment, a lovey dovey in a list of possibilities). A finger pointed her out. She was lovely.

"Your tongue should be able to recall many different pleasurable times."

"I wonder," & here she looked down at the sardines & grinned," how it sorts out the 'food' one from . . ."

"Don't say it. As my tongue tingles licking my smacking lips, my eyes dropping onto the sight of these silver fish . . . tinned fish . . . with their black smudges, say 'look'. Here is Astarte . . . now dead. As her blackened teeth were fixed by the flames first in a grin & then to glow to fall to a powder. Like her face burned rouge that day around the welcoming grin as she waited in the doorway at the top of the steps."

White paper; grey wash & thin black pencil lines: do they describe where we are? On a cold, 2D plane in this drawing? Does it add up?

"This looks nothing like what you said it would, you've betrayed me. Broken your word."

"But this is a picture . . . several glued together. How can you be let down by a picture?"

"Everything keeps changing."

"Now you know why he had to fix it in stone."

"Everything?"

"Love."

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FIFTEEN.

The ROCK with a cormorant on it is marked sgeir dubh on the map: The A of destruction. In the froth around it are the bubbles of transience. They had taken the designer some deft paddling, to form an effective show.

At low tide it is the enchanted castle, its bird shit glowing in the distant blue light. At a wind free flood the turrets become a row of fangs with white lacey scum-laden waves drifting slowly up to them caught by a perpetual spell of current. The surrounding mountainous landscape is generally purple no matter what the light. A cry for help splits the spindrift. We sit up together, our one action as perfect as a mirrored mime, like the two pages of an open book each with our own poem of response. Our long embrace fell apart. We saw the mermaid.

Not exactly.

She saw the mermaid.

I saw the crocodile.

Our clasp didn't exactly flounder on the call for help, the spine of it held in the hard bright light; we were still nailed fast. But then my inner man, musing on the other shore, never could decipher more than dot-dash. Thinking always threw up some forced pleading to try & thwart or impede carnal delight speeding home. We took cover again, pulled the imaginary landscape up to our ears, & tried to remember where we had been but it was hopeless, we couldn't even get our hand positions the same.

"What's up? Do they turn into Spam?"

Had we misheard in our own gasping? Had we called ourselves?

A breeze ruffled the rock on the painted backdrop. No. The whole structure shook. Out came N. flailing his arms. A gale of imitated outrage.

"Now do that again. You're frozen meat."

"And I thought we were fruit."

"And no need to undress this time we know you can do that." He rolled back under the breaking waves. "Can you act as if something was about to crystallize." His head bobbed up again, "It is the moment when they catch on . . . gain insight . . ." He went down in a trail of bubbles.

"This is leading up to what?" I asked the ripples.

"Oh you know . . . everything . . . nice. A shag if you like. Come on try again."

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She winked at him before they started again.

"You made me chose," she scowled down, "them or you." But as she said it doubt was evident in her expression. "Should that just have slipped out? Or was it supposed to be said with deliberation? As if it had been between them for a long time."

"Long time. Since the word dot. Go."

"How do you think she did that? Was it a copy obtained by long observations & hard work or had she really got the knack?" She rubbed his hand. "Just dropped into it after a brief perusal of the outline?"

"She was very slightly more formal. Only a fraction. I would have been able to pick it up if it was mimicry."

"Do you want it so accurate, like a forgery? Or do we get to know her better by these imitations. And why did she tell you that now? It was irrelevant."

"She knew that. She was always like that."

The lines of mysterious stones perfectly express what I felt every time when confronted by this unthinking spewing up of the worst bits of the past. Is it inexpressible, the machinations we make in love, except by drawing a picture, or making a simple map? And what does that tell us later? Is that unfathomable line under a breast the road to a heart? Or the road to nowhere.

"That line of enquiry is a dead end. Take a photo at this moment. It will help reconstruct the scene later." Shouted a voice behind the waves. "At least that way we can be sure of a touch of art from the process."

"I have to pinch myself to believe I'm hearing that. But I'm too cold to feel it." She snapped her fingers. "And I know you're itching to say you said it."

"Get on with it." A voice called from the depths of somewhere.

"If they are stupid send them to dance with someone else."

"And I did."

"It took you too long." Hard voice.

She put her head in her hands. Her eyes sparkled with glycerine tears dabbed on her cheeks. She still held the bottle close by her ear.

"I picture how they look & try to work out a way to answer only from that, to prevent myself considering their actions towards me & cutting those in on the decision."

"Delusion."

"It's kinder."

"It causes trouble. They don't get it. And I think you know. It's the anguish it causes that you want." He stood up abruptly. Grimacing. "The bottle doesn't help." He snatched it & tossed it into the waves. The bottle bounced back & shattered into a thousand sharp splinters around them.

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The sea kept thundering into the narrow cleft; its vibration brightened then galvanized her to shake & tilt her head to detach the gruesome images constantly invading her thoughts, then, composed, she pressed the tips of her fingers together with both hands on her chest as if in prayer. Her back, melded into the fold of cold rock ached to be rubbed & while she gently detached her stiff body from the niche by keeping its shape unchanged she pushed out a half sigh half moan, the same sound that escaped from her lips when penetrated in love or whatever. She stared at black water rushing over a massive stone & surging into the long groove that so resembled the line between her thighs she felt taken. The warmth of that thought helped to peel off some of the lurid detail in the distorted picture that always lined the arena of each of those actions; she was left this time only with the sensation.

"And holding a decal."

She kicked at the backdrop above the feet she could see under the black rock. They hopped away cursing, "I'd lick them off, you'd like that."

"No. You'd like that but one asshole in my knickers is enough."

The scenery was butted from behind.

"And you can get off on that."

A muffled voice had already started to cry. "What would you know about unconditional acceptance. What would you know about the incomparable excitement of . . . of . . ."

"You're stuck. Aren't you? You wouldn't be able to choose between bugging a woman & a sheep." She paused but didn't help as he tugged up the scenery to get under it & still had to crouch it was so heavy.

"You're so intent observing your own behaviour." She added vehemently. "You're as good as gutted before you start."

" . . .Lust. I was going to say . . ."

"I know & you slaughtered any chance of feeling because you were watching the word come out."

" . . . what did you say?" He advanced. " . . . mauled." She kept the distance.

"I know you want to fuck me, but you look better from a distance. Keep away."

Her former companion, who had been standing in the wings, waiting in the false landscape of hope; raised his arms in consternation but didn't speak. He felt the very denial of her desire for closeness, merely on the score of beauty, was a calculated tempting provocation, not in fact a refusal but always taken as an invitation of the most elementary kind. But then, he knew if he came upon a man hanging from a lamp-post by the leg playing a guitar, he could easily accommodate it into his ordinary expectation of a street scene & likewise he believed that he wasn't exactly contradicting what she was saying & acting; he knew what it was she was doing he was sure. But she didn't know what she was doing . . . really . . . in truth. And in this tangle there is, he said to himself, a

clear picture of how I feel . . . somewhere . . . perhaps in the song that guy was croaking . . . if I could remember the tune . . ."

"Why are you standing there dreaming? Help me. Can't you tell by the way he's looking at me what's going on?"

"I can see. But I thought we were doing this entirely 'from nature'. And I wasn't dreaming I was thinking. And waiting."

"Hence the vacant expression."

Then she was off.

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She deliberately but not ardently ran into the man who was rapidly gaining on her & took both of his hands in hers, pulled close to him but she also used her grip to make sure that he was held far enough away to avoid all but essential contact. Enough to control their movements & use him as a shield, an interface; it was a cumbersome kind of error.

"Error?" He wondered, was she trying to trip him up or stop him passing?

"Is that right?" She asked, pushing a leg out onto its toe ends & looking intently at the skirt draped over it, pouted. "Or carelessness in your writing?"

"I'll let it pass." But the tone was strict & cutting. "It's a random mark."

"We can only continue if you take my part." She looked into his eyes. "As far as I'm concerned it would take a great deal of skill for the next bit to be natural."

She tightened her grip. With not a suspicion of titillating communication.

He would have been happy if the handclasp had been tempered by a touch of tenderness.

It may have appeared, from a distance, to have expressed some closeness before she let

go & backed quickly away, but it felt like the gesture it was; a pincer; a manoeuvre without imagination full of aggression.

The man in the wings shuddered & sighed. "Now you're putting him on the same footing as me. Is that for the sake of confusion?"

"That would be unbearable." Her eyes never left her assailants face. "We would have to repeat it."

"They never do." He absently felt the paint on the backdrop & it smeared.

Instantaneously the act touched the thought & he remembered five brown marks resembling the scorched imprint of fingertips that always appeared on her shoulder in the heat of lovemaking.

"You would notice that."

"We would have to play all the insignificant details over again?"

"And know it was the left one."

"?"

"Shoulder."

"What effrontery. Carping. I took so much trouble to make everything precise. Why else would I have included so many instructions other than to help you?"

"So you can get it just as you like it."

"Impossible."

"& not very attractive."

A wink & the perspective changes. A snap of the fingers & the windows are not shut; they have gone.

"Does the outside world, say Lincoln cathedral, exist in this?" She wondered, "Are there any real items to produce as proof? What other evidence have I but your word for, say, that snake?"

No one finger pointed: the hand scooped outward, away from her inner margin, he would say.

"I knew that was coming. And it is, funnily enough, one of the few concrete facts in the whole story. Unlike the characters Isabella, Rosine & Astarte who are hopefully concocted by players gradually falling in step with the reader's imagination. Born out of song, play & one chance encounter on a flight of steps etc. And if the lucky ones who are left (or can't get out of it) succeed in combining themselves to the whole unadulterated scheme so much the better. They could do it by geometric means I suppose. (He scratched his head) or should that be sexual? No. The Hero hadn't arrived yet. And in this we follow them overcoming the invisible topographical aspects of the setting, the limiting you & me & all sorts of deviant behaviour to get it to some kind of culmination."

"He means the total absence of props or regular payment." Rosine deciphered automatically in her matter-of-fact voice. "Or escape clause."

"By artifice, chance or pick your own luck. They come alive, more or less, somewhere between the feet & the crown." His hand waved loosely about his ear. "They could dance, as well."

"So the answer is no."

"I think it's better if all the enigmatic sufferings of the body & the good deeds in the head (on the body if that's where they are) are trapped as one breath in between the pages

instead of letting them loose to roam at large in life & be hunted down & caught, caterwauling, by their tail under the stone of reason or something mmm relevant & trapped mmm no I've used that yes snared no strangled that's right better they are strangled by the guts trundling along in the body in the book."

"Is that in your body, in its entirety I understand; or mine?"

"At that moment when we are caught (hesitation) observed under the shelter & you are demonstrating your acting ability & I my forgetful side of memory & you dexterity in the cold starting from cold; I suppose it rests in me but at that moment, you know the one we share later (caught accidentally but luckily I must insist, on film) it could be transferred or be being transferred & then it would be in both bodies for the ejaculation I mean duration."

(The art is in the act the chorus said to itself).

"Oh. Is it spunk? Where would it finish up? I mean normally."

"Not just embraced on celluloid. But in ourselves."

"On shelves?" Perplexed.

"Coming, as they often do, out of vagueness & obscurity riding an old plot if I happen to overhear one & can remember it long enough to jot down a few points."

"In pairs & dressed diaphanously by you: but well wrapped up." Said in a controlled voice for some reason.

"Sleek one morning," he mumbled impatiently, " & perhaps dishevelled by the afternoon."

"With any luck." Exaggerated voice with a vee-shaped arm gesture.

"And jiggered by mistakes that highlight the flawlessness of its meaning actually although I can see you frowning or is it a scowl or am I being too obsessive in my need for positive responses not like the one I got in amongst the dunes . . ."

Measured silence.

"The sea-holly was prickly . . .holly."

"I can detect in that interjection, with its over obvious emphasis, an accusation of lack of imagination (or too much masturbation he couldn't help interpolating). And, to top it, I sense you feel it incorporates all the mistakes, & that fuck was one of those, into the text but kicks the good bit out of the story whatever that was, I could never catch their whispers & so although you know about it from bitter experience & the previous revisions you also know it didn't now happen in the definitive expurgated version. So the text still has it (as we did) but the story doesn't."

"Ah. I get it." Here they both nodded. "You regret the sea-holly. But are claiming it wasn't lack of care. Wouldn't marram grass have served just as well?"

"Been a more comfortable alternative. There wasn't any within fifty miles. What about accuracy? Truth? How can we live with ourselves if they are expunged?"

"In this case. . .with ease."

"But surely the story (fiction) must have a little in it of what is considered to be the truth & the differences in the notion of that, I admit, causes some difficulty to begin with as we frame mmm constrict, no endeavour to include a description recalled with regret or reluctance, yes both, is practically impossible without disagreement or conflict even

mmm uneven perhaps both. So in the scene on the sand hills some of the actual events were reported to me as confidential & must be kept secret."

"Did they take place? Do I get a straight answer?"

"I'm not entirely convinced of their absolute verity anyway & you can make up the rest."

"I take it the names are false? Pseudonyms?" Said with a slight drift towards hostility.

"Somebody has them."

"Rosine? How many Rosines do you know."

He held up his left hand with the fingers slightly spread & placed the spare index finger gently on the little finger. "One. Admittedly only in a play & I'm not sure she was really called that. I would like to include Don Quixote's horse, Rossinante, but you won't allow me a sorry nag (bad shag I didn't say that) will you." He caught her glazed expression.

"Two." And he touched the ring finger with some delight after quite a long pause. "The one we have here."

"That's not my name."

"You have been answering to it." Glibly.

"I'm paid to." Mocking glibly.

"If you get it." Mocking previous tone but understated.

"I will." Overstated mocking of previous tones plus corrective flick of hair. And glare.

"So fuck you."

Now what was on offer & who might get what had completely gone off the menu. Some of it was certainly still on offer as natural inclinations don't simply vanish in anger but an agenda can be submerged by the more primitive aspects of dialogue.

"And an offer is nothing. It can be a bridge; but an utterly vital section may be found to be missing, too late."

"A page too late. Vexatious."

A black dog borrowed from Led Zeppelin wandered in & out. She pointed to it. "We could call it that: who would buy it?"

"Why ask?" The drift towards a hostile encounter had been corrected.

"Wouldn't that be a botch?"

"A simultaneous, concerted & probably exaggerated dodge of something like borrowing an incident with a dog in the future, along with a wandering eye (& its brain no doubt) is unfortunate but not bodging."

"Even though roughly cut. Incidentally, while we're on it, like this stuff you supplied."

And she stuffed a tin under his nose.

"It leaves us with a finer more refined form of the past if we utilized what we have economically ignored investing coherent cuts & adding on what's left mmm over, no assiduously concentrating the residue yes that mmm & putting it with the previous something that we took. Which leads into . . ."

"I must have missed that. Nothing." Grin of despair modified by the fact he knew Rosine could be fickle on this subject & with luck might change her mind. "Again." This delivered with as above body language.

"Nothing. Twice. Did you miss it. Again. It's going to be quite strenuous trying to play that on four square feet."

I would like to record here that when I noted above, or before, depending on how we are doing this, they both nodded as she said 'I get it' I really wanted to put down that she got it. I know as I took his part, so when I decided they both thought that, they really did & were not simply nodding sagely & not listening. But they also wondered how one (or the other) could fit a 'got' into the text & still get it to make sense. They were unable to use it in that context unfortunately. Which leads to.

"Distrust?" Doubtfully.

"What? Things showing themselves to be so difficult that they can slip through your lips easily. Wake up." Someone grabbed a hand-full of air & shook it vigorously. "Ghostly writing . . .it only worked once . . .Blake & the angels."

"Doubt?" Suspiciously.

"Any of those. Plus any portentous signs: multiple rainbows, multiple couplings; careless screwing careful, effete actually delicately bonking crude. Ungainly composites at it excitedly, including many kinds of animals other than man. Notwithstanding the authentic voice."

"Yours?" Distrustfully.

"Of doggerel mentioned earlier in relation to a rock & roll band & the organ-stop called rossignol which imitates a nightingale & you ought to allow that as number three."

"It's nothing like Rosine."

"Were the first two allowed," wondered the third party.

"It's got the same feel."

"A stop button on an organ."

'Was that horseplay again? The attempt to pass Rossinante off as Rosine, to fatten the list with a mare.' The third party wondered, who had been hanging around during the better part of this exchange. Before sodding off for the bad bits in case he was invited to use his veto to ask where should he be & what was he supposed to say & why. He wandered off again. AS he's supposed to be prescient there must be a dull bit coming up.

"This difficult issue of what he has to do leads to a remingling of the words no bodies & a remangling of the bodies mmm no words elbowing & kneeing them into position if necessary hopefully this coercion takes place out of ear shot behind the scene which we have to wait to develop before we lift the curtain."

"He could please himself."

"Now how can we let him do that? What an audacious innovative (said with false passion) move to make." He drawled. "Would you be willing to comply with the outrageous demands he would be sure to make. (Not to mention the noise). Would you be prepared to cement, unfortunate verb, it, conjubilant & vigorously in full view of everyone. Not an enviable function mmm shag in a foxhole no . . ."

"I'd try anything for a word like that." Spoken coyly but deliberately unconvincing.

"I suspect that's unusual." He said, quite mistaking the tone. "Or have I got my hunch right that what would be both pleasing & unusual (again) could be to try it out for nothing. I'd say it could be taken as a malicious & very hostile action to come clean every single time you fancy a bit of intertextual contortion with an explanation of motive & driving force (is that blood? Here let me dab it). Just to please him. He could improvise.

And it could be while claiming to understand what the birds are saying you'd be better off

watching what they are doing; if claiming to be able to foretell the future you need more than a few lines from an almanac. That hand seeming to stroke your cheek tenderly could be a well rehearsed ploy blocking your view in the mirror for a vital moment of a scene played through many times."

"So when you discover it you only uncover the past not the future." And, disingenuously with a touch of malice, "That's strictly for the birds."

"Oh this slide into Hell has been described often enough that's why we're doing it. No real worries. It's all mapped out."

"No bugging about." Mock jovial coy glib plus reasonable but coercive body language.

"There's no time for it, pity on two counts; each stage is pretty weighty pause tightly scheduled. You wouldn't expect it to be such a narrow road going where it's going. Oh dear. So many constraints. Having to read fusty books to find the proper formula for getting started. That took some industrious research & the tests showed it all had no effect whatever, the placebo worked just as well. Well better. But we ignored those."

"Didn't we copy it?"

"It may be mapped out but we have to trace it. Follow the lines. You can't do that in a trance or stupor or any of the other ecstatic states you employ to get along."

"Caned?" Helpfully, from the bystander sitting quietly on a usefully positioned box not exactly on the edge of our field of vision because we can swivel, but in the side lines.

Incidentally wreathed in smoke, so barely discernible by the discrete glow suffusing the area we are concerned with.

"I could do it with my eyes closed." (She put out her tongue). "But rarely do."

"That explains it." Exasperated. "I'm surprised you are willing to admit it when you see it written down, but won't say it & never speak of it indirectly."

"I like to see their face when I do it." Stretching.

"It. What?" The man on the box leaned in earnest towards the youthful speaker or slumped in boredom or lolled in narcotic distress or should he loll & yawn & slump & groan. I was too far away to really get the feel of it. Had I been imagining the sounds?

"That's brought you out of your petulant & disapproving self-damaging & self-inflicted isolation I see insofar as any one can penetrate . . ."

"That's right." Gleeful roundness.

" . . . the gloom you cast." Lugubrious tailing off not quite mmm not at all convincing.

"Shouldn't that be 'whose'? Aren't you interested in who it was going down on her after all she's supposed to be, if I read on right, more or less, yours for the taking. It does, I know, depend a bit on her innocence & the outcome of how you handle . . ." Dragging sounds from afar (clumsy but not as yet the menacing noises of everything not screwed down being shifted). There was a pig grunt from behind the screen obviously inappropriate. Followed by, "He doesn't know what it is." Followed by giggles.

"How about that?"

"Taken." The girl mimicked.

Audible groans.

"That euphemism must have a significance & it's not hidden to me. So far in this conversation you haven't hesitated to use the vilest terms for fucking & its necessary

adumbration. (Ahh mock enlightenment done as badly as usual). I suspect you have more than a little interest in this portion."

"How did they keep me innocent?" Rosine asked with true bewilderment. "I don't like the sound of that." This was delivered from a confrontational stance generally misinterpreted as erotic posturing.

And here I suddenly remembered there had been a series of inobtrusive interruptions almost impromptu which didn't hinder the enactment of the dialogue & in some way could have helped to emphasize, with background noise, the particular delivery taking place. But it had been almost continuous. As if ghostly removers had been instructed to do something, anything but remove the contents of wherever they found themselves obliged to haunt. At first they heard no more than a low hum of disapproval. Not a jeer. Cut by a shuffle, perhaps indicating disenchantment with the sentiments being exchanged mmm rammed home by the protagonists. Somebody ducking & diving. Perhaps the stealthy creeping of a horrendous chaperone shadowing the heroine's every move. Flesh rubbing on flesh. Squeaking.

Weaving hand.

"I found the effects unhelpful. Leave them out next time"

"You try & shut them up. Especially when they're hidden & have nothing to say."

"Gag them." Garrotting gesture.

"What? Silvery cutting tones, voices with fuzzy roundness, unhelpful? And you with a raucous bark once we let you loose. A rape scene totally silent?"

"It's been happening that way for millennia. Why should you change it?"

The distant sounds swelled in a few seconds & were now practically a choir (more than that. Wagner. I suggest played loud). They have to shout for the first time.

"You were the one who wrecked it. You didn't want her to be played as innocent. And I know why. So you could take a swig of spirits before the cunnilingus climax & have blue flames belching from your lips." They eye each other, as they were sideways on I can't describe the looks. "That's how you lost your hair. Although I think you planned it to be fashionable & to make it impossible ever to be passed off as unblemished."

"You were pissed off because of my 'experience'. It sent shivers down your spine to you know what (take your pick) & the plot off on a speed wobble."

"Nose dive."

"You couldn't control the action. I'm surprised, with your lack of technique, you were kicked out of the Garden of Eden."

"Closing time." Wistfully.

"That snake should have kept you back & taught you life wasn't as easy as biting an apple."

"Wasn't cost effective." Obstructively. "So I had to get it sorted on the hoof."

She walked over to the backdrop & spitefully slapped at what could only be a head bulge given its height & the feet protruding under it.

"It has become a circus."

Bang. Bang. Bang.

At this signal the seascape jerkily started to lift but stuck at about knee height. There was a poor attempt to express consternation, or was it creation, by the confused milling of

lower legs & their stockinged feet but this brief revelation ceased as the curtain started up again & let us see what had been happening.

"Now we'll get what happened." The third party rubbed his hands but his jaw fell.

"Rubbish. There will be several garbled accounts usually piffle offered by those with a vested interest in denying anything took place, although the mud is full of footprints & used condoms. Loaded with tat & wading through shite up to its chin the story will emerge bedraggled; with every tender morsel scarred by teeth marks & the tasty bits sucked dry. Shagged to cinder; with not a shred of evidence to put our backs up it will be laid bare at our feet. To ponder on."

"They don't want us start from the beginning of the show again?" Pedantic consternation done heavy handed. "And make it better with Hindsight?"

"Wouldn't be cost effective." Stubbornly. Almost as above.

"Hoping that would give us a chance at a totally new loopy entanglement without having to take into account the uneven distribution of intelligent wit & the superficial appeal of skin knowing it would always be so difficult to replicate even if we tried to iron the puzzle out with genetic engineering." Looking sheepish. "Was that invented then?"

"I don't know." Impatiently for obvious reasons. "But we could get it just as cold."

"That wouldn't help. It would freeze the story where we are with all the vociferous clamour veiling meaning & near angry comments about compelling passions sure to be expressed against that decision & suggestions what he could do with it.

"?"

You know. With that & the illusion it was going anywhere . . . something to do with his anatomy."

"Yes, I remember he kidded us right at the beginning about having a hard on. Making it sound as though he'd had it for days."

"Hadn't had it for years was the way I read it."

"It wasn't such a bad spot to start at" Seductively(for the sake of character type). "It could have worked a spell on you if you'd given it a chance."

"Keep your mind on the job at hand. We didn't spot any of the flaws then & he's sure to be making every effort to slip some through now."

Uncensored by hapless devices all sorts of ill-concealed blunderings could be about to take place unless someone arrogant enough to claim the lead does. I do. Now concentrate.

"Give me your hand." Takes glove.

OR.

"Give me your hand." Handed glove. Takes glove in hand. If we follow that instance he went straight to the café table without hanging around indulging in introspective seesawing giving the two girls a chance to make a plan or finish up fighting. Accepts challenging interpersonal brouhaha. Is seduced.

"Give me your foot." Takes boot.

OR.

"Give me your foot." Gets the boot. Self evident. Rebuttal on precipitate arrival at a rendezvous. Does not get leg over. She puts the boot in. Poetic magic . . .no . . . he didn't enjoy it.

"Give me your lips." Takes kiss.

OR.

"Give me your lips." Gets a lot of lip at above tryst as well as his feelings being sucked dry. Marred by discretion.

"Give me your heart (breast). Warning finger.

OR.

"Give me your heart." Gets down to underwear in every fantasy pre-run of this dialogue.

Should I start again here? Demand the Ultimate clarification.

"Give me some breathing space." She demanded. "There are still a lot of my erogenous zones left." Wordplay. She wanted out.

OR.

"Get back to the box. What is it?" She had her own idea, that was certain.

So he laughed, only lightly though, "Oh you know, a safe place, a place for a present."

OR.

"I've just about had this box. It's got some stinking fish scales left inside. What's the game?" As she hooked him back with her crooked elbow & swivelled face to face.

Attractively matched, there couldn't be a better pair for the foreground, decided the man, shifting his seat on the box, stroking the dog between the ears as he perused the tableaux.

The fight going on between those two girls behind them was distracting. And I bet the dialogue wouldn't stand close scrutiny. We'll try & get a listen. Now that punch was so vicious & unusual; I didn't think they hit there. She was suckered into it, disgusting. Is that bite in it? And when the small one mounted the other, that too? The referee definitely

held the big one; more of a grope. He is a bit stiff in the 'come-on'. Pathetic would be putting it kindly. Obviously, here the story can split; you can follow the glove or the boot both ways culminating in the revelation of everything in the box. Hum. It's happened. The thing has frozen, seized up. If the plot had been kept limp it wouldn't have been anything like as easy to grasp & sabotage.

"This looks as realistic as clouds on a mosaic. Start again."

In fact, if I were to follow this line, he gets very little but a long, seemingly endless & bitter diatribe about his shortcomings. Albeit while half-naked. Including those in that department which, according to psychology textbooks, can only be touched by oneself.

"Doing it by the book. That would be a new one. Does Isabella know?" Rosine enquired, "She thinks there are only two positions, open & closed, & both degrading," she sneered as she read.

While setting the dispute up with argumentative replies. Punctuated by detailed descriptions of the intricate responses necessary to keep sane. And, to top it, lightening sketches of several difficulties with his deviant behaviour from Agraphia (can't write: brain disease) via Cachexy (depraved habit of mind/feeling) not Buggery or being Cuntstruck although she was tempted, to Sado-Masochism where the tale got stuck in vice. And so couldn't get to zero in on the meat.

I take an alternative fork. It turns out to be just as awkward.

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"After all that," said the man lifting his box, "You might feel less isolated in all that looseness, if the hostile characterization, painstakingly developed, is made one of the pieces' cornerstones. When you've got there call me in."

"Any fulfilment that doesn't collapse into likeness would do."

"Tell lies. I know it's cumbersome, frolicking with the cadaver of that last plot & trying a fresh beginning in a cloud of bluebottles. Stretch . . . a point . . . reach out."

"Regeneration with a nod at recuperation."

"You always finish up with a hand on the fanny. Why not start there?" He thought a second, "Problem of alignment?"

The girl sauntered up to them, pushed him gently off the box & sat. "Sexual impediment? Did you say? You've got it in one. If you've got one." Conspiratorially producing the object from up her sleeve, "A piece of string is indispensable."

They approached closer as if to shield the conversation against an unseen interloper bringing a change of subject.

"That's where he's shakiest, figuratively speaking."

"More rigour needed?" Abrupt & radical. "Don't go into detail."

"Yes." Strenuously. Along with this staccato reply & the precise gesture came a sigh of resignation giving a clue to the presence of a more abstract bond unmissable & familiar to all of them. "I still cling to my belief in the force of the heart being able to reshape these things."

"How many times has it been plundered? Divided? Palpitated?" Asked the man shoving back on to share the box, holding them both steady with an embrace.

They sit there & their hands stroke each other.

Waves crashed against cliffs on the amplifiers, mixed with piercing squeaks & whistles as the frequency shifted. It cut abruptly into a crowd booing & back out just as quick.

"Somebody scored?"

So she didn't reply, she had thought she was able to disguise her sadness & here it had flowed out unchecked in a sigh. So the least wan smile could betray her. It seemed he was the only one to understand. She felt it in his encompassing arm caressing her without looking at her. She felt strangely tranquil yet her uneasiness grew. He was going to speak of . . .

"Here. Rosine." Slowly slowly. "What do you want?"

"You're going to make me feel bad," she whispered it close to the side of his face with a smile. "Devastation wasn't on that list."

"More." Isabella, emphatic & functional. "More & fucking more & more than that."

They could get off the box & dance. She would insist.

They must stay put & chant more more more along with Isabella & the other third party.

Who, incidentally, looks such a fucking sight it's no wonder he's assigned to lurk, not wander, in the shadows. They'll tag him next. "Oh. A woman. She looks . . .well . . .dead."

"That's the lighting. We should fade them into the dusk that was gathering."

"Get tarted up. Go on. You need a squib up your arse."

"Encouraging & warning off, add up to the same thing. I'll stay as I am."

"With a face like an oyster & hair like a chimney sweep's brush. Where are you coming from?"

Gothic horror fashion. Stark white faces with a slash of red. Black clothes. You finish it.

"You're envious. I'm a pearl, as you say."

"You have got the pretty colours. But should they all be splashed on your face like that?

Giving pride of place to the deformations. Such as your nose. Come on."

I thought this jibe was unfair, as the ears on the side of the head under consideration were enormous while the nose merely discoloured & overblown. And those lips? They could speak to us about the accidents of something & the hollows of something forever. It doesn't last long.

Let us allow ourselves to drift down the necromantic byways of our childhood world as they tell us again about the Good Angel who came at the week-ends & the evil angel (spoken low, see) who came in & out of their life so quickly it couldn't have been sexless, but gave that impression. Who both advised the same thing.

"Get knotted. I'm going nowhere with you." All the lights twinkled as the sounds crashed back, the same distorted mixture of a rampaging crowd & an ocean surf thundering. For a few minutes their voices are lost in this hubbub but they carried on shouting at each other & turned to me gesticulating. . . "it's down to you. You decide."

"I haven't heard a word. Oh. Get on with it."

They both looked downcast or put out or forlorn or betrayed & asked if I would change my decision if I heard what they had to say. But I didn't think so, couldn't hold any hope out to them. They could switch the noise back on & try again?

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SIXTEEN.

BOX.

I take myself back. I force myself into the penumbra of that subterranean room. You see the back of me. The man on the box glares at my back & I can feel his irritation seeping through it.

I'm pretending I'm expecting two girls to arrive, plumping up the pillows on an imaginary massive bed. Deliberately making him jealous. Well, that's his own fault. He'd be hankering after something else next.

I was making out I couldn't remember what they looked like, which one was best. Very well acted.

I can't tell you now. Honestly.

"You couldn't act it then."

He made a wry comment over my shoulder.

"You're getting that grin of expectation too wide."

I can't remember his sour dig but I can imagine the mixture of distaste & envy compounded from his bourgeois inertia in what he said. And the fact may have been true, & he may have repeated it to himself daily, but I didn't want to hear it.

"They never came, did they? That's why we're doing this?"

I never expected them to come. But. They came. That I can remember. My thoughts now are the resistance to that past emerging clearly (if it could) because they strip a woman naked on a photograph that I never took, but see clearly, in my mind's eye, pasted in a book.

"They said it must have been her own fault that she . . . what happened to her . . . that's why you refuse to come clean out with it. You hate them still for implying that she . . ."

"One of them looked like a pig. I hadn't remembered that."

"That's all."

The camera only had a black & white film in so the snaps I took don't help me. Their wooden expressions didn't say a lot, as they were caught off-guard in a short but passionate exchange. The colour of their clothes would have been lost in the twilight. And I need those clues. Maybe they were drab, disappointingly stewed in vinegar & dirty yellow when I was hoping for a rich bouquet, a froth of pink. . .Did he say 'scum'? He found my gay anticipation unbearable & it was uncalled for, but it made little difference to my excitement. I'm sure of that. His envy was only a distraction or am I misremembering & did the charmlessness of his questions betraying his desires entangled as they were in my needs, shut the door on any communication & make me want to hurry him out quicker than I normally did.

"We'd rather try the sounds again." She stood ready covering a grin with her hand that was holding a black glove. "Try that." She threw it at him.

It's an exaggeration to say my memory of them at that moment was a complete blank, I knew something, but the feeling is intensified in my present reminiscing because I do know that none, none of my expectations was fulfilled. At least I don't think so. I can remember that I had an anticipation of a chance to do something. But what was that?

"Something might have happened anyway." She yawned now still waiting. "Without you doing anything. As usual."

Nothing happened that I can say now was unexpected at that time. If we do only add up to a few poems or a sketch or two then I lost a love poem out of the bundle that day. The elusiveness of my recollection is caused, I'm sure, because I didn't get what I wanted.

"Are you really surprised?" She wondered. "Listen to yourself. It takes someone like me."

But she couldn't finish.

That seems to have made my body cast out the episode erasing the memory of a burning desire I didn't succeed in, leaving me with an image like the hoops of a barrel would be left if you fired one. I can remember the hoops I jumped through but I don't know why I was leaping because unlike a barrel fired in the imagination, which leaves you the succulent shape, all I was left with were the flat circles of iron in the ashes. A chain reaction of disappointment.

"What do you think?"

"Physical stuff. I might need a double for all that action."

Why has my memory stuffed me with a mass of ill-defined reproductions forced out of dates & calculation when one clear picture, effortlessly conjured up, would do the trick.

"Right." She tried to sound eager. "Shall we try & make a start?"

Oh. Yes. We were all very quiet & I do remember clearly, she said quickly. "I'll do the other physical stuff myself, of course."

"Right. Naturally. You wouldn't want to miss that. No doubling up."

"I can't say that. Got to keep it appealing with plenty of combinations."

"I say. This room is more like a large cupboard. It doesn't have a window."

"I built it myself out of flattened cardboard boxes stapled to pieces of furniture, to give me a place where I could find that link through inky blackness to dreams unobtainable except by blocking out, by planning to numbers."

"And it worked out?"

"Now we need more space than this. That noise is deafening."

"Did it work?"

"Where has the sea gone?"

"Did you get there? You know where. Shangri-la."

"You could have left the box."

"It doesn't exist. Turned out to be Macchu-Picchu."

"That noise is the sea, always was from the start. The box is floating on it, now."

"Funny. I took it for a rock."

"Well don't. It's full of animals."

"Are they in there or are we going to make it look as if they emerge from it? A trick."

"She's doing the trick. We agreed on that. No substitution."

"Ah. So she's doing it. . .like animals do? Does she know? Did she agree? Does she know how to? Does it come naturally?"

"Of course. I know I may be beautiful but I'm not stupid; even though I have a certain dopey look when I study something intently & start sucking a pencil. That box of tricks doesn't hold water anyway, when examined closely. It's a ramshackle structure . . .one kick. . ."

"They escape from it."

"You. . .unleash them on us?"

"No. We rescue them."

"Why do you like the animals?"

"Because I like to tell the truth."

"So what is she doing?"

"She." She sidled up. "Is doing it. And not asking countless questions. She knows the animals help."

"Perhaps it will have to be done in the dark. Just shadows?"

"Sombrely. That's unlikely."

"She is acting the emptying of the box all by herself as realistically as possible."

"So we can't tell?"

"What?"

"The difference."

"She is the beasts." (She'll have to be quick).

"Somehow she lets us know, in the confusion, that it shouldn't be happening, it's wrong unfortunately."

"We can tell?"

"What?"

"That it's a bad scene."

"No. She plays it too well for that. Completely deceives us."

"How do we know it's that good?"

"We don't. I'm telling you. It hasn't happened. We're going at it back to front."

"Did she agree to that?"

"No."

"Ah. So it's confused. Perhaps that's why we can't tell."

"No. It's not. That is a very elementary position, almost the first you discover. If you've ever had . . . I mean been brought up with a dog."

"You consider that the animals should have been left there. Why don't we? Save a very expensive outlay."

"She likes the part. Gives her plenty to do. Plenty of action."

"And lots of different noises to make."

"The animals have been in there for aeons. They won't like the shift."

"In the box too long (in a translating sort of way) that's too neat. Shouldn't we cut?"

"Can't. Got to have this eye-catching moment of change."

"So the real, purposeful action can pass unnoticed."

"Something big such as unleashing the forces of Good & Evil?"

"A pretty homogenous grey lot they are. I saw them last week. They're cheap but not good value. They make a mess."

"We need to let them out? Surely they're out. They've never been in. There are crosses & skulls planted everywhere."

"There's hardly a clean place left for an atrocity."

"This room is more like a large box. I see. We all end up in it with the animals unless we let them out. So she is doing a good job."

"Will be."

"But I thought you said it was a trick & the box was empty?"

"She's doing the trick (for the last time). We agreed on that. She's best at it."

"She's the only woman here. We could. . ."

"We cannot."

"You could have mistaken the box for a rock in the swell, as waves buffeted it."

"The rock is marked on the map."

"The box," he added, as if making it up as he went along, "Is frozen in the sea so it's very difficult to tell the difference."

"And the pinpoints of light from under the stage before the performance starts are stars."

"Is it amongst those we are going to place her? Are they marked?"

"What do you expect? Something to steer your life by? They were produced by a haphazard reflection. Unintentionally. For a guess the curtain had been carelessly brushed aside momentarily. If you had been a yard to the right, or a minute later, you wouldn't have seen them. Or her naked. That's the point."

"But she came flying in at the end."

"Not the same. She was only the Venus of Mylitta to begin with. (It was her idea, by the way). She couldn't keep that up. Had to change. I'm going to say you missed that."

"And the lights?" She insisted, "Are they going to lower them & rake the crowd? I'll need that blinding flash when jumping from the rock or I'll be left caught standing up there like Cinderella half ass half bear."

"I thought you'd agreed to do that dance anyway. It's the only reason for keeping the idea of animals in & they're not really in. We are suggesting they're a component to see if you can pull it off at all."

"They are. She promised she'd do that."

"Was it because of the box?"

"That is the box serving as a rock? I hope I don't have to modify it."

"No. It's painted black."

"So she seems to jump out of nowhere. Good."

"Good? So it's not like an impromptu game where she throws the costumes on & rips them off? Doesn't this knock all the exuberance out of it?"

"Not at all. It's so slick the clothes & skins slide off her body like the magic of nearness. What more do you want: a brawl? She walks upside-down, sticks her arms in between her legs & pulls herself on like a coat. Genuinely crude like the animals she's illustrating."

"We could work it with an invisible slit, rearrange. . ."

"No need. No way. That's what we've come to see. Nothing systematic."

"So she's Ape & Armadillo straightforward, although that one would be a bit awkward, to a brick shit Wombat?"

"Not likely."

"No x y z? To get them in the mood."

"She does Chimera to get it over with in one go & she gets to keep the snake which she likes & that slippery sinuous reptile comes in handy when she's the Madonna. It gets folded up in a bulging not unattractive way instead of a baby."

"He's not at all appealing"

"Jarring. I always feel uneasy when there's a snake around; it makes my throat dry, the way it goes when someone, without saying a word caresses my body & the touch feels firm yet light & their skin has a raspy texture but is slightly colder than . . ."

"Unappealing."

"No? As long as she manages to conceal the snake's head everything swings but very often it gets tangled up in her tits & that's it. She loses the proper beatific smile & grins well gawps, gets randy too quick & loses it. Would be a fuck up but we aren't having that."

"No. None of that. Dressed as an angel. (How would they look?)"

"Not like her. Arseing about."

Chorus. Aggressively: "You could hardly call that dressed."

This chorus float on & off the pages skating on the surface tension of the tragedy with lewd abandon; dumbly glide behind scenes causing unseemly bulges; tiptoe about secretly inserting themselves in folders distorting the plot (Oh Yes) which, thus modified by their inconsequential twinkling choreographed groupings pressing against the boundaries of philistinism, loses itself. Their frivolous lack of dress is not the only eye-catching distraction from an already faint mmm dim no scattering circle of ambiguities.

The nightingale sings. . .Not Yet . . .They complete the job of disruption with monotonous chants, over-loud sighs & beseeching wails swamping the terse & novel dialogue; tormented & complex though it may be we can only gather this when we hear it in the breaks taken when the leader somewhat resentful of our pleas (& the bottles we deliver

the requests in) ducks out & they follow, unwillingly. Banished to that far off land of the audience until they can fulfil . . .

"Get on with it," She said provocatively, "The snake's getting peckish."

"I wonder if it's in love."

"They're not fussy. It could be." She held the snake at arms length sighting it, "No sign of it though." Turns it slowly, "Just make sure. It might be a girl?" General interest.

There would be brilliant lights, more than enough to knock spots into everything you looked at, very disorientating & enigmatic, & then this long finger of light would shoot out (from that slit he wanted to do so badly but you wouldn't let him at first & then did) & slice through, not touch, slice is more fervent (& aggressive) slip through the space in the words to tickle love.

"With an icy finger."

"Chill, gently chill & isolate her briefly as she waves, the hand caught in a brilliant shaft of sunshine, at you waiting to step out of cover. The stab of light makes the connection between the dead end shadow where you felt abandoned as if standing alone blah ever blah to send you spinning into pleasure again, beloved. The other rough looking tart mmm one is glancing away as if she doesn't know about it, disinterested bitch, but she's extremely angry & mouthing obscenities into her friend's face behind her hand for letting you back in."

"Very nice & compact agony. So that's why they keep their distance." The man slapped the box with a delight as if it was a hefty body. "I like it."

"What." She exclaimed. "If this isn't a hands-on piece of action you can forget it. I won't do it if I don't get it. But I will. I worked hard for it. Who would want it without it? I want it back in. I like it too. It wouldn't be real without it. It wouldn't make sense without getting close, close in. I need that contact. That closeness. Breathlessness. You know. Uncontrolled."

"Passion is in. O.K. So we lose the suffering. O.K. What else is there?" He stared at the blackboard trying to decipher chalk scribble but shook his head. "The graffiti artists have been at work again. Haven't they heard of sentence construction?"

"Fate." (Chorus fannying around come up with the goods. Pity they can't spell).

"What?"

"Fate."

"That comes out of the blue from a long way away. That's got a lot of distance in it." He got off the box. "And we could introduce a sleep-walker."

"Very, very erotic. This is sounding like a completely evenly balanced seesaw. Absolutely no action. Sardonic staccato something. Perfect for a love story."

(She disagreed argumentatively, he noted in the space for comments).

& to accompany what she rattled off made a twisting sign with a finger that frankly they didn't understand. "Separation, not a touch & someone dead from the feet up in the key . . . " She was opening a door lock? . . . "fucking role."

"Well, we are trying to satisfy most of the relevant criteria including a meaningless (& no doubt long) true to life love scene to keep everyone happy while slipping in an odd nod in

the direction of freedom. To make it add up we need one free agent & it's easier if they haven't got any lines."

"Makes them freer."

"Makes them History."

"Puts a bit of distance between the bodies as he shoves them around. Separation."

Significant look in her direction. "Crucial in a love story. Binds all the characters closer together."

"Who said it was a bloke."

"Shut up. It has to be. You'll see."

"There are only two, I hope. Can't afford a melee. It might be misunderstood."

"It might be spellbinding." The chorus was looking v. downcast.

"We can't have that. A spell is usually mysterious but silent & the sleep-walker is doing the mute. Prodigiously, I hope. And we need him when the die is cast. He intervenes with sign language, acts as a go-between, creates an intimacy unobtainable by someone who's always clacking giving everything away."

"You mean you're giving him the parts of Beelzebub & Lucifer? Both? What about when they're on together?"

"He makes the famous 'beast with two backs.'"

"Not with me he doesn't." She said unkindly in a cutting voice. "I like to hear a few sweet telltale nothings on the job."

"Yes. So you can finger somebody."

"He could do it in his sleep signing with his hands as he dreams sweet dreams. That would save time."

"You're the one who's been insisting & that in all innocence is a mild description, on incorporating the live act no matter what the cost. And, incidentally, how do you do a wet dream convincingly? Don't tell me." He playfully put his hand over her mouth & she playfully bit it. "Am I to blame if we are now a man er beast er demon short & have to double up." And, after deliberately rudely sizing her up, while rubbing his sore hand, said, "Anyway you're too big for a part like that, especially your mouth. You are worth two laughs before anyone else gets in on it."

Totally unnecessary shuffling of feet by the chorus, how could they be convincingly embarrassed given who they are.

"Even if they're asleep?"

"It would take two." She said defensively but with pride.

Chorus, brightly & as offensively, "Whenever. However. Whatever. Whoever."

"We could call on the good angels to stand in for a devil or two." General agreement.

"Ah. Free play. Exquisite," she said, "And so easy." They turn to fix her. "And lax." They bear down on her. "Better get a whopper for a 'big' girl."

"I have tried to compel them to appear in rags with rough make-up slapped on but they get shirty about cross-dressing & transvestitism & dig their hooves in, they say death never seems the same again; but how do they know? They never let on how they know. Something divine in their art prevents them is all they ever say."

"They see you as gullible. Use force." Unanimous agreement with one or two of the more gullible members of the chorus glad to be noticed & named at last, believing things were going to liven up, shouted, "Extirpation. Better."

"I tried proposing, subtly, the case for enrichment by experience & got two bloody fingers for my trouble." General concern.

"Are angels allowed to do that?" He took to the box again. Missing the look very close to contempt by a sliver. "Pull them up by the root. Have they got one?"

"They must come in various tints. Obviously, some are right off the holy scale. Actually, the ones we are lumbered with." Unanimous concern. "A very grey stew."

"Grace Dieu? Without that we're sunk. Aren't we?"

"The Holy Cook always was too altruistic to care in fact & the secular caretaker is the embodiment of totalitarian concern . . . for an elite. What's your worry?" Trenchantly expressed approval from the chorus, "Cut it out." Interrupted by.

"I have to say when I see her playing with that snake 'mother' doesn't spring to mind. She looks as if she is dying to take one of us out. Why not try & get an angel to do that bit."

"A date?" He shot out a withering disfiguring scowl. "You fool. What do you think she's here for? Just a nice bit of fluff to you. Eh. The Heavenly Host haven't got a cock between them because that iniquitous stuff is off base. They don't even think about it.

Until they fall. And that might take a lifetime." He spun a silver coin off his thumb tip & added, "Anyway they are of a substance that was not."

"No. Not an engagement, a substitution. Entertainment. Get the angel to wrestle with the snake. It is the original one?"

"And what does she do? Pray? With her fingers up her nose. She couldn't resist a wrestle or miss a chance to strip off & straddle some poor bugger hired for a day to flap his wings around. She'd fuck all the extras before the snake had slithered down the tree & onto her chest. I've got to keep her mind on the extrapolation of the chimera out of the box. All in one piece. Not doing different numbers everywhere."

"Angels are reputed to be good at wrestling. Quite a C.V. of mixing it with Sin in the mud & coming out on top."

He looked as if hit by a sudden pain, "What does it take to get through to you? Sin equals one extremely costly dish with an expense account stretching from here to Mars. That coupled with the lingerie, which invariably gets ripped. And those items don't include the price of mud which has to be hosed off, time after time." Overloaded pause. "And wasted."

She stood by the box & flicked her zippo flame under the man's snout. "Don't be peevish." Her free hand landed on his shoulder & perched there with glittering rings. He relaxed against her fish-net thigh blowing out a thin stream of smoke, spread his fingers & pushed them into his hair over his ears till they met & locked making a smouldering icon.

"I can't see it. If there has to be an end we could 'borrow' that ending where, instead of shooting himself, the old man shoots everyone else. No way of feigning that. Calls for proper acting" He fixed his eye on the chorus with a grimace, "Needs plenty of dead bodies. It's in."

"I like an end. A climax (if possible). It's so modern."

"We know. I'm working on it."

Rosine took the draw out of his lips & pulled on it, a big showy gulp taking down a large draught into her lungs, swallowing noisily. He felt her become rigid & then she went weak at the knees & as she said so slid down on to the box catching her breath.

"What's in this shit?"

"Shagweed." (Mr. & Mrs. Dhatura Strammony help you take that purely secular jump into passion without getting your knickers wet).

"Fuck me."

"No need. It's quicker with them. Not so untidy or messy. You get to be like jelly every time & it keeps your hair straight."

"It is." With an adroit shake she flapped her skirt & laughed softly. "Nice."

They gazed into . . . the far corners . . . but the haze obscured what cues there might have been calligraphed in the multicoloured graffiti. She snuggled closer.

"Did you peek?"

"Don't let's get side-tracked." He slipped an arm around her waist's warm skin squeezing her pants loose. She slipped a hand down her bare side to break the hold. "It's too open."

Here we find we are stumbling along towards the right fantasy to nourish our folly where we can play it out without any catchpenny justifications . . . full length with illustrations . . . let's stick to it. Please.

She tried to hold his hands, her eyes lambent with an inner ardour. "Keep them to yourself out here."

"He gazed back, he said, his burning look fried the windows of her soul."

"I'd get rid of 'fried' try illuminated."

Trying for verisimilitude in the teeth of facts that are crazy, employing absurd strategies to disguise that it's all a play to gain pleasure, to make seem plausible, by crafted evidence, what already is: isn't going to add up. If it is dull, play it longer, so long that the tedium becomes annihilating. That is the best way to get rid of the chorus. She cuddled up closer.

"Please."

"But I'm left with an empty, hungry feeling. I need filling up. Can we get in the box?"

"With her? Are you going crazy?" He protested, & slowly turning around appealed with his hands spread & his back still bent, a supplication to the crowd with stretching fingers. I need the velvet darkness, this was the spot for the nightingale to sing by the way, where we can realize our destiny preferably woven with elaborate designs & figures; not the mouse-grey trail of folly or delusion or pretence, one of those, where we meekly comply while exchanging puzzled looks.

"It will be warm & dark in the box, heavy with her intoxicating perfume."

"Will that help?"

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SEVENTEEN.

INSIDE the box is the A of Consummation. It has been left bang on the spot we wish the rock to occupy. Around which trip the light crowd, when they can get it.

"You see what I mean? You've let ambiguity in once more so here the story can be split again. It was the box of Temptation, or has been up until now. We have been given a choice that I didn't want."

"Tricky."

"It was easier when it was a rock."

So we are left standing & slouching by a complex institutional structure (box) with the task of making that choice from several options. But can only pick one. This is very different from our original estimate of what was going to be what.

"Having about half a dozen?"

With the first unfortunate decision to buy into a strict duality we created tonal variety but do we get any more or satisfaction?

"He means we can't switch or does he? I get the on off bit but after that."

"Depends how much is off by the sound of it."

Not if we have a sneaky penchant for the other with its lurking presence weaving a bitter thread through the whole. Keeping us on the knife-edge of pretence.

"I'm sure he means aroused there."

"We could do both of whatever it is we are only allowed one shot at. Once when we really mean it & the other one as a sham. Firing blanks. I know it can be awkward if you

enjoy both of them, but you don't have to tell. I know this doesn't solve it. But it does mean we can get on with the job."

The chorus shrieked with derision. "You couldn't fake it."

"Watch me." Rosine pushed him before her into the crepuscular shelter of the box pausing at the entrance to attempt a corny great moment with a mock vampish pose knowing its dissembling amateurishness (plus the lack of mascara) would spoil the atmosphere outside but not diffuse the madness she hoped for inside. That shut the chorus up as they alone saw the feigned seductiveness of her willowy body & didn't read the beguiling smile that he saw following him into the dark.

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Once inside the box, space altered. The walls & roof became an intense black trellis stretching into the horizon with blinding white gaps. Whether we get one future or the other here depends on a haphazard choice of either chemical ferocity or chemical passivity. Consummation is horizontal & graphic. While Temptation is vertical & diffuse. The one a worn mosaic, the other a damaged fresco. They can both be satisfying, depends upon your bent. Take your pick. She bent down & picked up a toy flag off the floor, perhaps discarded after a parade, a scrap of white with a few splashes of colour in a pattern that caught her eye. We can go on the rampage as animals, like a sorcerer in disguise, or escape quietly by blending into the background. He was a featureless hulk in the gloom although his teeth gleamed as he flashed a quick smile back. It was gone. Nothing moved at snail's pace here. Except one thought spiralled round & round in the guise of a song she remembered. You'll get it when I remember.

"Stop kidding. Where are the animals? This version is creepy. Must be Consummation.

It's got murder in its heart."

Although they don't know it they're on display & we have to watch. Well, what should we do? Skulk around the back until they'd finished. Where's the back? And is there an end in sight? We'd have to watch closely for that so we could get in on the beginning again. I suppose it's because such unmediated reality has its terrors & is chock full of horror that we were aghast observing the scene develop as if merely a diagrammatic chart of the progress of stick people, without surprises. Each individual error or success became a curve or bump or angle or crunode. How could we change that?

"Let's pretend we're the only ones left." The puzzle was being solved by a pencil crossing out & ticking various parts of a diagram.

"We are."

A breeze ruffled the grey side of the box. She noiselessly crept over to him, & just as silently made a questioning sign. Could he see the mob of spectators, more like beastly apparitions, revealed as the gauzy side netting wafted against them as they huddled up, close as they dared, to catch their faintest whisper & peer in on their every act.

"Are they really with us?" She mouthed. Aiming a sudden blow at his chest, as if to her eyes he had become a suspended ghost & she needed reassurance of his solidity. It wasn't vindictive but she did have a strange & vacant look as she waited.

"They are until we let the dogs of reason loose on them."

At that she crouched hopefully on all fours with a feline glare, the air stilled. "If they are waiting for that something let's make sure of its inconsequentiality. Mount me. That

should give them the reason & it is what I came in for. I know you would prefer something cut with deeper intensity. But we could start at the bottom, have an episode in sin, before we get worked up to the dizzy heights of prudence & quench the fire."

The scrim sides of the box seemed to sigh. No body moved. (Two out of ten).

"I know you need to be provoked by a burning sincerity to feel ready to act but that more often kills what slim chance there is for anything . . . fun. And it's very tormenting waiting for it to come on." She shoved her thigh against his shoulder. "It's not beyond reach, is it?" Delicacy & precision were being hammered flat. So. (Still two out of ten).

Someone winces here. But the crowd remained absolutely frozen, one or two of them with an expectant grin, fixed with lines, which could transform to a grimace in a flicker. They hoped the inner moment would be delivered in full & hot, passed from hand to hand by delicate but explicit touches, any second; so their concentration was shown by slitted eyes as they tried to transmit the desire consuming them to him, as he leaned, his hand poised to caress her heart, against what he thought was solid rock. It was a rotten stick & broke with a crack. He rolled back.

"I think they're only phantoms. Tempestuous sexual action should scare them off. Shall we try?" She said, while crawling over his prone body to stare down into his face with hers so very close her tongue could touch his nose. This is when we need some inside information.(Like a clear direction wired to a lamppost for a boot sale).

"Aren't we . . ." He gazed through the space between their foreheads. "Don't we . . ."

After a bit a head poked through the trellis, "Bit tight. Yes? Bit of a squeeze, but you enjoy that. No?" A hand came through another part of the structure as if to grasp their reply.

"Shut up." She put a hand over the intruder's mouth. "Not another excuse to spoil this chance." She pulled the little flag out of the back of her waistband & clamped it between her teeth. The head disappeared as her free hand shoved it back with force.

"I couldn't steer properly if I was on the back," he shouted, out of sight. "And you weren't looking where you were going."

"I see, he was simply observing what was in front of him."

"With a wandering hand."

"He was trying to be affectionate." The absent chorus sitting in a row stared at each other in well-acted poorly acted feigned amazement. They had understood it as a simple juxtaposition, nothing mysterious, of his head (plus blue eyes) & your arse (minus pants) & what that adds up to. If asked, they would have described it not as hallucinatory but certainly a spellbinding semblance behind which there was, & the chorus were unanimous on this, more than an affectionate interest. It was almost a work of art that single moment when one of the uncaused causes, love, began.

The box's boundaries soon go. It did appear regular but only from a particular spot. One step just one step & the trellis wasn't up to much, it soon became distorted as the crowd surged back & forward greedy for the action, some getting carried away trying to join in. Eaten up by need.

"No way. You can stop right there." Rosine said over his shoulder, "Better cut in a march to legalize something illegal to send them off on. Keep them out of my hair." Which she patted & knocked his hand off. And sauntered a little way, with an action as if juggling, saying, "Nudged suggestively? Brushed suggestively? Pushed suggestively? Bumped suggestively? Shoved suggestively? Any of those? And that could be before I reach the corner."

"No. None of that loitering in the street scene. You are in a hurry."

"No half & half weighing up to pay a low price & no more for a pretty toy? No 'You have an interesting face' when their eyes haven't lifted to my neck? Is this run taking place in the dark? There must be an idiot in it somewhere enquiring if a tongue spiralling on my belly would be any good really hoping to get to a firmly zipped in paradise? No?"

"Of course we will have to get rid of the snake at some point so we can deliver the full profane message of Art."

"If you chuck the snake out there will be trouble," he talked low & rolled his eyes in the direction of a Rosine engaged in not taking notice, "And we won't know whether we're in Hell or Paradise."

"So whose sexuality is it, that serpent?"

"One ends one & the other the other . . . by the look of it," offered Rosine, "but it still takes two to . . ."

"Absolutely not. You do it on your own. With props if you wish."

"The odd spangle on the nipples, you mean." Rosine derisively.

"Anyway the nude would be left without a baby if the snake went west."

"Nude? Who said the Madonna was being delivered as an 'artistic' pose?"

"No need to be ashamed, they all are these days. No need to lose your figure to be taken seriously."

"So that means I get the erogenous zones airbrushed out & my features digitally modified to take ten years off my face (paying close attention to those wrinkles beside my eyes). I don't have to vanish then or be secretive about the way I've kept my best points? But I can't look good & sit still with that amphibian contorting away."

"You don't have to wriggle as well. Decorum."

"You can't see it & it's under your nose. That is so oppressive. Don't move. Don't adopt suggestive poses. Don't . . ."

"We are getting an accumulation of feelings here, a log jam, but it's almost never on target near reality. I only say 'near'. If we hit the actual bull all Hell would break loose.

'What the fuck is that?' we would be asked. 'Do you think we should put up with that shit?' Someone would cry. We couldn't afford to set that cracker off with this line-up."

"Are you sure it hasn't happened? Look how much solace (in violence) we need . . .too much truth gets in the way."

"A sinister carnival . . ."

"But you're right. She is a cracker especially in that bit near the end."

"It's a muddle; what could be here doing a trick (dog) is difficult to find, what was there (rat) is impossible to see so we abandon it; one could be tasty the other nasty. We don't know which one is what. The animals should help to make it plain. They are easy to identify in a hurry & those labels are useful when you're stuck." She rubbed her bottom

lip with the silver rings on a middle finger. "And you usually are." She waved the flag. "I must do them." The chorus waved back. "I'll start by being a mermaid. I don't have to adapt too much for that."

"That's up to you. They were sexless. Difficult?"

"You would only know that, close up. Is it true?"

The chorus mouthed 'It would be a rest.'

"I'll need a transparent green skin, real looking if possible, up to my neck with golden highlights for scales." Rosine began. "Skin tight," she pursed her lips.

You'll use paint down to the waist." Putting a tick in a box before she could object. But Rosine had decided against paint so said nothing. She would try & filch something special. "You can do that," she lied. "Finger painting. Get a better cover that way. More satisfactory texture." Adding, & bugger yourself, under her breath covered by a smile.

"Splashes of gold?" Thinking daubs, he asked. "On the flesh or the dress?"

"I'll forget the tail, no it can trail behind. I like to kick my legs free."

"Just out of bed look? Wet look?" He asked crossing out the 'paint' box & ticking 'improvisation'.

"I'll see if I can get it true to life."

"No sea-weed allowed, it stinks. And that kind of glassy-eyed look doesn't go down very well. Might not matter though with the costume as it is."

"I was thinking more of tumultuous swirling movements. Her escape from the water. An idealization but with lipstick, she was primarily a siren."

'Improbable exaggeration.' He noted with a morose grin.

"Degradation."

"They must have started off with more than a box? I can see this one is changing but it doesn't inspire any fear. Not yet."

"That's up to us."

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EIGHTEEN.

At TRONOEN, Astarte & I were picnicking by the malarial pools. On the distant Calvary, a grey-white raft beleaguered on a dune, I could see two cloaked figures under the cross holding up three goblets to catch the blood dripping from the nail wounds in His hands. Only then. That Once. But that was enough, I'd had it. If seeing this was all my imagination why did I find it impossible to wash the stains out of my mind later? She could help. She'd been around at the time.

It was in the afternoon when the Greek police arrested eleven unaccompanied mules heading up a mountain track into Albania (carrying marijuana) that I, on the rocks, lying entwined with Astarte & having my fingers up what I thought was her quim, & she let me think it, declared she was meltingly the most precious woman in the world. But would she please tell me how to break the curse. I was still trying to pump her about the past. She acted stupid. Squirming about. She never looked like telling me, being one of those steadfast animals. Nevertheless, I continued the heavy soulless questioning, my hands working in a slime of clotted blood & viscous secretion & my heart torn apart as if speared by her crazy excuses to delay the act & say nothing, as she lay in the stone cyst we had assembled for our tryst.

"Knocked up would have been a more accurate description."

"You don't think a rich precision with detachment adds to it?"

"No. It's boring. I prefer the vague & perhaps unreliable double meanings spoken out of the side of his mouth." Rosine pointed, "And you could split a few words with dashes,

show some philological know-how, clauses with alternatives till in the end . . . sorry where were you?"

I felt compelled to count the drops of blood falling steadily on the shrine. And as well, I had to watch her body slowly becoming poisoned by an invasive decay spreading from the gash my fingers were lost in, as if this was the way her mind had chosen to protect its silence. As I watched the flies playing around this festering wound, slashed into her belly when the blue ribbon of guts was ripped out by sea-wolves, it blew open with pus & was soon rotting fast while putrid yellow flesh peeled from her bloated limbs like bark off a dead branch.

"How do you expect me to mime that? You can't have her body dropping to pieces. Too difficult. It's easier just to drop dead." She stared at him. "It's tacky as well."

"You'll have to wind on a few flesh coloured bandages here & there & I'll unwrap them as we go along." He looked pleased, "Don't put them anywhere awkward."

"Clumsy. And what are we left with? A pile of rags cluttering the already cramped space & me naked. Not a very promising start."

"There could be other pieces of junk left lying around. Jewels falling on the earth winking, no, peeping like spring flowers . . . you know the stuff & I thought we might spray bone shapes on a skin tight body stocking . . ."

"And wear it yourself." She said with a finality that also said old hat. "Carry on. You're intent on mangling this one up. What did she do?"

"Nothing."

"Oh." Disbelief. "So why were you pestering her?"

We are left only a slick promise of marble with her bones protruding from tatters of skin,
& her heart to become a separate stone beyond devotion with the last black flesh
dropping away bloodless from her ribs.

"That shouldn't be too difficult. It's dry."

Her joy, she repeatedly said, as she lay inert, would have been complete if she had been
left alone. Then she would have been able to achieve that giant array of desires dragged
up from the dark blue depths in the storm which threw her onto my shore. Before, before,
before cloudy jealousy taking slice after slice off the side of passionate love reduced it to
the bone. Making pallid slaps of our cheeks. Etc.

"What were they? These melodramatic hopes. It's not easy for a skeleton to look as
though it wants something with that big grin it's stuck with."

"A plenitude of enchanting anodyne sexual interludes with seaweed & seahorses & lots of
bubbles."

"That's what he thinks. I give one pull on his joystick & he's under my control & I send
him diving straight for Hell when I feel like having it in there. It's obviously the brain of
the animal. And needs plenty of squeezing to keep its thinking straight."

"I'm sure (with practice) you'll find that easy enough to do."

"Authentic as well. You know you were without a glimmer of control even on a picnic."

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The mahogany table had two massive carved supports for legs that spread & buried
themselves in the carpet like giant tree roots.

He was dreaming again of a Goddess. A woman appeared in the blue glass sea with the head of a dolphin. She swam with a cream of tide around her neck, a lacy collar of phosphorescence. And was lifted by his longing into the box with him. A breathtaking piece of bait. But he was held back by her beauty. The beast was not delivered completely naked. Yet, sitting on the heavy table with her legs dangling in long boots, high on the thigh with those stiletto heels ready to jab the gut of anyone trying to roll her off her perch, she was available, she could be taken in a rush if he dared. But could he chance force to override the block that always bedevilled his sexual considerations? The dream whisper asked. Causing the circumspect delay in which he performed like a rotating zodiac all the acts of bestiality he had seen illustrated, all at once, never finishing one before a competing image froze out the end & began an inducement that left him no time to tackle the Goddess. In the dream her head sometimes mirrored the grotesque face on the table leg. Sometimes not. This ugly pug was crudely chopped out, lowering, squat, throwing malicious stares while grimacing behind the pencil thin line cutting the air as a boot swung clipping its chops with a click at short sweet intervals. Kicking its pig face back under. And slowly rocking her thighs apart to show the bulge between them slung in a tight translucent purse that soon came over the table edge, a fat package she tauntingly stroked & cupped & put a crease in with a finger. Then, provocatively, she rubbed again & made the crease deeper & again many times to make it wet & again to the right side where she liked it. She carefully fingered & lovingly manipulated the enchanted flesh like putty until it was the colour of mud stained by smoke. Quickly she placed rows of frosty teeth sharp as razors in the newly created vagina, the wet window of her soul &

thrust out her breasts with their long nipples, while her eyes flashed like sapphires. A shark's head designed by lust. The table face had an enormous tongue sticking out of chipped thin lips pulled back in a snarl by the unseen force delivered by the carver's knife. And in this dream the table became ferociously animated & cruelly took the fish-headed being, dextrously impaling her on its tongue & keeping her fixed there (by some invisible evil force only available in dreams) writhing & jerking dumbly pleading while he crept close. (I want to join in here). Keeping out of the reach of her clawing fingers. Trying to catch her whispered appeals through the propellers of her arms. Having the feeling of disgust churning his entrails but wanting to fully taste it. He always saw the sweat droplets raised on her cheeks. He never read them as tears. Saw the blood oozing out of the slit as she is tossed away like a gutted rabbit to lie on her face with her mouth locked open in an endless howl. He draws a finger through the pink stain on her thigh & raises it to his mouth. It was never wine. It was always salty. And its nose was up my bum she cries out at that instant breaking the spell of horror with a return to normal humour unbeknown outside the skull, while the table is left growling like a dog with a glove puppet stuck over its muzzle. White spittle mixing with the creature's spawn on its hard lips. The image melts.

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The two flayers could see she wanted the skin more than she was letting on by the way she stuck with them despite their abusive bargaining. Her cool demeanour had become frosty while her wide smile began to slip because of the duration it had had to stay fixed. One of the men acted against completing, the other wavered. His wandering eye left its

examination of the scar on a tuck of skin behind her ear & caught the line of her body, saw that it was deliciously squeezed in under the silk & he licked his fat lips wondering if he dared push it that far. His other eye remained steadfastly fixed. It had no choice.

While sticking to the task grimly but wisely switched off, Isabella imagined a story of duplicity in which Rosine was made to spill the beans under torture, & her tongue whipped in & out of a thin-lipped smile as in her mind it dipped into the honey & sucked out the answer. She would do it for the answer; she could bite & keep on biting.

For.

The answer.

The chancier.

The delusive.

The mermaid's skin. Her need was desperate. She knew that by wearing this skin it would enable her to ensnare her quarry absolutely.

Bodily.

Before he knew he'd walked into the steel loop. Before he felt the trap's first gentle touch too late. Before he had time to taste the poison. She clenched her fists. The disadvantage of her bargaining position coupled with the intensity of her desire to gain the object had made her wet. Nothing could be so tempting in the soft candlelight etc. Nothing could match the allure etc. Now she could feel the wire of passion biting remorselessly into his flesh, as she wanted to bite, binding him to her as the iridescent scales blinded him of the danger. Then on this hook as he fell deeper & deeper being revealed clearly & completely. She would become utterly spellbindingly irresistible.

She found she was standing by the men with her tongue out.

"It was what I imagine it's like being at a dissection she said."

Her body perfume engendered a cold remorse in the flayers, despite them being unaware of perceiving it, so they dropped the ploy & reluctantly agreed, quite without their usual flashiness & not knowing why, to a price determined more by pheromones than the invisible hand of the market.

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She clutched the box close to her heart & her lip curled with delight as she ripped the paper off. Its lid lifted slightly. A gasp seemed to force her mouth open to an O. A sharp pain hit her belly & thighs as the skin's perfume invaded her guts hollowing her out, ready. It rippled like a sack of precious feathers as her hand slipped through the slit feeling the prize.

The skin shone greenish gold.

Proudly Isabella laid her reward on the bed sheet, where the crumpled, slippery, luminous skin with all its jewels shot glints & gleams in disarray as if shrieking out for the return of a body.

Under the impact of the skin's sparkling light the room seemed composed of grey sponge, devoid of things. Disorientated, she felt this loss acutely & it impelled her to strip & crawl onto the sheet taking the skin against her body for comfort, kissing & rubbing & slowly fitting it on. First Isabella tried the space for the breasts, caressing her own with oil to make them sleek before slipping into the hollows that seemed to pinch tight straight away & pull her nipples making her shiver as the breasts grew taut & hard in their new

skin which shone pink. Then, holding the waist, her feet slid smoothly down silken tubes encasing her legs & she felt with surprise the skin knit invisibly over her cunt as the waist now nipped in. Her arms were covered as easily, each finger with a perfect touch.

Inquisitively, Isabella felt between her thighs & found a soft smooth mound, no hair, or slit. Shoulders, belly, back, neck; the skin irresistibly enveloped them, shrinking to fit.

Lying back to pull the frail mask finally over her face, unable to resist the compulsion, the transformation was complete, yet with some disquiet, she felt for the mouth. It was there & the lips were open & wet. An urge overwhelmed her to search the room for a mirror, as if the same force that had hurried her into wearing the skin now wanted confirmation of her delight. This sheath had the gentle glow of candlelight. It was a difficult shape to focus in the silver glass for the outline seemed to be pulsating. Rippling like a tide. A swell. As her feet touched the floor she heard a murmur, a far off call.

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"Not yet. Don't rush it. Let the sense of disquiet develop around her & perhaps disgust will kick in & that uneasy feeling grow when she sees herself in the mirror as another. If she ever can. I hardly expect it though. Not when that kind of sex is involved. Burn a hole in concrete." This was said by an unknown woman sucking a big yellow lollipop while consulting the I Ching. "You were beginning to fool me into thinking you were taking yourself seriously." She added between sucks.

"Getting serious on the job." It appeared he had only just caught up. "Me? No. I was trying something different." Then sounded very much as if he had forgotten immediately.

"A one off."

"I'm hoping," she continued, almost ignoring him, "You weren't fooling yourself. That really would be living with violence." And she sucked noisily, licking the lollipop with long strokes of her long tongue, working her lips over it to express an obvious reference. "That way you could develop a vicious streak." She looked up & laughed, "And get nasty twists in things," She closed the book, "Like a path through a wood. You know, become like the philosopher (the rat) who tried to snaffle Dante's wood. Spiralling into it. Going for poetic immunity having shot the muse in the foot. Making a hybrid. A No Body. A No blame beast. Devouring words. Grinding them up to pulp saying, 'Don't blame me. Blame the pen'."

She seemed like someone worth getting to know. You can get to read a book title, without asking, by twisting your neck into an awkward position but this is not the best way to get a stranger's name.

"But it's not for me to castigate you - too much body here -" it wasn't quite a question. Though a denial would have been welcome, it could just as easily been taken for effrontery.

"Casting a poetic shadow?"

She was pleased (it would even have pleased the cook). And her wooden look of concentration softened.

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"How did you get her name?"

"I asked & she hummed a tune & said I've forgotten it."

"You laughed at that?" Isabella asked. I nodded.

"Of course he did," Rasped Rosine contemptuously, "It was the hook. Don't write it down Isabella it doesn't work when read out."

"Then she said, I can see you're not going to swallow that, & smiling at me added, I've mislaid it."

"I know you think you're trying to be helpful this time," Rosine said sagely, "But" . . . & she gestured to Isabella for compliance in her disagreement, "Here we are no further on." She definitely thought 'petrified' but hesitated to say it, aiming to stay composed. "What did she want?"

"What she thinks is given is really nothing to her, not much of an item at all," Isabella broke in, "She has to take. Then . . ." She saw Rosine's raised finger.

"She wasn't just pulling you to see if she could. Anybody could do that. But we don't want her served up devoid of her conflicts."

"Or her torments made light of." Isabella popped it in like a tit bit.

"There's been enough of that attitude & Isabella & I (they caught each other's eyes) want it dropped."

"She was an odd fish." Yes. I felt like provoking them.

"Stop."

"I can't, you asked me. O.K. 'Doxy' how's that?"

"She arrived. She." They both shouted in unison, "You always like something from the 'beyond' don't you? 'rabbited' out or 'spelled' out. Do you ever wonder how we feel having to put up with them when you bring them back as you invariably do? No. Out of a play, you say. Out of a book, out of a song, you say. Are we supposed to believe that? And

once there was that other one 'out of no where' you said. We had a different place in mind."

"By the common . . ." Isabella strangled the rest of her interruption at a sign from Rosine.

"Don't take the piss, Isabella." Rosine cut in. "He knows where he got her. We've all got one. We're not going to get what we're after this way."

Isabella was breathing 'satisfaction' as Rosine spoke.

"Look." He sighed. "I know there was that time I saw somebody on this balcony I thought I recognized & gave them a wave & it turned out I didn't know her. Anybody could make that mistake, but we got along fine & so I brought her back & said here we are meet . . . so & so . . . & you met her."

"And she stayed for a long time."

"Look. The second time. Was it? I was reading something keeping myself to myself on the tube & the girl next to me (Dutch) . . ."

"We know that." Isabella said pertly.

". . . saw me underline a few words & without any inhibitions struck up a conversation & on that basis we got along so I brought her back & you both met her."

"And we couldn't get rid of her inhibitions either."

"Look, that last time, this song I like came on Radio Alice so unexpected & so loud she leaned over to turn it down . . ."

"And you said leave it I like it loud & illegal & before you knew it you were both back here introducing her to it . . . us." They both chanted. "Looks as though we've heard it all before."

"Are you telling the truth?" Isabella asked (innocently).

"Of course he is. Well. As best he can," Rosine launched in. "Why else do we feel so irritated & helpless." She wondered why she was defending him so stood up to appear distant.

"It went further than you think." I said softly.

"Now where's that?" Rosine challenged.

"Think."

"No. I got to that. And got nothing. Where?" Rosine was angry. Then astonished, "You mean?"

"I mean you."

"Me? You'll find this hard to believe but you're sometimes more engaging when stupid, than in your saner, aggressive moments. Me, I can't . . . But whenever we're together it's as if you're battling to keep some deep part inside vacant, with something worthless; while preserving an identity you don't really like. Sustaining it by these tricks. Like springing this, now. And that alienates me. And you never say it when we're alone."

"That's the cost of friendship." Isabella said (frankly).

"You see." Rosine stormed. "Yes. That's why you do it. Partly."

"And?"

"You know well enough. Nobody likes to be a good thing, available & nothing else. It's an empty ride."

"I don't mind. Or I don't think I'd mind if I could get into that position." Isabella said (eagerly).

"It's two dimensional Isabella. Though it might suit you."

"You just need a punch-bag for your common sense Rosine." Countered Isabella.

"And you come swinging back."

"And at my first word you stop me." Isabella said (petulantly).

"Unfortunately impossible." Rosine stopped. Acting as if she hadn't understood. "Even though incoherent & garbled I persist in listening to you & I don't know why."

"I know why." Said Isabella insolently.

"Why?" Rosine & I asked curiously, both having our explanations frying like sausages.

"Because I've got a better part." And she grinned sheepishly, "In life."

"There is the proof of the danger of reading." Rosine barely flickered an eyelid.

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That night Isabella made off.

SO Rosine & I could, at last, get down to it.

OR. See Angel.

AND. Go to Deck to get the Golden Fleece.

THEN. Try & get it on.

BUT the birdlike Isabella couldn't really disappear. She left a note dramatically impaled with bubble-gum on a spring.

'I'm fed up actually it's all flat & tasteless & sad this summer & because I've been bossed around too fucking much I'm off & so it's goodbye to you.'

"She's spreading the damage." Was Rosine's wry comment, "It used to only be in her head. Now even the seasons are in the line of fire."

"She's not coming back in this brick of a book. I'll see to that . . . too dangerous & she's used up all her openings."

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NINETEEN.

The man on the slush-covered DECK shifted his feet mechanically & flapped his arms around the sides of his heavy coat. The sea ice was breaking up. An isolated box floating off the stern started to bob gently as the wave action returned with the thaw. It would soon be the end of his watch when the voices of the night fly off. Releasing him.

"Can we trust him?" She nodded in the direction of the head's exit through the latticed interior of the box.

"We don't have to. And he will be back. We need him."

"Oh. You mean we will be able to keep an eye on him? Interfere?"

"Help him out a bit. Throw a switch.

So here a warm wind gets up as a machine coughs into life bringing with it a harsh brassy light. This softens the snow. Until he comes back & he does teasingly wander off at these times promising to be back quick, but actually going by way of Peru, we will have to cool our heels. And the flat, unengaging boards of the interior landscape becomes our only focus as we lie in wait. Falling asleep another terrible dream takes shape & in it we believe that although the other is formless we are self-sufficient, but we begin to realize there had been some comfort in his constant interpretations of our chance remarks, that he said were never chance. The box starts to shrink.

"I know it gets messy at times without it but do we need that uniformity of a closed vision, is it comfortable? I find it too tight. He seems to want us to dance naked round the sacred bonfire to his perfect whatnot." Rosine hopped from foot to foot as her flimsy shift clinched tight at her bird waist caught at the ankles blown by a blast of warm air from the

generator's exhaust. A heavy lacquer screen, caught by the wind, collapsed & several of its inlaid ivory birds flew out.

"It happens at this time of year. Not enough to set the dogs barking."

"What time of year is it?" The generator powered a radiant blaze of lights on the area keeping it a summery golden but also supplied the power for the dry ice mist that continually swirled around their bodies while engendering occasional flurries of false snowflakes. As the man stepped off the triangle of frozen deck into the hot updraft of a hatch he gave a last glance back & shrugged. "Incomprehensible," he whistled. "Not enough (stubbornly) discontent to build a barricade. Petrify the dog & the cat, never mind the time of year & get some sweat & pencil into lifting that box out of the ocean."

"This is where my animals come in," nodded Rosine, "Flawed as their portrayal may be."

"And unlikely." He pointed to the illustration. The man, coloured in clumsily with thick grey gouache, had his left palm, a dab of pink, laid flat under three pencil line fingers of the right hand (pink dab); with his mouth slightly open he was turned as if made of card towards a young woman (pale) remonstrating or exchanging courtesies their signs were difficult to interpret, propped up in bed by a slop of paint that could have been porridge or concrete but would have to do for pillows as her hands or raw chops reposed on the bulge of her covered belly. Behind the bed-head hung a photograph of a crude painting, a red angel coming out of warp or a hornet's nest holding a bunch of flowers having released a red dove or dropped a red hanky (the picture is fuzzy) over two good shepherds round a fire.

"Brilliant. We'll do it."

& half tucked behind its frame was a letter with a scrawled blue-ink address (written on).

This letter was the subject of the conversation.

"The sender was?" She smiled & shot a mocking glance at him, not a look of trust. 'How could you have cut yourself off from that intimacy,' she thought but said, "Even though doubts remain, how lucky we are to have them."

"Yes women," And he hesitated wondering if he had been betrayed by his enthusiasm, "or animals?"

"No. Doubts." She pulled both her earlobes & out slipped her tongue at him. "Yes. That too. And this is how I do it." She took a step that brought her very close up to him.

"Not yet. Look. That choice means isolation. Takes us right out of this space." He cautioned, taking her elbow & guiding her towards the line of seawrack on the supposed strand marking the last high tide. "Over this & out there." He pointed to a black rock being pounded by the heavy sea. "What we need from you, before we give up, is an entire emotional zodiac composed of animals complete with twins & scales, but we'll give the crab a miss. Can you do it?" She spun herself free to face him. "Where do you think you're trying to lead us now?" This was said more with irritation than impatience.

"If you're thinking of seducing me, forget it."

"I wouldn't dream of thinking it."

"Why?" She asked. And was put out in more ways than one.

"Because you haven't got an abundance of pubic hair." Matter-of-fact & sly.

"I have." More matter-of-fact.

"You haven't got a super-abundant lot of pubic hair." Thoughtfully, "Black?"

"I have. Or I could have if I wanted."

"Do you want?"

"What a nice snatch that would be." Tenderly. "I thought we were happy enough. You're so different at night. I feel you almost understand me." Her hand touched his arm quickly & dropped back. "We almost had it . . .we should have stayed there in the bunker (?) & fixed it . . .how do you think I feel conforming to these set pieces, spinning round one after the other, that I have to click into at the drop of my . . . well without a backward glance while the world turns to dust . . ."

"Or mud."

" . . . under my feet & with it my . . .mumbles . . .something crumbles."

"Are you going to tell us what that something is?" She cupped an ear, "A monstrous linear rational abstraction perhaps? The usual deviant nurtured by reasoned development miscalled feeling then amazingly woven into some commonplace concrete shape & called . . ." She whispered in his ear. Then bit its lobe.

"Perhaps."

She whispered again.

"Deep."

"Magnificent." The chorus would have said, but they always misunderstood.

"Hardly." This said petulant or guarded. "Depends who's being what. Difficult from that angle. Aerodynamically impossible unless someone's got three legs (Not that dog). Could be as flat as cow shit. Fit only for flies. One of the chosen animal's cured pelts, shaken & dragged into the daylight, draped over a pole, exposed to all the elements without a

murmur of complaint (except perhaps about the constant pleas for favours on the wind).

Dropping to pieces with age would be as much good as . . . be as fitting as . . . we'll see."

"Is what stands within you disintegrating? That's the one to watch." Mmmm, agreed by everyone. "Not some old skin."

"Deep. I hope we don't get that one to answer."

"Betrayed by the pelts of capricious animals we admire. No. We should stick to what was written." She pulled out a crumpled envelope. The blue ink had smudged with rain. He could still make out part of her name Isabella de & the rest was lost in a damp stain.

"The letter says," she looked at him, hesitated then passed it over. He bent his head & swung away from her to get the sheet into better light, gave up & fished a reading glass out of a pocket & saw that there wasn't a space between any of the minute scribbled words, barely a patch of white on the page that he now detected was made up of a series of notes pasted together.

DarlingthisisDarlingLilethenamouredofasnakewhodyouthinkyouarefatherRedcapfather
madcapfatherredcupfathermadcapfathermadcapDarlingthisisDarlingLilethenamouredofas
nakewhodotouthinkyouare.I love you

"Bit of white showing there."

whodyouthinkyouaresantaclausdarlingthisislilethenamouredofasnakeformanyyearsandIh
avenotdevelopedapsychologyofrejectionIamnotanactress . . Iamlilethenamouredofasnake.
YoumustdesiremeafracturedsurfaceavoidofbonesIhaveenduredthestingofsolitudeandthebit
tercoldwithoutawordandithaswoundedme.

"There. Now. Does that throw some light on why?" She wondered & shook her head. His head also nodded in scrambled agreement & disbelief. "No light at all." But he felt the passing over of the letter had been a deliberate ploy as if she was pinning a target for the firing squad over his heart. It couldn't be answered.

And as in a choked farewell, she imagined her mouth being dragged over the freshly sanded square of a prayer painting, its multi-coloured grains stick to her lips. She spits. How can she frame the thought so it's finally understood; she took back the letter. Narrowed her eyes with an intense gaze against the light that had been switched on a moment before.

"When we made love." She paused, as she crumpled the paper a golden image sprang to mind. "One foot felt as though it was on seven ducks' backs; the other lost around his neck. How could I think? And there wasn't a flicker, not a flicker, of response in his expressionless face as far as I could see. I must have been invisible."

"What do you expect from a stranger? The nonsense of an enduring passion spliced with that once in a lifetime jive. He was there by chance."

"Lucky."

"He was trying to throw you with that vapid staring into space, making out he didn't come to decisions by his feelings or your desirability."

"He didn't look as though he had any."

"Probably didn't then. It was all kiddum."

And there you've got it, the violence in riding a horse with a dead face with a dead face.

She brushed the dry grains of white sand from her cheek, "And the gifts? What was she waiting for?"

"To capture his freedom the best way she could." He glanced at her. She gazed back. You could see by his uncertainty that to him it felt as if he was calling into the darkness, that he'd only got it third hand.

"She was never that hard up. And what happened if her gaze went through the mirror to encounter his reflected glance?"

"Nothing."

"I see." She declared with an assertive stare, "You're thinking of only allowing her the demeaning gaze. A kind of walk-on role with whatever the current fashion considers cool. A bean-pole with shaved pubic hair. Well we aren't playing Eve that demur way here any longer. She can easily put on that look like a cobra about to strike."

"I know the one."

"Even when naked."

"Do I know that one?"

"She can drop into it so naturally. Must have been born with it."

"So a glance is reckoned more penetrating than a gaze?"

"Not in English it's not. Hearsay can be quite misleading. And I'd say a snake gazed more than glanced. Dogs & crocodiles can have a very worried glance (he pranced about like a dog on a lead) but snakes never look worried, they must know we're instinctually shit scared of them." His arm formed an 'S' shape that just touched her ear. "Piercing. It depends where you put the word, nothing else. Chilling."

"Killing." She brushed his arm away.

"So we put a snake in the box with them to make the perfect paradise of Hell."

"As a kind of dose of excitement. She'd agree to that . . . I hope . . . but don't overestimate how attractive being in the know would be . . . for the others."

"Oh. I suppose they're too serious to join in. And will both be so busy trying out indifferent stares in the mirror oblivious as the snake uncoils to glide over their knees sliding about its usual ulterior business. While with doubts that would make most of us itch to pick up the letter & read it, their thoughts spiral away, unencumbered, like scattered snowflakes in a blizzard over the top of a tree. Making love like butterflies."

"Not much fun in that? Not enough weight." Obvious substantial thought. "Might break."

"They hesitate, their eyes as always blissfully fixed on the crystalline mountain peak (of the schizophrenic) never the base camp rubbish tip (of the rat). Wafting delicate unique but inedible wafers under our nose. Not to be tasted." He jerkily performed an inappropriate wooden salute as if shading his eyes.

"Is that the butterflies or the other two?"

"Why must we consult them first about the serpent. It should be a surprise, a shock."

"They would wish they had kept their clothes on." He slipped into a red jacket,

"Especially their pants. And kissed the bottoms of pots & pans instead of her arse before they've finished." He put a finger in an ear & while pulling a face worked it vigorously.

"No secret about that."

"I see." Said the chorus. Artlessly taking his action as a clue. "They are doubling as butterflies & thoughts."

"Those two would be better occupied doubling up, better at it, & apart from that it wouldn't take much effort or skill for them to drop right into the parts as croc & dog." Wooden signpost gesture. "They are it. Just needing permanent made-up worried looks in case they're caught on the job."

"You wouldn't catch a dog & a crocodile up to that." Shivers. "Not real ones."

"So we can't do it here? Is it because of the cold they would be reluctant to ejaculate I mean separate? We could throw hot water over them when we've had enough."

"That would be a way of shaming them." Rawly.

"And spoil their paint. And let everyone see how angry they really are. A fact both would have kept well disguised until that unmasking rinse stopped them coming. They are supposed to be very sorry & they're not at all sorry but pretending very hard. We won't know that unless by letting you chuck a bucket of warm water over them we give the game away" Wooden revelatory gesture using both arms. "We're not put out because they're shagging & having a good time while we have to hang about. No. But we're not having that temper."

"Then I guess we're not having them do a dog & crocodile double act, even as an interlude, because we might find out they're mad. And I expect you feel the same about the butterflies?"

"No. They are only thoughts. It's the fact that the two animals are angry, not thinking, that we have to beware of."

"Ah. They are only insects. We can have those. They only calculate."

"As long as they don't think they're angry or show it."

"But one sharp word or the hint of a scowl & they get the full bucket. Right?"

"Right. The butterflies can be symbolic & nothing more."

They all stiffened at this singular image. Swamped by the difficulty of how to do nothing more & show it.

"That demand could lead us into a morass." They looked down at their boots. "Of speculative fancy."

"It could be a shot in the dark. Pop. In the end."

"What." Glancegaze glare. "At the end."

"What could?"

"What end?"

"Which end?"

*

*

*

"The one you're ogling at."

Take cover.

THE END.

