

The giant had put his foot in it by suggesting they took a chance & gamble on how long they got. What had they to lose?

Care had reluctantly agreed & drawn **the short straw**.

“Oh!” They all cried.

And then there was or rather wasn't

SILENCE.

?

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‘Thirdly. If you look very hard you can see a beginning.’ The driver had said as we questioned him. ‘A spark, the living glow of a ruby dot that is a reflection of the torment of enthusiasm in an eye. In this beginning the denizens say they know everything except what had taken place in the first unthought second. Before the silently mouthed why.

Here choice comes second to speed; it doesn’t matter where we are going, or who with, as long as we get there fast.’ The driver had added in his normal roundabout way.

So, as they couldn't tell where they were & they weren’t prepared to say whether it was from absence or nowhere or immateriality etc . . . You name it . . . they were coming out of & they weren’t going to say where they were heading: You can see here we are getting up to speed going from zero to one. Exploring . . . striving . . . to find out what nought was like before it came apart behind the flapping screed of blue muslin.

HUSH.

Now it started. A massive boulder was projected, behind two indistinct figures (perhaps there was a third) onto a huge diamond shaped flap of wood & steel girders delicately but precariously supported over the dusty playing area by a twig-like strut.

That is a short description of the work. Best to stop here.

"Do I get to push the boulder, again?" Asked the giant, defiantly ignoring the SILENCE sign & reaching out towards the stick. "Is this twig important?" He grasped it. "I want it. Can I have it?"

"Don't pull that!"

Too damned late.

Crash.

The whole scene was sprung. Thrown roughly wrong. Knocked right out of kilter & left hanging loose like a giant pop-up page in a fairy-tale book that had more than served its time as the stamping ground for a child's imagination. Where some of the figures were torn, barely still attached to the page, some had lost limbs & some were ominously missing.

"Some had escaped," Said the giant proudly. "Of their own free will."

"They were the ones who had come unstuck." Said Rosine. "They didn't have a choice."

"They made their own holes." The giant protested. "To pop out of."

"That may be so but they could have hung on & waited to be rescued properly & thereby shown some gratitude for the effort put in by the rest. It would have been more appropriate." Rosine steamed & the giant hopped about on one foot looking scolded.

"Up. In. Out. Over. Positions for you know what! What do I care?" Rosine asked. "Look at that for a charming centre-piece."

One female slap bang in the middle of everything had been stripped completely naked, struck by lightning. She stood unfazed in a pile of smoking underwear.

"How do you clean up that mutilated picture, trapped contemplating its own navel, before it gets worse?" The driver asked over his shoulder, "And make some sense out of their willing confessions. Stern work, eh?"

"Give them a good pasting." Replied the passengers. "It should be child's play for someone as tough as you on the knight shift to make them see the error."

But. There had been blood spilt over it. Shit stuck to it. Filth & grime thumbled into it.

And milk dripped onto it. Who would want to touch that body?

I will. I will. I will. Shouted the X's. I will not said A. I will. I will. I will. Called the Y's.

I will. I will. I will. Cried the R's. Who were they? These phantoms crying into the wind.

Out of bed stark bollock naked flopped X (sometimes, but not always named as Pearl, Isabelle & Astarte). In out of the rain ran A (called Beatrice, leave it at that). Down swooped Y (called Margarita, Medea & very occasionally Medusa). So it was handy to know which way you were facing & where the mirror was. Up jumped R (called Rosine, Rose & Ruby). And I think I caught sight of a group of poor buggers in the distance, all with names used so many times they hung on them like old coats. O Yes. And there was a fox slinking on its belly losing itself in the leaves of grass, scavenging for any insignificant morsel that would give offence against blind planning.

In the hunt to find improvisation, next, briefly, I must try to salvage what is left of the weather from my childhood so that another equivalent emotional catastrophe can occur.

There is the peaceful sound of RAIN an April shower on stone made by winnowing steel nails, through the palms of your hands held prayer-like, into a paper cone.

Drenched, the participants take cover.

Wisely.

Remembering from their childhood, being grabbed against their will then spinning dizzily at the end of an arm & a leg in the game called a wing & a prayer.

And flung.

Offal. Tossed aside.

Isolated, all but cut off in myself because there is SNOW whispering its exciting whiteness into all the crannies of the words before I can speak. Blown wildly as I watch, then settling; we roll this snow into scrolls until they are too heavy to push & there we build our castle. Undulating whale-shaped drifts catch the imprint of the wind.

There is bouncing HAIL a sharp barrier, a quick drop. Rattling on the armour plating of a cranky heart. Quickly gone. It leaves the helpless lettuce riddled with holes. And worse, we laugh at her.

Is there MIST rising? Dissolving our entwined bodies before their very eyes. Giving the play to bobbing candlelight. Can we only make love in it? Anywhere, I say. (There is always mist in a foreign landscape.)

There is a dreely DRIZZLE. Alone, you stretch out your hand & encounter the invisible friend of my childhood, the one with a crazy name who at that time was more solid than the doors & walls we walked through together. We fade & you follow dogging our footsteps.

There is the invidious SLUSH seeping through your soles as you trudge up the back bork to lessons. When you scramble to your place you are sodden. And there's not a whit of a chance to take off your socks before mental arithmetic whisks your mind out of your

boots. You sprawl & steam in a murky hierarchy of insidious disorder. And get marked for your trouble.

Neither here nor there, is SLEET inconvenience. Robbing the daylight of its edge.

Rounding your shoulders over the hard work of saying yes & no. But meaning neither.

You arrive at 1.

“That’s one too many . . . very filling . . . totally filling.” Scarface shouted, fed up.

There is revealed, in unadulterated daylight but surrounded by a grey dimness in the head called FOG (or HAAR), an overall splashy, blotchy picture like a sheet with the inconsequential squirting & dribble of semen on it, not adding up to anything particular with nothing much depicted that you would want to lay your hands on. You find others have got there too. And discretely size them up.

At the 'Il y a.' Or thereabouts.

[illegible]

ZZZZ

PART ONE. ‘Wood’

STAKE.

As the driver took a break & sat silently devising another master plan he realized that to finally clear up the muddle, a gullible & innocent culprit was needed, as usual. Only for show, nothing else, nothing as arduous as fabricating the truth to fit an enormous lie, someone who wouldn't twig what was at STAKE. Or someone who would tenaciously hold a belief through thick & thin that there are better things to come which naturally helped them to go along with, but only as fellow-travelers, enjoying pornomammon in all its spectral manifestations.

“Hi! Giant. Take a a . . .” and at that very same second there erupted into this impossible total vacuum, as if the very sides of meaning had caved in, the nose of a memory which had taken a long time to find its way back to the coop. Would it be possible to salvage enough facts & figures from the debris this memory dragged along like tin cans after a wedding or before the honeymoon, to construct a plausible rehash or make it add up to shit & get a bit of fun?

A sweetheart limped into the yard with her gamy leg encased in a glossy thigh boot the same as the good one, her flared skirt swishing the raindrops off the weeds as she beat a path straight up to the idling stranger, relishing the effect of her irruption. In all the time their paths crossed the driver never saw her sitting down. She was always strutting around on those long pins & being bossy. Slinkier than a Bocklin mermaid, with

something glassy about the look of her eye, the same as they had, she could well have been landed on an oil-rig & forced every man-jack to dance her tune before they served her breakfast.

This sweetheart whisked the inventory out of the driver's hand & flicked through it until a page caught her eye. She fixed the place with a thumb & held it in front of him as if he should swear an oath on it & quick: Forget the rigmarole.

"Why are all these items crossed out?"

The driver didn't answer but stared dumbly at the mistakes on the mistreated page she held up. Then she came along side so he could get a better look at the damage; to force something out of him with the squeeze she put on with a hip. He was put out; the memory didn't bring a waft of perfume with it. Had there been any scent given off at the time? Or was he getting a mutilated deodorized version back?

"The figures needed rounding out nicely & the opportunity never presented itself for me to work on them." He tried deliberately to make it sound both enchanting & passive. "So I left it at that."

"I get it. That's why the driver didn't use any of the expressions with 'pop' in them, at all." Astarte gave the 'pop' some considered & bubbly work.

"Too much at stake?" The sweetheart ignored the rough idea. And began to fade.

"It was a failure to recognize the poss . . ." The driver began to reply in his serious mode then realized she had gone.

The giant broke in. "Here. A stake can make certain that the erection of a structure is safe.

That's why I need this one to underpin my efforts, **my struggle**, to overcome a

desperate feeling of insecurity . . .” The giant dropped his prompt & prepared himself for a snatch.

“Take it.” Sighed the driver languidly indicating the stake. Surprised, the giant hesitated not wanting to waste the potential left converting to the kinetic right or to have a charge of misplaced character foisted on him. There was a giant value coupon stamped indelibly on his very vague whatnot & to lose that would have completely wrecked his identity.

“An electronic price tag. Good idea for him. Not messy like bargaining & invariably being cheated.” Astarte had the haggle in one bite & chewed him up.

“Someone could get an ugly picture of the giant from the pitch you take.” Rosine admonished her roundly which was about right X 4. According to Isabella later.

“I agree too. I think sometimes the giant is given an entirely wrong voice.” There must have been a real need of criticism for Isabella + thought to now speak up.

“We know it only happens rarely, that you think, Isabella. Don’t start to make a fuss now.”

“It’s simple arithmetic that’s why it’s difficult to get to know her.” Rosine whispered to Pearl.

“And there could be diverse additional reasons too, for what I am not.” Said the giant apologetically. “Most of them undiscussed before they’re dropped in the can. But it may not be entirely accidental that my algebra has been superceded.”

“They are called nuances.” Scarface revealed. [He didn’t say to whom he owed this insight.]

“You know it’s a shame. It might not be his fault. I’m sure the giant’s bad habit with sticks has got something to do with a nasty prick he got as a child.” Isabella + hobbyhorse.

“Can it be as bad as the nasty crack you got?” Margarita looked down her nose.

“Knocked her dizzy. I’ll bet.” The giant commiserated with Isabella but he seemed too preoccupied with counting for it to be genuine.

“Six.”

“Get back to the point.” Scarface intervened rudely. It was his job.

“What? That she was hanging around most of the time?” Rosine thought it was obvious.

“She appeared just as he appeared? What triggered that off?” Astarte pointed at the giant.

“She loafed just as he loafed. And almost in the same spot. I never got a look in.” The giant chuntered, catching the mood while keeping an eye on the finger.

“Had it off all over the place.” Said the driver. And they could have sworn there was a catch in his voice.

“I must answer ‘right’ to that.” Rosine had never been able to budge her. “She seemed glued to him.”

“Nothing random in that I hope.” The giant was worried by the seat of his pants.

“No. I swear it.” Promised Astarte. “Whatever they got up to thereafter they managed very well & were not lying around.”

“Not caught lying around. Is that what you wanted to say?” Rosine prompted her.

“Within certain limits. Yes.” Astarte made it clear to the driver with a look that those were lax & about the same ones as her limits.

“As a preliminary sketch that isn’t bad.” The driver thought aloud. “But there is something missing . . . her boundaries . . . it was impossible to tell where you were with her because she didn’t know where she was herself.”

“Close by. You were given that.” Said the giant.

“You thought she might reject in advance the hand of friendship you were going to offer, but be dejected by her act of rejection?” Rosine wanted to clear this up.

“Not enough space to go round.” The giant said. “Ticklish if you got the itch.”

“Confined . . . Ummm.” Astarte’s imagination having been kick-started a glazed look appeared above her open mouth as she juggled the balls of fantasy.

“She made out that there were definite things she wanted to enjoy & did; but what she described then, she’d always lost, or given up, so I never felt she was very attached to them.” That the driver hadn’t grasped it you could tell by his puzzled expression & the task he made of relating it. He tried many words that haven’t been recorded.

“She must have belonged somewhere. You make her sound lost.”

“No. She seemed, to herself, to be available any old time, but I never got any other feedback, only that she was unavailable at the very times when she said she thought she was asking for it.”

“It was new each time she thought she was asking.” The giant opened the catch.

“She was in a different orbit.”

“And remote.”

“Although she was always around?”

“Are you sure she was genuinely 3D? Because the way this memory is developing it’s becoming one of those ‘weres’ that is indisputably behind the closed door & nowhere else.” Said Rosine impatiently.

“At a distance, I’d say.” Said the giant. “Unless she was talking in a whisper because I didn’t hear her ask for anything.”

“You weren’t there. Liar.” Pearl was shocked by his lack of control.

There was general relief in the main that he had completely missed this complex point or else had he taken it on board it might have clogged up a waste pipe from his mind’s drain etc.

“She wasn’t unapproachable . . . no . . . it was more that at a certain distance, if you came near, she didn’t close off but simply did not have the ability to keep a constant presence . . . she faded . . .”

“How far did she go?” The giant knew what ‘arm’s length’ was as he was always there & wondered if there was ever going to be chance of company. He hadn’t the concept ‘flighty’.

“Far out?”

“Are you on foot?”

“Yes.”

“About as long as it takes to smoke a wasp’s nest.”

“It varied day by day. But on that one day I’ve picked out something changed.” And the driver looked as if he had been struck by an onerous thought that should have missed or

stayed concealed, but he knew it was no coincidence, nor an arbitrary whim that had uncovered the memory. Now that it was out it had to be grasped.

“So one side felt very much the same as the other to her; do you think?” Rosine broke his uncomfortable reverie.

“She was ambiguous, in the signals she put out, about what she felt.” The driver now lied.

“Underhand?” Astarte hoped.

“Any side to it from this angle?” Asked the giant dangling a piece of paper scientifically.

“Kept you curious?” Astarte giggled.

“Guessing . . . wary . . . Stop flapping that sheet, giant.” Shouted the exasperated driver.

On the stroke of midnight the giant fumbled several times trying to fit the lid back on his biscuit tin. “Is there only one stroke? He asked. “That doesn’t seem to give enough time for a really smashing ‘coup’.”

“I get it. That’s why he didn’t use any of the expressions with ‘pop’ in them. The unwelcome thought was biting like nitric acid through his wooly defence into intimate presence. She might have meant it & if so he had missed out all that time she had been around.” Rosine giggled. “She must have meant it.”

“So what she was actually up to is still unclear?” Astarte was puzzled but giggled.

“The selfsame thing as she always was.” Said the giant. “Couldn’t be otherwise or something would have snapped.” He had a rubber-band theory of motive that was surprisingly similar to that of many great minds.

“Even if I tacitly agree with that it still leaves me in the dark because she never came out with it.” The driver was obfuscating badly but he needed the rest.

“Not flagrant.” Astarte echoed & nodded her head. She’d got it. “Classy & shrewd.”

“Explicitly or not she was after something this side of the Kanadas, after giving up a man once.”

“Or twice.” Smiled Isabella + questionable vacancy. “We have to stick to the facts.”

“Ha. Ha.” Said the giant. “That’s a nice piece of evidence in keeping with the theme.”

And with dubious propriety he took the stick without being given it.

“Don’t wait for those facts to lead you astray. You don’t know about the waywardness, yet.” Scarface took the giant aside.

“Perhaps she was noncommittal only because she felt if she revealed even a hint of what she might want it would deter you?” Rosine asked but thought ‘tosh.’

“Devaluation. That’s right. It never works because the others sink their dough with it as well.” Isabella + pink paper.

“Talking in opposites . . . do you think she had lost it?” Rosine hoped very hard.

“Scuppered at the midriff.” Said the giant whose mind often weighed anchor.

“Yes. Undoubtedly.” Astarte knew in her heart. “That’s why she was trying so hard for it by being a cool & unresponsive creature.”

“I gave up that positive interpretation practically from day one.” The driver admitted candidly.

“So you were an awkward, unresponsive bastard as well?” Rosine thought she had guessed it all along you could tell by her tone. “No wonder she felt miserable. She felt overlooked.”

“That seems tantamount to saying the driver did nothing on purpose without considering his feelings (or hers). That he was avoiding something in himself seems obvious . . .”

“Incorrect.” The driver corrected.

“. . . massively & substantially obvious.” Rosine finished & felt as though she’d won something.

“We need to find out what she did about it.” Astarte suggested. “Before he does.”

“What?” Scarface wanted to know suspiciously.

“Eavesdrop.” Astarte nudged the giant’s ear out of the way & trod on his toes.

“One explanation is as good as an explication.” Said the driver. “Find out what she did & what she needed & what she expected when absorbed in herself by herself. See what I did & didn’t do within limits.”

“And watch what she got? The giant, who was impressed by the brief but impervious to shame or a good shaking said. “I’ll take care of that.”

“No. No. No. No. No.” Came the largely negative response.

“She wanted to be alone.” The driver suddenly said cinematagraphically. “Most of the time when she was about . . . that showed just as clearly as her need for contact.”

[There is something lacking here. We need a second copy model to work out some changes on & see how they develop (a) alone (b) together & take our finding back to square one (1)]. Scarface plus horse sense.

“A copycat crime. Excellent.” Astarte settled back waiting for the gory details.

“Did she have any reason to mistrust you? No. My guess is that she couldn’t trust herself to keep a foot on her feelings when you were around & I was right. She certainly wasn’t indifferent. I can see through it.” Rosine continued with conviction.

“I suppose if you’ve been there you recognize it.” Astarte yawned & added. “I wouldn’t want to go anywhere near it . . . too bleak.”

“Too inaccessible an escarpment for you to set foot in, Astarte, you’d need to pick up some feelings on the way & learn to show them.” Rosine countered.

“Feelings + emotions” Isabella loosed a bolt. “= muffled noises.”

“No. A few rhythmic squeaks wouldn’t do.” The giant developed the theme without being asked. “You’d have to really grunt & squeal.”

“You pig, giant.” Spluttered Pearl with the darkest thoughts just making her reel.

“I’ve got it.” Rosine tried another tack. “She observed that you were practically identical to her in most ways.”

“Come off it, Rosine.” Warned the driver pretending to be touched to the quick.

“And that served as a warning to her to watch out. How tricky you might be . . . even playful (she dropped that in to get the driver back in tow) . . . & she felt danger . . . sexual danger.”

“That’s a bit obvious, Rosine, & even when true it can only go so far. We need to come up with a better fit, a closer match, something irreducible beyond the initial undisguised ordinary feelings before they are submerged by what inevitably came later.”

“Always! That sounds misleading. Has there never been ‘love at first sight’?”

“There’s a glut of that these days.” Said the fox. “And then when the enchantment only comes out of a bottle they use up dramatic quantities of 2nd thoughts.”

That caused quite a stir.

They divided on party lines.

Then they split according to gender. That did not help the uncordial atmosphere.

The balloon went up.

Pearl didn’t want to know. She had cherished bumping into something akin to that & had, alas, tastefully suppressed the desire.

“Either a placebo or a surrogate would do her nicely.” The giant said pleasantly forgetting his own growing need. “It would make it all add up.” And he quickly looked at his fingers. “And I don’t mean numerals.”

“She could count on those, for sure.” Agreed the fox. “Although they would take her over.” [Example for the doubters: Only 10d to the shilling].

“Six.” Said the startled giant invested by the ghost of devaluation.

“Again?” They all wondered how he managed to lag behind by so much that they thought there was a catch in it.

“The feelings of disquiet you got in her presence was because you stubbornly refused to admit how you felt.” Rosine said emphatically squaring him up.

“No. I knew that, Rosine.” The driver replied with a block. “It was because she didn’t give me a clue how she expected me to react.”

“The catch was – you needed that hint - & you were caught. You didn’t get hold of it.

That empty sinking clutching sensation told it all . . . something you like to control was not yours to dispose of whenever you met even though you were unaware of it.”

“They both had entrenched positions.” Isabella + diagram. Agreed with Rosine’s analysis.

And now Astarte seemed put out by this picture as she couldn’t quite remember doing that one. So, guess what venture was next on her list.

“And each from their positions tried to manipulate the other to satisfy their own needs while totally ignoring the other’s . . . needs.” Isabella + heavy book.

Astarte was certain sure she’d been more than half way there on a sofa on many occasions.

“They never went the whole hog, Pearl.” Said the giant eminently satisfied by his deduction because Pearl turned red. “I’ll vouch for it.”

“Nobody would do that, giant, so keep quiet. You’ve made Pearl feel sick.”

“You can’t disguise the fact that she cut herself off in your presence essentially to protect herself. She knew.” Rosine cried looking at Pearl quizzically to confirm the idea of ‘driven snow’ in her cheeks.

“I wish I knew too.” Said the giant. “When.”

“You’ll never know. That’s why you’re still here.” The driver sat bent, the side of his face was tilted gently to the left, & this cheek & part of his chin rested comfily in the cup of his left hand, the spreading fingers gently touching his skin. The elbow under the arm was nicely supported by a knee & a lower leg & foot did the rest. The giant observed this tight contortion with awe.

“It lacked magic.” The driver murmured half aloud. “But it wasn’t tawdry, as such, I have to be up front about that.”

“She was always thrusting her front into the lead . . . & let the outcome follow.” Astarte knew how to take up the slack on the boom without question.

“Yes.” The giant imagined. “She led from the front, all in one blow, practically.”
?????(?).

“All one? Sounds dangerously religious & much too Eastern to (he cast his eye about) boot to be allowed out on its own.” Said the fox trying to orientate the conversation back to . . . & of course, he was stuck at the wrong end. How do you catch hold of a funambulist? “Until now they have used most of the known numbers to fiddle the fundamental.”

“Leave it at that.” Said Rosine primly as if she anticipated an unbecoming directional twist & didn’t want the fox to let the draught in.

“This disruption is making me gasp.” Isabella + heartstrings.

“It’s fragmentation really.” Said the giant. “Pity we’ve been lumbered with the job of trying to make the whole who when the driver isn’t forthcoming with the spare parts.”

“And when he is it seems to be to deliberately nullify the progress we feel we made.”

Rosine sniffed.

“It must be inappropriate to criticize him when he isn’t doing anything. Not much sign of action yet.” Scarface worked on the assumption that inertia was best. And delay just as good. And he wasn’t going to rush & lose his nerve now. What were they waiting for? To come up with the right recondite stuff for a strategy?

“Unrestrained.” They all pounced on the word as if it was the last cake on the doily. It was the driver who had spoken. “I lacked that attribute at the crucial moment.”

“Cabbage family.” Said the giant with authority. It would be misleading to suggest that there was collusion between the giant & his brain, but he did say it distinctly & that’s a start.

“He should have been more careful & avoided a split in the first place.” Isabella + reason.

The giant went red.

(Copycat thought Margarita).

The giant’s complicated preparations to shine just once intellectually were in the bin.

“I don’t know, pal.” Said Rosine. “I’m beginning to get a few pointers here & ‘over there’ & ‘uhu’ are coming into this fast. There was about a yard between you two in this place, did you say? Just out of reach. Enough space to forestall any chance of an accidental touch or feel caused by a reflexive twitch.”

“Knee-jerk.” Astarte said as offensively as she knew how. “My bum is covered in bruises from them.” She showed Margarita who felt one or two for ripeness.

“We can do without any of those disclosures.” Pearl couldn’t imagine even opening one.

“The clear space between you both wasn’t open.” Later Scarface claimed to have said this.

“And it wasn’t dark.” The giant surmised. “At six.”

“It was darker than you can imagine outside.” Isabella + Gothic novella.

“This was inside.” Rosine reminded them. “If that heap of grotty jumble collected under the leaking roof of a ruin counted as inside.”

“Inside: Outside. Who can tell?” Isabella + Gothic novel.

“What we are concerned with is why he was unable to bridge that gulf between them?

After all it was a mere step.” Rosine proceeded.

The giant seemed ‘caught out’.

“Still with us, giant? Not weeding?” Astarte squatted & grinned up at what she imagined was the kind of space that had stopped the protagonists.

“If she had fainted he would have caught her.”

“Not these days.”

“And they would have banged their heads together had she dropped a hanky.”

“Anything tempting left to drop?” The giant set forth on his rough analysis but was stopped dead in his track by a fiercesome scowl from Margarita.

“The best we can say about this so far is that we’ve got him ‘there’. But unfortunately not ready to participate fully. And our knowledge about that is incomplete. The driver has confessed to a lack of urge which he later confessed he first covered up as a lack of prompting & as for her . . . we don’t even know the colour of her lipstick.”

“It’s called red in all these books & then there is a lot of trouble deciding which one to choose.” Astarte couldn’t believe the way they rode roughshod over the basic foundation.

“Out of attunement, nothing like it, causes a sensation, everybody looks & they’re hooked without a word being spoken.” Said the fox & he turned to Astarte who gave him the green light with thumbs up.

“Suit you & your idle talk, giant.” And it has to be said once, he knew his onions.

“Inhibited.” The driver hadn’t budged an inch. He was still hunched up over the task.

This word had been murmured at the same pitch in the same tone, & straight after they had gobbled up the one he had just tossed out.

“Stuck Frigid.” Said the giant. “Like a frog in a philosopher’s stone. And twice as harmless.” He completed the homily effortlessly.

“It was a fleeting chance.” The driver could hardly bring himself to say it.

“I don’t know why. She didn’t change her mood much, did she?” Rosine first asked in elevated language to prevent a guffaw from the giant. “Easy anytime.” She had to add disparagingly

“Difficult to tell. I suppose I must have been indifferent to how she was. Can’t remember looking at it.” The driver gave his laconic replies like a sleepwalker.

“Oh. I don’t think you were supposed just to look. It was all in there waiting. It had been looked at pretty thoroughly in the mirror before it came anywhere near you. All the looking aspect of it had been worn out by the time things had shunted together & there was only that electrifying gap left between you both.”

“Geared up. She said it herself. I remember that.” Said the driver.

“That place could have been a sanctuary for her, out of the run of the mill rat race, where she could give reign to her irrational side that gave you a bad time because you were coming at it from its blind spot.” Rosine wove from left to right & back again.

“You have to squint down the sights.” Said the giant from memory proving right every bad word spoken about it.

“And squeeze.” Shrieked Astarte for whom a gap was inconceivable without some cream filling.

“Hence the expression ‘Cutie pie’” Isabella + lexicon again.

“Did she, ever so slightly, turn away?” Rosine asked cautiously developing a hunch.

“Being just a little bit evasive, hardly showing it but as it was there, if it was, it could have given you a discrete message not to try your luck even while the big placard seemed to shout ‘dive in’.”

“So the wiggle in the tail wasn’t there.” Said the giant. “To lead you astray.”

“Does that matter? Very often the lack of a body movement can be a ploy to call up or engender a more serviceable move.” Isabella + sting theory.

“Very good, Isabella, but she wasn’t letting on according to the driver. And what was going on you couldn’t get from a book. He’s saying he got the nod, (not literally, giant, so don’t think you’re missing out) on the one hand & the no on the other.”

“Not quite sure about either of those.” Said the driver aiming for precision by closing one eye. “There was more to it than that yet at the same time I felt less compulsion to make a move than at most times.”

I’d have called that a wink.

Pearl’s blood ran cold. Was that for me?

Margarita felt that strange tremor at the top of her legs. Was that for me?

Astarte bagged the wink.

“Dithering.” Astarte snapped. “I’ve run up against the threat of that nebulous petting once or twice & I found it turned me off & left me nervous & my blouse full of creases.”

‘Doesn’t like to neck clockwise’ the giant noted & conspiratorially showed Isabella the diagram who wrote on it ‘= fussy’.

“The threatening lack of movement + (damn Isabella) the fact you felt bereft by the lack of the necessary information flattened the mood just enough to set you wavering.”

“What went wrong was the finger on his pressure gauge.” Said the giant. “It dropped off. Then he didn’t know if he had got up a nice head of steam.”

“That’s a vast improvement. I like that.” Astarte giggled. “Taking your pulse to check the state your heart.”

“The spoon on the kettle spout model of the works has had more influence on psycho-analysis than the whole genome programme will have in the world.”

“That would mean total surrender.” Astarte sucked in the whole world in one gulp & everyone could feel her tongue rummaging around the Tropic of Cancer.

“That doesn’t fall within the scope of our present search.” Rosine adjudicated in a fairly biased way but a little punctiliously & pushed everybody back on their uppers. “The lack of arousal is now concentrating our minds & whose fault is that?”

“Brewer’s droop is worse for the French peas than blow fly, so don’t look for an easy option.” Said the giant fully in tune with the interested parties entangled in the debate.

N. B. Here we are only listening in, as I’m afraid the drift has got very close to the shoal of Angst thus to take part might prove harmful.

“Ha. I knew it. The driver was afraid something might happen.”

“Some hurtful thing?”

“That sounds like it could be something lugubrious lying dormant in him. So you’re really saying he was afraid of himself.”

“You’re not supposed to do that on your back.” Said the giant gloomily. “I saw a little boy being hosed down with cold water by his mother in France before he had ever thought of harming himself.”

“Your mother needed a good ticking off.” Said the fox. “And a lot more besides. Then she wouldn’t have been so quick to grab the hose.”

The giant knew then that he had jeopardized the family tree & all that meant.

“Oh. Blunders. Who cares? If the driver had tried one we could have skipped this bollocks & done the shaft [a section to come not the dance]” Astarte adopted a reckless tone. “What was he afraid of? I missed that part.”

“An inner being.” Gothic character + Isabella.

“No. No. He was afraid for **her**.” My emphasis.

“Doing it for her? I thought that was out of date.” Pearl was shocked. Not rigid.

“Depends on the results.” Margarita did not leer but it was close.

“Can vary. You’ll see. It’s old-fashioned enough to give you misgivings about it all & make you glad this was an isolated incident.” Rosine rubbed her eyes. “I wish he had suppressed that memory, given it short shrift with a cynical grin & in contrast mused about one where he managed to get it over without all this palaver.”

“It is interesting how the ones we miss are most significant & difficult to digest.” The driver confessed a biscuit theory. “In the general run of things it appears we can handle those we call successes much better.”

“Much better.” Astarte repeated after him cheekily. “If you say you were up to it once upon a time we have to believe you.”

“Tip. Top. His ability really added up to something.” Isabella + square root (nouvelle cuisine).

“Six.” Declared the giant immediately without blinking. Having toted up real & imaginary ills.

“In contrast to the moment we are looking at in which we haven’t found anything that adds up, not even why they were together that evening, if, as it seems it was, imbued with indifference.” Rosine still kept on tussling with the unusual juxtaposition. “And if that was so, why does he get the feeling that he threw something away, if he did? It’s as if she had entrusted her heart to him & he had thrown it down like an old hat. And she blatantly didn’t.”

“That juxtaposition, Rosine. Where did that come in? How did they get into that?”

Astarte was determined she would wheedle a description out of her later.

“Shut up giant before you start, it’s not a free-for-all, this might be the time for you to grasp something different for a change.” Isabella + high horse.

“I think it is transparent now that she was free.” [Scarface].

“An outstanding deduction. I get it. She was invisible.” The giant was overjoyed. “And although not objectively there threw her voice his way creating the right atmosphere but sadly not giving the driver enough body language to go on.”

“Clueless but charming in its harmless attempt to lead us up the garden path.” Said the fox. “You forgot to address the problem of the gulf/gap created by the two perspiring bodies into which they were ready to plunge as the voices rang & the echoes replied.”

“Hand that book over, please.” Isabella + empty hand.

“That would have required a plan, worked out in advance by her or him. Some arrangement in which one thing followed another.” Rosine dished that.

“Plus compensation for the inevitable slip.” Said the giant. “Up.”

“A strip would have left him in no doubt, Rosine, but we heard earlier that if that had been intended everything would have already been on a different level.” Isabella + split skirt.

“And more comfortable in the time allotted.” The giant needlessly degraded the subject regardless of all the mess the double ess & the slap it caused. “If you could have measured it & not been intrusive, but I don’t think I would have found it any less comfortable than they did by being discrete.”

“Let go of that one, giant.” They all pleaded. “It only is what it can be & it looked very lumpy to us.”

“In all the wrong places.” Astarte was coarse & could even get up an abstract nose (at times).

There must have been a logical flaw somewhere but it would have needed a flimsy pretext, badly jointed into the nonexistent slot to cover that up, which, when disclosed by a fluke would show how the misunderstanding came about.

Rosine wasn't going along with that. She couldn't see it. She nudged the driver, who conceded, without opening his eyes, that he didn't think there could be a pure solution, not with the facts they had access to.

The driver's elbow slid off his knee. His head bobbed like a loose buoy in a rip for a second then his eyes cleared.

She or I said fuck me: She or I said no. Oh. The sweetheart.

Best stop here & now. She cried. Warning me. But. The woodpecker was tapping. A motorcycle roared by, scouting for an infantry column, raising dust into the cold North wind. Dubious stuff.

POLE.

The sleepy driver wasn't sure at first who or what he was remembering but quite certain he must be up the POLE & he didn't mean the one in the celestial sphere. A young woman came to mind in such a jumble of shapes & sizes that it showed graphically what a real hash memory made of things . . . no beings. It certainly shafted them in its own mysterious way. Trying not to be thrown by this first mixed-up image the driver slumbered on into a melange where they spoke gibberish, determined not to be left stranded with the first polymorph that emerged from the beleaguered regions. Then the sweetheart advanced, just in front of, but in pace with, a tide of reminiscences as multifarious as krill, with the looming outline of a Hydra. And, however you wanted to interpret the vision, it had a distinct look of trouble & gas about its person. A composite creature unable to exist in air without the lurid reflections of the driver's mind. An interception seemed out of the question without a skirmish in which some precious trinkets of memory would be badly mauled.

"Nobody asked her in." Said the giant. "That was a big mistake."

"The sort only you make." The driver's retort was short, sharp & explicit & gave no room for a freer interpretation & its sting left the giant grinning like an elumbated hyena.

"I get down to it. Now you get down to it. Look it up."

?

"Where else but in the loin." Isabella + stowaway.

What was this thing or being (we are not sure yet) at hand? The driver ran through an imaginary index as far down as X & Y & at these cyphers he was jolted into a realization, the same ones as usual --- under a bridge with X--- in a car with Y --- the other side of a door was ?. Particular heads were beginning to come into focus as names that needed knocking together. But the driver knew that to look at the labels simply wasn't enough & he rubbed & smudged them away allowing in a broader diffused picture. The one he could live with as with no other.

"Inexplicitness." He smiled. "The boon of faulty recall."

The giant who stood close by gave a nod of approval at this comment.

"To mislead ourselves . . . what a gift to treasure." He looked at the giant who had been struck dumb by the sentiment. "Don't worry, giant, you'll get your turn with the naked truth."

Astarte looked both peeved & pleased & breathed in. "I understand." She said quietly construing a veiled message about which she hadn't a clue but had to make out she did for pride's sake.

"Hold on." Said the giant who felt he must tickle pride too. "But I don't know what to. She hasn't got here yet."

"All the girls left ages ago." Said the driver. "But somehow they leave so many traces no matter where I turn there is something to spark something off something else."

"Friction." Said the giant. "The glue of relationships that makes the sparks fly."

"A natural history of love + the ricochet theory rebound. Oh. I'll enjoy this." Isabella + illuminated capital letters.

“But some things are final. Remember they can walk out of the door whenever they want to.” Said the driver magnifying & concentrating & focussing with a microscopic needlessness that astounded Rosine.

“From what you’ve already posited.” She said. “We are not exactly in for a whale of a time with every last thing hidden or exiting.”

“You started it about ‘doors’, Rosine.” Astarte remembered & was still waiting for Rosine to use one.

“He has got their food in stock.” The giant had noted. “So it’s 1st come 1st served.”

That should have made Astarte stink like a polecat & it happening sooner or later wasn’t finally ruled out till well after the end.

“I assume that door was included because you didn’t want the coming & going to be universally applicable?” Isabella + nut shell.

“We all usually exit by the undertaker’s door.” Said the giant. “As a last resort.”

“That’s right. And we’d have nothing to do with him at the same time.” Said Rosine.

“If somebody came round knocking at the door.” Asked the giant. “Did he let them in?”

“Strictly speaking (it being a peak period) we can only deal with one person, slowly, at a time. She will have to be taken as a hybrid.” Isabella + Mendel.

“I’ve got one in a row at the moment.” Said the giant. “Big pods.”

“A dominant trait.” Said Isabella + Gregor + peas again.

“You need three in a row to win.” Said Rosine with a baleful glare at Astarte to top it.

“Three things up.” Said Astarte concurring with the dare but her lip twitched.

“Three yellow fingers.” Said Isabella + one-armed bandit + dim light.

“That’s a good start.” Said the giant. “I’d like a pull.”

“You’ve won.” Said Rosine. “What did you get? No, giant, sorry.”

“Oh. Three bananas.” Said Isabella + better light.

“Bananas = Usual banal symbolism. Leave it out Isabella.” Said Astarte.

“And short change.” Said Isabella + pole-axed look.

“Small change.” Said the driver & that put the kibosh on that episode.

He meant ‘fry.’

The stray thought had hobbled the image.

And at that the driver looked hard at a pebble on the ground between his feet with a strange wriggly zigzag pattern on it. “The absurd isn’t incomprehensible; quite the contrary. And why we went round in circles we say ‘I don’t know’ but we always do know. So we don’t run up against our true feelings.”

“Which ones are those?” Asked Rosine. “Just your own or do they intermingle?”

“And those absurd moments aren’t bare of meaning . . . they are like volcanoes about to erupt.” The driver ignored the jibe politely.

“Dangerous cornet.” Said the giant. “When tactlessly left open upside-down.”

The driver felt he must round up his thoughts & grind some sense out of the confusion of tongues or the future could assign him fewer loopholes.

“Nothing left then to stand your pots in.” Said the giant blithely unaware of the incoming admonishment.

“Shut up. Let him be with those complicated figures that the horrible memory has churned up.” Rosine snapped rudely, feeling left out. “We’ll get on with the present.”

“Pass the parcel? Some hopes, the music died years ago.” Said Scarface glued to the wireless.

“When she comes into sharp focus I can see what she’s made of, what she’s got. But is that truly her?” Asked the driver.

“You should have cut out dimming the lights so often.” Said the giant unable to contain himself. “During those intimate services at the soirees.”

“She was always herself which ever one it was, who else. You shared those common, fugitive minutes several times or more. I guess you were in visible range? And that she was palpable?” Rosine started to put her finger on it. She would have really liked a number.

“As the light dwindled it became more difficult to tell.” Said the giant who had been at the philosopher’s keyhole again. “They simply had to rely on touch.”

“Less than human.” Margarita + Isabella.

“I think they copulated. Too dim by then to see clearly what was going on in the dark circle of light.” Said the giant frankly. “I had to surmise by the sound of it.”

[Only angels love them before they know them.]

“Better avoid a standpoint in the circle.” Isabella + Faust + in the Gods.

The driver yawned as he held his head in his hands & could you blame him? He knew in his heart that each random step was taken in that circle alone.

POST

After knocking the door post with his fist, satisfied with its firmness, the driver hammered a nail through the top of the notice, 'To Let' daubed in loose letters on Kraft paper, into it. Then he wearily began to load up, or rather tossed the next bulging sack onto his shoulder & spun round to release it onto the growing pile of cargo in the back of the lorry trailer. When the driver paused in his calculation of the time wasted creating this junk, into that space the accumulating memories burst.

'She came sailing right up the stairs,' he sighed to himself, '36C & rising with the most luscious lascivious loving smile . . . Got as far as the door post . . . then . . . turned . . . away.

"Put it back." The driver shouted horribly angry at the slip of his tongue. "I'll wipe that grin off your acquisitive mug. Giant. Put that POST back."

Crash.

"Damnation. What a lop-sided malefactor you are." The giant, who pretended to be as deaf as a post, had deftly removed this section's prime support: A pillar.

"Ah. Now we know where you're coming from." Said Scarface with an ugly smile.

The door creaked. "Was somebody using the door-knob?" Asked the giant "Or was it that breeze I stirred up?"

"Careful! You could make an insidious mistake."

"I heard about that. It was awful." Said Pearl. "Did they ever get it out?"

"Loose?" Said Margarita disdainfully questioning. "What were they up to?"

“Did she renounce something at that moment? This mysterious visitor you say you didn’t have.” Rosine picked up the trail.

“I didn’t ask.” The driver replied. “I never had reason to ask.”

“Was she turned by an apprehension that she might not be made welcome, not loved, not even let in?” Pearl would have hugged her.

“I didn’t ask that either, but putting her in front of that door is already fateful for the love.” The driver confirmed their fears. “You’ve asked for it.”

“She didn’t know about the knock-on effects?” Astarte was surprised.

“Ah. A door was shut inside her.” The giant deduced. “A common-place disorder that used to be cured by an anagram.”

“An enigma – not bad – I’ll go along with that.” Said Astarte.

“Useful.” Said Rosine thoughtfully. “But problematic if you don’t have the key.”

“She didn’t knock.” The giant offered. “Got cold feet.”

The driver smiled wistfully. “All women have cold feet in bed.

“They wouldn’t have, in your bed, don’t worry.” Astarte started on her newest campaign to seduce the driver with a delectable smile around the quip. And she kicked off her shoes.

“O.” Wondered the giant. “All?”

“He wouldn’t have your feet under the bed even, don’t worry.” Rosine tartly rejoined.

And although the giant thought this retort was aimed at him its trajectory seemed to bounce the barb off his head & get Astarte straight between the eyes.

How do you know all this?

She told me.

You were taken in by her.

“No. You’re not listening.” Insisted the giant. “Nobody took anybody in. Did they?” He tried a half grin. “She just stared at the door for a while. That’s all.”

“Deficient?”

“I agree.”

“It was a lingering look.” The giant stopped to add the other half of the grin. “Perhaps she had forgotten something?”

“That he belonged to someone else. Would that count.” Rosine asked dryly.

“That makes three.” Astarte gasped jealously. “Still easy enough to handle.” She added with a pout.

“With one hand.” The giant bragged.

“That sounded awful, giant, do you know that?” Pearl said heavily involved in guilt.

“It sounded sweet, if a little mean.” Said Margarita.

“She was the other side of the door as well, naked, something had come unstuck.”

Scarface scratched his head. “Is that why I was told he made it a fairy story?”

“That’s far-fetched. Something had got gummed up, I believe.” Said the giant. “But there have to be rules.”

“Are you trying to tell us something else?” Rosine wondered sucking her pencil.

“She never got through the door, Rosine, they’ve admitted that fact.” Pearl never could face up to the bare facts.

“That fact.” Scarface saw a loophole as big as M69 in Andromeda.

“Are you sure he didn’t rush out & snatch her up like romantic booty & drag her inside etc.” Astarte had decided she would do the rest. And she wasn’t going to share her fantasy about it.

“She wanted to be there until she got to the door. That’s obvious. It was then she had second thoughts.” Rosine deliberately delivered her decision.

“O.” Said Astarte examining the new concept.

“They sound awful.” Pearl vowed never to use them.

“They have to be well-timed or you can be caught with you pants down.” Margarita noted from her experience with her time on the crease.

“They are very good for relieving a rash.” Said the fox intervening effortlessly. “Or an incurable itch. Try one.”

“Ha. You can’t foist that cheap imitation on me.” Chortled the giant. “It couldn’t possibly be one . . . they come with a two.”

2. Wrote Scarface.

I’m trying to make it easy. You’ll understand why later, if the giant doesn’t take everything apart.

“You can anticipate the first one, thereby releasing the 2nd for immediate use.” The fox explained. “That’s why it’s unmissable, that’s self-evident, so even you could get relief.”

“Ease the pain in his neck. We all know how he could do that for us, side-by-side with himself, by jumping off the end without a parachute.”

‘Margarita spoke for all – one.’ Isabella thought

“Buggering off is what you normally advise.” Said the giant. “And I’m taking the end, Kamikaze fashion, with me.”

“He’ll never do that, he’s wedded to the spot.” Pearl liked the image & scattered confetti over it. Then blushed.

“Is that allowed?” The giant knew he didn’t have a certificate yet, although the kind man had said he was working as fast as he could, given the unique circumstances, to get him off . . .”

“One.” Added the driver kindly. “Is enough for you to handle.”

“He wanted to be indefinite . . . makes it easier to slip off if things (the ones initially given) don’t turn out right. It’s another good example of the use of a 2nd thought.” The fox nearly cried wolf on Astarte who was juggling with ‘slip’ ‘things’ & ‘off’ in colour in full view of the driver.

“It’s like a membership card of an exclusive club.” The giant said. “By the way the kind man described it.”

“There are regular paper storms of them when they are torn up & tossed hurriedly into a changing wind.” Was Rosine tart comment.

“What would have happened if she had knocked? If she had been more (Astarte drove the point forward with her chests) obstinate? A bit pushy.”

“Not really.” Pearl blinked.

“And really got in the way. Remember who was through the door, already naked except for a filigree pouch that made her look completely nude.” Astarte drew the word picture by mimicry.

“Mouth wide open etc. Very elegant, Astarte, that’s enough. I know; no need to fill it in. Look. This door is becoming unusable for normal use.” Said the driver hurriedly.

“Well you know who damaged it – tell him where to get off.”

“Our backs . . . soon.” Muffled chorus. “Time to knock off.”

“Bye-the-way. Those 2nd thoughts never coincide with the 1st ones. That’s why they are so useful.” The fox reminded them in case they were hanging back being precious about the 1st one, which they might not want to lose.

“So, you’re saying, it’s incontestable that with the 1st thought she knocked, was let in, & then having a non-coincidental 2nd thought turned & ran. I see now why the door has become redundant (apart from its ability to attract the attentions of the giant).” Rosine figured.

“Oh. It is still useful. She was hardly through it before she threw off her dress. And that was no accident but incomprehensible in the circumstances.” They all pursed their lips at this piece of info from the driver.

“Good. That clarifies it. So now we’ve got the door closed again things (these were not given initially but are a later sort used in the future) can get underway. She remained standing but naked, with the door as a necessary boundary.” Rosine figured along.

“More or less. It had taken a battering from the giant & the sign hanging on the door knob had fallen off.” The driver added a detail & watched their faces.

“Beaten from pillar to post.” The giant said gleefully poking Scarface.

“It was only a red arrow . . . I don’t think if she had looked in the direction indicated it would have changed her mind. It wasn’t that useful a sign. She was on the threshold . . .”

Margarita clutched his arm oh so tightly. “And that gormless oaf broke **their** door!”

“Yes. I admit it. But we didn’t know that yet.” Pleaded the giant.

“But but but you don’t comprehend.” Rosine said grudgingly.

“And he never takes heed.” Said the fox grinding its jaws wanting to hit him.

“The arrow might have brought her to her senses, you don’t know, made her treat the (door) step with circumspection.” The driver suggested, but thought otherwise.

“We will never know.” Said Scarface. “What is coming.”

“That’s not exactly true.” Countered the driver. “Although neither of us got what we didn’t expect.”

“No second chances.” Ruled the giant who was the board games expert. “You have to live with what you toss.”

“Not all at once, surely.” Astarte knew a rule or two & generally knew when to bring it into play.

“Only in the surrounding world. I got through the door thanks to your Mr. Giant & his kleptomania.” Said X.

WHO?

You set him up!

“Conspicuously. It was for his own sake. I couldn’t leave him be. He was miserable. He needed working over. To free up what was already there earlier waiting for a move (touch).” She jerked a hand expressively disclosing her own need hidden in the deed. Who need what here? And whom?

PILE.

The driver had been concerned for a long time with certain unnamed troublesome elements deliberately letting things PILE up in their wake & then in their haste to shift the blame of neglect groundlessly allowing the gist of it to leak back to someone in the wrong form omitting vital parts of the picture thus leaving him caught on the wrong foot unable to get out of it & this was aggravating. He was still thinking about it.

“Not all nicely tarted up, perhaps.” Said Astarte the lingerie expert. “For conspicuous consumption.”

The driver said nothing.

“Something you don’t want or think you’ll never need at the actual moment of being offered it . . . a hand say . . . becomes precious when viewed from the wrong end of the passage of time.” Said the giant who was sitting alongside the driver watching to see who was next. “Now I’d always lend a hand if someone offered.”

“To bite it?” The fox snapped.

The driver purposely paid no attention to the bickering. Could he lay the ghost by putting it into words? He wondered.

“Would it take the innuendo?” Asked the giant. “Nobody likes a talking to. Not even a nobody.”

The driver gave him a warning look. But was met by the blank expression that the giant passed off as understanding.

“Getting your deceit out in the open? Making it known to everyone? That would have been destructive & a cover up. The fact wouldn’t have been believed especially if an elaborate explanation of why & every last bit of detail of what, had been used to trivialize the scenario. Only someone completely dumb would have been capable of gabbling out that kind of a story hoping everyone would swallow it.” Rosine stopped suddenly. A lot of eyes were flashing & alighting with suspicious looks on various other suspicious looking faces. Ears pricked. “Knock it off.” The fox growled at the giant. And all bar one thought it was a huge joke.

The giant, meanwhile, was trying to scratch up two words (hold your horses) synonyms (right) from which by giving each an obscure & different meaning (his very own) he could cobble together another new religion. Baffled the giant decided to apply long division & split one word into two.

Thereafter.

The driver could hear the column on the march.

The giant couldn’t imagine it.

Rosine called them names.

Astarte would have liked to call one of them over.

Pearl thought they looked uncouth.

Isabella said they = rough + ready.

Astarte said that’s what I mean.

The giant said don’t hold your breath, Astarte.

Rosine said they were mean & murderous.

The driver shivered as he could hear the column on the march.

The giant couldn't imagine it.

Rosine called out to Astarte & the rest to give them the once over.

Astarte said she shivered to think what they had to do.

Margarita said their uniforms were drab.

Isabella noted the dull colour = their look.

Astarte said something pretty would brighten them up & threw a flower.

A voice said it would make them grin like wolves to watch 'the inhabitants of a burning house 'save' the most unimportant things nearby'.

"That rasping breath didn't sound like a part of the raillery. Did she bring it in? The giant pointed.

The driver was shocked to see his sweetheart again standing there grinning like a skeleton. He threw down his sack & shielded his eyes.

"She's here on a mission." Said the giant. "To back track down & capture – Memory – the notorious tomb-robber & despoiler who has looted her belongings."

"And taken a lot of fat with it." Said Astarte as she enviously took in her figure.

"That grin." Whispered the giant obviously overawed. "Was enough to make my toes curl."

"Pleasure = curled toes." Said Isabella. "Fright = hair standing on end. Make your mind (sic) up."

"I wouldn't be seen dead out with hair like that in a million years." Gaspd Astarte aghast.

“It would be like fucking a bottle.” Said Rosine nearer to the point.

“You lost sight of something important.” She said as if they were alone, unheeding of the idle talk around the driver. “I never went away. I never left where I’m coming from now. I’m there every day. Do you think I don’t know how you feel? I only ever was here. (She grinned). I just needed discovering again.”

“And I needed to see you once again.” Said the driver. “Although I see you every day you are never anywhere near as present as this.”

“Ambiguity is useful sometimes.” Said Rosine shortly. “But here we know she hasn’t come & isn’t coming. So why pretend?”

“Beforehand, Rosine (yes I’m still harping on about it) you would have been expecting her the same as the driver. What’s changed your mind about this attempt at fairytale romance?” Astarte wanted to be in on the kill. “Is one wave of the wand enough to banish all of his urges?”

“One!” Margarita could scarcely believe her ears. Had she allowed herself to be soiled . . . sorry . . . to be co-opted just for that?

“They say it helps more if the wand is given a good shaking.” Said the giant trustfully.

“Yes. Spellbound.” Astarte knew the look.

“Recapitulation is useful, sometimes, as well.” Said Rosine. “But if he runs through that ‘undying love’ scene too often all the sparkle will rub off.”

“He should gloss over the badly mauled parts.” Said the giant “That would keep it fresh.”

“I was never nearer to you than in those days, that’s what I felt.” The young woman carried on as if she didn’t hear the clamour surrounding the driver. “The feeling of

estrangement you coldly expressed when death came stalking stifled what actions could have helped us had it been said positively & encouraged their completion in a reconciliation. That cruel & untrue description including only how you felt, excluded me as completely as an act of violence would.”

The driver put a hand to his head & hoped he was losing the thread as different faces began to emerge, to coalesce & as they froze in focus their mouths snapped sharp complaints & blame, which rattled through his brain like marbles in a bagatelle. His eyes flitted from form to form. Then he gave up & turned to the job in hand.

Now the driver concentrated on maneuvering the crane. It swung a load over the florist’s booth & a pollarded willow beside the canal. A cheer went up from the onlookers. Clare smiled from a prone position. Her turn for a go next, perhaps. The crane’s diesel engine thumped & hiccuped, cogs whirled as the load was lowered safely onto the back of a red lorry. The clanking noise stopped as the motor died.

“Good riddance.” Said Rosine beside Clare. “We can breathe fresh air at last.”

“We got the message + inference.” Isabella said haughtily standing by the giant.

‘I can’t believe she has come back.’ The driver thought with his feet on the ground again.

‘It leaves me torn between two poles. Despair & sexual desire once more spin & twirl around in my head like a pair of mating butterflies.’

“The actuality was too difficult to live with or describe.” She said. “So you transformed the reality into an empty waste where the horror of this dilemma was predominant. If you want to grasp the total picture of what happened when I left, you have to accept that these two feelings almost completely filled your innermost being. Everything else was

shattered & dispersed. And, you said, the crushing impulse was a huge sexual need that all but crowded out the despair which was carrying away what little hope you had. You were also constantly assailed by another thought of wanting her to get it over with, to give up, to embrace death. What did that do to you?"

The driver whistled & smiled.

With another crate attached to the hook he pressed the starter button after turning the key.

A motor clacked like the tapping of a woodpecker. Best stop here.

* * *

Intense flashes of green light winked off the gilt clasp of her girdle like sparks. As he momentarily awoke out of the dream the driver blinked faced by this apotropaic image.

Astarte stood with her arms raised. She waited. Keeping her face hidden by the thick tumbling tresses of her hair. In their shadow her teeth were bared.

"Bye the way. What happened to your refugees?" The driver murmured drowsily. "Did they survive?"

"Oh. I'd forgotten them." Astarte answered negligently & ran her palm over her thigh to smooth a non-existent wrinkle out of her dress. "I had no call to remember them." She added with deliberate callousness.

"What's that dog of yours smiling at?"

What dog? Scarface wanted to know.

"Nothing. Why?"

Snores. Zzzzzzzzzzzz.

I believed that dog was a pet (suitable for use in T.V. adverts, to pat, to fuss, to stroke etc. Margarita had said).

You were taken in. I'm one of the Dogs of War.

Don't give me that. I've seen you wag your tail.

Wait & see. Here. From a thick wad of papers he selected a scruffy sheet & gave the driver a newspaper clipping with text beside a grimy half-tone plate practically indecipherable. 1, 2,6,is that one? How many are there of you?

A pack.

52?

Down to about 40 or so . . . it's hell scavenging in the Elysian Fields . . . there's a lot of collateral damage from external trash (missiles & bombs) & natural wastage because of the diet (iron rations) with its sprinkling of depleted uranium oxide ash.

Where was he coming from? This grey-haired man with fresh cuts in his dusty skin; a dream's width away.

"Is that a scythe?" The giant ran a squeaking finger the length of the blade. "Bit rusty. Needs honing."

What thin ill wind had blown him in?

He comes with the pack.

How are you going to talk that one into invisibility? He had asked with his finger on the photograph under the smudge of a body of someone bloated beyond recognition. Would it be possible to make good use of him or her or it? He had screwed up his eyes.

As?

Offal?

Good for propaganda.

'Huge blunder slaughter in the skirmishing between extremists takes out the best part of them.' The driver examined the backdrop in the picture, obviously chosen carefully.

Across the front of a slapdash line of palings, tents like white fangs had sprung up in amongst the rubble. And in front of these frail shelters worn-out people lined up. One crying child hung back clinging grimly onto a sack. Nearly clipped off the print the small body seemed to be contorted by the power of an inexorable force.

He noticed my furtive glance to one side.

Time is a sharp knife & only cuts one way – down. [Scarface read.]

Don't look away. Are you drawn by the splash of sunlight? I would begrudge you the feel of that warmth at this moment. Concentrate, as we do, on Annihilation. What a beauty.

Bony – white – almost dead already.

Can I keep the picture, Yes? The driver needed to have a record of what was written all over their faces. It would help him perhaps. Raindrops slashed across the page he was reading & ran down it, how else, like tears. Out of its blotches & splashes mingling with the print thousands more forms configured & passed by bowing behind their flattened newspaper images. Going with the acquiescence of the times, was this human shield heading into oblivion? Column after column, mashed together, harassed, wedged & pounded to dust. Hemmed in by the shrillness of the advertising block with its ambivalence to violence. One eye glued on murder the other offered a gusset.

“You avoid looking into my eyes. Why are yours bloodshot?” Astarte enquired without real interest.

“I was up all night playing cards.” The driver lied.

I suspect it will be necessary to say they overstated the horrors of their flight.

Declaring their plight must have been exaggerated to gain some ulterior advantage? They looked pretty bad to me. Lacerated skin, protruding bone, hardly a dog’s dinner could have been taken off them.

But you can’t just give pity away, hand it out free. Those with the power are not interested in the condition of the dispossessed, except that they are alive & available for use . . . as pawns. That’s a plus. Atrocities are necessary in the long run for bringing in support. So if they don’t happen of their own accord soon, someone has to make sure a rape or two does get committed & reported. It’s easier to harass women.

“The women are conditioned & tranquillized on the template of the power broker’s violence.” Isabella + pure & simple.

Refuse to say anything. And that call!

Malevolence.

STULL.

“For the last time. Don’t push or pull on that STULL.”

Crunch.

Now where are we trapped? What can I do? This part of the picture is crumpled out of all recognition. O. Now look what’s happened. Enraged she had flung the empty cockleshells down. They had broken apart. Separated in her hands. The hinge had gone. It must have dried out & become brittle in the tense atmosphere & snapped.

“I’ve lost my bearings.” The giant bellowed & started to pat the earth with his large hands. Everything ground to a halt. Those following all piled up behind him as he groped for a lead. In a heap they clamoured for room. And the yelling, for all its seeming camaraderie, expressed the covert animosity of the members of that group for one another. Even the light was bad.

“Horsing around on purpose.”

“That's my guess.”

“Ignore it.”

"It makes you want to slink away." Her drooping lips pulsated. The knife fell. "There. It's marred by the brawling as well. If this is depicting a rescue it isn't very thrilling. They lost most of the victims. They were too late. And nobody whispers in this season. It's all shouting while they're reaping. I can't take it. That loud creaking noise is completely anachronistic here, all the doors are jammed & buckled; it's devoid of sense. What is making it?"

“Who, you mean.”

“I can’t handle it.”

“Take a look.” The giant pulled aside a naff pink tattered curtain revealing a dimly lit room, in fact, the light was flashing intermittently on two figures. Sparks, discharging in a stream out of a socket rained down to give the girl a halo, a golden electric coronet, as she balanced on the knees of a figure leaning back on cushions apparently unconcerned who watched as the badly hung curtain flapped open. Nor did they turn a hair.

“Look. I’m getting out as soon as they don’t need an English Rose.” Rosine confided.

“Quiet.” Whispered the giant. “It’s the climax.” The girl had rolled her eyes up & the pupils had disappeared. There was white froth on the girl’s lips. She wiped her mouth & said, “I’ll fight it.” She was unrecognisable in that faint glow which barely lit her face. Her flesh looked for the world like melting polystyrene, slightly translucent, with small black flecks of carbon.

“Those beautiful lips of yours have given a smack too many & taken up their devouring shape for good.” The man said to her quietly. “Give up. These diagrams may help you to develop a different slant on it. Another way to come at it . . . perhaps.”

She examined the sheet (a print out) for a few seconds then screwed it up.

“Who gave you this?” She twirled off her perch apparently angry, prancing towards the mirror pulling her dress down. Its bodice tight, the hem circled the floor. She made a very tight ball of the paper, patted it over her head negligently with a knuckle, belieing the tautness in her voice, then slowly spun round to face him with her tongue out. “You’ll

never persuade me, never.” Yet her words were accompanied by an air of indifference, perhaps contempt, which infused her beauty with a new radiance.

Unexpectedly he rolled forward playfully, head over heels; although she giggled she shuffled back a step like a wary child, but he had caught the loose hem of the flimsy gauze peten-lair. A blink of flame momentarily twinkled by his finger & in a flash her dress took fire.

What's being forced open here? Is it the beginning of her trouble when the cockle is prised open? And are there two very similar stories? One from the opaque body & one from the opaque world, which never match up although they should. Or are there three versions counting the gap which is opened up?

But it broke. Remember.

And was that the flame of love, disguised in ornament; or did he brutally set her on fire?

What she later called her visions while in a self-induced trance were really what terrible images came up on the screen after she pressed the button. To cope with the shock of seeing this stark depiction of her rape she had to deceive herself, to pay off some bribe or compensation to get herself a way out, by concocting a series of stories to cover each episode. She came to believe these fabrications implicitly very quickly (it wasn't instantaneous) & soon wrapped them around with embellishments that hadn't been hinted at in the action on the screen. The pictures had been relayed quite simply via a video link & she was meant to see them. Deliberately edited, because of their crude digital quality, to make them explicit enough for her to be able to piece together the individual culpability of each person in the group. To assign complicity to Margarita.

To assign duplicity to Astarte.

To assign what to Medea?

"Multiplicity of forms? Vulnerability?"

"Pity?"

"No. They've got enough of that."

They were intended to destroy her; drive her mad.

As Rosine said, she often tried to rationalise the attack by thinking she could have had a flashback because of fatigue, having extinguished the light to quietly dream, & it was difficult for her to accept she had been deluded by a waterfall of older phantasies that inundated with lurid oscillating hallucinations what really happened. She was simultaneously believing & disbelieving. But the sheet told a different starker story.

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You will sing about sexual desire. And like it. Got it.

But she hesitated, balked,

"I have never been penetrated except by those (she pointed & I thought I saw snowflakes)

& they

have frozen

frozen

frozen

me.

My fraught look had followed her fingers back to her body.

There."

I shuddered as they jabbed inside her fold of flesh. It was smooth, immobile, a swollen off-white peach as her fingers spread the lips & deftly eased out a ruby clitoris in their tips. "Mine." Unnerved, my gaze broke off & settled on a puddle flecked by pink blossom petals, but uneasy it shifted again, to the mess of transparent flower stalks strewn in the splash of shattered glass. And then I became transfixed as she danced across the room to me slowly as if in chains. Innumerable wind driven autumn leaves, swirling like golden rain, gave this setting, the best she'd ever devised for me to meet her in, a supernatural air as if all the seasons were confused & changed at the twist of her body. The blue decay I humped about fell off my shoulders like a sack of logs. She placed both hands flat on the table then turned slowly as if offering a choice; her profile shrank into the glass vase. This gave to her, delicate shoulders, breasts like duck beaks, a nose a soundless jab, & such a warm, wide mouth undulating like two bloody succulent ribs over the pale crescent crystal, before the identifiable shapes contracted into splinters of colour; shards organised into a different story. The one to where the word 'beauty' had fled.

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So they were left.

Dragging 'ugly' by the hand as it was shitting, pissing, & vomiting blood drenching itself.

And them trying to keep clean. Keep up an appearance of rightness to their friend as she re-entered the room. Impassive from her trance. Or torture.

Did they yawn?

Did they rub?

As the horrible pictures flickered before their gaze & took them step by step through one debacle after the other she came back. In body.

Eyes slit with tears trapped in their lashes, hounded by a disembodied voice, she slumped towards the bed as if opened up, wounded. And plopped into it like an autumn apple.

Parts of her already permanently bruised & rotten, oozing clear liquid from deeper livid scars.

Did they drum?

Did they bite a gob full?

Did they strain red-handed?

This is the shaking off. But there is a catch. While cobwebs have to stay & gather dust in corners another curtain darkens this kindling. They search for the slot of tidiness in the muck. Watch. She reached down for her shoes. Throwing a guarded sideways look up into his eyes wondering.

Did he want frenzy?

Did he want cautious hands?

Through a window the background was a grey nebulous façade, a distant picture hoarding slashed by rain held a lolling nipple-less female model commanding this approach to the city.

"What did you want to tell me?" Her fingers slipped under the shoe heel. "Do you think I'm some kind of Lulu always going to keep coming through the door?" She was sullen.

There was still enough blurred light to kindle a weightless tragedy.

"Always down to my skin every time. Hardly a word spoken. Touch . . . touch . . . touch."

"Isn't that enough?" He put, purposively obtuse.

"In another dimension I'd be going out . . .out . . . to find someone who'd talk to me."

"And meet yourself coming back in for more titillation." He provocatively added. "And to take . . . take . . . take."

"For another. Make no mistake. Another chance. No messing about. Someone who could understand that I don't want to be touched. Not yet."

"Ah. You'd depend on it being right, that next chance. You know there isn't going to be a next time. Those left are still stuck in that dark corner in winter where we propped them against a wall licking their dry lips trying to muster up the courage to touch each other. He'll certainly never show up in this story." He stooped meditatively. "Would you stay if you could leave?"

"I'm certainly not going to be shagged like that bitch, again & again, for what? Not just yet anyway. And the vampire will have to wait her turn to suck my jugular."

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What if those two meld & become a strange creature. And it takes up the centre. Just suppose. Imagine. An animal made with a heart of stone. A cryptic angular message cut on its belly. Offering itself to you for sacrifice like a lamb or a pig.

I'd called up the deadline.

I knew you couldn't carry it through.

* * *

"Come on. Answer me."

"I'm still here." She said, wistfully. "But for what? To be chucked to one side, like cagmag, when it's over."

"I'm here." He started to move towards her. To her it appeared menacing.

She started to lisp a defence, "What's your game? Why do you want to provoke a response? To what? I didn't suggest we did anything. You're stuck in the flat bodiless dialogue we had under a tree years ago & again in front of that horrid picture. That's because you were telling lies. You've forgotten. You had no intention of keeping your word. I know another story was drifting through your head as you spoke. We pretended love, confiding there amongst the fluttering leaves, that we almost believed we hadn't blown it. But I always felt it was something else with those other women. You never said, but I felt it." She held her guts. "Here."

"Because it was clandestine. And I could decide not to go back."

"O. You could always just light out."

"Partly. I left something."

"So it could fit a pattern of disappointments?"

"Perhaps, but would I have known?"

What was the lure that had tempted him to try again? She wondered sulkily.

All I could recall was seeing the few remaining willow leaves hanging like threaded sprats until the hail, that drove us in, struck the twigs scattering them precipitously & then she had ducked at that moment in our conversation as if she needed to avoid its wounding fragments. The leaves twirled into the pool.

She received the inconsequential answers in silence, fuming. Opening up. She continued.

"You began with a lie so that destroyed any chance." She waved his objection down.

"You can't lie all the time."

"We didn't meet by chance. You had dogged my movements for days." He parried defensively.

She gasped, "It was the other way round. I couldn't shake you off."

"You didn't want to."

"And you, in your tyrannical way, you threatened to be violent by immediately getting angry if I probed deeper. In your zeal to be treated with respect, in the way your warped vanity demanded, you forgot to treat anyone properly."

"That sounds like you."

"But starting in that way. How could it have ended up differently?"

"Oh. It was all me." His frustration matched hers.

(The persisting randomness of the argument made them both feel it was always inevitably frayed to a lace of inconsequentiality which never made their own point the salient one).

She tossed the icy grenade of hailstones she had squeezed high into the tangled branches of the tree.

The flame or is it the axe of reason should have made me keep my mouth shut.

"You're obsessed with trying to shaft the past with the present; you never conceal that.

You'd stop & scowl & I knew you thought we were repeating something inch for inch you were sure you'd done better before. But I could never match anything up to explain

it. How was I going to handle that? Did you ever ask yourself? It was impossible. You made it impossible."

The snowball shrapnel whizzed about us. We dashed for shelter. Out of it.

"How should we talk between ourselves? Openly? How can we when you feel everything you want to hear is really undisclosed." But was he ready?

"The lies?"

"You could start by forgetting."

"And the malice. What do I do with the wounds that caused? Spit on them?"

"If they were raw & bleeding I'm surprised you didn't try to fuck them better." She retorted maliciously.

"Oh they were juicy soft, like the wounds of the lamb. Warm & hot & gaping open like those lips of yours that so often curled onto mine." He taunted back, pointlessly & needlessly.

But although it was meant to hit & sound spiteful & provocative she bent & by placing both hands between her thighs protectively as he spoke this comforting action slightly softened the harsh edge of the jibe for her. She replied as she tottered forward in this ungainly pose.

"Some words knock the feelings they are trying to describe right out of existence. And 'tempting' is one of them. If at night I find myself repeatedly made to pursue phantoms, you are in the chase somewhere. Hiding up a tree if it's a wood, behind a rock if we're in the sea. And I feel threatened. That you'll dart out & grab me, pull me down."

"But I was not there. And you know that."

Before we got inside a stray memory hit me. The image was of a man swearing an oath of allegiance on a packet of fags (approx. bible size). And with it came the thought that he looked as if he had only been struck into life off a page of a notebook, lifted off a detail on a screen in a portrait photograph of somebody else & yet I knew it had taken place & I caught myself wrangling, again in a kind of weather battered isolation, about the way the light might have shone on his upraised hand even while I could hear her asking what I was dreaming about.

Safe inside she sank back & stared tight-lipped through him. The padded chair protecting & isolating her (promising herself to keep quiet if she could). You were convincing. Face to face. Under the bare tree. Ankle deep in golden leaves. Making love seem possible again. But I had already said I couldn't return to you. I knew that, even though I agreed to come & let you fondle me. Poker faced, mind you, & with my clothes on, I wrestled with the angel of desire in silence. It was the devil of need. She grabbed the heel of her shoe & pulled her calf up to her thigh. She had deliberately revealed a slash of flesh for him.

Now, completely contained amongst the pillows, a cold smile flicked across her lips, as she wondered if he might take the bait.

“If you find I'm taciturn it's because of cold punishing hours spent biting the tip of my strangled tongue listening to a surgical monologue of complaints (about what hadn't been done) as I was methodically dismembered all those years ago.” Her lips were full & they trembled.

They both looked away; she stood up, pulled her skirt straight off without a flicker of appeal & crossed to the window. His gaze flooded past her to the grey sky.

Does she know about us? She slipped out the question as she shrugged her breasts out of her bra. It might have worked once.

Why should she? Why ask unless you want her to know.

No. She guarded the tips of her breasts with her fingers.

What is there to know? It's in your head.

She must suspect. She laid her hands on his chest. Then moved them questioningly to his belly.

What is there? Nothing.

No. Not quite. She straightened her back to thrust her body at him. That would do it.

Not quite?

That's in my head as well I suppose. Her nipples were erect. She pointed them towards his mouth.

It doesn't mean anything.

Doesn't it? She pushed her breast close to his lips. A nipple brushed them open.

No. How can it. If it did we wouldn't have been under that tree. She had slipped this meat of the conversation through the mincer plenty of times. She pulled back as his mouth tightened on the nipple. Her fingers pinched the free nipple. Her lower lip fell. The gap between her teeth & lip was filled with saliva.

She turned from the window. "Do you really want to know the plot?" She asked, stroking her hair up enabling her to knot a scarf. "You make it impossible to tell, as if you're indifferent." She gave him a firm gaze; he should make his mind up. And took his silence as consent.

I'd always thought she was crazy to take up with me, & stick for seven years until I heard who she'd ditched me for.

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STICK.

"Stick?" Astarte puzzled, reaching for a cake. "Where did you get that from?"

Mouth too full. She lightly touched the crease at the edge of her lips.

"From watching a rescue. The stick saved a life."

She slid a finger through her closed lips.

"The lake was full to the brim." Astarte watched his hands give the level, waiting for them to stretch out to her.

"The fall had taken her out of arm's reach from the bank." He poked with an imaginary stick & she took his hand.

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Still with her shoes on. Legs crossed at the ankles. Astarte sat up on the edge of the bed, made-up to look like an adolescent doll, a touch of lipstick, hardly any, on a docile smile, slyly licking the fingers of a sticky hand. Her lank hair, unusually undyed, had patchy wisps of brown in the black froth springing from under a little embroidered hat that she never wore again. Astarte sighed. Then gripping the mattress in a way as if she feared it would engulf her, to prevent being offered up, she whispered, with eyes like a dog tied to a post, that she didn't know why she had come. Astarte couldn't explain it. She had felt a tug to try again to see. And also implied that the tumult of words I pelted her with, trying to persuade her to change, were like hot water flushing out different colours into the wash, shifting them to bleed, merging them to leave just one cold hue. She hunched her

shoulders, taking the weight of an invisible icy hand & shook her head. All the chances had gone.

That way I remembered the snow flying off her hair long ago.

"I can't go back." Astarte blew into her hands as if caught in a tempest & the gust had sucked out all her breath. "It would be like deliberately stepping back into a nightmare. Who would do that?" She sucked her fingertips, unaware.

We keep doing it. We're always going back & are never satisfied by what we find. I'll bet. By what finds us. We try to keep it. To hang on. Too late usually.

Break the stick in two. I read. And wish.

And the same gale blew her clothes off. I'll bet.

We decided to take our time before we made love & so she led the way.

It wasn't difficult, I bet, to get her to throw a few poses for a set of photographs.

We knew you would guess. We talked about it.

Astarte grinned eagerly into the lens, her lips that she'd now pasted with lipstick wide, but only her legs riding the stick & the wonderful sleek black gloss of hair at their joint with a flash of red came out in colour.

With those large dewy eyes tracing such a need each time they met yours, I bet. It was strange you should try & hold back. She was a tart. And you'd got that gaping mouth ready for anything. What was the catch? If only I had been there to take the photographs.

I would have caught you both just as you were.

I'll bet.

Her eyes popping out of their sockets with the exertion of acting as if she was completely without an emotional memory. And you with that strained blank look . . . I remember it so well. Why?

Because I so wanted to catch that dried blood look of her tan. And it was a loss that the rest of the images taken in the heat & flush were bleached of any colours & only the outline of her body printed.

She was like a bag of flour.

That's unkind. You liked her once.

Flush! You should have shifted the focus away from where she was astride the stick. Got your nose out of it & used your head. No. I'm sure that came next.

After, Astarte stretched out on the bed rolling her face into the pillow, arms by her side, both wrists lying loosely in the small of her back.

That was your chance. You could have slipped away while she slept.

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She used to have skin like cream, I told Rosine, like fleecy clouds.

You liar, Rosine retorted, she was always ghostly pale with her upper lip covered in stubble. By the look of it. Although I never got that close. Made her look mad.

She was fragrant . . . at least, I stumbled on. And I meant snowy, you know, thighs.

You ought to know, you always had your head in there, cried Rosine.

Oh. It wasn't an unnatural whiteness all over, I protested. She was firm.

No. I know that she was pasty. Her flesh practically glowed in the dark. That's why the pinch marks showed up as red blotches for a long time where she had been grabbed &

held & used. She gave in at once, tried to connive with them & was beaten black & blue.

She was a patsy.

She learned to powder over the bruises. She was discreet.

She stunk like a dog. You had to wash your hands after you'd touched her. It was your magical touch that brought the best out in her. You grew the lumps. And so were her legs.

What?

Covered in black stubble. Fleecy! Rosine leered. You made her wear stockings, even in bed, to stop her legs scratching when she hung onto you like a crab. Not because they were sexy. And her ankles weren't slim, they were swollen & chapped . . . ugly.

What is the sound of a stick striking the ground?

It is those hip joints cracking as she strains wider. Under you. You couldn't shake her off.

Are you saying I wanted to?

Didn't she catch your look of repugnance, you thought you'd concealed, as you caught the acrid smell? As you itched?

She melted away as certain sticky foods do in your mouth if you wait.

So now she was sweet! She was a bitch. I can't forget her look behind your back. And it wasn't full of wonder at your technique.

I could hold my own.

You had your appointed slot & that was it, jeered Rosine.

She was spiteful?

Yes. She gloated.

I can't imagine her like that.

Yes. Spite. It's disfiguring. As disfiguring as self-mutilation. And it shows in the look.

She had that look?

Cuts you off.

Yes. They need to be cut off if they're spiteful. You can see it. Sneering scars them. They can't forget.

Listen to this.

As a precaution, just in case she didn't feel like it, if she had to drop them, & supposing it might hurt because she'd had enough, Astarte had stuffed the gusset of her g-string with a large handful of the feathery leaves of a pretty blue flower growing under the apple trees. Her hand tingled as if it had inadvertently brushed a nettle. She didn't intend letting him have it but sometimes it was difficult to hold back, so if her cunt was soothed before by the cool leaves it would be better after (if she did come round to it) & so that herb would help the soreness as she did miss it, naturally. Any succulent leaves would have done & that one she had chosen was much better than the cow parsley, not so coarse or pungent, & it somehow did seem to numb the ache & take the raw edge off the hinge. Astarte rubbed the bulge of the pouch making it a comfy fit into the lips between her thighs. A slight ripple had travelled up her belly into her chest when the delicate leaves had been forced into her vulva. She had caught a heartbeat & felt her guts fade & with that sensation the anxiety about the date had disappeared. Then she had pulled down the hem of the golden dress. It was a copy of one illustrated in a film magazine, worn by an actress, now dead, for a few seconds. (Film?) The original had been concocted out of paper, with the rich embroidery & jewels printed on with inks, & held together by glue &

velcro. Her copy, with the designs revealed by a magnifying glass off the colour photograph & painstakingly stitched onto the taffeta, had hung loose about her slim ankles. By now, all of her body below her waist had lost most of its feeling but the deadest sensation was concentrated at the base of her spine. Her heart missed a beat, she felt lighter. Astarte was beginning to feel like it, want it & there hadn't been a hand on her. Not the slightest touch.

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Raindrops were bouncing off the ground around their feet as it siled down filling the gutter with rushing water. Hidden Tannoy speakers issued the command while over the square the clock returned a hollow echo.

'The actors will leave the stage'

'The actors will leave the stage'

They filed off. A Thersites still mauling his lines . . . 'thou hast no more brain than I have in mine elbows; an assinego may' . . .

A squall. Scarface held tightly to his Venus as they dashed into a side street & hurried off to a room & a bed, passing under the 'Friend at Hand' inn sign, that had a sailor crouching in the prow of a boat grabbing the wrist of the drowning man in the sea. It swung in the gusts as they passed, now hand in hand, at a gallop as if on the way to the horse doctors. Pink blossom petals were blown wildly around the square, swirling across their path. As they darted for shelter, another shower of fine rain cut the petals down, which were plastered by the chill wind to the bark of the sombre, massive trees still in bud & to the granite block the lovers came to sit on resting their backs against a grey tree bole that

gave them relief, time to catch their breath. From here they observed one of several knots of people crowding the square. In this circle a young woman, discreetly dressed, mainly in black, kneeling on a cushion protected by an awning was surrounded at a distance of several paces by predominantly male onlookers, three deep. A segment of this ragged but tight ring was partially missing, looser to give access for passers-by to enter the arena & approach the kneeling woman who was guarded by a youth of her own age. Firstly, any prospective client had to address this young man who then led them to her side where they bent down & the young woman whispered in their ear. This took several minutes during which the girl paused, waiting as if she gained her knowledge from the gaze of her clear eyes that swept the crowd. No one in the crowd could possibly hear a word nor read her lips. The partner of the man they saw use this service seemed put out by his decision as he abruptly disengaged their hand clasp & stopped to talk to the youth & with a toss of her head showed impatience with his behaviour as he was lead to the girl. Perhaps she feared his question concerned their love. Nevertheless the neat looking man was unperturbed & listened carefully. The transaction finished the lovers linked arms & strolled off. The crowd in the ring barely shuffled. The girl settled back comfortably on her cushion with a bored look on her face as if she were dealing in trinkets. This all took place calmly & slowly in a fine drizzle.

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"The wiring in this place is a nightmare." He gasped over my head as the bedside lamp flashed on & off while the large iron bed thumped up & down under us. I lay there occasionally holding my breath & heaving my pelvis upwards while he tried to obliterate

himself, in the moist oyster between the wings of my thighs, gasping out simple instructions to an unpeopled void.

As we shook, out of the corner of an eye, I could barely see to a wall, although the tiled floor had a silver sheen even in the dark. A clock tick-tocked laboriously dragging the present along in an uphill struggle against the tugs of the past. He gave up, poised above me, sweat running down the crease of his nose & the drops spilling onto my breasts.

Those invocations had failed to keep him airborne. My heart was booming.

"Nearly made it?" I asked encouragingly.

"I can't feel anything. My dick has gone as dead as cock robin."

Still, there is the pounding dunt of the heart. And what a mess it makes. Makes you wonder.

But suddenly the sheltering heart was racing, going wild, wobbling loose behind the ribs touched by a panic attack. Love is irrational. Its anguish comes out of the blue.

Leaves you tired.

Yes. With a surge of passion. Love is irreversible.

Leaves you helpless.

Not both? that's awkward. . . . All I was hoping for was something obscure. Not destructive fickleness.

Admiration but no further.

No. It leaves you feeling generous.

Not indecisive?

Gives you a fluttering pulse.

The lamp really did go out.

Later.

"I had been dreaming of a river . . . a log jam . . . a silly story . . .you woke me . . . "

"Are you sure you're awake?"

"I'm worried . . ."

"You're awake."

" . . . how is your story's heroine? I mean is she still beautiful? Those curves."

"She's dead if that's all you remember. Killed herself chasing it . . .finished up thin as a rake . . . a nail. Like a skeleton in tights."

"Oh dear. On the same tack . . . how's the other one you thought of bringing in?"

"Same high price. Beauty came too dear. She went pop . . . or one of her breast implants, full of Soya bean oil, did."

"So she's out of it?"

"She died twice. Both sides went."

"How dreadful. What are you going to do? You needed two women to get the right play of light; one to cut the other unknowingly while the other cast a long shadow . . . that sort of stuff? No? Arm in arm? One of them so wild leading a man (you) up the . . . No? One with a face like a wolf & the other a sheep?"

"I'll take a rest. But keep trying. It's all a give away."

"Didn't she consider padding?"

"And be like a scarecrow! Wouldn't dream of it. Had to be wobbly & under the skin.

Mock biological."

He watched, his gaze concealed by the glare of the morning sunshine reflected off a spoon, as she pursed her lips & looked down her body.

"It seems your play is about the weather?" She did say it with mocking disbelief. "Not an invitation to ascend?" (The 'for you' was implied). "Is this setting possible?"

"We're always being invited to do that . . . aspire . . . & then shown how we're not good enough . . . can't get over ourselves. (Which means we can't get past the brown paper-bag test). So I thought I'd blame it on the weather."

"It's a laughable adventure? No elegant gestures (She held up two fingers & then rubbed her nose with them). You need a platform, a clutter of furniture. Are there no fine movements?" Margarita became more animated.

He looked away expecting her to demonstrate some.

"Harsh music? I thought so."

"I'll sprinkle a few sequins over a naked charmer even though it's absurd & got nothing to do with anything." He reached for a spray-can of body lustre, "This will do."

"That'll make them faint." Mocking.(You'd have to knock them out).

"That'll make them forget . . ." Imitating her voice" . . . whatever had just made them shiver with curiosity."

"Which was?"

"What had, was knowing the plot off by heart, but anticipating how its inner mechanisms would be exposed . . . if they could be . . . by the detail they didn't know."

"Oh. The attractiveness of the plot. But are they curious? They know she or he betrays one or the other in the end & marries the one left over, the one who had murdered

someone close (although it really happened it could be called unlikely & dismissed). It's just as likely that someone in the audience could have been paid to shout 'set the dogs at the lot of them' or one of the actresses could have refused to continue her part until the none existent mice had been trapped. Did the Moscow stage-hand scratching the back of a skillet with a fork at the prompt 'mice scratching loud' wonder, in the realm of some truth, if something wasn't being contradicted trying to make an audience forget it was in the theatre while he stood there? The spectators knew where they were & they accept so many illusions around themselves, in everyday life, why did he want to rob them of this one?"

A child shouting out, 'that's glass being smashed in a bucket'.

"They never get a close-up. Wrinkled, old flesh is frequently sold as young & plump. In life we're never that distant. When our emotions engage we have to be touching."

"But then what about when we observe any action that we know is directed (prompted) by some affects beyond the knowledge of the actor/person . . . are we to step in & say that's not real you should do . . . such & such . . . if you want to be true to yourself. Are we able to know these things in the way you can kick a stone & know it's there?"

"Ah. Common-sense. Do you hope that will deliver us?"

"You're asking did the audience grin or shiver." Pause. "It doesn't matter."

"Did it make any difference the mechanic was hidden?"

"One of them must have thought that's X wasting his time."

"But X is a girl; nearly a woman."

"Nearly? How did she do that? With a corset? Ankle socks? We bleed & that's that." said Margarita flatly without rancour.

"Ring that bell." He asked politely, not being drawn in, with a slight inclination of his head, like a gander, towards a wired contraption (possible even with a head on a pillow).

Thankful she rolled over to the window away from his cabbage breath. A mouse was scrabbling behind the wainscoting. When dreams don't come back to inhabit your sleep you know the guess is true that the wound left by the hollow blow was irreparable. She felt a pang in her chest as if all the birds of childhood had fluttered on to her ribs. Cold air came through the panes with their view of industrial debris strewn along the bramble-infested riverbank. The current ran swiftly under a gaunt tree. Several large balls of mistletoe hung amongst the dying branches & two cormorants were perched midway between the trunk & dead ends of two thicker limbs, digesting carp.

"Yes. Pull it." He stroked her back as she fumbled for the loop. The chimes reverberated long into the change of threshold to a picturesque spot on the river.

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"Long ago there was a HAIL storm drumming on the roof. It hissed into my mind all the thoughts of annihilation that have taken up so much time since." Margarita rested her elbow on my shoulder. "And that's . . . how it felt. The hail. But this distraction isn't only telling about the impact of the weather in the past, clouding over ugliness, treachery & debauchery; it also rains shit down on idealism, passion & loyalty: working its changes by cold-blooded killings. They still take place." She gripped my arm peppering it with the nails of her free hand. I thought she was imitating a claw. I struggled free. The shifts

threw her body about, distorting it, or perhaps a folded slip of paper was pushed between my fingers distracting my eye. Perhaps that was its purpose. I flicked the note open.

Margarita looked intently through the window beckoning me over. "They are unable to say? I'll bet." She hadn't bothered to turn. The spoon still hung from its blue ribbon around her neck dangling straight down like a builder's plumb giving the angle of her mood. Her heel slid the length of my shin with a rough comforting touch.

"That's where I'd like to go back to. Then." Margarita sighed.

"When?"

"Where it would have been easier to recognise the offending feature or calculate the offending years & strike them off before they meshed. But it's done now."

"Was it that bad?"

"And you wonder why I don't always turn up. For what? Ask yourself. To be damaged again. Would I look for that?" Margarita made it sound like a plea.

"Could we have replaced any of those things even if we had known? Could we have held back?"

"You should have returned." Margarita faced me. "Earlier." And offered the view through the pane with the palm of her hand.

In a swirling white fog Clare observed our street. Through its wisps I could see her waiting discreetly concealed in an entry by the flower-stand.

A man & a woman emerged from the tube station, loaded.

I saw Clare noted it.

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The lights flashed & shorted out. I climbed back into bed. "Earlier? Just for what reason?
So I'd see the grave at last with my own eyes?"

"You're always wondering if it's true, admit it."

I lay staring up at the cracked ceiling. But I am unable to say, also, what is hovering up
there under the mind's eye, pulsating with some meaning I'm sure, a flow, the sense as fat
as butter but scratched in a crude gibberish I can't decipher. I screwed up the paper,
"Might just as well be Linear B."

da-pu-ri-to-jo-po-ti-ni-ja Mistress of the labyrinth.

Not that I am confined beyond the reach of the right words. That they are inaccessible is
at last made finally clear. That they are given twists to tinker with my impulses & make
me dream of shrieking to be awakened, you can tell by the awkward gesture I made most
nights with both arms up in the air perhaps hoping to touch, perhaps trusting that another
pair of hands, a giant pair, would sometime reach down & grasp my fingers. Take my
wrists in an iron grip & yank me up out of the mess. Out of the fragility of being human.
And cherish me if only fleetingly.

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The lovers slowly strolled, hand in hand, on a clear night. The star Alphard was twinkling
over the city. They passed under the 'Friend at hand' inn-sign once again. On it, painted
in garish oranges & drawn with a crude line, a man buried up to his head in snow is
worse for wear while being rescued by a St. Bernard dog.

GAFF.

They were all more or less where they had been & still seemed more likely to blow the GAFF than make a move.

“Get it off the giant there’s a spike on the end & it’s barbed.”

“Let go.”

POP.

“He’s burst the pretty bubble!” Cried Margarita.

“All that iridescent nonsense gone.” Said Pearl. “Don’t tell the driver he likes to revel in it.”

“The sweetheart was tantalizing.” Said the driver apropos nothing, on cue & out of the azure. “Because at the same time as the desire that she engendered in me just by being close came on, there was an indescribable resistance from within this temptation itself pushing me off as if it had been inserted along with the offer.”

“Wallowing in it again. You are really describing a form of contamination as if some holy place was desecrated by a presence or even a look.” Rosine objected & bludgeoned the nonsense quickly before it had time to develop into full-blown galimatias.

“Did she do that? You don’t expect **it** to come cheap, do you? When you’re out to get something it’s naturally tantalizing until you get it & find it’s hardly intact.” Pearl chose her words carefully with as little tact as possible.

“You are wounding yourself unnecessarily with those silly thoughts.” Astarte agreed inserting an easy offer in the look she gave the driver.

“Self-inflicted wound.” Said the giant. “You could get shot in the foot for that any day.”

“What usually holds the fort has been washed out.” Declared the driver tapping his head as he realized he had done substantially nothing. “Had anything changed?”

“You’ll never piece the two parts of that feeling together. Desire always comes on two levels like that.” Rosine knew. “No matter how you would like it or how you want it.”

“One on top of the other.” Said the giant. “So that’s it? Sardines?”

“No. Plates. Think piles of dinner-plates, giant.” Said Pearl. “It’s cleaner.”

What really happens is that because you don’t want what you know you want but can’t bring yourself to say it or don’t know what it is you want except it’s not the one we’ve just passed over so say yes to anything in case that’s it. [Said Scarface protected by brackets.]

“And the more you want it? I know what you’re going to say.” Astarte interrupted. “Well when I get what I want I like it & gobble it up.”

“Are we near the end?” Asked the giant. “I’d say yes to anything.”

“More than a foot away.” Rosine stared at Astarte hard as she cut the giant short.

“It wasn’t like that at all.” Said the driver. “I had what I wanted & loved her & so wanted more. But. There was no denying the other feeling. I didn’t know if she had had what she wanted & wanted more. And I never did know.”

“Oh. I’ve missed my stop.” Said the giant in dismay. “It looks as though we’ve gone past the end by the sound of it.”

“When my sweetheart had just had what she wanted that wasn’t it. That was happening all the time. It was enough up until then but she had to know there was more to come.

Where it was to come from. And she didn't seem know that although I made it clear." The driver protested.

"Only to yourself."

"I kept her wishes in mind."

"Ha. Ha." Said Rosine. "How are we to discover what they were except by knowing you got what you wanted." She smiled grimly. "And you say you didn't want it. Truly?"

"He knew he wanted it even when he turned his back on her." Astarte said vehemently.

"Got a crick in his neck." Said the giant. "Couldn't take his eyes off her."

"How else do you find out?" The driver asked quietly.

"When they were together it showed, you couldn't rob them of that." Rosine admitted.

"They could never conceal it."

"I can't forget that either. But it was a deliberate act of subterfuge on his or her part that blew it." Margarita was sure.

The giant with a black look said. "One minute out in the open the next back in the dark. Is this a cuckoo clock?"

"No. Darling." Said Margarita. "She was winding you up."

Everyone sighed, they had known all along he would get the wrong end of the stick.

The giant brightened up. "Thanks." He took the thin end & hearsay has it that he pulled.

Apocalyptic explosion.

Crack.

"Not an original experience." The driver opined enveloped by dusty motes. "And I bet the motto is a plagiarized proverb. Nevermind. Let's see what is at hand. Let's see if

anything has been switched.” He squeezed a cherub in the top corner of a shelf to puff the dust off all the stuff.

“There’s a hopeful note out of the blue.” Said the giant nearly correct picking up the motto slip as it wafted across his foot. “Perhaps last has become first & nearest.” He looked around for the reverberations.

Not a chance, the only thing he can remember is the zip down the front of her clinging woollen dress which started at her neck & stopped below her navel.

“He’d be hard put now to tell us the colour of her eyes. That zipper divided her into two before opening her up. Was that it?” Rosine did have ‘dress sense’ but rarely showed it.

“Perish the thought (ending what is only alive).” Isabella + thought + after thought.

“Double-breasted.” Said the giant. “With a slash in the revers to show the bottom all half cut.”

“Yes. I’ve seen them as well, after a fashion, in that state.” Astarte said, half pleased to have a worst dressed nightmare confirmed while the other half wondered how the giant had guessed.

“Who else were you looking for, if, as you say, you’d found her?” The sweetheart asked. Her voice carried clearly to the driver over the general hubbub. “I believed at the time it was me.”

“So did I.” The driver had been certain then.

“It didn’t appear flawed.” The sweetheart said lightly. “By any irreparable blah blah or harmful blah blah blah . . .”

‘Were they of this earth.’ The driver wondered as he remembered the zip slipping down smoothly. The voice faded. The sweetheart had embraced him. In the twinkling of an eye (the colour of which he could swear was blue) they were flying through the dark wood away from the path on the sandy bank. In the clearing they heard the woodpecker tapping. They felt the North wind on their cheeks. Better stop there.

“One thread is unmistakable in all this. You made a mistake every time you kissed.”

Rosine summed up bluntly.

“Took too, too long thinking about what next & got cold feet.” Isabella + icy tone.

“I felt I had to make time for her, try not to be a hindrance & clear a space for her headlong dash.” The driver searched for an excuse. “We leave most things unfinished, that’s how I feel, but at that final moment I had my eyes peeled. I saw nothing new.”

The giant, puzzled at his best, groaned. “All this flitting about in the dark.”

“Right up your ! + street.” Isabella + grin. “End of the road.”

“What more do you want to know, giant? What would you do with it?” The driver asked kindly. “Where would you put it in all that emptiness?”

“Pick a random spot.” Said the giant “I’ll go along with it.”

The driver remembered the rush he felt when they came across a beautiful glade where his sweetheart had danced on the massive fallen tree trunk.

“Not yet.” She had requested; it was as cool & polite as that. She made the act of coupling seem imminent while refusing to do it as if a thunderstorm was about to break & they might have to take shelter. It was a fleeting moment. She wasn’t evading closeness.

She was biding her time. Listen. Best stop.

The driver heard the motorcycle.

The giant thought the circus had arrived.

The girls pulled on their bomber jackets & tossed their hair back.

Margarita declared she wouldn't ride pillion.

Astarte would gladly.

Rosine waited for the telegram. She was convinced it meant trouble. It certainly did.

"You pull it, please." Sweetheart said pleasantly as she peeled her body out of the tight dress in which her arms were entangled. "They were going in the wrong direction." She laughed & leading the way embraced him.

"Nothing indefinite about her mood." Rosine said.

"Didn't leave room between them for an eyelash to flutter." Astarte noticed & it sounded a little bit peevish like a complaint.

"Was she still holding him close to the earlier agreement?" Margarita asked anticipating some absurd promise on his part in order for her to part with a pair of knickers temporarily.

"Possible impossibility." Said the giant. "What an exciting factor to be faced with."

"Teasing?" Said Astarte. "I never took her for one of those floozies." She looked up as though contemplating the arrival of an alien.

"There are standards to be upheld tightly." Said the giant. "Even when urgency for action is around gnawing at vital parts."

"But no rules." Isabella + sliding scale.

The giant looked crestfallen, he had been mugging them up for ages, walking the white line of sobriety unsteadily but persistently while stoically repeating.

“That doesn’t make sense, giant, try again with your mouth full.” Pearl was heartless & relentless in chasing him into perfection.

“Not a glim of a chance.” Said Rosine brusquely. “You’ll need to start from rock bottom (she glanced meaningfully at Margarita’s, to Astarte’s relief) & if you got him down there you’d never get him out.”

As this sweetheart held him. No. As they clung to each other the driver could just detect a faint creaking sound. She grinned up at him. But the driver thought he saw an empty wheel.

Spinning.

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

PART TWO. 'The wasted day'

ONE.

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 in a strange & heavy currency. 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. I took off.

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The Dogstar, a dive, 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 fateful rendezvous in a different time.

"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.

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Ten Years Ago.

Astarte had called me to arrange a date 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 in the steps of a bridge high above the city).

Then she went back UP.

And I descended into the narrow winding streets. The blue-print of her desires 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. Rosine came to mind.

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.[THAT I NEED TO TRAP MY
LOVE ETC.]

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."

* * *

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 lightning 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.

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Scarface & Astarte compared notes later because it was possible, but not at the very latest because that would have been impossible. Given the skew of the story.

"Is the crow to be taken, like thunder & lightning, 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." Astarte exclaimed crossly. But Scarface held his peace.

Remember he was remembering. He knew that:

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.

And more.

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.

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TWO.

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 from an alley I emerged out of 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 in the sign's pale light next to another girl in a tight black bomber jacket smoking & jeering at the few passers-by below them. They posed behind the balcony rail 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 about to fall apart." 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 in 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." Scarface 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."

* * *

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

* * *

THREE.

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.

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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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FOUR.

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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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."

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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. Pleading 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 'pleading' 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?"

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"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. Someone 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 written in 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 sleight 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 carhorses, 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.

* * *

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 paralyzed 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 the assumption that she could evaluate other people's feelings of emotions exactly, 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 reduced her kindness to a stump, rising out of the ashes & balancing on which 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. I 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."

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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 buggering 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, lightning 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-Masachism 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.

"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.

* * *

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 especially with you lot here & everywhere actually it's all flat & tasteless & sad this summer & because I've been bossed around enough too fucking much I'm off & everything I do is inspected & analysed even my ideas need galvanising you say let alone

my mug & arse & every fucking thing else so it's goodbye to you shitheads waving the red flag under my nose.'

"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.

DarlingthisisDarlingLilethenamouredofasnakewhodo youthinkyouarefatherRedcapfather
madcapfatherredcupfathermadcapfathermadcapDarlingthisisDarlingLilethenamouredofas
nakewhodotou thinkyouare.I love you

"Bit of white showing there."

whodo youthinkyouaresantaclausdarlingthisislilethenamouredofasnakeformanyyearsandIh
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 demure 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?"

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"The one you're ogling at."

Take cover.

PART THREE. 'Weather.'

RAIN.

1st shower is sharp & sweet.

'It's not easy to be deluded by any wishes when trapped in the vortex of a WHIRLPOOL so we can start again there; or rather take that way out.' The driver had said calling the tune.

"A path of senseless confusion. Good way for you to go." Said Rosine. "Almost as good as the window of opportunity in an illusion. I'll take the door if you don't mind. It's sexy." She drifted off over the mire, taking her bearings lightly on the neat duck boards with only a rapid glance back, heading towards the crystalline image dazzlingly caught on the tiny window panes which made up the north light of the tall studio.

"So, Rosine left him?" The giant sadly wiped away a tear.

"Don't jump the gun, giant." Margarita was already too close for the driver's comfort.

"Well that sight was something." Said the driver. "Even though she's now gone."

Surrounded by fragments & unfinished pieces of sculpture approximately wired together, his hand was poised on the wing of an angel waiting to be delivered into boredom. His eyes rested a long time on the face of a caryatid that stood aloof beside the unworked blocks of stone then he polished its front with a free hand, thoughtfully.

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Clare blushed. Holding her fists in front of her chest she cried, “Look at these dirty finger marks on my sweater. Why didn’t somebody tell me?” There were dark smudges on the white wool showing where her breasts could have been fondled.

I know we were pulled into the whirlpool by trying to ascribe a reality to our hopes; or rather initially I alone was sucked in. And the driver also had admitted being swept into its cone of influence. But as the whirlpool seemed to be the best place to get beginninglessness, we co-opted it. And I agreed with Astarte, shapes could be important, nothing was irrelevant, the whirlpool was a better space than the back of a lorry they were always falling off. We knew there were types who thought the dependability of the machine made up for a lot of discomfort but that was predictable from Sadomasochists knocking on the door of Nechrophilia, not that we were anywhere near them or it by that time. The whirlpool shape also appeared to offer the best escape route out of a vendetta the 20th century had with its occupants.

Needless to say the desolation of the weather over the early mind’s landscape had to be counteracted by a few positive shapes taken from nature.

“Lupin.” The giant had learned this off-by-heart. “No? Why not?”

But luckily the giant had no say in it.

“Then you can have one cloud burst to stand for the inundation of her normal common-sense by irrepressible emotion or a jag of lightning for any ostentatious show of inspiration.” Rosine offered. “That’s your lot.”

“I hope this isn’t going to be a Greek cost-cutting concatenation of metaphor, we can leave that pursuit to the fox.” Snapped Astarte. “And his paint pots. This whirligig shape

in front of us has just the right feel to me. It's one way of getting nowhere fast. Let's get in it & get on with it."

"And can I have a thunderclap when it's time to get lost." Said the giant. "In case I lose my prompt?"

"There is a catch."

"What's that?"

"I was enjoying the senseless compulsion. Running with the mob etc."

?

"In with all the meaningless horror!"

"Well isn't it time to thaw out those feelings of murderous greed? Sideline them. Put them in a love story." Astarte said hopefully. "With me."

Or me. Or me.

I still hesitate. The words slip. Our eyes follow them. We slip. Scrambling up we try another word. That one trips us up again. It will take an act of courage to get to a possibility: Upright.

"Is this a description, albeit inadequate, of the sexual act?" Asked the giant puzzled by the verticality.

I am not saying the giant was a beast or half man.

"He was worse than a cross between them & we had to bear it." Said Margarita. "And it was an uphill struggle."

"That's one way into the scheme of things." Rosine agreed. "But there was a lot going on before that."

The words pile up over the other meaning I want, so much, to tell. They smother it. One line knocks out another line, the better one. The one which I was sure would satisfy a craving.

“It’s looking more & more like it.” Said the giant. “Getting overt.”

The words slip out false. (From where?) Her mind follows them closely. She cuts one out. The thought collapses. Words pile up behind it. There are two good ones. We knew. (Not those, **the two** are being kept secret). She grasps them. He blocks another. She does not like that. It rankled.

“Might have scored?” Enquired the giant beginning to chafe at the abstraction.

One word obliterates another. Leaving her bereft. She repeats it. But the first feeling has gone. She waits for it to be spoken again.

“I know. I know. I know.” Shouted the giant. “It never was.”

Our eyes meet. Why are we left with him? We glance at the page from the inventory fluttering over the muddy yard.

I expect it tidied up.

I like it neatened up.

I want it knotted up.

Clare murmured. “You must be more discrete. They can hear every word. Unless you promise . . . I won’t come & see you.” She hung back just more than an arm’s length but showed no sign of rushing away.

I falter. I lie & dream. Lines come easy. They make the 2D figure alive. It interests me.

What? That I want to fill it out. I am able to fill it out. I anticipate the next move.

“But then you want everything to be like plastic. Perfect.” Said the sweetheart.

2nd shower is short & sharp.

While groping around each other in the gloom but not total darkness of a flickering projection the two lovers slowly froze under their blanket. A match spluttered.

Illuminating their lips. One pair closed with a slight gap between each luscious red petal; the other pair already tinged with blue just starting to open to speak.

"I'm going to lie here, Rosine. Tell you everything. Lull you with capricious favours into accepting my version." It was raw. He puffed hot breath into the cup of his chapped hands. "Of what happened."

"Really. What sort of favours are those? Scarface." She demanded, her cheeks aching on the hard ground, "Cheap tricks, lies & insults? The usual grist of human intercourse. I've swallowed enough of that. I'd get a better line of service at the greengrocer. They weigh the goods. And try not to bruise the fruit too much."

He grimaced, but stalwartly took up & squared the sheaf of papers. "Still harping on about being betrayed."

"Cheated." Rosine insisted, "It doesn't sound so grand." She gave him a cold smile. He straightened, made uncomfortable by the submerged hatred surfacing on those full lips.

And scattered the written evidence to the wind.

Don't you wonder about how difficult it is to handle my side of it some times?

How can I wonder when I know the picture inside out? Where's the surprise?

As the papers blew about they fell flapping into the mud. First of all an intelligent woman fell out from between the sheets. A lanky bewte. Small waist. Big tits. Blond hair, typical

for p.3, lustrous skin smooth as glass & shim . . . "That would be Pearl I knew she would be here already, waiting for us. It must be Heaven." Said a gruff voice always roughly interrupting uninvited.

Hello giant. Come in. I thought we'd bump into you sweating near the top of page 3.

Medea (who's face you remember, luckily) started up half awake. "Where have you been?" But weak from sleep she faltered. Having seen him, in flight, in the dream.

Remembering being able to hold him again. Plunging into the incomprehensible blue yearning with him. The rain still pelted down on the exiles. She nestled voluptuously into her fleece.

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Again a pencil rapidly scratched a note over the white void . . . the woman holding it parted her lips over clenched teeth through which issued a strange snarling hiss . . .

Awake, Rosine's eyes eagerly searched for his welcoming glance, saw his gaze sinking, lagging behind her erotic wishes & the force of horror she felt at a possible rejection was as final as being thrown into a ditch like a dead dog.

"There! That sets the picture perfectly." Medea claimed. Peering at the typescript she had rescued.

Astonished, Rosine's eyes followed this new line, "Give that here. You didn't say anything about including other members of the Animal Kingdom beside yourself." She pushed towards her & cried, "Get out of the way. I'm not having that rubbish written about me," She was repulsed but stood glowering at them.

"Hold off. You'll get your go with the blue pencil, later" Scarface intervened gently.

"Stuff that. I've never looked that way in my life & I'm not starting now." She reached to snatch the papers away & tear them up.

"You can't do that. Remember they were scattered into the mud. At that moment when Medea re-appeared & set herself in the pillows between the squabble." Scarface insisted. Rosine nodded her reluctant agreement.

"Did you ever get any luck with the opposite sex while you were away?" She asked her, relieved Rosine had given up the tussle. "If there is one."

"It doesn't look like it. Or would I be back? And now you're back it won't be long before everybody else will shove in here, you'll see." Rosine grumbled. In the silence she reached for a massive book the size & weight of a granite kerbstone lying by the makeshift bed like a step up. She placed it on Medea's knees.

"One moment before you crowd luck out with innumerable references to prove your point. I think I did have a stroke of it that time I looked in our three-panelled mirror on the dressing table & saw I was beautiful when the side glass swung into focus & I glimpsed my face beside a photo pasted on it. I became beautiful at that moment, because I was able to say to myself. Medea. You look as lovely as a figure-head."

"Admiring yourself. And you didn't know you'd been fooled?" Rosine clearly mistrusted her. "But I can understand how – carved out of wood – exaggerated body organs useful as fenders."

But Medea only half listening, blanked Rosine, fixed her eyes elsewhere & muttered to shut her up, "And I suppose you were hoping she'd be as easy in this story as in the last & Scarface would be able to get his dick up her right at the start before she could shake the

umbrella open?" She paused for her to squirm. Rosine remained stony-faced. "And they'd be a permanent item."

"How did you hear about that?" The giant wanted to know. "I'd say she was tugging hard at his arm in a bare-faced attempt to have him all to herself."

"Didn't take much twisting." Rosine guessed right.

"Still got his hat on." Medea smirked conspiratorially at Rosine who snubbed her back.

"Never let go of the broolly, either."

The driver growled, "He took his chance. They had to do something to keep alive in that glacial hole. What better?"

Still ignoring them Medea carried on speaking jerkily, in a puzzled way as if giving herself a difficult answer to the question, "You insist on that's how you're going to begin it. No tricks?" She felt cut out. "No mention of what we were up to? It counted for a lot, to me."

He nodded yes. Said, "No." And meant something truthfully indeterminate but not in between.

"It was this side of the truth. I was there." Pearl said. "And it was difficult to keep quiet about it. I hoped you would say they scurried into hiding & described the place or took refuge and then say how they met the others. You had time. But you try to make it sound so easy as if the beginning is simply about the dirty weather."

"They were trapped. Cornered." He continued to stare at her grimly. "Nowhere to go but up." He brandished a clenched fist. "If we have to keep it sequential."

"Most body functions are better done in the right order." The giant persisted.

"He's covering up." Rosine, now wide-awake to the implication of the hints, broke in, in a harder voice, "Because he is insisting on taking it from when we were caught sheltering under the rock in that hollow trap for larks. That gives him a way out. I knew there were other places we should have searched other people involved."

"Too busy wondering." Said the giant "About nothing."

"Caught at it. More like." Medea said with a touch of wistfulness.

She ignored the jibe (truthful) but clenched her fists, "Even if what you think is true (& I'm saying nothing) you are trying to fill out the picture falsely so it will make me angry (& I suspect you are doing it for that reason) because I'll know it stinks & is still full of holes. What's to stop you making yourself look good?"

"What about you," The giant innocently wondered. "Won't the rain wash off your make-up? If you didn't have time to open the umbrella."

"It's not illustrated then?" Medea smiled widely at him.

"Not from the back." The giant thought.

Now bolt upright Rosine added, "It is. But it's not only that, we were participants, not observers, we drew the line; you can leave my actions to be described by me." She touched her breast. "You keep your nose out of it. That's what I want."

"We got that. Up to your neck in it but playing the innocent." Said Medea as sweet as nectar but quarrelsome.

"Cock up again. No forethought. Straight in. Sounds like him." Commented Astarte, having appeared beside our bed like a deranged sprite that couldn't be kept away or quiet.

"Couldn't you start on someone else?" Scarface complained, "If you knew some of the facts it would help."

"Funny I always miss out on those." Astarte misheard so started to get into bed.

"You've tried that come on so many times. What's funny about it?" Rosine pushed her back.

“Share & share alike, Rosine . . . please.”

"No. We're only given that one chance. And you missed yours."

“Could we say it eluded me & . . . start again?”

“No. We couldn’t.”

“Why?”

“Because the beginning was fucked . . . remember! And now it’s gone.”

“Where?” Asked the giant. “To bed?”

[illegible] ZZZ

3rd shower turns to persistent rain.

We are going to take it from just after that first moment. No further back? It was a long night's work even when we had planned every move for days, Rosine's thoughts rambled as she propped herself up on an elbow to open the book, her face slanting watching an evolving figure reflected upside down in a glass jug filled with water. "What good will it do to speak about her again?" She pointed at a tiny detail in the picture, you could just make out a young girl sitting beneath the shade of a broom thicket at a picnic, & a piece of net stuck over the crude printing made do for a diaphanous frock. There were strong straight black lines indicating sunshine bouncing everywhere. It must have been a scorcher.

In the illustration:

Beatrice had been caught holding two dogs back from attacking an intruder; with a knee in a red stocking keeping their heads & snapping jaws apart. Over her face she wore a plastic Halloween mask of a bear smiling with a long red smear of human lips; black & white dots & flecks did for the rest of its maw as she collected the yellow broom flowers into a beer bottle to dry & smoke later. Strawberry blond hair, shredded into hanks by the gusts, flared around the benign cartoon hiding her scowl as beneath the skimpy frock her underwear glinted & shot their bright colours into an eye when she prowled around on all fours in the tall grass stalks waiting for them to get it over with. She was stubborn & unruffled. They wouldn't kill her she was sure. That was enough.

"That's half-baked; they were as poisonous as snakes."

"Their eyes were everywhere. You never caught Beatrice alone." Pearl corrected. She stood close by the bed also ready, but only on a proper signal, to pull the sheet aside & climb in. And she pointed, one by one, to the others hidden in the landscape. "Remember that one?" (It did look more like a lamb to me than anyone described in the plan). Beyond the sandy track, dark green a forest edge creating a shadowy landscape grew up to the bank of parched grass. In these shadows it was possible to imagine a legion of grinning beasts.

The landscape illustrated was divided into the four seasons, mainly by depicting its weather. Each section had a principal figure surrounded by vignettes edged by cloud shapes, in which creatures scurried about pell-mell in a torrent of abortive action. This one we are studying was caught in a freak storm . . .

Scarface lay there like an amazed puddle waking up to a deluge of raindrops that had destroyed its comfort & was rapidly destroying its form.

"I heard you say you got a new feeling as you looked in from the other side of that forest for the first time?" Margarita accidentally elbowed the table as she leaned nearer to embrace him, tuck herself into his space in the book & as the glass tumbler bounced on the stone floor its released liquid fumed in the warmth as it would on a summer's day. "You leave something essential behind even when you're born . . . that's it . . . the first loss. And sometimes, like at that moment in the forest, you feel a feather-light touch & know once again you nearly regained it"

"Have you ever had . . . tried . . . would you like to . . ." My hand came up to pat the offer away. "Not here & now . . . it's not the place. To open."

"When I did. It was the first time I felt worth anything. Although it was torture in the beginning to let . . . anyone in that close." Margarita could hardly bear to say it, because she had gone against a bitter voice which constantly provoked her to stall at all actions with a future; to stand on the watch with a rock in her hand waiting to respond to any slight until she dropped . . . was tempted to drop her guard.

I want you to rehearse it. You turn from the mirror & say emphatically . . . I came through. She had listened in consternation. To observe herself as intently as that . . . to be generous with herself. Could she do it? Rejoice in herself . . . treat herself properly . . . after all the deliberate negligence. The stone in her heart melted.

This simple sentence is necessary to express a relationship with every part of her, even the most insignificant. She had heard the confession through the screen. (Or was it through the scream?)

"She said it every day. 'I came through.' That cryptic sentence is it? It did what? You're not going to say what?" Rosine asked. "Isn't it imperative that you explain the process? It might help us. Did it happen despite herself?"

"I don't understand why myself. It will show, I hope."

"But shouldn't someone be made to tell us more about who did what? How he . . . it was a man I suppose . . . went about it? From the very first moment." Rosine looked around for help from the others. They shrugged their indifference.

"If they know for sure . . . perhaps."

"That one would." Medea pointed at Margarita, "If I, & I vowed I would not tell, she might split on us." Margarita didn't even blink above her smile.

Medea pointed again but this time she touched her own infolding tongue. "Take no notice. This is too sharp for the gentle words needed to explain." Then she closed her lips into a permanent smile.

Then she must have seen how much I wanted to join my lips with it.

Badly.

I ought to have tried a kiss but the mouth was too far away.

* * *

So Scarface, reckoning that he was desolated by the repeated sequences showing Rosine's hardening will against their intimate contact organised his reflections, got them under control, not without ripples of tortuous effort, before it was too late, or so he thought & yet still blurted out his wish by mistake. Why? Because her refusals inextricably bent him back to show each disappointment with the shape & silence of a shaking head. And every time into that gap jumped Medea with an elusive booming corncrake voice. This time she blurted out, "While you lie here feeling lost . . . at least I'll chose that uncertainty to be certain about while I wait for an invitation to get into bed with you . . . & I can easily change again if I wish."

Here was the chance for that full kiss. To melt into those full lips.

Gone.

"Arbitrarily?" Rosine wondered & adroitly flicked on a few pages to check.

"I can decide to lose myself in a velvety sack or an immense plain over-arched by stars."

"Both empty." Rosine cut in, "And at the moment, useless. Like you."

"Do the things I choose to dream about have to be obviously useful? Be better than the other contortions? Like the ones I've seen you make. I'd block out that contempt." Medea riposted. "You don't know how things might turn out."

"O.K." Said Rosine closing the book, but leaving in a marker. "Tip what possibilities you've got for us out of the bag." Rosine made the gesture. "But you're not getting into bed. Let's start here."

(The words assemble for the act: to wait in line: to dance along the line: to jump off the page).

Medea shook her hair & they were sure they saw the chaotic choices of aspect tumbled out, spread to the clear horizon again, hopping up & down making themselves obvious, hoping to be chosen. Which one is the favourite? Which one to allure? Which one to leave? As they fly like snow into our eyes as we go against a blizzard, we can't see to pick. We fill our lungs with their bitter iron & pitch. And they pinch our heart.

Rosine added carefully, "Then or now what?"

"Which version can you bear?" Asked Margarita still by the bed, paying attention, despite my glares. She licked her lips making them ready. "Take it."

"And candour?" Rosine asked, tight-lipped, she'd seen Margarita's glances with raised eyebrows. She turned to him. "So who had you lost the girl to? Did you see?"

"I'm not saying yet."

"You are bluffing. You haven't clapped eyes on him." Margarita jeered. Medea, with a hiss, emphasised her tight lips. "He was there."

"You should have tied the sack's mouth with a string." Scarface pointed over his shoulder with a thumb, "You let that cat out." Indicating Margarita, who didn't notice.

Medea shook her head.

"But I know." Margarita said gleefully. Medea again shook her head silently.

"And up yours." Said Rosine.

This tireless & evocative gong of reason obliterates whatever else tries to rejoice between my legs.

"Didn't you mean ears?" The giant asked. Hovering about a foot away from the foot of the page. Watching every move like a hawk.

"Shit. I've started before making a list." Rosine reached for a notepad & pencil. "It's absolutely necessary to have one. Without it I don't know who is where or what they're up to."

If this list was an afterthought how much more vital information had she forgotten to record & hand over?

The first is a list of unfulfilled dreams recorded by exotic sub-titles. And the second, one of all the losses, neatly tabulated with the scores.

"This is the list of complete objects (not many) & fragments & other animals he's offered to put up with in the world if you let him help frame it."

"Are these embodiments he's letting us in for gifts?"

"Yes because in a way he never lets go. This is the best we can hope for," Medea surmised. "And it gives us a chance to slip away."

"Where is he when he lets you take on being a sack? For instance."

bewitchingly. "Oh. I missed something. It was years ago. They've probably both dropped a couple of feet by now & the powers that be were concerned about accuracy."

"I'm sure they both were." The giant was quick to reassure her, hoping she hadn't thought he thought they only had one. Not wanting to be caught flat-footed. "Unless it said something different in the small print about the position of a mole."

"Come on you two, turn a page."

"You agreed to participate while we waited & watched."

"I thought it was the other way about," Rosine protested.

"So did I until somebody told me the right way," Said the giant, "But I'm still not entirely convinced."

"Try it." Suggested Margarita, "But on yourself first."

"And you've been dreaming all the time, Rosine. Trying to restore to questionable use some treasured thought unwittingly washed away by forgetfulness. Something only visible for you now in dreams & dolled up in their black light." I argued (& yes, I've got to say it, convincingly).

"Charming." The giant moved slightly out of character for an instant. "What was it?"

"That isn't what I'm reading here," Rosine tapped the book.

"Stop reading & listen. I'm going to describe how all that nonsense came about, later. And anyway, who insisted you lay there shuddering through that night like an ice-cold stone.

No one. Whining & snapping like a mutilated dog. No one."

"It was as essential as grit at the centre of the pearl." Rosine was out of bed in a shot, entirely naked, to emphasise her point. "To produce this." She posed. "Got it." She challenged.

"With no beat. No flow. Encountering nobody?"

"The near. The low." She encompassed us all with her smirk of triumph.

"Are the fears you get so odious you have to structure the landscape as protection? Is their cosmos so dangerous you need to take on a stone shape able to withstand all the elemental forces? I'm only curious. Yet isn't there another part of you as naked as a maggot? Why be lulled by that internal silence to lie there, sorry . . . to stand . . . a peach with a heavy voluptuousness . . . but at the centre a stone."

"Do I have to put up with that delusion? You say you like the goods but want to ask silly questions about what distorts them." Rosine's eyes flashed.

"I wondered why you picked a pebble when its boundaries are such a hopeless constraint & the choice seemed to make us all have to act as unremittingly angry?" Medea agreed with me & that was highly suspect. "Is he right?"

"Or was he getting carried away?" Enquired the giant hoping for some part-time work.

"Skip it then." Rosine said almost to herself. Putting on a convincing vacant stare for inspiration. "I'll get dressed."

"Why pretend to choose so early." Medea, not always sensible, slipped in quickly, I was beginning to warm towards her. "I think I know your type . . . lying in wait . . . waiting to be picked up."

"Stones do that a lot." Agreed the giant.

"Why don't you accept my choice of a sickle-shaped flake of adamantine (you creep) & get on with your own variations. Most lives are crushed & swept away. But some are tenacious. A stone is not so easy to obliterate. And that's not the only reason I chose it. For when it's pulverised . . . O wait & see . . ." She was wounded.

"Come on tell us." Margarita urged.

"The place I'm coming from is so controlled that it feels impossible to express anything good about it. As if I'm forced to speak across my own open grave, having just been accidentally dug out of it & then made to sound as though I hadn't been forcefully persuaded to approve of my position . . . That choice, called the feminine one, leaves me furious."

"About being woken up. I'm the same." Said the giant breezily but obviously still asleep. Rosine carried on undeterred " . . . what happens when the dust is ground together with wax & spit is that it makes a pigment, a glowing earth colour & that is daubed onto flesh & granite, defiantly, showing what's what. Words aren't the only doors."

"I think you get another chance. Take it." Said Pearl.

Rosine shrugged, "What chance? Where?" Caution flooded in along with uneasy hope.

"Is it possible to change sex & forget I was a woman?"

Nobody spoke. They looked away. "Can't say."

"Excellent. If it's as nebulous as that I'll keep my player as a triangular piece of flint with a dazzling white patch bleached on it by the touch of a rotting body."

(But look closer. On one side of the pebble a serpentine spiral had been incised; on the other the form of a woman. Traces of pigment, flesh blood colour aged to black remained

in the engraved lines. So whoever she was, all that was left could have been swept into a shingle bank. To become anonymous. The confession would be the patter of a bloodless revelation. If we ever found it.)

* * *

Rosine snuggled close. Her ribs & shoulders cold. She whispered she wanted me.

And I had to follow that request by a whistle of disbelief & a smile as I cut the moorings, passed the grinding demarcation of reality & drifted into the green enchantment of make-believe again.

"The flood can be the mother's blood." Rosine suggested. "In this world of tireless winds & dust . . . only what good did it do?"

"Bound them together. Gave them control. And that daub you are looking at so intently came out of it."

"It was the breakthrough."

[illegible]

ZZZ

SLUSH.

The dog fox looked wise sitting on the passenger seat with plenty of room. Surrounded by all the paraphernalia of relaxation it cocked an ear cunningly listening with suspicion to the aimless chatter of the seven characters stuck in a cramped space behind the cab as the lorry sprayed SLUSH over the pedestrians, some with carefully painted hairless eyebrows, as it careered on. The fox had a history as long as the language & had heard it all before so it monitored the amplitude of their babble only, not the content, ready to exit through the cab window at a preordained pitch that it knew equalled trouble. A hunt. But the fox couldn't figure out what had attracted the driver each time he whistled approval into the wind. It saw him smile. Could it be because men were descended from Komodo dragons, or was it the Python, that the driver liked to see yards of bare skin bobbing about? Became more excited if it shone in their eyes as they passed by. And given lustrous highlights glistening on its curves, of any coloured pattern, the driver became uncontrollable & whistled, mawkishly blowing kisses. Were they kisses, those strange signs made when these skins began to peel off? Whenever that happened then the situation became explosive & the fox's nose was blocked with the fury of the messages it received. The fox often wondered if it was the sight of raw flesh what charmed the driver in this shedding & consequently kept a sharp eye on him as he scratched his bare chest. You could see his joints, where the angles of his body melted into his clothes. You could see an angel's hand had touched the heart. What did that smile signify? The one brief

creasing after each whistle. Was that a thought? Was its own grin the same thing? Was it a thought? It wasn't a smile.

The fox grinned. Gave another sly look at the driver. But in attempting to modify the wide grin to a smile by narrowing its lips & covering, to some extent, its fangs, the fox lost concentration & still no thought sprang out. The crafty eye on the driver blinked. It could see the wrinkles in his skin where the happy thoughts had ploughed furrows. The fox's tongue rolled out over its maw. Not a blemish could it find to show for all that effort, the short fur of its muzzle was perfect, the nose snotty fresh. The fox's ears cocked automatically.

It could hear the urine sizzling into the can. It could smell her desire in the piss as she slashed. Why didn't the driver whistle?

The driver leaned back comfortably, mumbling the words of a hit song. (Like the poet I didn't know it).

"Why does that dog fox get a whole seat to itself?" Astarte's voice grated the question into the driver's ear as her wet hinge dripped piss down her thighs as she squeezed in her ample buttocks closing the pussy, to regain a place leaning over the driver's shoulder.

Then, as the limbs were chafing making her sore, inciting her anger, she rasped. "Would you do the same for a vixen?"

"Not likely." Answered the driver amicably, "A vixen, when on heat & like you when she's getting it, makes too much noise usually in the middle of a very quiet night."

"Only once a year at Christmas?" The giant was intrigued, knowing something of Astarte's reputation.

“That’s the ‘silent’ version: giant.” Pearl admonished him gently.

The fox lowered its head. It could smell the spite in the breath coming over its back. The fur around its neck rose.

"This fellow is the one with the brains in this perttaunt-like purgatory." Answered the driver, who seeing its hackles up fondled the fox's ears as he added. "What’s up? Astarte.”

“The game.” A voice suggested.

“Or is it an attempt at resuscitation?" Wondered the giant remembering the terrible state of the pop-up picture, “With glue.”

“Restoration. You mean.” Said Pearl, wrinkling her pretty nose. “It’s beginning to smell like Friday in here. Fishy.”

"My rump is flat & aching," Astarte whined. "I'm not used to being cramped in this kind of space. I'm worn-out, sore, squashed in, wet through, kept down . . . put upon."

"And fucked up?" Enquired a voice.

"Put that fox, your partner, down on the floorboards, please, & give me a go in the comfy seat." Astarte pleaded. “I’m getting a lot of stick, as well.” But before the driver had to choose the giant said, “I’ll take hold of that for you.” And he grabbed it. Then there was a screeching of brakes & clatter & a hollow bump. Followed by the shout of “You fool.”

Crash.

The scene was now in a fix.

Someone had spragged the wheel with a stick.

The driver whistled again. The fox knew instinctively it was the same one but now used in response to a car crashing into a bus & flattening itself against a tree. What drew out

the whistle from him this time? Was it that composite mixture they always called the smell of burning rubber, so close to the singeing stink of flesh? As they all knew the driver stunk, overpoweringly musty most of the time, & from that the fox concluded he must like being surrounded by obnoxious odours & perhaps could have been entranced by this sweeter one. The fox observed the smile; saw it use the same worn pathways, the same weaknesses, but still as before, the smile's structure contained a thought that the fox badly wanted.

‘Flat as a pancake,’ thought the driver, ‘One could easily fold that away between a page.’

The fox sat up smartly as if to show off a row of stolen medals expressing its efficient love/hate friendship with man & to get a fresh slant on the scene that had caused the whistle. Any bare flesh? The fox craned its neck. Flesh. The core, in its variants, of many appreciative noises. None. Blood? Try it, although that had never produced a whistle.

None to lap up. Feathers? The fox was being self-indulgent here, it knew, but that wasn't an unknown phenomenon with the driver either. And now the fox felt it had to take an initiative, so barked, ' De-do-vshchina.' A good howl that trailed to a snarl.

"Bullying me?" Asked the driver affectionately, "To stop & look? Quieten down. There are enough souls in that crowd milling around the crash to find a sense of common purpose." But he pulled over. Seeing her chance Astarte put her face close to his before he could open the door. Being a hopeless flirt but persistent, her voice always curt even with her attempts to soften it, she was counting on her attractive smile, its glistening curves in the curl of her lips. "So was the fox's first thought that it would risk its life for you to be able to smile like that?" Astarte asked.

The driver drew away gently.

"It knew it had to learn to whistle first."

The fox shifted uneasily on its haunches feeling vulnerable as this conversation began, never having confessed its secret hope. It had smelled her rank desire & knew she was after a place beside the driver, probably seeking a permanent exchange of positions if its nose was right & the fox didn't want to be thrown in the back to share the floor space with a slop-can of warm urine plus twelve feet in ill-assorted & restless boots. Not even temporarily with the dainty fashionable pairs which belonged to all the girls, designed for champagne, because the giant's pair were ominously huge & as he was forced to bend his chin almost to his knees it made him ill-tempered & he kept tapping his toes menacingly.

"All that ankle, no wonder there was a lot of whistling." Astarte persisted, "Giving that fox plenty of chances to copy. Is it a fast learner?"

The giant spoke up, rumblingly, yes & ramblingly, "I'd like to think I'm the one who should have first go in the passenger seat if it came vacant. Look at me." He continued jogging his head up & down in time with his toes. "I'm also cramped. And I've been around as long as the fox."

"And fucked up?" Enquired a voice.

"I would be if I could move my head." Snapped Astarte. & followed that with a reptilian hiss, meaning shut up. "And keep still. I'm beginning to leak."

"Sawdust?"

The fox guessed this was its prompt to growl the troubled proceedings to a halt, so let loose a menacing low 'rhinencephalon' down in its throat although it also knew that a

snarl would mean it took the full brunt of any blame for starting the scrap, whatever it did.

To forestall any arguments that might be brewing the driver swung down from the cab, "On guard," he winked at the fox. "Take ten," he ordered the rest & strolled over to join the onlookers gawping at the crash. "And do something about that pot." He called & held his nose. "Apart from filling it."

They tumbled out.

"In a dream last night," started the giant, "I got a love letter."

All the others caught each other's eyes in an instant.

"but" & he wiped under his nose, "I couldn't make out a word of it."

"How did you know it was a love letter then?"

"There was a big X on it."

"Show it to the driver. He can read."

"It wasn't me." Cried Pearl promptly. She thought she had been known as X sometimes.

"Me neither." Said Astarte coldly eager to dissociate herself from it & Pearl.

"I didn't write it down & I don't know if I'll get one tonight." The giant was unsure. "And I can read."

"Oh. You'll get one, sure thing, they come in threes." Margarita was infectiously certain.

She was charming. "Darling."

"Three." The giant was dubious. "I couldn't handle three." And he declared after a thoughtful wipe under his nose again, "Three."

"Not in one wet dream." Suggested Margarita. "Eh."

"I've got that between my legs," Proposed Astarte helpfully. "Want a go?" She tipped herself towards the giant. "It's a bit chafed."

"Not a chance on the street." Said Pearl wisely.

"Or off."

So there was a kind of rambling solidarity amongst them. Like grateful beasts.

"You could try a rub of this ointment." Offered the fox. "It used to be called an unguent but you wouldn't persuade anybody to grease an axle with anything called that." He twisted the lid off a green jar. "Voila." A gluey, green substance glowed dangerously putrescent. "Not that I'm insinuating or presuming anything." He added obsequiously.

"Where shall I rub it?" Asked Astarte brusquely, taking the container, tentatively sniffing the jelly & wrinkling her nose above the dewy lips she showed & used to her advantage.

"Into the vaginal slime," said the fox seriously. "In situ."

"I'll do that for you." All the friends chorused. Some obstinately didn't.

"What's it made of?" Astarte ignored the clamour of offers but noted the enthusiasm & the dissenters.

"Plants," The fox nonchalantly scooped a blob of his salve with its paw & lifted it to their noses. "That would make you tango."

"Phoo. What plants?"

"Foxglove, Hemlock, Blue Rocket, . . . & others . . . it is mixed to a secret formula so that it gives a specific sensation while curing the itch." The fox declined to be drawn, enjoying the hold over them.

"What sensation?"

"You take off."

"Wow." Said the giant. He'd been trying to say it for ages.

"Strip?" Enquired Astarte, making her eyes wide, before you could pop a button.

"I'll do that," repeated each of the friends. Thankfully with exceptions again.

"No. You believe you are flying. It feels like that." The fox explained.

"Long way round to cure a rash?" Queried Margarita. "But interesting side-effects."

"Long way up."

"All right. I don't mind." Astarte challenged the group.

"It's only an illusion, but it's vivid," The fox cut in before someone had to appear reasonable & blush. "And the best way to apply this cream is to get a straight stick about four feet long . . . "

"Four feet?" Grunted the giant who stared down morosely.

" . . . with this diameter." And he showed the circle of his thumb & forefinger (I know. Well forget any objections or comments about the size). "Scrape off the bark & make it smooth. Then put a good lump of my cream at about the middle, place yourself over it & ride the stick, twirling it round a bit to mix the cream in with the mucosa."

The dog had been distracted. It is obvious why. So asked, "What?"

"You'll see. Otherwise, the usual finger does the trick."

"I get hallucinations that way without the ointment." Margarita bragged (Also with big round eyes).

"But do you get to fly?" Countered the Fox, a little piqued.

"What," Pondered the giant, "Is the active ingredient?"

"It will be revealed in your letter tonight, Darling." Margarita drawled & pinched him.

"So you know?" He wondered. The giant rarely made an intuitive leap (being obsessive).

And not realising either that he had landed the pinch what the Fox had been playing for so hard.

"You should try automatic writing tonight," Pearl advised the giant. "That ought to help you do it. Sorry. Fix it."

"How do I copy it? And remember I'm slow at joined-up."

"Take your time." Advised the Fox grimly, "Along with everything else. Take a pencil & paper to bed (should be fun). You could even tie the pencil to your hand so you don't have to fumble for it as you swim around in your dream. And pin lots of sheets of paper here & there so it doesn't matter which way you face when the dream letter comes."

"But that ointment will cause irregular beating of his heart & produce delirium. He could be off his head." Pearl felt she had to warn them.

"What's new? He'll sleep it off so it's the same difference. Got it?" Margarita glared at the giant & pinched him again, harder.

"He's not having it to try anyway." Astarte said, "I am." She took the jar from the fox & bagged it.

Pearl blew her nose with the corner of her shawl, the piss-pot, still full, nestled between her feet as she furtively consulted an enormous encyclopaedia. The A to Z of Alphabetical Horrors, checking up on their roles.

'You can wash & punch this part in the dolly hundreds of times & mangle it too.'

Repeated a stranger on the page under her finger, 'But its colour won't fade or run. Even

though it gets more washes than his face will have in a lifetime'. "God. These puzzles. When all I want are clear instructions."

* * *

Under the absent-minded gaze of Pearl, along with Margarita, Astarte & the others, each with absolutely no hint of carelessness & brimful of toughmindedness (spunk) or the other way about, the driver listened to the onlookers twittering while crowded together at the car-crash. They took it all in without letting their feelings spill over & the driver surreptitiously collected these utterances in his notebook in case they might come in useful later, if he was ever called on to compose an emotional love-letter or send hate-mail.

Bemused beside the driver the fox stood & heard, several times, the story of how that fancy car had ricocheted off the red bus & hit a dead looking tree which, like an apple-tree in a garden blown up by a bomb in the last war, had instantly blossomed. 'Perhaps now', thought the driver, patting the fox for its help, 'I ought to begin the difficult explanation of who these friends were & why I felt I had to disguise them with animal names instead of calling them old soldiers or dusty travellers.' A large finger tapped his shoulder. The giant had slipped away from the bunch eager to confirm that the driver's help with his letter would be available should it be dictated to him again.

"If I get the same dream tonight," Said the giant slowly (you could suppose reluctant to really divulge his secret by the laboured way he came out with it). "If." He emphasised.

"How will I know it's the same letter as the last one?"

'Can I really divulge his name,' wondered the driver, 'Jack Straw would lock him up.' But said, "What letter?"

"The one in my dream last night, they . . . " and he waved over to the culprits . . . " say it was a love letter."

The driver adroitly turned an automatic grin & a stifled guffaw into a pensive gaze etc. by stuffing a finger into his ear as fast as he could. The fox watched this manoeuvre fascinated. A grin transformed. It must practise harder.

'The giant + A woman.' The driver thought for a moment like Isabella, 'He would need a label + this way up - sewn on her body & he'd still think it meant keep to the right up a staircase.' He took the finger out. It was safe. "Does it matter? One's as good as another, generally." He tested the effect of the last word with a quick glance into the giant's eyes. Not a flicker. Good. But not a clue either. Not so good. "No one in particular?"

"In particular what?" Asked the giant, "Clothes?" He was puzzled how this line of questioning had arisen from what he thought was a simple request for aid.

"In mind." Retorted the driver, he had forgotten what it was about himself & was concentrating on vivid & rapid interjections. "A hint?"

"Shoes." Tried the giant, endeavouring to sort out a suitable fetish from a limited stock.

"O.K."

"They say automatic writing is my best bet if I'm asleep." Declared the giant, "What is it?"

'He'll probably use Ogam,' thought the driver, 'He could cut notches on the bedhead.'

"Usually there is a guide for that kind of writing. Someone from the past. Dead."

Explained the driver. "Over the other side."

The giant grimaced. "Why only one. What if they can't spell?"

"It's not me. They say don't pick an historical person, too many distractions, sexual, so don't get morose again. It's not impossible to sort someone out for you. It's best to have a total stranger, anonymous, an aunt. So you can't have Kle-o-tra-pa."

(She glides past. Small part but significant because she knew so many languages).

"A phantom amanuensis?"

"Yes. It's your best bet," The driver said.

"But." Interrupted the giant.

"No 'buts'. The quicker you get to sleep the better."

"We could enquire amongst this diverse crowd," whispered the giant, "To see if they have any ideas."

"Look at them. There are seven nymphos on the rampage for a start. Their collective idea would be shag if they could put one together. You'd better get yourself off to bed before they do."

"Oh. Yes." Worried the giant. "I've got to keep myself in hand for the sender of the letter."

The driver looked puzzled. The fox waited for the smile. The driver waved the companions to come over. Did he realise what transformation was in store for them, as they sauntered in a bunch to the edge of the square under the architectural trees, after they crossed the patchwork of shadows? No. But he wasn't going to let on, was he?

Now what can we do with this mess?

Clean it up.

How can you tidy up the space in a fairy-tale?

With fireworks.

This isn't a story . . . this is a rescue attempt. Or the accident.

The group sidled up, this distraction distinctly looked like overtime.

"Do we get time & a half for this? Time to open the champagne?"

"And a chaser?" Astarte volunteered, starting to pull off one of her fancy boots.

"Don't be daft. You're normally like this. To get paid at all you have to act (he tripped over that word) correction . . . you have to act abnormally . . . you have to act . . . normally. You must do what you were hired for."

"You mean act properly like normal people. Don't you?" Astarte suggestively slipped a zip down. "If it's an epic it means night work."

I would say that looked more like Margarita to me.

Have you seen her half-undressed? No. So. Shut up then.

"Not having to cram it all in, in one day. Not like a mushroom up in a night."

"That's quite a good time for it but I'm not really fussy." Margarita surveyed the group & thought it was certainly no time to be choosy.

"Overtime. Deadlines, plenty of those." The fox watched the driver glowering at the troupe. "I don't need suggestions." He wanted complete control & wasn't going to start cajoling, "You have to act badly so that the spectators aren't sent into an unthinking trance, staring goggle-eyed at what they are led to believe is true." Astarte was working on a flashy clasp of a gorgon's head that had stuck, "And believing it?"

"Give us a hand." She pleaded. Her girdle wouldn't shift. She raised her arms & waited.

"Leave your clothes on."

"Sounds as though we're edging towards double time here, at least."

"Well. Neither loafing nor flirting is down as work so that's most of you out of pocket."

"So we can draw our pay for bad work?" Pearl wasn't sure. It sounded like kiddum.

"As long as it's synthetic enough. Yes." The driver hesitated while he examined the word (near enough kipper to pass). "Lucky for you, you stopped. Bare arse out of working hours & its trouble."

'Was the crash an empty sacrifice?' The fox wondered (You can understand why the fox gets this bit foisted on it). 'Or an illusion like the Rhinemaidens held up on a plank by poles pretending to swim? What was the river doing that high up? It wasn't. It was an effect. Now concentrate. Was it a riot? A protest or a demonstration where we wound up?'

"A diversion. And we missed the sign."

It isn't that the fox is tiresome. Wondering instead of barking. It couldn't be blamed for occasionally snapping a loose chicken head in the nonsense of all these relationships. And you could sympathise with its disgust having to watch the driver squandering energy on the other creatures various whims. This intermingling of fable, where it had its back paws on the ground; & reality, where it was out of its depth, was a treacherous stretch for a fox unable to smile to run.

"Turn your pockets out." Commanded the driver, "We need a whip round for the poor girl who crashed her car. Aluminium, tin & silver paper won't count for anything. It must be

solid gold. Doesn't matter if it's a common thing like a bar. But nothing bizarre." The fox began to chase its brush.

A list: We do not want that tin mouse with a broken spring & leather ears in the kitty again.

A list:

The fox threaded its way through the legs brushing its tail against some crackers & came to the damaged bus off which the car had bounced (painted with swirls it looked a monster). And the bus changed as the fox loafed in front of it. Standing back the fox now realised the giant was part of this scenario . . . knew the girl driver . . . seemed to think he owned her . . . got very, very possessive . . . kiss. Freeze it there. We've got to get on another tack. He wasn't there just to get seduced. Perhaps we could return by ten the morning?

Night passes by in a blink or by the morning after the giant's sleep it has gone.

Right. Sunrise.

Blazing light.

"Taking ten didn't mean ten years." Blustered the driver, "Get over here & look & learn from life. This chaos has all the makings (hopefully) of an inflated Expressionist drama devoid of any common sense. (Spring Awakening? She enquired). No. Something monumental.

I had wondered what drew the driver to the accident for he was, by habit, indifferent to the spills on the road but here the surrounding denizens commented on his intense but bewildered appraisal of the scene. Crap. I knew different. I saw his smile flickering at the

edge of his lips. "Can that be . . . " He murmured, his gaze distracted from the pile-up by a woman sitting under a plane tree fanning herself calmly with a sprig of leaves in the middle of the confusion keeping an eye on the twisted wreck. "No it couldn't be . . . " Pools of petrol & oil were burning with an unquenchable fire. "Yes it is." He exclaimed with pleasure. The fox had been correct in assuming the driver had stopped to see an old flame.

Glockenspiel music accompanying these dancing flames is heard amongst the din?

"Keep that in." Said Pearl dryly, "And I'm out."

"One more job like this & I'll be ready for the bone yard myself."

"Darling. I thought I recognised that face . . . exactly the same . . . not a wrinkle." They kissed.

Such a crash yet a child was still flying a red pear-shaped balloon, on a long string above the crowd, with a smile, just a smile in black, painted on it. The fox considered the curve; consigned it to memory.

A chance meeting after all the years of separation between Beatrice & the driver the location needed mapping for a detailed memento to be kept (& evidence always came in handy)

Astarte took out her notepad & began to sketch the positions of all the clutter & debris of the crash methodically adding notes & measurements (guessed). It was at this studied moment that the first explosive projectile came in (artillery shell or mortar bomb they still don't know) & blew the tree to smithereens, back to a stage flat standard winter tree. But the bus caught the full blast & opened up like tin of sardines tossing its cargo out like so

many gasping & gaping pilchards. Another shell lobbed in spewing around smouldering earth & incandescent splinters. Plumes of dense black smoke drifted, choking. The fire raced in a stream of crackling red ribbons curling round every object it encountered which exploded in sparks.

“So much for fixing a stable picture for posterity of the view of the tryst.” Rosine’s mouth turned down as she spoke.

“And getting one from it. Set in concrete.” The driver mused. “Anyway we’ll have to stick it out. Hello giant. Come to watch the fun?”

Oi. Leave it.

Crash.

The front of a block of flats was sliced off, collapsing, revealing

A slut

"The fucking bedroom wall has disappeared."

"What the Hell! Get some decent clothes on. Everybody can see you."

"They can fucking look. My figure's not that bad." Clare lifted each breast on a finger.

"You're not a lump of dough but is that the point? Stop preening yourself in front of that mirror you'll attract attention." Scarface was never diplomatic.

"You're envious of every opportunity I get." She pouted. "It could be my big break." They both looked about themselves as if something in the shattered room needed prompt attention.

"That claim to be superior," Scarface spluttered, "Is offensive."

"Good. Now when you said we needed a breath of fresh air in our love life . . . you didn't plant . . . did you?"

"No."

"It shows the wallpaper was no good."

His expression changed. "Why are you waving to that bloke down there?"

"Who?"

He looked at her dubiously. "Don't be daft asking frivolous questions. You know who.

The one with the dog."

"It's not a dog. I know him. He was one of the few people I could trust."

The smell of the cake she was eating drifted over to him.

"He's talking to himself while staring up here . . . it's ridiculous . . . " His pride had been hurt. He knew he didn't count but he didn't like it spelled out.

The crowd that had been milling sheepishly about began to gather. Coalesce into rings of spectators several deep sometimes around single speakers sometimes around groups of performers. One woman, so ugly it was difficult to take in, had a blue plastic file clutched to her chest, almost becoming a body part, as she hung back just behind the man & fox.

Was she whispering? I couldn't tell. She tapped the driver on the arm & at the same instant stood on the fox's brush. She saw him wince as his pet yelped. Her furtive action was exposed & she felt her ungainly body had let her down again. She screwed up her eyes attempting to focus clearly. He put a hand on her shoulder & said, "Take care. It's only got one." & smiled wanly for her, perhaps to soften the rebuke. She slipped back out of reach into her defensive shell but stood her ground. She had come too far, no, badly

wanted, no, she was off the margin, no, . . . needed . . . to clarify? To catalogue? All too gentle . . . another missed shot? Another door closing, no. The careful thought she had assembled beforehand dropped to pieces; she knew she would only be able to splutter out its pastiche, stripped of the central beauty she was sure she had captured in it . . .this . . . what was it . . . her dry tongue ran aground, to a whisper. She pursed her lips, not quite a smile.

So she did whisper?

I'd have described it as a whine.

But she only wanted him to look.

He'd had enough of that, painting picture after picture.

She (the ogress) had a nasty wound on her head.

Yes. I saw that too when she bowed.

I'd have described that as a flinch.

She'd been caught up by the mob & whacked in a batten charge. I suppose?

No. A large plate had rolled off the top of a cupboard & smashed on her head.

Ah. I get it. Fairytale?

No. Fact.

Rubbish. The ape hit her with a bat.

Ah. I get it . . . Fact. No wait a sec. Fairytale?

No. Poetry.

She had a face like a pile of offal.

You could have read poetry in it.

I would have described her as a dog's dinner.

At the matrix you would have described vigorous sex if you'd had the chance. I'll bet.

Certainly not. Couldn't let go to an uncontrollable impulse.

Adaptation. Surely.

Would you have bothered to call that the centrepiece?

"Oh! The crane is moving." They all cried. "What a nice diversion."

The massive hook on its heavy chain & cable swung slowly through the pruned tree branches. A giant of a man had one foot rammed into the curve of the hook & held the cable balancing by thrusting the free leg out. He held a rope lasso stiffly beside his body, a resigned smile directed down at the mob jeering below him. The fox noted the acrobatic stance accompanying the smile & tentatively lifted a front paw. Not a dog in Hell's chance.

What does it lift?

There is a serious point to this.

Is it to hide everything?

No. It's to pack up.

There is the message.

But who is it for? It can't be the giant that's obvious.

You don't expect me to come right out with it?

Perhaps.

My guess is that when they read it, if they chance upon it, the person it is intended for will know.

But (shouldn't you tell that person?) But . . .

No. I'm not dealing here with poetic embroidery.

They are woken up. And swap identical dreams.

"That face had a line or two of nasty prose in it, a revelation, externalising many, if not all, of her deepest feelings."

"It did look as though it had done a few rounds I admit, but whether they were feelings imprinted there or lost hopes I wouldn't like to judge."

"Oh. No. You could clearly see her desperation had caused that mess, without a doubt."

"Nothing trivial? Like greed."

"Nothing sinister either like hatred."

"You think that's why her face resembled an abandoned string of sausages?"

"It didn't. You are putting a hopeful spin on the dream. It was worse than that."

"An acquisitive rat could have collected a prettier pile of detritus & put it to better use."

"She said she'd devised an exercise from occult doctrines that would give the true form to her desires & it wasn't a fault of the spell that her face had become frozen."

"Could have been the desires running amok. Did she say what they were?"

"She was supposed to have learnt them off by heart but must have forgotten her lines, misread the part & so remained a careless fat head. She would have got a better cure & done herself more good hanging upside-down on a hook as some wise men do & looked better to boot."

"That way would she have exposed the flaw in the in-can-ta-tion?" The giant felt insecure & hoped for more detail to prevent him ever reading the wrong thing. He always read out loud, by the syllable.

"More than that." Said Astarte very, very seriously. "You got a good gleg at the whole caboodle. That's a term they use in magic if you were wondering."

"Did that word work? They often don't if they're only spoken. (Pearl could have added 'especially in rhyme.') They can go astray." Margarita asked. No, she prompted.

"Seemed to have worked backwards in her case. From ugly to horrendous." Said Astarte breezily. "It was difficult to judge. I had to keep my distance."

"Yes. But was it any better than the face?" Asked the giant. "All in all?"

"I didn't take to it."

"Did you put the boot in?"

"Boot! There was room for your head let alone a boot."

She was left cold: jumbled up: roughed up.

* * *

Up above, the couple still half-naked were still slogging it out. Sorrows & silences all grist to the mill.

"Don't torment me with descriptions from a gloomy day you thought you barely survived, conjured up to try & pass over your indifference. You're not really unhappy." Clare swivelled away from the mirror her teeth clenched. She began to munch the cake again, relaxing, after the short outburst. She couldn't engage.

"You told me you liked to get a full picture . . . to be honest." Scarface had sensed her disengagement.

"Honest! You wouldn't say anything that touched you inside. What are you smiling at?"

"It's a grin. Defensive. Like a dog caught in an instinctual trap. Too close to run. Too close to snap."

"I'll wipe it off your face." She lost her temper again. "You rat."

"Listen." He sighed, trying to compose the situation, "We'll get nowhere this way."

But Clare didn't want to anyway. She pulled a tress of her luxurious hair from over her eyes. "I'm off." She stopped at the mirror. "This room does feel unfamiliar now. I can't imagine going out of that door onto the same landing & the stairwell. But I can't stay."

"The back of the block has probably been blown-up & collapsed as well. Now you can't open the window to deliver the best scene when you frantically beg forgiveness, it's gone."

"Good job too." She said curtly. "That was a piece of sentimental shit."

"We're exposed to the world so we can't follow our instincts or impulses." Scarface was dejected. "You know how it went."

"Not a lot to do then . . ." Clare replied blithely. "I know where it's not going."

"Got to relax sometimes." He was sounding very disappointed.

". . . but to lay bare " She hadn't heard him, " . . . the fake charm . . . letting it fade unimpeded into oblivion." Clare spluttered, "What shite. Good riddance."

"Wouldn't mind a poke at it before it goes. Just a formal experiment, nothing serious."

"No need for that shabby attempt at a pull. You've had all you're going to get."

"Nothing oblique?" Scarface gestured & it looked interesting enough if you could have deciphered it.

"Not even a quickie." She was coldly emphatic.

"Certainly not. Wouldn't dream of asking although it's essential." Scarface's sarcastic attempt at remoteness was hopeless.

"For you. Not me. We've had our chance to find out if it's essential . . . & it wasn't . . . not like that. No amount of twisted thinking is going to put it straight between us."

"You mean don't mistakenly try to start or try to get a 'finish'? Puzzling that, where do I come in?"

"It would be pointless. Now we are on show we must keep to the theoretical line we agreed on."

"It's obscure & humourless & whose is it? Not mine."

No ambiguity here. Can't even switch the light off to work up a bit of profundity although as it's only a feeble reflection of real life it might be more interesting in the middle. Clare tapped him on the papery skin of his cheek & put her tongue out. He caught the look in her half-closed eyes & seeing they were empty of any invitation or sexual draw, dropped his gaze. It made him seem furtive. She was oppressed by his inability to play at being seduced although aware her clumsy gesture hadn't touched him in the least. She didn't want it to. She screwed up her eyes almost closing their lids to distance herself from the action. He put a hand on her shoulder & shook it very gently as if asking to be excused his fault. She slipped back out of his reach & fully opened her eyes to bring this mock intimacy to an end.

"I understand. I'll slip away now." Clare pursed her lips, not quite a kiss; not quite a smile.

He looked at her with clouded eyes, "It's nothing."

"I know," She said harshly, "Do you think I'm impervious to your insinuations?" She had opened the door. The passage was still intact. She felt routed. Yet it had almost seemed like banter.

At the end of the corridor she hoped to come to a flight of stairs. A door, normally shut was hanging off one hinge & the wire reinforced glass panels shattered. The stair was totally wrecked. An icy draught reminded her how few & flimsy the clothes she had snatched on were. Little tongues of flame darted in the debris under the sagging floor. But her thoughts were off on a meander, looping back via her cold flesh to the moment when she considered he had rejected her offer although she admitted, on one of the loops, that it had been ambiguous. He had then reached out to her. She shook her head. The smoke was making her eyes smart. Tears welled up & ran down each cheek. A casual observer could have mistaken these smears left behind & the sombre expression as the signs of despair. But as the tears were rolling down her face she was already concentrating on crystallising a line of attack to be ready as she re-entered the destroyed room.

He was surprised, caught grimacing bitterly.

I would have described that as a smile.

Seriously?

A ghastly smile.

Is it to cover up his pain?

The smile of the underdog.

He was lost in his memories.

But who was it for, that smile?

Unable to relate, his spirit wounded.

The smile was a scar?

You don't expect me to know, do you?

He hid everything?

Perhaps.

(I was amazed how cheerful he became the moment she left the room. What pleasure had he found?)

There was always some impossible stricture that had to be observed in that first moment :
no noise : invisibility : no names : magical signs instead of a good read.

And another thing. What had the serpent done to Eve that day?

It's obvious.

Woke her up?

Exactly. With a puff of sweet breath like apple blossom, to passion.

How did she extricate herself out of that one?

In a detached roundabout way.

Kicked out?

Scarcely had time to take her clothes off.

Put them on. Surely.

I told you she had to be devious part of the attraction. Off. For effect as she went out the door into the light. I know what I saw.

So the whole thing was a childish derivation pasted onto the remains of an earlier attempt at the same thing.

Right. Unvetted creation myths always have a female striptease stitched in. They are prone to it. Doing it must have been the only chance of getting her own way? Playfully thrusting herself forward, starting to make good but some busybody tuts & she's shown the garden gate. A misunderstanding with an animal, a difference of temperament has a disproportionate effect & bang. That bit is broken off the clay tablet. Four or five more genders, each with a vote, giving a nice ambiguity to the result & we could have bent it her way & given ourselves a totally different start, but it wasn't to be.

We'd still be wondering what to do with it. It's a liability you know that.

Hush.

There were light footsteps echoing in the passage. Almost inaudible.

Astarte came into view, "The last time I looked this place was empty. Where have you all sprung from? And if you got in I can get out."

"I wouldn't be in such a hurry to get away, the crowd outside is in an ugly mood."

"We have been here some time," The driver lied, "Bit of a problem." He nodded towards a heavily built, despondent looking man clutching a sheaf of papers. As she watched & probably because of her surprise arrival he shook them at the group around him, screwed them up & tossed them down the stairwell into the flames.

"I shouldn't think too much about it. You could have dreams like that one every night for years," Pearl consoled him. "And then again some things are irredeemably unknowable. Why bother."

"Now where are the controls?"

"In the guts. They must be. That's where you get all those feelings of anxiety. That's exactly where they hit."

"Yes. If you can't let go of some deep-set insecurity you feel it there in the guts. Most of the time." The giant held his belly.

"You could try a swig of this elixir," offered the Fox appearing round the corner carrying a blue bottle with pronounced vertical ridges. He had his teeth on the cork in a flash. Pop. And he swung the bottle in a curve under their noses. They recoiled. The stink had a ton of shit in it. "This is the medicine. Believe me." (Aroma did not come to mind. The Fox hoped for this correction later). "This is the cure."

The giant surreptitiously released the embrace in which he held his belly.

"Phew. That smells as though it could sterilise a potted opera. A bit like crushed geraniums."

With a bright smile the Fox declared, "This is the culmination of years of pissing about."

"With what?" Frowned the giant.

"With something exceptionally technical." Dissembled the Fox. "That." And he pushed the cork back in, "Has got more punch than the 'Brown Bomber.'"

"No." They cried in unison. "Don't cork it up before we've had a swig."

"Really?" Asked the Fox, a little flattered by the surprise request.

"Where does it knock you to?" Wondered the giant, he knew there was Kingdom Come but he was fed up with that trip.

"You can't guzzle this precious fluid. It has to be meticulously measured by the spoonful."

The Fox eyed the spoon hanging around Margarita's neck, neatly tucked between her breasts. "You're not wearing much, but what you have got on looks useful."

Smiles all round & one grin.

"And I'm sure it's natural." He remarked with such admiring delicacy that an embarrassed silence followed it. They dropped their eyes.

"'Quid tum.' What then?" Tried the Fox, fixing the giant's rolling eye. "This medicine with its magnificent power what makes all the impediments of the inner life unbearable, at last, so that out they pour or stumble, according to the dose you have taken, inspiring more repercussions than a bare arse farting into a plate of green Plasticene peas . . . is"

"Efficacious." Suggested Astarte. Does it? You know. Give you the urge?"

"Ah. Fresh peas." Approved the giant. "Metaphorically speaking."

The Fox shook his head & dripped a few drops of the silvery viscous liquid onto the spoon Margarita had removed from her cleavage & held horizontal under her chin. "The blue ribbon is very becoming." Flattered the Fox.

"Let's wait & see." Parried Margarita. "It will need the power of Hell-fire to kick start me into the mood at the moment." She gave a sideways look at Astarte with enough nuance in it to curdle milk. Astarte huffed with exaggerated modesty.

"This is the best stuff there is for gradual paralysis, usually, as you well know, an uncontrollable impulse." He was tapping the bottle with a fingernail as he spoke, "It is

guaranteed to relieve cramps with delirium & nausea with groans, apart from everything else. And the answer to your important question . . . a dribble of this elixir or even an unintentional spill has been known to set off an epidemic of orgies within a three-mile radius. Take a look around," The Fox made the appropriate gesture unnecessarily, "Do you see any flies? No. They're at it. Do you see any dogs? Likewise. At it. Or if not." He had spotted a dog lurking in a shadow. "Certainly going to be at it soon . . . or else." And he stamped his foot. "Let's do it."

"But they're all male." Protested Margarita.

"As bad as that. Oh dear." Chortled the Fox. "In that case in this crisis a good draught would be the business & will help you to get back to fundamentals."

"But I thought that was the vent," interrupted the giant in dismay.

"Fuck off." Said the Fox. "Although many of these fundamentals are harmful we bring them onto our side by the quality of our . . . pleading . . . no not that . . . our diplomatic language . . . what are you thinking of?" He pointed an accusing finger at the giant, sounding angry. " . . . because it's putting me off."

"A fundamental itch I expect," Suggested Pearl hoping to help the giant out of the shit.

"Tell him to put his finger in it & stop putting me off." The Fox paused wearily, "Is it in?"

"Roger," Said the giant. "And out."

The passage had become gloomy, with either end barely discernible.

"Over. You missed out over."

"Yes. That's right," Said the Fox, "We win them over by the quality of our charm. We don't need a quick fix. Yet I wouldn't say no myself."

The word no no no no no no no echoed about.

"It's beginning to get spooky in here & who knows who may turn up."

"It would be handy if she did. She's the one I was telling you about tugging at the driver's sleeve with a contorted face like thatonearlier desperately clinging onto him while he was struggling with himself." Said Pearl.

"Not again." Exclaimed Margarita. "What a waste & here we are gagging for it."

"Ugh! Christ. Do we have to imagine that."

"I'm counting on it."

"So we were knocked for six a bit back?" Concluded the giant (fed up, the worst he hoped for was the middle of next week).

"More than that. We were transmogrified, hence the way you look & to top it all we were also transubstantiated, the only accident being we are left here leaving spoor."

"No flies on that." Said the giant. Trying to get in again.

I had warned the (untrustworthy) driver to look both ways, but he was careless & cavalier about the past just tossing salt into it. It must have been some celestial desire, some chance like that to produce this travesty (this is the fox again). So at this point, if it had been left to him, there could be around forty men & women steaming into this book committing a grave assault on the story by disrupting the plot. This possibility of considerable damage, a proliferation of names to name but one, although it would allow us to vary our device at will, by substitution, even if the urge had gone, might cause irreparable harm to an ego trying to maintain its kleptocratic hold on the reins (mulishly).

A short sharp interjection of improvisation, while the main (paid for) characters hang

around like a bunch of kippers, has been known to fix it. Or smoke it out. O.K. But to be harassed by a group of unedited newcomers off the street charging for the only seat left in the front row wouldn't. It would be very untidy. So would being swept to the outer limit of ordinary reason & expected to explain Chaos with a lump of dough. It could be alright for a good spinner of delusions, but a mere spectator poised above the keys with a head full of stereotypes would be left with nothing to do but tap the parietal lobe (behind the ear) hoping the fingers get a straight message from an intimate space that has the power of numbers behind it, quickly.

"About those flies." Said the giant. Checking his buttons.

"Is there a price on this bottle of piss? Can we fix it before dark? Or are we going to wobble about yapping all night like a circus dog on a trapeze." Interrupted the driver. He'd obviously caught the gist of the fox's thoughts.

"No. They ride the horses."

Sensing a sale the Fox spoke up. "Yes. It's simple. You give up your (very) soul etc., but get it back on loan for a few years so you can vacillate & extract a little use out of the bottle but in the end I call the (shots) call the (number of the boat) call your (bluff) call for the empties. And you don't get your deposit back. That's the deal roughly. It has been sketched out a few times before. Worked from a German masterplan."

"Sounds a fair deal." Agreed the giant.

"It would be if you were included, but you're not." Snapped the Fox roguishly.

"About that deposit," Astarte asked in the nearest style to coquettish she could do in the twilight with fuzzy hair. "What about tick? Décolleté naturally." She jangled her bangles.

"Tick?" The Fox sounded as though he was staring onto the void.

"On the knock?"

Their mouths fell open. The arithmetic was starting to worry the giant's fingers.

Astarte wouldn't, couldn't, shouldn't, mustn't, cannot, willnot, knock-bhang she bent over & picked up a peculiar object with a walnut shaped bowl from out of the debris, "I wonder who dropped this piece of equipment? Some Sadhu?" Then packed the small bowl with a couple of glowing embers from the fire, sprinkled some brown dust onto them & puffed. "You don't give anything away?" She nudged his leg with the toe of her canvas boot, which crumpled because the boot was too big. "That 'interjection' mentioned above. Is that available on the knock by any chance?"

"Subtle."

"A compelling touch. That amalgam of poke & push."

"Are we going to get some urgency, some round flesh, into this?"

(No, a blackened toe). "Chance would be a fine thing."

"A chanceless knock?"

"That's a pity. I hoped I was in with a chance."

"About those spies." Said the giant, checking his flyhole. "I've heard on the wireless there are different sorts, one called a 'walk-in', another 'a dangle'. Is it true?"

"What?" They all shouted. Worn out by endeavour (we started at dawn, not ten) caught on the hop & with doubt gnawing at the bone of contention. "Shut up. We need a recapitulation."

“‘What booteth it to swear the fox?’ Who knows, but here I am as unambiguous as Essex man.” Said the fox, all grins, rapidly counting that there were twelve of them (& luckily some of the dozen vaguely resembled women). “Same story?”

I whistled & smiled at the fox & gave it the nod. Off it ran hunting.

Someone started bleating that we had set up a chance encounter in a blitzed plot for as many idealists as could be mustered. And that was a mistake. That they had met under a dirty light in the middle of a long corridor, connecting one part of the story containing someone (possibly female) escaping from a worn-out love, to another part, with a ragbag group of troublesome charmers from off the street was another mistake. Normally this would have been a disaster, unless it could be shown to have gained meaning from actuality; meaning close & detailed reporting of a fair mixture of facts & lies. Or a grilling, either would do. But not both, as this was considered greedy. One problem was that as soon as the imagination touched on the dredged up, necessarily intimate, doings of the lovers, disputes began. Who was prone to it? Who was prey to it? The mixtures didn't keep very well in sunlight but as they were going to be needed later on some accommodation had to be made to preserve them. At that 'pop' the wrangling started. What had been good relations began to fester. Who were the rogues? Was there a victim? Who stood aside & sorted the false perceptions from the nuggets of pure speculation? Anyway, back to the noises caused by pain as all the above casually invaded their bodies wholesale.

First Astarte's (Starlet's) nose began to bleed. "It's these acrid fumes." She held her head back & closed her eyes. She felt alone. Blood ran over her closed lips over her chin

dribbling onto her breasts & also formed a second crooked stream down her neck staining the elaborate hieroglyphic knot of her scarf.

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Now where are we? Imagine a view from an aeroplane. Let's take that one given by a playwright to explain why it is so easy to drop bombs. We lack imagination. He was right.

Below the sheared-off blitzed building balcony two of these creatures we've hired for the duration assess the damage.

"There's no half-light with its implication of ambiguity." Pause. "Check."

"Light through every crack. Right."

"Just facts shown up brilliantly." Pause. "Check."

"Light on every cranny. Right."

"Light in every corner. No secrets." Pause. "Check."

"Can't be . . . self-evident . . . no fucking wall."

"A spot-light on every crank. Right?"

"I think you must be miss-reading your previous line."

"I understand nothing of it, but it's interesting."

"How do you know?"

"Hanging around for days. Makes it epic."

"What the draught or the exposure?"

"I think Astarte had the draught & Margarita had more of it exposed. And then, because it was getting darker, they both felt like it but didn't have time or weren't given the time or

one of them didn't have the inclination & the other was in too much of a hurry to wait for it or, & it became a cliff-hanger, believe me, one was hanging around still waiting for it while the other had it all & the first one was put out yet it was the other one who wanted out. In reality it was his fault because he should have paid more attention to one or the other but not both, not at the same time & made his mind up which one ought to get it & making that clear. Neither of them believed it was going to happen although one of them thought it could come true & might if they closed their eyes & wished or hoped.

"I can see there is some excitement in the lack of sense."

"They were full of it."

"They were patient."

"Carrying on a conspiracy would have been more comfortable for them, sitting around clothed, drinking, talking treason. Not many props or sound effects needed, the odd clink now & again. Could have saved money on fuel with the protagonists muffled up, dim lights."

"But that would have been a set, unalterable life. We'd have been waiting for the finish from the start. They were better off the way they started, stark naked. That way they can escape . . ."

"What? "

"Indifference."

"Ha. Ha. They are trapped like us." He winked, nobody knew why. "By temptation."

"We can gesticulate."

"With all these eye-witnesses. No way."

"So why are you waving to that bloke over there?"

"Who? I'm not."

"The one with the dog fox."

"Don't be daft. I wouldn't do anything frivolous to spoil it. This is serious alienation."

"Is it a friend keeping a look-out for you? A watchful eye."

"More likely someone catching a flash of leg & stopping for a better dekko."

"If they wanted to give us the feeling of estrangement - they did it - this place really does seem unfamiliar now."

"That explosion is what wrecked this fucking scene. Allows the light to be thrown on it from a different angle."

"Opened it up completely. Should it have done that?"

"Right? Check?" He answered, experimentally. "Panoramic."

"We don't usually get to see them at it. They throw a sheet or boiling water over them. I think."

"It should have been decided to use cardboard cut-outs from the beginning & insisted on. That way they wouldn't have had people blunderingly living through it. I realise they followed their instinct & finished up making the best of it; one nursing her lover until he died; or him killing her off in a jealous fit of rage & obviously making heavy weather of it . . . "

"All that at once? Any panic as well?"

" . . . looking over their shoulders at the past as if they were on a conveyor belt being inspected for faults."

"I didn't think they got that far into the story. The last I heard they were still trying to find out which one got it or trying to decide which one would get it & it seemed to be taking a long, long time."

"No impulses allowed either?"

"Got to relax sometime."

"Not on the job."

"No. Got to keep grinding at it."

"To find out."

"What?"

"It is or it ain't it's obvious."

You need plunging into silence & holding down.

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Snores.

In the morning every sheet of paper had, written in a shaky hand all joined up, the same message. But not all in the same hand; there were two entirely different styles.

"One almost Gothic."

'AlthoughmyheartleapsforyoutherewasalwayssomethingIcouldn'tellyoualthoughIlovedyouIneededsomeoneelse'

"Is that to me?" Asked the giant puzzled by the different handwritings. "For me only? Did I write it? I never had a dream last night; someone is trying to pull a fast one."

"Not a definite article in it. That is suspiciously vague even for a dream."

"Not much detail in it either. Nor the word 'eternal' now that is suspicious. The note is brief."

"I think there will be an implausible explanation offered for this duality but don't worry you won't get it." The driver was in an analytical mood. "They might even try to pass it off as 'versatility' but I wouldn't swallow that if I were you."

"I said I didn't have a dream," insisted the giant, "Sometimes though I spend the whole night counting pubic hairs."

"You need to get the elves in."

"You could ask for a rewrite. It's like a third umpire only quicker."

[Noises off. Fucking l.b.w. Plumb. That finger is up. Out. Irrelevant barracking.]

"He was lucky, he could have had one like R. Wagner's nightmare of a fettered donkey sinking deeper & deeper into a pond & finishing up dead. No sweet note waiting to be read for that he-haw."

"That was an omen."

"Oven?" The giant asked, surprised they had remembered. "About those pies."

"Could be." Said Bear, but thought, 'Dumb fucker. But he doesn't know it.'

"Looks like it." Said Fox, but thought, 'Who got it right in the end? I tried drugs & poison & they didn't work. Perhaps it is impossible to sway a mind like that?'

"What else?" Croaked Griffin through its beak, but thought, 'I know I don't get it.'

"Who knows." Said Oaf, but thought, 'Nothing. But it is important.'

"But I haven't had anyone yet." The giant complained. "That letter has been sent to work beyond its useful shelf life. It's arrived too early. I've got to have the good bit first so I can

SNOW.

"This is a silly story but it's true." She said. "Let's not go on. Stop now. It's best."

[illegible]

ZZZ

[illegible]

The young woman who without doubt I will never see again said, Serbia has plenty of cows. Macedonia doesn't. The young mothers needed milk for their children so they caught the bus over the border into Serbia. Now Serbia needed blood. Its soldiers were lying wounded in hospital. The Serbian guards started to insist on taking blood from the mothers crossing the border for milk.

[illegible] ZZZ

In the chaotic snowflakes of a blizzard several vague figures appeared. They were whipped by the storm's ferocity into a cowering mound lashed together by frozen bandages as they trudged in a featureless landscape of SNOW. Driven out of their homes by unscrupulous & bitter men, these dispossessed have always been passive, without identity, without voice. They fade beautifully into the half-tone blur of the wild setting shown in the obviously hurried & clandestine film sequence & then

“O. Get a move on giant.” A large hand reached out. “And don’t touch that.” Continued the voice primly. “It’s not stuck.”

Crash

Bugger. The pitfall

“Properly?”

‘Pop’ the channel swapped ‘Pop’ & back again. The giant gingerly removed the remote control from under his elbow & offered an embarrassed grin to an empty corner. “The button had stuck so I tried . . .”

“Your elbow.” Rosine snapped peevishly. “Now look who’s here.”

A bright thin girl flashes her easy smile over the screen while telling us it was a so & so man who had taken a fine risk to get the shot of misery on display. So look.

We take in the succulent lips.

“Did we ask for him to be put on the line to record the news of hatred in front of which we were squashed?”

Hand on heart we did.

The girl then pastes something for us to eat onto the tail of the report. For being so good.

"Was it the very best way to show the maliciousness of armed rootless men? Why is this much notice given to them?" Pearl demanded. "Entertainment?"

Packed around the table as close as the refugees in the still. We hesitated. Our knives poised under our nodding heads. "Rumbled." We all agreed.

"You called it love of freedom. Why?"

"They are invisible anyway." The woman speaking was caught in the shadow & I couldn't see her. Her low voice came out of a space too small for the pity of the words.

"They are poor."

"We could have bribed the bastards to lay off us & still had . . . plenty left over." Rosine was faltering over the cost, almost as if she felt compelled to give the correct figure.

"For lends or for keeps?" The giant had learned there were rules when he lost his marbles 'for keeps' in a game.

"For them to rob us of You fool. We're here gawking because of what we imagine we should do, fired by childish or sentimental reasons, not because of what little we can do."

"Keeps." Decided a disgruntled giant. (But at the back of his mind he thought somehow they should have been paid to 'lay on' them.)

"We only pay on paper for our impotence."

"I lost the lot so you can count me out." He breathed a giant sigh of relief.

"He didn't even know them." Claimed another voice from a hidden body. "Did he care or was it curiosity?" She wondered vaguely. "What do you think? Sorry, not you giant."

Is this an investigation? Did he try to get to know them? How are you going to classify it when you write? Scarface. When you bravely cross-examine the survivors & give them a hard time to get at the truth, in comfort, naturally. As a lament? As a sell-out? Let's call it a knife-edge; paper thin, this place not described in any fable. Not acted in any myth.

A woman sidled around the back of my chair leaning closer to me. "Makes a nice cake of misery, easy to digest?" She pushed aside a dirty plate to clear a space for a book. "This is compact. Got them all in. No stragglers moaning about being left out." She opened it at random. "Take your time. You can choose where to start."

Why did she force him to take this first look at the picture from such an angle that the poor group was blown up to a huge snowball of hopelessness? Was he crowded out by the bulk of her body or attracted by its odour so that his head slipped on one side following a desire prompted by his nose?

"No." She was shoving the open book away from him as he peered intently at one page. He explained. "Its text was blurred. The complicated Arctic illustration was ice clear but there could have been one or two items missing in the foreground. There were some rips & tears. And some greasy paw marks."

"You don't need to study it." She began to close the book. "It's obvious what's going on at a glance. They are dead."

My hand slipped as I reached out to draw the book nearer as she snatched it away disturbing the delicate structure of the picture, knocking one figure out of a tranquil hiding-place into a new dimension.

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Under his nose Rosine squeezed the snowflakes tight. The snowball froze her pale hands. She hurled it with numbed fingers at his face but the lump of ice shot out of her fist straight up into the tangled branches of a tree. Its twigs shed their icing onto her hair & she tossed her beautiful curls angrily. "You've ripped my new dress. Stop right there." The North wind was cruel.

The hidden woman's voice shepherded my thoughts back out of the rough past. Edging together, nearly side by side by now. "He could have been indifferent to their fate. It was a subject nothing more. He could have been as heartless as the icicles hanging off their chins. For all we know." I sensed another invisible gesture as we shuffled even closer. "What did you want him to do? Join them? One side or the other?"

"He already had & made it clear by what he didn't do."

It must be carefully recorded, directly & unequivocally on a piece of white paper (that slowly scorches in Hell).

Earlier while being inadvertently pushed together over the open book I felt the softness of Astarte's body.

As her arm unexpectedly coiled round mine, first felt its weight. Our proximity seemed to engage from her the necessity of this indiscreet action. Then I heard that low voice again as she whispered the question, "Why not?" This time, to me. So close I felt her breath on my cheek. Her rich dark hair carried an unpleasant odour like that of raw tuna.

"I'm surprised it wasn't gunpowder. You fool."

I thought, to begin with, I had merely been jostled as she turned a page but as the contact remained & the pressure steadily grew firmer & such a sweet warmth began to penetrate

me, not actual heat but some incandescence transferred by emotion, I knew I had been chosen.

“Chosen!” The guffaw drowned out her voice but I heard her say, "It's awful getting used to an older body in such a short time. I must have slipped.”

“Picked not chosen.” The giant corrected meticulously.

“Lucky you were here to catch me.” A troubled look flowed over the features of my companions to whom Astarte had adroitly given an almost imperceptible sign to disappear as she simultaneously smiled her thanks at me. I caught it too. “As if it were pre-ordained by the stroke of a pen”

"We'll go. Don't say a word," Rosine whispered, I didn't know why, just as puzzled by the compelling look.

“You couldn’t wait for us to push off.” The giant thoughtfully explained.

“No. Wrong. The design was out of my hands.”

“Not for long.” Naturally, Rosine frowned suspiciously at this sudden step to get rid of them. “If she has anything to do with it.”

"Why is this turn-around necessary?" I wondered.

She whispered, “I can’t bear it.” But shrugged at the same time. Rosine must have assumed I knew this stranger well. A rude eagerness in my voice connected it with a past sexual exploit. The others stood up & silently filed out. She left with an exaggerated pout in my face.

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"But anyone could see that my grimace was fake." Rosine broke her silence defensively, afterwards. "I must pull you out of this."

Now it was my turn to ask, "Why?"

"Because the show was purposely put on with the aim to swamp your imagination with hideous images & so control your genuine feeling."

"Contrived propaganda? A montage? I don't think so. No. What we were shown was happening & is. A moment after the shutter clicks the dead don't rise grinning from those heaps behind the back of the woman with the beautiful smile."

"Nevertheless it was set up." Rosine pointed to the text beside the photograph. "I know how you feel. Like you, I think what are called 'uninterpretable positions of the bodies' could easily be explained. But you can't calculate a percentage of feeling to dole out for every case."

We banked the conversation away, as, no doubt the helicopter carrying the cameraman did, to distance us all from the butchery.

"You see. We've had a taste, a dose . . . & off we go."

Outside, after the blast of warm air from an automatic door, we shivered on the river embankment. It was sleeting, turning to snow. The cold North wind was unpleasant. It bit my exposed hands & face like a repulsive dog at raw meat. "I knew a woman, having an affair & desperate to keep it secret, who asked her lover to walk backwards from her door to his car on a night like this. She was afraid his footprints would be frozen in the slush & give them away." We linked arms & carefully descended the steps to the riverside, backwards. "It didn't make any difference."

"Are you saying she was wicked?"

"No. But she felt better for the attempt at deception. And for some people that's enough to condemn her."

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Rosine wrote. My being was emptied of its heaviness but that was replaced, & strangely I felt it, by a lightness, a weightlessness. If my whole being could be seized by nothing, it was, which floated into those spaces untouched by others. I felt like snow melting on iron. She stared into his face, unfocused as if presenting a vague target.

And his thoughts drifted back alongside hers

"But why did I have to leave?" So she had been vexed. It now showed. She didn't want to see him.

"Don't be sad. She couldn't bear sharing anyone. That's why."

"You fool. She was a wolf . . . ravening . . . she enjoyed sharing the picture record of her victims. She pulled you close. How was that possible? She engaged your lust. She needed to gain your body heat, to feel your heart beating. It satisfied a craving."

Astarte had denied that, "The snowflakes were a vortex in which we saw the persecuted family's sorrow, their resignation touched me, opened me. I needed to touch someone.

That embrace was taken without reflection. I had to defy the lies of those wicked men robbing the defeated. I uncovered myself & you felt that gulf. You called it love."

Astarte let this refrain slip clear of a chaotic mish-mash of needs & it felt as though she had shaken snow off the branches of a tree revealing the essential stark skeleton of branches, that gave its special shape. The sensation of her tree. A natural picture of her

thoughts. She also felt a poignant relief at finding the room empty as she wafted through the open door bringing with her the subtle hint of vanilla. In her mind the skein of a story she knew so well & repeatedly told began to unravel as if searching for the peace of a line. Its narrowness the necessary constraint to enable her to express the anguish. She watched as Rosine scribbled swiftly on the paper. A corner of the room grew darker. Things could now be pushed into it & left unidentifiable until another irreducible light is written in.

"Will this light mean an absence of feeling?"

Laughter.

She felt a grip from behind & started to struggle & twist & kick. She didn't want to be taken.

They embraced clumsily. She hoped it was because of the cold he felt so stiff & held her awkwardly some distance from his body.

Rosine collected the papers she had found strewn about the floor. And started to write again.

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[DEW].

The plum blossom brings the snow. We know that. Together they provided the illusion of gentle cover under which she slipped away, inexorably. I had to stay to cook (looking for the recipe to be a hero) the books, not because of an accident & not because of this chance encounter . . . but to . . . here . . . you can tell it, she confided in you.

It was either by complicated chicanery on her part or by allowing generous discrepancies to creep in while rearranging in telling the actual sequence of facts, that you met each other, but make no mistake, it wasn't an accident. I know.

Rosine didn't look up as she spoke, frowned & ticked another box on the pyramid diagram in the book at her side. She could feel him prowling around the room, still undecided, trapped in the angle between a casual interest & bristling passion.

Rosine continued the subterranean line. 'And I felt it was often easier for her to get on with a fate that came randomly, better than one where her constant decisions did nothing to alter the outcomes; never the sort she had planned or chosen. Both are certain to be breathtakingly compressed almost flattened out of all recognition in a brief draft. What came with the snowy days was no exception.'

And I was totally unprepared again, as we met under the plane tree after months of separation, for the surprise kiss, that enduring transilient kiss yielding you utterly, with such passion that nearly trapped me in your underworld. The snowflakes blown whispering past my ears left me wondering if I could hear the future singing, while you half leaned, half fell into my arms, deliberately keeping one foot on the ground when

giving that delectable kiss & kicking the other leg out to form a playful flaunting arch, trying to spring a trap. Such an illecebrous embrace with its touch soft as snowflakes to offer me the raw split, the painted untouching was, I felt in my bones, a youthful escape, a delight to entice me into your opaque body from my opaque world. And I plunged blindly into the lake without hesitation.

"Your fingers like rays of light you could have said but never did." Rosine stared through the window & absently played with a corner of a paper as she tested the words aloud.

For that

She was on her back in a heartbeat, rolling, melting the last nub of chocolate on my tongue melting her clitoris into my palm.

"Overcoming, in that same moment you dived, her feeling of reluctance & distaste, you could have said." Her head was low down over the papers again, her hair brushing along the swarm of lines above the pencil.

For that

She was splashed, crushed, bounced, under me over me under me over me.

"Just twice?" He asked.

Rosine couldn't resist a smile but touched her face as if to hide it. And in a mirror, way over the other side of the room, her mouth, in profile, gulped down pearls of light suspended on the tips of her fingers.

"Two of both." Rosine decided. She closed her knees. She sensed a change. The paper felt like silk under her pencil. She scribbled on.

Then pointing her toes she lay unmoving on the bed, her body a grey sienna all over like a shaved dog ready for any monstrosity, any act that would steal my heart, her flesh stained the colour of dried blood. Stretched out, on a few pieces of abandoned clothing crumpled like a bat's wing, she spoke of a dumb brazen crawl over the sand in the DEW as the riffraff closed in on her naked body. Guarded only by swift shouts from the girl who had forced her to go there. Rosine stopped writing, picked up the diary & turned to a marked page. Guarded words? Lead on. Set up. Sold. She needed to examine the scribble again. Pearl had written, 'she followed the stranger reluctantly, half-hoping she might get a clue to her own fulfilment in the desolate spot. She felt attracted to the woman, but had no great belief that she would be able to catch, or be shown, any helpful insight that would show how to order all of her disorder . . . passively.'

"It was a necessary detour." He said laconically. Reading over her shoulder.

"Yes." She agreed. (To his surprise). They read on.

'Even a hope for danger in an encounter; not exactly dangerous events but unknown things. Any contact. Any small enticement. Merely to pull something, someone.'

Rosine's fingers played on the edge of the page as she read. Her lips were pursed. This time she was unconvinced of the veracity of the record.

"She followed obediently, gave her attention, didn't she know she was going round in circles?" He wondered, "She must have wanted to deceive herself. Or you?"

"She. She. She was so evasive." Rosine said, "Always . . ." And frowned. "But just because you can see it . . ." And she stopped to look at him quizzically. "You can't necessarily do anything about it."

He took the offer, "Such an ingenious chance meeting to start an adventure. Didn't her eyes that were misty in front of the ugly photograph, become clouded by desire? That's what he didn't see. He was cleverly put off guard by her help."

"Seduced. No. He knew what he was up to. She was useful."

"Useful! She saved his life. And she forgot to give us the reference for that. Why?"

Rosine's eyes followed his obdurate zigzag movements about the room as she waited for him to settle. She wrote J. loves M. in the margin & put a box round it. The mirror kept shuttling him back to her & then dispersing the fragments in an abstract black & white triangular pattern, fluttering beyond, down an endless corridor of rectangular lights.

"Earlier, when we first met, you were always describing the lovers as able to accept any 'ugly' scene as if they belonged in it; as if the refugees caught in the mountain pass was a pastoral winter idyll or the contorted heaps of bodies swelling in the sunshine, a part of a lover's picnic. Making out they only felt uncomfortable because of the press of the crowd or the kind of weather or that they might be discovered together. Is that why they left in a hurry this time?"

"No, that was what could be guessed from the photo & deliberately made obvious. Other things had taken over. "

"What other things? Are you too squeamish to say? It doesn't add up. You know imagination can't give us the smell of gangrene. It always sprinkles the true horror with icing sugar. It always says, 'at this distance those bodies could be asleep.' And 'that is the wrong colour for it to be blood.' So although we know it to be an inaccurate excuse we try to accept it. Make every effort."

"No. Imagination does give us that stink, we can turn our nose up because of it even when enveloped in an exquisite perfume."

"I think you wanted to make it look as if he could see Hell & return happy because of her. Didn't you?"

"He certainly could provided he observed it from a distance. Not close to. That would have given the game away for then he would have been able to see the pile of arms & legs under the tree. And count them if he chose to. And to precisely calculate the carnage would be hellish. Impossible for him to face & deny. Everyone likes enough room for comfort."

"You mean to leave them utterly lost down there don't you? With not a pang of regret written in? Click & the work done?"

"If I can. They were made for each other. Where they were didn't count."

"But he couldn't be fooled for ever. Do you think he had an inkling of whom she really was? I do. That's partly why he fell for her. He was trying to change . . . her fate?"

She demurred with a chop of her hand. She thought that was a clumsy excuse.

"Where did they really meet? Have you told me that?" He reached for the book.

"O. Yes." Rosine barely breathed the response as she pushed it further from his hand. Her ribcage felt crushed.

"Not in front of that crowd pushing from behind to see the crash? I didn't believe that."

He suggested, not hearing her.

"No. I remember it was . . ." Rosine tried to say it slowly, very slowly, perhaps hoping to vex him, but also seeming to be in pain.

"She wouldn't tell?" He blurted out impatiently not waiting for her.

Onto the flux of what looked an easygoing smile which suggested I was mistaken Rosine tossed a suggestive but grim fortune-teller's quip. A whispered aside that also carried the subliminal proposal I should become a skeleton prior to which I might try a fugue. " . . . it was in bed. Mine. Slotting into my life like a blade forcing a door."

"But the slightest slip . . . if some one had barged in . . . intercepted that touch. Didn't you, Rosine, realise it would be difficult to start convincingly without the . . . touch?" He was becoming wary.

"By then it didn't matter. Astarte had got him hooked."

And here he realised she hadn't stalled. But had she forgotten? And was now developing a guess because it was so important for her to believe she had known everything all along & to keep her share. She had bitten her tongue. Blood bubbled onto her lips.

"She would never have allowed that." Yet Rosine suspected he knew the place without needing her description. Could he have been there? She looked at him intently. Could he read her thoughts?

And I am left wondering what it was she was looking for so intently. It showed. It must have. We knew that. You caught her appealing gaze in the reflection & turned again towards her mechanically this time, like a melancholy horse, like a baffled diagram triggered by the haunted look & pointed to the sharp curl she had touched into place.

"Did he ask her name?"

She held her breath.

Blood trickled off her lower lip.

Rosine held him back with all the strength of her arm, protectively.

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The furies were a troop of virgins. Provocatively dressed, lewd in speech but intact . . . as yet. Their specialities were torture & murder . . . it was too dangerous to take one. Or drag one along. They came out of no where filing through a gap in the steel lattice gate into the world. Flattening into the shadows to pry. Anthropomorphic messengers with bloodshot eyes & grainy white cheeks. Faces where one grey shape ran into the other. They shifted constantly until it became uncertain where they were.

"I knew there had to be bestial force or cunning somewhere on the rampage. This rough stuff is coming out pretty quickly. How long had you been there? Did you say? Before you . . . ?" Rosine cut herself short, then gathered back her breath " . . . realised it was murder?"

"You let them loose. You should know."

"That was another lifetime." Rosine threw her pencil down.

"Well it's not going to happen here." He didn't sound sure. "It must have left a trace. You said she had gone mad, but it was only a moment."

"That was enough. She touched him in some way; I would say she caressed evil out of him."

‘Although the men who kept creeping up on our tryst hoped the bushes concealed their foolishness, they were plain to see. They were harmless to us. She chased them off every so often. She was bold & unashamed. They were persistent.’

Engrossed, Rosine barely heard his footsteps coming round behind her. He rested his hands on her arm as he read. Fine platelets of a metal necklace rose & fell with the rhythm of her throbbing neck artery.

"Naked?"

She looked at him pityingly. "They would have touched her at their peril."

"And they ran like rabbits."

She ticked the air with the pencil.

"But you never noticed anyone."

"I had no need to be vigilant."

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On the screen, a paused video flickered a white morse of interference underneath the frozen figure of a solitary woman caught about to pour some more liquid from a clear blue bottle into a spoon. There was a transparent drop falling from the rim but not yet at the half-full spoon. Were the irregular ripples of horizontal light reflecting off the ridges blocking out an eager mouth?

How do I get out of this? Rosine wondered. Probably best to shag him? She straightened her back raising her arms high over her head as a preparatory exercise for the task.

Meditatively Rosine stared at the blizzard on the screen; she pressed a button. The distorted image in the advert slowly faded, at first this vaguely resembled a fox, but then resolved into an entrancing woman slowly swallowing the proffered brimming spoon. In it Rosine was surprised to see herself & wondered how this reflection had come about.

She rested her chin on her fist.

How is he going to hold me? No he's not. Not on that sore shoulder it's still bruised from
when the bear or fox
the gorilla or griffin
the oaf or eagle (stretching it a bit)
swiped me.
Necked me.

Pinched me.

Her thoughts floated through the refuge of the mess & disorder of a poem she loved
seeking a way of escape & then she was rudely grounded again by a memory.

Seized me.

Spread me.

Mounted me.

Across the room a pair of lips sucked up the spoon's liquid, a tongue flicked the upturned
spoon clean of any . . . medicine? Rosine pressed the pause again & studied the lips. Did
she know them?

How about with one hand there in the small of my back pulling & holding. Is it up yet?
No, but it's hard. I can feel it. The other hand in the nape of my neck. No. Don't touch me
I'll do the tugging & blending. Yes. That is a hand, lightly resting on that lump above the
cleft of my bum rubbing & scratching. Her body was seized by an involuntary
contraction, her chest made tight, her belly made tight, her waist pinched. She was
thrown down. Her ribcage exposed. Her knees bruised on the cold concrete floor. Blood
dripped from her nose. Drop by drop the stain splashed on the dusty concrete under her

face & the patch grew. Large oily tears ran through the snot dribbling down her chin.

Each word she babbled burst out of a viscous bubble that made every one sound decisive even though they were incomprehensible. There was a discernible undercurrent of terror in every snivel. There had been a slim chance to escape her torment & she had lost it.

Rosine's body stiffened against the hard chair, her eyes glared across the table.

"Are you there. Rosine?" I passed my fingers, with a slip of paper wedged between them, in front of her eyes. "Are you there?" The flow of blood stopped. She was up & away fleeing the hard bodies. Barely skirting in her haste the lustrous bowl patterned with a pyramid of dotted squares within a loose flower border; crunching on the rice grains strewn around the dishes, kicking the fix of their divinatory scattering to Hell; skidding past the green jug with its rough hewn hunters to pitch up at a lake of spilt treacle that had run to the convoluted rim of a glass dish, colour, constitution, form of phlegm flying wildly through the air. 'Now. What will the pool hawk up?' Rosine wondered. And it was here, gazing into this magical surface, that Rosine imagined the marvellous pictures that she never forgot which saved her. They appeared, reflected on its smooth surface from an unknown source.

Perhaps the elemental scene she saw in her vision was a manifest of the three inborn fears: crawly snakes; long drops onto hard rocks & the pitch black dark. In an over-abundant luminous bleakness of radiant yellow light that cast no shadow & showed nothing, but upset the space she had to work in, Rosine took aim. The crudeness of the women's shapes in her sights made her think, 'That mind needs walling up.' But she continued to squeeze,

"There is always something missing in a dream. You can't properly say missing because the failure is in the blighted yearning
the disappointment is in the blighted yearning
or an impediment is in there because of your inability to remedy any of them. And what is missing is the ability to feel right about feeling wrong. And that was missing before you fell, slithered under your feet or cut out the light.

I can't describe the beings but their voices are there, they always are, cajoling, ordering, wrangling about some defect, some need, some unassuageable thirst."

There was an unnameable reptilian rasping, an emptying sound that raised her hackles. It attracted her. It connected with a heartfelt wish to recapture the love she had lost. It made her guts fall. It rippled through her lips & moistened them. It made her lurch. She wanted to be coiled & held tight.

As I kept watch Rosine's mouth opened involuntarily, a narrow slit through which her tongue flicked to wet her lips. A shudder rippled down her body as it shed the rigid pose & slumped to rest on the table. And there she stayed. But for her, in the trance she had induced, this brief composure instantly broke. Her neck jerked her head away from the slouch of her torso as if attempting to alleviate some shadow of a pain caused by the struggle of the transformation & with more agitation she was thrown onto her feet.

Rosine stood, initially taking a crane-like stance before starting to strut shedding a cloak of golden feathered reflections. In this flurry one hand flew off to claw apart a shred of gossamer then over the down of her belly she slid both palms & plucked deeper.

She rolled her swollen vulva up to his mouth. "Suck this."

My age clanged about my ears.

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Now I must follow this blunder of candour with an enigmatic passage from when I overheard the oracle at DIDYMA in a hailstorm that declared her fate. I take this from the time I had been concealed for six gloomy days in the fallen frieze from the shrine's towering walls (where I thought I had been spotted once or twice). I kept watch as she memorised the whine of an artillery shell ripping through the word CORINTH forced on her back, legs splayed wide, while a child sitting on a sack observed the act, fascinated, loudly chanting a rhyme to block out the screams. The building became rubble under the permanent night sky. Snakes rippled over the stone powdered bodies of the men taking her apart. The hordes were petrified. Her home had been obliterated in what was a smoking ruin. Her family had disappeared in one of the lines of refugees which filed east & west taking their chance. There had been the rude sound of an engine, a dive-bomber screaming up the edge of the screen pulling out of the action.

Crash.

Then it was gone, leaving a glimpse of white wadding poking through the shoulder of a jacket, the wearer unidentified. It came to me much later that what I had seen was a raw bone sticking out. The last shot was of a rotting dress with a bold golden pattern & a live snake being drawn through a hole in the flesh of an arm. What else could he do but go to sea. It always looked more or less the same & that gave him comfort. And what else could he do but cook.

(Something similar was sketched in the winter before we met. Where you learned to recognise the signs of impending death in the hospital never dreaming they would appear so soon in your own mirror.)

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SLEET.

I'm afraid I have to gobble up every dead letter from the laconic language of a dream that was so rapidly obliterated by a HAAR it was breathtaking. Because I never had time to take a bearing on the melancholy shore before opaque white fingers of cloud jabbed between the peninsular faster than a mackerel snapping up shit, I was lost. It was a soundless

Crash

Only a huge sleeper, tamped into the clay, standing ten feet from my doorway was visible & in front of that bobbed a pied wagtail, incessantly, which I drew for days as I waited & wished. Those days were drenched & the light softened by the clouds that clung around the mountain. So that small space betwixt the doorstep threshold on which I sat & grew numb & the black post had no shape to contain it. The ragged soft edge of the mist was a defacement, a severance from the phenomenal world into which I could jettison those few repeated hopes that had piled up monotonously in the shuttle of my glances to pick each line accurately as the drawing grew. (Or I could piss over & beyond a smudgy demarcation into where the men of straw were stacked). If I wanted those hopes to be really exorcised, easily like a puff of smoke, why did I fix that moment with a sharp bird pattern under the large stake set up for no reason?

There were four full sacks of sand stacked by that baulk of timber (I had forgotten those until I saw the drawing again) & the two other empty sacks made of woven fibre-glass that held slack coal had a rubbed grey look. By now I'd almost forgotten what who I was

waiting for looked like. I stanked back the emotion. Sat on the cold step. Drew on the matching frigid emptiness without & within & drew the bulging sacks. The pencil whispered as it roamed their folds & crannies, while on the post it scaled the gloomy grain with squeaks.

“I read that in Colchis men’s dead bodies were suspended in sacks from trees.” Rosine told me later. “It didn’t say what they did with women’s bodies.”

“I can tell you their frames keep going forever & were there pulling on the ropes hauling the bastards up into full view where they could keep a good eye on them.” Cried Medea.

“When dead?”

“Yes. When dead they needed to protect themselves from violence.”

I suppose I knew then.

I took walks to the ravine to stroke the pure white layers in the bed-rock of the torrent buried in its deep slit in the mountainside & there I thought of the leap.

When X eventually arrived I was disappointed & she made plain so was she. I saw this lumpy shape coming up the hill emerging out of the fog struggling with the steepness of the slope. Our tepid greeting was strained of all warmth, imparting the disapproval of our appraisals & getting the distance right . . . disengagement. In this place where great waterfalls gushed from the skyline I expected things of the heart & cock to zip along with more than a little fire. Greedily & crudely I’d expected to get my craving for sex satiated. Full stop. We squinted at each other resentfully. “You don’t expect me to bury myself up here, do you?”

She carelessly smudged the drawing when I showed her it that first evening. A commonplace happening, I can't think why I got angry, perhaps I suspected it wasn't an accident but her clumsiness a covert answer to my unspoken demands.

At that time we cooked on an open fire setting the pots around it on stones & the semi-circle in front of the blaze was the only warm spot in a room that was bitter cold & dank. The walls covered with a loose mixture of damp whitewash & dust oozed drops of moisture. There were several heaps of sand & bags of cement ready to be mixed to concrete the floor; as yet raw earth.

Outside on a concrete slab, to the west of the stone hut, a long plank had been balanced on a yellow tin drum that had a grey-blue band with black dashes painted next to its rim. Twelve gutted & salted haddock were drying on it in the wind. They were never eaten & slowly became putrid yet odourless & their flesh retained a delicate pink colour. Near another pile of sand she stood with her back to me, weight on one foot, red woollen stockings rising into a home-made fitted flower patterned dress with a back zip from collar to the base of her spine, arms loose by her sides; dark hair swept into a short plaited tail. Why there was a large wet pebble a good yard from the drum, which stood on the edge of a damp circle where concrete had been mixed, I don't know. The shadow cast from the shelf of fish ran over a wooden door on its side leaning against the wall with irregular patches of orange lichen flaking in the unusual heat. A breeze flapped the short flair of the dress hem & out on the loch a dark blue patch of water appeared for a few seconds.

A snipe was haunting the milky moonlight; cloud shadows imploded, raggedly thrown on the massive boulders of the mountainside. They were rapidly torn out to sea by the rising gale.

I blew the candle out but didn't go for her body.

She sat up abruptly & cracked her head in a beam. We slept in the roof space.

I re-lit the candle. She stumbled awkwardly over the tie beams towards where I lay buried in a pile of bedding.

Do I want her? Do I want him? But we were already asleep.

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The netsuke was a squeezed brown cinder of ivory. I could just make out the figure of a woman entrapped in the coils of a dragon's tail amongst what might have been clouds of fiery breath. But in the fine swirls as well, when the clouds changed to waves was a crayfish chasing a man.

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At first glance on the Rembrant etching displayed in the corner I saw, to my surprise, a delicate, tiny figure, a nude female reclining looking to the left in the direction of the artist's self-portrait. This woman was drawn with a few fine lines at the edge of the sheet & to the side of a small blur of marks that later resolved into a peasant woman's head.

This figure then became her scarf.

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Over an isolated archaeological site it was SLEETING hardly clouding a pale natural light reflecting off the marble that shone on the woman's ash coloured hair as she turned

to the sombre man caught now in a maze of fallen masonry below the three remaining gigantic heads of the temple's frieze. A white scurf of lichen gave the carvings' cheeks a childlike bloom. And the inwardness of each Gorgon's trance was uncannily reflected in the finely chiselled emptiness of her gaze. She clearly wanted something, so at first all her movements were over-laid with a calculated meticulousness that initially could have been mistaken for naturalness.

"Tell me, how did she make him hand over the gift he had so carefully concealed?"

"It was never told." His eyes had followed her expressive hand as it plucked towards his arm. The fingers gently alighted on his wrist & pushed.

"Force?" Both of her arms dropped in surrender.

He guffawed & choked. "Persuasive . . . barbaric . . . you think they acted like that?" But he had been caught in the sexual undertow.

She merely nodded; words were superfluous for she thought the evidence they had left of their use of poisons & drugs was irrefutable, but asked innocently, "Yet he had traded the secret & kept his word. How?"

"Subterfuge." And his abrupt gesture placing his hands close together emphasised the meaninglessness here of that word. And the way his glance chopped the curve of her neck ruffled her slightly. She rearranged the filmy scarf that was held by a snake knot under her chin with a calming deliberateness.

"Or?" She tried disarmingly.

"Use your imagination." He countered; again inexact. He couldn't find a simple word that didn't sap the strength of the maelstrom of images now exposed when called on to explain this episode about which he understood so little.

"But surely the treasure is the image of a woman?" She persisted, but cast a look to one side as if hoping for an ally.

"She was like us. A figure of string & dirt. No more than that."

"But by cutting it down to as little as that, can you find what you want? You only eliminate all the richness you seem to want." She turned her foot towards him.

"Or find more . . . "

"That way. More?" She shrugged her disbelief.

"What else?"

"Not so for him. There doesn't seem to have been much value placed by that fool on those . . ." She paused to clear the anger from her head, then continued coolly, "cheapskates over the years. Except, by some kind of twist, for barter" She deliberately struck the first discordant note between them. "Did she ask for a kiss?" She asked, hoping to take him by surprise & yet disarm him by the way she lisped the word ask.

"To heal the wound of his absence. Once & for all." He parried. He was sure.

She turned grimacing, although her thought had been incomplete she wouldn't have said that. "She never fell in love. She was never able to go that far."

"She waited. She believed it could grow . . . she hoped . . . she fooled herself."

"Perhaps he wanted their love to blossom . . . hoped?" She almost held her breath as he stepped closer.

"And it was here, that's when she got the idea?" To appear nonchalant he bent over slowly to examine the blue haze of a flower in which her feet nestled beside the block of marble. There was also a scattering of peonies in bloom. She cupped her hands over her ears as if not wanting to hear.

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I noticed a dark red folder I didn't recognise under a pile of books stacked on the floor. I was drawn to it so knocked the top six volumes fast against the wall & pulled it out. Inside were some illustrations torn out of a book still stuffed in the fawn covers & as I flicked through them I remembered I had found these scraps on a stall in Crystal Palace. Illustration 3. 'Phallic symbols placed at the entrance to a tomb at Caere, showing the number, age & sex of its occupants. Three were unmistakable male objects. But the two others were surely like loaves or kerbstones. Were they the female symbols? Or books. "A book. The ultimate female object." Rosine settled its spine between her knees, "Into which we dip. And what we cannot put down." She frowned. "You could fill me in on what's eating you up."

"You wouldn't hear it. I've told you often enough."

"Could I . . . we . . . call up." Rosine clapped the book covers together with a loud crack & put it aside, then stood up moving towards him.

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Do I drive? The driver repeated, accentuating every word equally. I believe I do. At the present time I'm only steering. The CRANE swung & the crate on the end of a chain

smashed through a flimsy matchwood shelter scattering cut flowers out of their buckets.
Clare toppled over in shock.

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At a doorway she stopped by the broken edge of a frieze showing a three-quarter figure half turned to the left. Or was she deceived? Could it just be the way the stone had split that gave the look of a face? Her ribcage was sore. Her neck was sore. But Rosine smiled. She had seduced him & got out at the same time. Kept her kolum cake & eaten it. It was as her footsteps clattered through the empty manuscript room that she had had a premonition of a scene in which all the buried antagonistic feelings withheld by a natural spell till then, would rise. Unexpectedly, as if the enchantment of concrete enjoyment had lost its power to bind them down, the traces of her discontent had joined together in that noise & surged up as a vague disquiet. It was this tentative outline of a figure that prompted her unease & released the full pull of half felt desires. Why they were made apparent by this trick of broken stone & shadow she couldn't explain. Perhaps because it was so difficult to capture & hold its image there that the unfinished face caught her at the very moment when her imagination was available to supply the expectation of an amusing encounter.

The clatter stopped.

"Back off." Rosine pulled her hand away, quicker than he intended she should, leaving him awkwardly poised expecting to receive her weight. "I could have passed you & said nothing. Let you go by." He wavered.

"I wish you had." Rosine leaned sideways as she stood so it didn't bring them closer together & fingered the ankle strap of her sandal. "I'm not happy at being singled out by you."

He didn't move.

She added caustically, "As if I lived like a lonely caterpillar under one leaf. And you're living in delusive hope if you think waylaying me as if by chance is going to get you anywhere. I'm telling you I can't help you."

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She silently mouthed the name at him, both of her forefingers emphatically striking the space between their midriffs as she mimed. He moved his lips trying to copy her to effect a landing for the word but failed to reproduce a telling shape & shaking his head with a puzzled frown gestured for a repeat. She had stopped. The irreparable mask of her face rapt as she watched him struggle to interpret her simple clue. So she sculpted her ravaged mouth again & her hands became still as she gathered strength to put some sound into the attempt. He concentrated on the crust of make-up around her lips. Avoiding her gaze.

With no prior warning from her he realised that any slipshod error & the destroyed shrine would be alive with monstrous spectres; her life-long longings embodied in incomprehensible shapes. Made of straw & clay, slipping around the mounds of desolate rubble, they would reinvest the stones with improbable shadows, their false stuff subtly disguised, to help her in a quest. Birds would strut & spook at the encounter. Her lips seemed to show this need to squeeze all the elements of her past back to one innermost event; a naming.

"So it did eventually dawn on you. It was a kiss."

"A kiss struck the deal." He echoed & they both smiled.

It wasn't any kiss she described then. It was the one from long ago. That one she gave while twirling around the slowly unfolding body of a lover caught by surprise. A tender surprise for both of them.

In that kiss came the thrust of an ardour unknown, untapped till then. From the vortex of childhood released by waiting & waiting & waiting.

And being told countless times . . . that's it. That's the way it's got to be . . .

"It's not always manipulated, that coming together; it's not always a cynical choice.

Something different can happen when lips touch."

"Year after year?"

In a damp trough between the fallen blocks of stone the scent of vanilla wafted up from flowering winter heliotrope, its heart-shaped leaves concealing a mush of rotting foliage; but I was dreaming, comparing those thin-lipped biting kisses to the full voluptuous ones being smeared across my face. I should have believed that hunger.

She cut in, "I felt trapped. I was in a terrible fairy story where starvation meant attaining beauty. Yet I had to bite."

"Unobtainable beauty means starvation? Splendid. Was there a happy ending?"

"How could there be one?"

"It must have been something else." He nodded stiffly. Reached & took her wrist turning it to reveal a fine white line.

"I got that."

"It's obvious you don't see your memory as an obstacle to our getting closer. Surely you understand the colour of my feelings are there in what I say & it's for you to give me . . . pleasure . . . harmless pleasure."

"By forgetting?"

"First by paying lip service to my need. I have to know."

"How she kept him? Why?"

"With what."

"She never tried anything."

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What was left after the spontaneous clatter of her greeting that I could still hear through the MIST? Before she took the solid form so beguiling. The skeleton of that memory rattled like a mistake, like an aversion to waste flesh every time I shook it awake. I scrawled an inky line of black crows on the paper to give body to the dim air surrounding her. To chalk up a resemblance I could handle. She appeared as an improvisation or illustration that would be able to speak but not keep to tight & particular meanings. Like an image on a fogged photo plate, some parts gleaming too much as if there, in those places, her emotions showed. The tip of her nose flashing a blob of fire by a cheek blanked, as if obscuring insanity had lead her out of the haze, to reveal, on cue, nothing . . . an insatiable but deadening curiosity perhaps . . .

"I had to tell you where we were, in that solitude, under its harsh battering weather which we used to cover all this up."

We acted from the beginning of that winter as if in a fake dream with nothing but point blank emotions grappling each other like mutations of Cupid. Twanging separately up & down each day, unfixable, yet inseparable. A bitter tiptop knowledge slit her & shrivelled me, then blew us up again before it finally lapsed & beat it. Leaving us confused but fixed on considering every aberration.

The paper became a brilliant white under her delusion, a clear canvas on to which to whip down her dripping sex. And when she pulled a leather belt to its last hole, the spike jabbing through held back her shamelessness. It was possible to look, now, at the curls beside her cheeks in the shapelessness of the shade & not be tempted.

"Yes. From this far distance. But you get nearer. You'll see." Rosine placed the photograph back on her desk. "When you meet you'll find her irresistible. You're lost."

I admit there was a chance she had shouted a greeting to him, as the marble gleamed under a clearing sky & the shadows could strike their blows again in the pearly light. And as she stood with a blue scum of forget-me-not trampled around her feet a new rhythm entered her voice with the softness of the beat of an owl's wings as the secret, disentangled from desire, became plain.

So she decided to strike up in her generous way. An animal. Did you say that? You did. Are you with us? She tilted her face, again. And froze. To just the angle she had practised many times with a smouldering eye. And again made slight shifts as she chose the impudent look. And froze. She had explored all these possibilities in the mirror many times to know how best to exploit the outside of her body. Her smile was perfect.

Yes, an animal, look.

She wavered. The smile, given its irresistibility, should lead to a kiss & another & another, but here he had stalled her. Had he picked up a barely discernible undercurrent, a guiding chance; was the smile received as genuine but logged unbeknownst to him in the brain as false? From there, the retort had shot out in a flash like the tongue of a lizard sticking a fly, an inadvertent sequence of words selected as a blind that were inappropriate but couldn't be helped. A question about an object (dog) available in the vicinity of their conversation was chosen before the smile had flickered to its completion. And stuttered out at the moment of the full pout, the highlight of the expression.

"Look here. This is supposed to be a seduction. Her smile is pure melon, we decided that, big & sweet & juicy."

"And it is."

"We are talking of her smile here, aren't we?"

"I've got it. Her smile, designed to be armour piercing, flashes through to the right spot like tracer. No one & certainly not his heart could have resisted that bombardment. He had been waiting for years for an offer, any offer, so why would he have turned it down?"

"He didn't. You still don't get it. He didn't. It would have been a different kettle of fish in another place. They would have stuck & sucked like lampreys. He would have been fooled. I've already explained. It was something in the air around them that triggered his performance off. He didn't have a say in it."

"The blunder was imposed on him? Slipped from the bottom of the pack of lies? I thought he was seeking her love. That he became tempestuous."

"Although he was delighted with any response he got you could hardly call his actions passion. His warmth slowly increased but only because in his detachment he found it pleasant to pretend he wasn't vacillating. He knew what he was doing."

"Are you saying he was never more than luke-warm? I thought I heard him gasp when she smiled so invitingly."

I don't think he was even that hot.

I'd have said it was a choking sound.

"She wasn't deeper in it than him? Surely not?"

"She was marking time but undoubtedly that contact had an effect."

It cut her off.

I thought there were tears in her eyes.

Could she do that at will?

Her voice floated the words to me as I thrashed between her knees. "This is the way out of it."

I saw her face dissolving back into the mist.

I saw, unmistakably, someone else, becoming under my astonished look.

The one with the dreadful face.

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I was staring at the door. The loud knocking seemed to be coming from behind me.

Loud squelchy bumps of seeping luggage being dropped set off a groan. "That one has burst. Oh the mess. What's that thing?"

A book the size of a loaf.

My heroine doesn't travel light.

"I'm back. Glad?" ----- (Here you can put an illustration to fill in for all the thoughts racing through a head dumbly answering the question. Perhaps you could add a line or two of text).

"All over?"

"What is thereWhat did you bring?"

"Put that box (of tricks) down there." Her voice was beguiling husky. "It's easy to lift."

Hush. They are by the door. The eye was pulled back from the keyhole & through it came the whisper, "You should see the number of hats." Followed by a piercing whistle.

"Stop rooting through my bags," She stormed. "Are you looking for trouble?" She laughed. "Look at these." She handed him a set of photographs of the site.

1st. The stones were scattered like fish scales, a cold code of sequins, spangles & fuck knows what else on the mud bank. "We marked the layers & took measurements. All in order. Even so he picked that one up."

2nd. Small figurine, triangular shape in flint, like an arrowhead.

"And licked it. Put it in his mouth. And the pebble revived all those desires he had attempted to deny, I'd say."

"The one intimately connected with a stone showing their desire for immortality."

"Yes. That's why I'm bringing her in. Clare O'Connor had lain close alongside a slab of shuttered concrete by a cutting in the main road all my life. Do you think I can use her?"

"Was that the way you told me to take?"

I nodded. I knew she'd avoid the question.

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"Quick as that. A Plot as well?" Scarface jeered. "It's always the same you make sure they're dead before anyone can meet them & try their luck."

"Did he say she was dead? Has he killed her off? Yet." The driver countered.

"He gave you that feeling."

"So what would be the point of the ensnarement if she is out of it so soon?" The driver persisted.

"A trap? Where did you see that?" Rosine asked startled.

"Perhaps it was an effigy, frigid, crumbling . . . an absence . . . no warmth in that for the lovers."

Well it's not true. She's trampling through the book. Those running steps are the paradiddle under his yammering questions.

"I never ran after him in my life." Rosine said. And if you had seen her as she spoke you would believe it was true.

Why did all that take place? You excused the capricious tricks they all got up to. We know that. What else befell us? And why, to start with, did he say, 'I shall not address myself by name.'

"That's a trick."

He said it was because he'd seen situations where characters were manipulated, tied down, generally fucked.

I'd like that.

Yes. And that's significant.

She shrugged. What was it for? If not to deliver.

Look. I'm going to try & follow what you said that night, carefully, so if you put any lies in to confuse everybody else, please tell me.

Sometimes the sense is easy to find. Sometimes not. It's just as hard for me. If it is difficult I wonder about it too.

"It got passed around."

"The name? What?"

"No. The carving. It's still on the move."

"Do you think she'd fall for that? She who used silence like a sledgehammer. It was her most violent method of attack."

Not until the words are all chipped & well-rubbed by use, will they fit with one sharp tap of the tongue & teeth. Then they get polished off, even the blunt ones. Leaving solid ones behind, sullied but recognisable. To spit out.

"Not if they're not spoken."

"Nobody in their right mind knows those words."

"It doesn't have illustrations in it?"

"Who said that? If there were no pictures on the page how would I know which way to hold the thing up?"

"You want woodcut figures, then? Like Caxton. Not photogravure?"

"Cardboard would suit him better."

He was holding it upside-down. "I thought you'd like the detail of the photographs

'without which it may not lightly be understood'" (1481)

He left unconcealed his belief in the triviality of a picture beside the importance of words.

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DRIZZLE.

The cold was fearsome. Not a chink of light escaped the blackout of my childhood. As usual, only as we entered, had I been able to steal a glimpse past the closing door into a dark green kitchen, looming bleakly behind the smiling old woman. A sheep's brain had been simmering in an open saucepan for a long time by the look I caught of a grey, stringy scum clinging to the exposed lump of offal. Nothing else was being cooked; a sweet smell pervaded the drab space. I stood on tiptoe & latched the door. Onto a post beside it a cheap chocolate brown paper-bag was impaled on a rusty nail.

This, I imagined, was the test devised to stop anyone getting in. And it meant you could be sidelined by a raised eyebrow, for nothing.

Yes. I was sure you had to have the giant's nod of approval to pass through that door to get into the bloody mess. But, although it took a complicated tangle of steps to cross the threshold, when you got in there was more chance of arriving at a poem than facing the music. And the shame was, you were only given one turn to fondle her buttery flesh in your fingertips with the heavy drum scratching out the reach from heart to bed before the feeling of enchantment fled. It was, of course you hoped, the opening to a secret road marked by kisses planted full on an open mouth.

The room was dank. It had never been aired or heated. That was a rule. There was a grey film of mildew over every stick of furniture. All the walls had large green snowflakes sponged onto a musty ochre background & below a thin ribbon of gloss black the carpet held the shallow form of each footprint that had ever been crushed into its damp weave.

The horde of free riders was waiting there for a lift. I hated them. They were running through a group of video shots, taking the piss, with a bilious look on their faces as if they could smell a mattress burning.

“Get your paws off me.”

“Who?”

"Lay off."

"What?"

"Did you?"

"What?"

"Pinch me. I saw your fingers move but I can't feel anything because my leg has gone to sleep." Isabella's shaved legs had skin like a slug's. I didn't touch them. I didn't. She stretched them out looking for tell-tale marks. "I can't tell." She bulged here & there above her slim ankles in a fairly becoming way, good enough for a 4x7 postcard or a Rubens's machine but not a scrawny enough bean pole to deliver the glad tidings . . . don't touch it giant . . . fuck . . . The shithole slid away in a landslide as the giant snapped the key stick. Quicker than we could turn to memory as a refuge, the capricious future was on us. Odd.

‘And a good bit heavier by this time.’ The giant thought.

Beatrice clicked her fingers.

Up loomed a spectre of the Whore of Babylon's car packed with more available cunt than a West End telephone box. The in-crowd eagerly piled in. Egged on by curiosity, to my regret I followed like a lamb.

“You threw in your lot & it took up a lot of room.” Grumbled the giant.

Initially there were approximately seventeen to twenty-six onlookers left behind if you count the red cherubim & the nymphos. Later there was a mob. (None of them engaged in Creotechnics). So while this group of misfits was hanging about, technically brewing up a phoney rampage . . . the lurch came . . . which they joined with alacrity.

Later, in exasperation, while our lorry had been stuck in a twenty-five mile tailback on the motorway for aeons, caused by a deluge of cow's blood, tons of it spilt; we decided, coolly, this was the best opportunity we'd ever get to betray each other.

To top it, it started to DRIZZLE. Then there was a pink spray kicked up over the windscreen, in the vehicles' fitful spates of movement, so seven or so of us sat uncomfortably squashed into the cab & talked, in a rosy light, of those commonplace acts we all said we enjoyed & laid out boldly in the real eye of the imaginative present.

"What was the worst fuck you ever had?" A hand pointed to me. I didn't need the flag. A hand dropped. I was off. I looked at my companions cramped together; strange bedfellows off the page. I pointed a finger at Isabella. If you expected her to shiver deliciously at being singled out you weren't concentrating. She shrugged 'fuck off' & bent to ease a foot out of its shoe. Her hair drifted into my eyes, we were that close, "It will no longer be ours to savour if you tell." She whined like a T.V. commercial mother flogging the usual garbage. She even flared her nostrils as if there was delicious gravy being spilt.

"Who the fuck wants it? It won't be theirs either."

"You're right. I didn't want it." She snarled back corrosively, "And you knew it."

"None of us want it. But we get it. Get on with it."

"I never got it, did I?" Retorted the giant petulantly, "Not unless I got it near the end & what use will that be?"

"Wait & see."

"No use at all." The giant insisted, "No time to use it before somebody scrawls 'The End' all over it."

"It's a gift. Now shut up."

Thoughts slipped through out up along & into a grin, although I tried to stop them. Are the thoughts snaking through my head evil? Would a smile make them more palatable? Give them a better entrance into the world? Are the thoughts worming their way through my glances, out into the light, as bad? Let's see. Shall I spit out that lie about if the 'I' of the book fucked a tree she'd be down the garden interrogating the willow. Looking around for witnesses. My tight-lipped defence that it was a spiritual exercise would be brushed aside imperiously. They'd all start asking me to prove it. No. I won't use that: the truth will do.

"For me it was the vision of a hideous demon's glare I had while shagging Isabella . . . at that instant she was struggling to break free from the thrusts & I nearly got blown out. She didn't seem to want it. But just then the extra weight added by the sight I caught of its stone-cold stare, balefully observing the action, not only staring but being a part of it, helped me to hang on grimly pounding away to come to the climax, to come, while I felt she was still fighting & forcing herself against it. Not wanting the sperm."

"I couldn't feel a thing." Said Isabella.

"Not big enough?" asked the giant.

"Nothing?" Astarte was surprised as she felt most of her thoughts there.

"Not a flutter." Said Isabella.

"You fell out of bed with the effort." Comforted the giant, "I'll bet."

I would have said he sniggered.

"I was thrown out by her desperate kicks to avoid the come."

"Knock it off I was numb. How could I tell?" Isabella's glare showed she didn't think it was much of a story. "And the state of the bed. Sheets torn. Blood soaking into the mattress. It looked like a murder. Not a love nest."

"What did that get you? Shedding your load up her unwanted." Margarita wanted to know in case it came in handy later as an inducement.

"Nothing. My dick felt like an icicle. Don't know what happened to it."

"It conceived an assemblage."

"Engendered by that tricky bitch Medusa, not you."

"Look at her lying there enjoying it." Medusa was entwined around their ankles lapping up the attention.

"Weren't you petrified?" Medusa hissed as she glared at the unbroken sky.

How do they know all this? Do I talk in my sleep?

You talk to yourself out loud.

A mole is a web, a grisly jam of tissue, crimson-blue strings & strands entangling the womb.

The lorry tarpaulin had flapped incessantly splashing droplets of diluted blood over the windows. Their dribbles constantly renewing the curtaining rosy glaze under which we had started to swap our stories. But I had known something was wrong when I saw her yellow pallor. "I'm fascinated. A Heroine," Scarface declared, carefully placing the box next to the door to keep it open but not coming in. "Did she ask about it?"

"What?"

"Why you'd given her that awful colour."

"I never told her & she never mentioned it. I don't know whether she saw herself in the mirror & was so terrified she suppressed her fear."

"That's impossible. She was brave."

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"I thought you'd go & miss out her feelings." Moaned the giant. "I knew it."

"That doesn't mean what you think it does," snapped Isabella. "You big lout. You're fishing for some lascivious descriptions of my body. Well you're out of luck."

"Or in luck . . . depends on dogged attention to the detail." The driver was emphatic.

"Take that group of three marble-skinned beauties drifting back along the shore from a rave doing a line dance in the wrack. The middle girl, not the only one off her head, worse for wear . . . one of the other two left, was out of her head & the other all set to give head. Arms gone . . . feet gone . . . bodies shattered by all the night work yet they still kept a deep straight line down the vulva, so emphatic & unnatural, which looked as if it had been carved by the rough strokes of a file."

"Trust you to notice that clean cut."

“They hadn’t got much other detail left to examine.”

"Who would believe what I say was going on is, unless I have a nicely drawn figure in proportion to pin the description on? Spell it out explicitly in big letters. If I didn't supply a hook only a few nobodies like you would rummage through the heap. "

"So I'm to be the Fool?" He unconsciously touched his fly, "Who falls for it?"

"Yes. Scarface. You are."

"They're all falling over for it." He retorted. "Keep that finely cut detail on file."

Isabella had lain in between the sheets, pillows piled high behind her head. A friend, Medea was on the bed leaning over so close I thought at first glance they were embracing. It wouldn't have surprised me. The shock hit me when I saw her colour. I'd seen that phosphorescent yellow once before so I knew she was a goner if we didn't act quickly. Only a moral tale could save her. We voted in the victim & nudged her. Then had to shake the drips off her filemot cunt & put it back in a filigree pouch.

The piss smelled like tuna straight from the tin. Astarte released the willing knees she'd held & steadied herself momentarily over the pot before lurching into her spot. "I've got a good one. It wasn't a shag but very near, it might count?" Astarte looked enquiringly at no one & as no one winked she wedged tightly back. "Oh fuck. I'm wet through. I must have missed my aim."

"How can we tell?" They all looked down for the puddle.

"I bet we just got a sniff of it." (And it smelled unusually like cocoa).

"Listen. Behind all this frankness. What is there? Deceit." Astarte took their eyes on one by one, defiantly. They shuffled a bit. "What is it? A cover to be hurtful." She pronounced. "Being frank is nasty shit."

"If it's not . . . if she's not going to drop them . . . it doesn't have to be a lecture." Scarface complained. "Will it do the trick & change her colour?"

"Come on." Someone keeping their head down pleaded. "We don't mind if you put the boot in frank. We realise that could be your way . . . to get it off."

"Deceit. Deliberate & shameful. Is that what you want? Painstakingly stitched together so that it sounds genuine & honest . . . but what does it do? It conceals spite. It's a guise."

Astarte spat out the words. They could have blinded anyone too close.

The giant put up his hand, "You've got all the answers . . . but they don't count . . ."

"So?" She pounced on his words, "Listen to him; now you know it's a blunt instrument or he wouldn't dare pipe up. Frankness sounds like an answer but it's an ill-conceived way of stripping bare what should have been gently exposed."

They settled back. It sounded as though Astarte was getting close to the beginning of her story & it sounded as if it might be in the right vein. "We can tell you're not going to dive straight in," They agreed, "Wallow about in monotonous abstractions as long as you like as long as that fine detail doesn't get cleaned up when we get to the good bit."

"I hate it when you tell me what I'm going to do."

"We're kidding ourselves, sorry we're infuriating, you know we get a furtive pleasure out of sharing our mistakes. You're the boss; we will pretend to enjoy your story, if we get an unexpurgated one, even if we can't make head nor tail of it."

"Wholeness." Astarte started.

They sighed. Now they knew she'd come up with the goods.

"You could never forget something as important as that to your being."

"No." They chanted their agreement. "It's always on our minds."

"Could you?" She entreated. "I had to stand by & watch when she sold out for him."

"Yes." They chanted. Sterling stuff.

"Not the wholeness of a spiritual love of someone for themselves as opposed to physical submission . . . sometimes called love . . . to someone else. You couldn't forget that?"

"Yes." They chanted. "If it came to it. Come on."

"But what if someone doesn't feel right about the . . . process . . . you wouldn't make them do it, would you?"

"Yes." They chanted.

"Who is this someone? My lack of imagination needs a name." Worried the giant.

"Calling her X takes all the fun out of it. It could be a mollusc & how would we like that?"

"Worrying."

"Could be your sister. Eh." Challenged Isabella (Formally known as X). "Can't you put two & two together?"

The giant crossed his fingers behind his back.

"Don't be spiteful," Astarte cut in. "A crack like that can be as disfiguring as self-mutilation. Cuts you off. Is that what you want?"

Now Medea deliberately started to undo the buttons on her fitted pink jacket. "Let me tell you the less he cared the more I hung on. Clung. Hungry."

"For MORE." They all chanted.

The acid reek of the stuffy space was overwhelmed by the powerful smell of her body perfume & sweat mixed with talcum & urine. "And this tight space is making my head whirl . . . for one thing."

"Yeah." They chanted. "We thought you'd lost it all."

"She did. Years ago. And plenty more besides." Snapped Astarte annoyed at the interruption.

"If I'd got a mirror I'd get you in it."

"Oh. Yes. That trick. We used it on her." They all pointed. Medusa didn't like the crack but ignored them.

"So what did you do?"

"I took a powder." Medea said. The fox's eyes lit up.

"To overcome the fear?" They asked not knowing what had brought this outburst on.

"No. To take careful fucking aim." Medea presented the gun. "To have you completely."

The giant's eyes widened, didn't that require tumescence. How was it possible to do that here, so closed in, & so soon? Unless this here & now, with everybody looking (he organised his thoughts under his breath not to let the cat out of the bag) was near the end, surely as a cohesive group they were forced to stick it out until then, abstemiously. That was very hard but they . . . And out popped, "had to put up with that cat." He clapped a paw over his gob but too late a voice blurted out various disjointed fragments of the

thought which had been appropriated without his consent. His eyes tried to look as though they couldn't believe their ears.

"Shut up. You're not allowed a full sentence. Not about this subject."

"Keep your long words to yourself. And that!" Every eye fastened on the offending object.

A big stick.

(Hold on, giant, you have got the wrong end of the stick. Don't pull it. Fuck. Now we're stuck. This is very awkward to explain. I think we have just looped over an entirely irrelevant piece too soon & scooped up an extraneous object.)

The giant coughed & not being able to see his boots stared up at the roof. "Carry on about the impossibility of being whole, please. I'm listening."

"And he is concentrating."

"Yes that bulge shows his brain's working. Carry on."

Astarte continued. "I had woken up groggy; immediately fearful of what might have happened in the night because I'd been out cold completely defenceless. My fingers checked the important parts of my body for damage. My head was spinning. The sobs I could hear seemed to engender a claustrophobic space as they buffeted my ears. It was a few seconds before I realised I was crying. The first moving thing I saw was a big black & white patterned wedge gliding across a patchwork of bushes. I wiped my eyes; it appeared to be a giant butterfly flying backwards dodging the thistles. I should have known where I was from that clue straight away & quit quickly."

"You were home, remember, worrying about Frank." The giant had rummaged around in his memory & tried to be helpful. Shepherding the few items that his brain kept like pawns on a squareless board & lifting one at random. [A plan he discovered of a square, cone & circle would have been useful for him to explain the resurrection of Art but as that was all he had in store he left it.]

"Impossible to describe? (Impressionist). Too gloomy? (Expressionist). Not had enough? (Cubist). Wanted to see it through? (Futurist)." They made suggestions.

"I would have called it 'broad' daylight," Astarte, almost invisible, whispered in a low voice trying not to break the sanctity of the formal garden she had seen defined harshly under a pitiless sun. What had alerted her to this vague memory were the randomly placed carved rose-heads she had felt, set in the wall of the down sloping corridor that had led out to this area. From that past she remembered touching each one, waiting for a pattern to emerge as she noted their incongruous placing & there was no surprise. The only informal tree was a Mezereon showy in purple flower.

"It had been a compelling touch." The driver said throatily, lost in a thought of his own. He whistled softly & smiled.

"But I was full of sleep & my head was still spinning. That should have told me." She ignored him but did smile wryly. "I was trying to get the wayward woman in my head to pull me out of it. Fuck care & patience. And bolt." Astarte mimed shooting a bolt. "But for us the internal distance is endless."

"No horse. Just a nightmare left in the box." Isabella laughed.

"Oi! Hold on, Astarte. How did you make it? You can't bang straight through & out the other end missing out all the endless middle of the trip where you know what is going on but we don't." The driver wanted to insist on knowing.

"Do you really think so?" All the girls asked spontaneously.

The giant was bewildered, "You can't tell that middle bit. It isn't yours to tell. Doesn't it belong to him?" (He pointed at me).

And he nodded, "I'm still considering adding a few remarkable moves. The first one being to keep right out of it."

"He's been peeping," Medea exploded, "What was he up to that he doesn't want us to know? Shouldn't he tell us more about who did what? How she . . . it was a woman I suppose . . . went about it. From the very first kiss." And stuck her thumbs in her green & gold belt cockily waiting for an explanation. "Or cut."

"Yes. You can sometimes . . . or . . . someone can be made to feel whole by having something cut off." Astarte was determined to get on with her story. That pronouncement made the giant shiver. He admitted as much later under cross-examination. (Blabbed).

There was barely time to shiver as pushy Astarte carried on deliberately. "And other things reconstructed somewhere else on their body."

"Something somewhere else. What?" Asked the giant in a small voice. He did not want to know but could not keep his mouth shut. (Babble).

"Somewhere else. Inside. Silly." Repeated Pearl, who had kept quiet very close to 'I' and 'he' for a long while but now felt she was coming into her own.

“It’s not as bad as that, Pearl. I’ll explain.” Said Astarte. “It’s the lack of choice from the start that makes those born to one shape feel betrayed & angry. Above all when it’s fell. You’re lost when your body is a bad fit for its thoughts. From the very beginning you hope for a different shape to emerge & get angry when it doesn’t & you’re stuck with what you’ve got & hate.”

“That’s the result of mass-production.” Deduced the giant. “Or was it niggardly cost cutting what reduced us to approximately two or three homogenous sorts? It is called duplicity. Something like a hollow glass ball with no snow in it never mind a Santa.”

“Even though she’s a monster & doesn’t always talk sense, she is a beauty, nevertheless. There’s a Picassoesque geometric symmetry in her ugliness. If you get her from the right angle in a good light.” Margarita was somewhat concerned to cover up her dig albeit in a negligent way.

“So that elevates it? Being somewhere near a likeness to art? You don’t think that the reason is she decided she’d get away with violence easier as a man?” The driver swung the wheel sharply.

“If your world was created by the sound of a kiss . . . then . . . ours . . . theirs was made by the sound of . . .” Astarte fumbled about, hesitating to declare her position.

“ a Fart?” The giant thought loudly.

“I can’t cope with these interruptions. I’ll give you a list & you can choose, or add your own theory to it.” Astarte finished peevishly.

Fangs tearing flesh.

Chop.

Whose effort is next?

I was walking down Alaska with St. Waterloo in the snow, began the giant, released with the speed of a slug (same colour as Isabella's legs). Growling. Incoherent because of pent-up something or other, his mush taking the mien of a mad man crossing a motor-way with a delicacy & care as if tip-toeing down a candle-lit corridor; when who sprang out before I could fang but the fox who said the main reason I find it difficult to tell you about the output or input is because I don't feel it really belongs to me. Is it mine to sell? Did I ask?

"Boring." They all hollered. "It sounds like an excuse." And the small space reverberated tinnily. "Start again."

"I was beginning to drop off. It was good." Said the driver drowsily.

"My foot's gone tingly," Isabella said, raising it around in a Lotus that gave a lot away.

"There must be something interesting coming up. It usually goes dead."

She had promised to do something special or had I made it up, wishfully. She had promised to make an effort. The giant's voice became croaky with emotion. I had been given to longing at that time. Astarte winked at Medea.

"We don't want you making a song & dance about your mother again."

"And we miss your silly voice."

Next.

The driver slapped on the brakes hard & everything squealed . . . "Don't stop. I was getting into that . . . wasn't it sometime between April & October (1970). How come it was snowing?" he prompted the giant, kindly, whose face brightened frighteningly.

“You must have the gift of mind reading . . .”

“He’s been given Carte Blanche then. Nice bit of fluff that one.”

“I was up north. I’d got this leaping man on my mind taking a first step before the big jump . . .” The giant restarted. “And that was the last thing I wanted.”

“You’re kidding.”

“The first was what I’m hoping to get long before the end, a . . . “

“Step on it driver before he mentions it by name.”

“Don’t tell us.”

“What had you trodden in? Or on?”

“He was an austere thinker. He watched where he put it.”

“Is that the input?” The driver scratched an ear quizzically. “Or it could be the output. No?”

“No. Shh! Or he’ll come back to that without being asked.” Rosine was wary.

. . . so the fox stepping out made me jump . . . “I didn’t know you was here. . .”

“Tiresome.” They yelled, bringing the roof down, exasperated by his bumbling. The driver scratched his other ear, but didn’t pose the question.

. . . and the fox said amongst the echoes, “With nerves all jangled & knotted up tight as that, with synapses firing quicker than a speeding centipede’s innumerable legs, cha cha cha, giant, you need something to suck. Try a sweetie to calm them.” He proffered a flat tin with its lid open. “These blue tablets are very soothing, ace for unscrewing the secret of eternal beatitude from the fog of appearances & for keeping down other indigestible ideas as most of the ones you get are.” The giant reached out attempting delicacy with a

thumb & forefinger. The fox snapped the lid shut. “Hold on before you pop a couple.

They are expensive. Close your eyes & answer a few questions.” The fox was no slouch when it came to rigor.

The giant shut them tight but left his mouth open hopefully.

“This leap.” The fox began with question one, “Is it really necessary? It is your desperate, last-ditch attempt to describe a thought & raise a smile, isn’t it?”

The giant’s tongue, pink shading to green shot out straight. The perfect place to plop a blue pill on.

“He seems to be thinking of something deeper than a ditch. Quite a plunge by my reckoning.” Said Pearl. Observing the giant’s mouth & drawing the only conclusion.

“Is it a thing or a form?” The fox persisted, “I. E. Are you going to leap or are you only going to give us a lot of flannel with diagrams & back-up calculations? And a lot of scribbles. Flouting our trust & perception I may add.” N.B. This has nothing to do with the famous leap of S.K. who was, to all intents & purpose, the other side anyway. It is the other more famous one (into bed) of lovers.

“I object.” Said Pearl, “Less of that. It’s making me feel very uncomfortable & uncertain about words. And if it’s only that why the bitter pill?”

“Giving us a large dose of inquietitude in the wrong place.” Astarte asserted. (Dextrously displaying the palpable objects accompanied by a misplaced worried frown).

“That’s not actually an object/thing like a polished stone, by any chance?” Rosine asked.

“Bit longer.” Said the driver thinking someone had asked how long they had to hang about. Also, didn’t they know, he felt they were staying unnecessarily when he could have been shagging X or . . . “Nevermind.”

“Hard work, I’d say & it gets you low down although a jump does have its place & price tag.” Astarte smiled at the driver lasciviously, & catching his eye said dreamily,

“Sometimes I can leap into bed . . . you know without . . . a second thought.”

“Having used all of them up.” Snapped the fox. “Let me get on with this interrogation or I’ll never get to extract the poison from anyone’s mind.” He did wonder how it was that the driver’s mind seemed full to the brim with something else whenever he tried to get anything concrete in or out of it.

“I touched on that lack of concentration earlier & was shouted down.” Rosine said reading his thoughts, picking up the sheets & shuffling through them to find the place.

“Here.” She stuffed it under the fox’s nose. He perused the page intently.

“It was washed out. Look at the weather he described. No one in his right mind would have been out in that. So with no correlation of facts an investigation is out of the question. Hard luck.”

Rosine made it obvious she didn’t like his reasoning & snatched the papers back.

“Have you made your mind up yet, giant?” The fox glanced around to face the driver, “Or has someone snuffed out the candle?” The driver’s eyes glazed over giving nothing [0 0] away.

“You’ll have to give me a recap of the essential choices.”

“They were 1. Yes. 2. No.” Replied the fox generously, knowing that one more number would have blown a fuse in the giant’s overloaded wiring.”

“I’m sure there used to be more.” Wailed the giant.

“There are several but you did specify ‘essential’ didn’t you.” Said the fox breezily trying to mollify him. “This is the perfect place to assert your . . . size . . .”

“Start again. Lower down.” Pleaded the giant, starting to fidget.

“Is it a symptom?” The fox demanded, “This leap.”

“Language doesn’t show us everything with one gesture (like Scarface) for everybody to pick up on. It would be obsessive to ask it to answer all our questions; it can be partial.

Take the word ‘shit’.” The driver left one eye on the road & used the other to fix his audience.

‘Mmmmm’ several of them thought in unison. ‘Its impact is over estimated, by those people (Turds) fascinated by the substance, for its shock value on anyone normal who wipes their own arse.’

“In the hands of some artists it becomes chocolate.” (He pronounced it chocolatl).

“So I can respond to Mr. Fox in sign language? Inquired the giant, “Or with . . . a lump . . . a bar . . .”

“That would be inconvenient (and not the same). I couldn’t accept.”

He wouldn’t couldn’t shouldn’t mustn’t cannot willnot wizz bang wallop accept it but he held out his hand for the peculiar object the giant had firked out of his pocket.

“You picked this up in a Deli?” The fox sniffed the bargain, flicked a flame onto his zippo & scorched the object. The giant looked on glumly. “Is there anybody in there?”

“What? Are you having flashbacks again?”

“So anything purporting to be shit for the sake of art but really being chocolate in art is a load of shit . . . Right.”

“Right.” They chanted. “Wrong smell.”

“Lucky for the Great Artist celluloid only has one smell.”

“Lucky for him.” They chanted. “It smells like fornicating mice.”

“And even if the G.A. smeared real shit around (& I’m not saying he or she doesn’t) it still wouldn’t smell right on film. Got it?”

“Don’t do it by numbers on film. That’s the Golden Section.” They tacitly agreed. “You can’t get it off.”

“Trapped.” Exclaimed the giant, thinking of a fly paper, overwhelmed by the success of his story but not remembering this part too clearly. He knew something got caught somewhere. Or was it shorted out in disgrace? Mystified he listened.

“I’m not talking here in metaphrastic* or metamorphic terms, get this straight, I’m talking of genuine imitation. I’m not going to metagrobolize**. It is a matter of an illustration of high, kissing arse, art (A) nose in the air fooling about with cocoa. And getting a lot of footage out of it.”

* Art of translation or interpretation.

** To puzzle; to mystify.

“And getting paid scads of dough?” Astarte asked dejectedly thinking of her bare kitchen cupboard (& her bare chest & that cheered her up). “Did they leap about with it . . . on?”

“They had to cavort. And crawl. And float. De Rigueur. I don’t want to come over xenophobic but the name says it all.”

“Nobody asked you.” They chanted apolitically. (This was not ‘Made in the U.S.A.’)

“This breaks new ground, even Goya wouldn’t have thought of it. He might have tried licking a few crumbs of it off his girlfriend’s tits but that’s not the same.”

“Who asked you?” They chanted. “It might be.”

“Did the model get paid for it?” Astarte asked, “I suppose she could have unless she was loaded.” There was a hopeful note in her voice. “Did she get to lick him?”

“It’s practically an historical fact. A few tweaks on the documentation & her tongue will be in there.”

“Payment? Does everything depend on it, the universe, say? The shape of things to come. No?”

“Yes. Yes. Yes.” They chanted raucously. (Or vacuously, this scribble gets worse).

“No! Although it does require a decision & we all know that indecisive masturbation can cause mental problems in a giant.”

“Oh God. Do they do it . . . backwards?”

There was an awkward silence while nobody volunteered to put the giant back in the picture.

“And now we know how X came by that colour which so intrigued you earlier. It wasn’t dried blood it was a coat of cocoa.”

“She must have been modelling for Bonnard.”

(Who wrote on 2 mai 1936 in Deauville. Un ensemble de rapports qui se tiennent font du vrai. Le choix de cet ensemble est affaire de convenance. **On peut nager dans le**

chocolat ou dans l’azur.)

“That should raise the hue & tone. Diving in with a quote.”

“It was a clever way of getting into the swim.”

“This leap/dive, nice curve admittedly, does it mean you consider yourself expendable?”

“The leap is the form. It’s not a plunge.”

“That’s what we’re left with? (Not exactly the Great Wall of China is it.)

“Momentarily.”

“You could chose something more substantial.” The giant suggested with a grin. “One line isn’t enough. It takes two to produce a monster.”

“And that sums up his knowledge & experience of sexual intercourse.” Said Rosine.

“A dance would last longer than a leap & would at least give you a chance to get to know somebody . . . momentarily . . . Then you could dive gracefully out of line if it didn’t work out. I know it’s a fine line but there we are.” Margarita would have twirled accompanying her fine words but they were jammed in rather.

“If he was to dance with words in his head he could stay put, save the act for later & have a nice intention to be going on with . . .” Rosine didn’t want the giant to move.

“Doesn’t have the same cachet as a good jump . . . to my mind. A jump is a very satisfying thing stroke act; something you can get hold of & think about at the same time.”

“Now that is really interesting. I can see a split & a sort of curved line working into it; are you saying that’s bound to be a lovely line. This one I visualise?”

“If it’s the same one I take whenever possible. Yes. Especially with an interlacing line; there is no better alternative. There is, as I’m sure you all noted, a difference between a

leap & a dive stroke plunge cum jump. It could well be that in taking a leap he goes up & stays there. (i.e. doesn't come down).

“That’s the one for him then.”

“With the dive it’s definitely down, straight or curved to the phantoms, in his case gigantic. And it’s getting close to a plunge which is definitely taboo.”

“Some spiritual gymnast, the giant, but for all that & more he could be left with nothing (the one the driver gave away earlier).”

“That is the point.”

“I suggest he takes the leap while adjuring in a footnote that the dive/plunge/jump were seriously considered but he wanted to go up & we wanted him to stay there so we add a footnote to his with the exact details of how far up it has to be & how long he must stay there.”

“And he mustn’t let any draughts in; specifically metaphysical ones.” Demanded Scarface.

“Before he does this; now it’s been sorted out, subject to contract, it doesn’t look as though he’ll be doing it across a ravine or over a cliff.”

“He could just as easily make that leap while lying in bed.”

“Or lurking on a corner . . . truer to type . . . exposing that inadequate wistful yearning from afar . . .”

“What? You are getting carried away again & there is nothing [and this one has nothing to do with the driver (who nodded)] in this to give even a whisper of that kind of tripe.

Bye the way, it's worse than going on about a centipede's legs in case you need a yardstick . . . don't pick it up."

"Giant." They all yelled. "Can't you leave well alone?"

"Ask a . . ."

Crash.

Darkness had caved in on them. Usual consternation etc. whether they'll emerge in an artificial paradise full of thugs or the Northern line.

"If the giant could be persuaded to get on with this leap now instead of touching everything there would be more room for us in the disrupted space & then we would be willing to designate a fall for him (off the back of a lorry) in the same category as a leap as soon as he did it. The jump etc. would also be included." Said a muffled voice with an impatient ring in it.

"Not much chance of that. He's hoping for a better shape of things here & now, or a bit later . . ."

"But not much later," The giant broke in. "And certainly before the end."

"Are you worrying about that again; there is something just after 'The End' & you never know it might be your lucky number."

"UP." It was emphasised. "Has a lot more going for it. All the descriptions & pictures are choc bang full of delights. I know they don't say how experienced the (damsels) are but there isn't anywhere else for them to dodge off to give the imagination the slip. At least it generally looks like a picnic or a Degas monoprint of a friend's birthday party."

“Unless it’s built helter-skelter style, because with that plan it’s possible to spiral down & get shot out on your arse back to the gate & ticket booth where you pay to get in again?”

“That’s the sort of plan you might have but the proprietor of this leap is honest.”

“It could be a variation incorporated in the masterplan designed to kick in at a later stage knowing the faithful could become very squashed up at times of fervent crusades; or a plain exhortation to behave might propel quite a few hooligans up in the heat of a moment while their natural propensities would have been a dive/plunge into iniquity (not usually fully-clothed). Then a safety valve would be necessary to skim off the cream & bale out the rest by giving them elbowroom (see below) & a breathing space. What better than a corkscrew course back to where they started?”

“That’s got to be reincarnation.” Margarita breathed heavily into Rose’s ear.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Sighed the fox. “ But there is only one box on the questionnaire & it only accepts one of two hieroglyphics, either a rampant tick (yes: up) or a cross kiss off (no).”

“It’s a simple plan for it.” Scarface continued enthusiastically, ignoring the fox. “All that is basically needed are a massive cone, some cushions & cyclic time. The drawback is monotony.”

“I could see it would be very difficult to get anything permanent going with anyone fancy, just brief glimpses & a wave or two & bump you’d be back in the queue.”

Margarita did the actions; the cramped space became hotter & stickier & reeked of stifled orgasms. “It could be set to music.”

“Provided the cone is set on its circle as its base & not the point,” X didn’t want any misunderstandings. “If you were to shoot round it the other way you’d end up at the dot.”

“I can understand why he’s holding out for a lift. He thinks it will be easier than a free fall.” Rosine elbowed Margarita’s tits who jabbed Astarte in the tits who took the opportunity before it became vulgar to press her tits hard into the driver’s shoulders who smiled as he pinched them.

“So that’s a yes, then?” Enquired the fox. “I take it’s an up-lift he’s after?”

“No. He’s looking out for a little piece of nonsense.” Isabella cut in. “To go with the one he’s got.” The giant nodded vigorously while trying to tie a bootlace with his teeth could well have finished up with the boot on his head.

“Double-dealing. That’s right at his limit. Another jot & he would break a law of nature (again & flagrant & as usual was tacitly understood) probably the one propping up the present dimension which would then ricochet many times on the waves of gum taking out huge chunks of common-sense picture-book narrative before dropping like a brick into an abstract structuralist hell-hole.”

“I’ve been in plenty of those.” Said Rosine grimly. And the girls all smiled nervously & sang, do-wah do wah do wah in a repressed mass-produced way, except the irrational Medea who muttered, “Home from home.”

This dream is endless. Anything else? The giant isn’t Time itself, is he?

No, there is more glutinousness about him than that; he’s cross-grained & likes to delay things. Doesn’t match the profile at all, does it. He’s a hitch. That’s why the others are

trying to push him off the back but there's no gallantry about this giant. If it was snowing we could send him out to play but even the weather is dead set against us. Juggle that around & you'll get the picture.

I thought they would bond in that claustrophobic atmosphere. Hoped something like authentic cheerfulness would rub off.

Like in the Blitz?

Yes.

Too many viscous feelings still were adhering to the present for that to happen. And don't forget it was the giant's fault they had lost the plot always going for a crooked quantity of small eels. He was perverse. Same as squeaky hinges on a door or its noisy latch letting everybody in on your secret movements & making out he was compelled to do it. When there wasn't room in his head for a conscience, his excuses made the mind boggle.

The fox rustled his papers impatiently, "I'll write 'don't know' against the first box & get on with this task before my ears droop & drop off."

They huffed & puffed & spluttered incoherently but let it go for the time being. Knowing most of that was borrowed.

"The next question, I can say without conceit, has been thought out better. It's an auxiliary, one of my own." The fox began. "It has a twist in the tail so there's no box & plenty of space as I expect to get lots of detail. More than a thousand words worth easily."

“Ha. The build up of this voluminous dossier, which sounds both unnecessary & irrelevant for our particular purpose & carelessly thought out to boot, could be useful. [See end of SNOW section.] Not bad for a home-made teaser. But as the giant’s been absent since before the start you can notch that one up as answered --- yes.”

“I think I could manage more detail in my reply than that.” The giant offered politely.

“Or no. Sorry giant for underestimating you’re graphic capabilities. Where did your tongue go?”

“No? Questioning is the problem with that so & so. Therefore they have to be eliminated.”

[I see. Not only am I rudely interrupted but also provoked. This whole section on betrayal is built around unanswered questions.]

Scrap it.

Next.

In the ensuing confusion several large coloured partitions were erected to prevent a brawl breaking out. The joint bulged & creaked with noisome stinks. Another pot was spotted.

“Is that fish glue?”

“Is this tin can big enough for any additional scenic cargo?” Noted on the floor space at that moment; ten feet; a pair of knees; 1 box containing an inflatable cone; some cushions with a big R embroidered on them surrounding a slop-can containing a yellow liquid (not glue, in all likelihood, soma). “No.”

“Correction.” Roared the fox, haggard & careworn by now & spluttering. “You missed out the ‘I’. Throw that pot out the back. This wreck is dropping apart, falling to pieces & foreign to our sensibilities.”

He also wanted to know why anyone should be allowed to blab on about door hinges & that question brought some order to the joinery at last. Or was it the fish glue that had held it all together?

“There isn’t enough time for that supplementary.” The driver quietly commanded. “I take it that was a supplementary question to your auxiliary question we have been waiting for with bated breath?”

“It could have been a beauty. Like . . . Oh Dear . . . Something is seriously wrong.” Said the giant (ominously). “There is a biscuit-shaped piece missing in the jigsaw.”

“What?” They all cried looking for a SQUAIL to throw at him.

[Calling ‘too soon’ here could be taken to mean that they had let loose at him with a projectile & the driver was, in fact, calling the equivalent of ‘no-ball’, but we knew that fact about the giant already.]

Hence.

“Not yet.” Ordered the driver impatiently. “We agreed to throw insults not a loaded stick.

Let us get back to square one. (Not you, giant, you don’t have one. You squandered it).

Do you call that a beauty? What about this one?” Astarte & Margarita held hands & were about to jump in with a reply & if Astarte hadn’t been running a finger under her bra strap to relieve its pressure they might have got a word in. Her sigh of pleasure as she pulled the ribbon off her shoulder held up the joint effort. Margarita managed to mumble

something to Pearl but that didn't count because Pearl shook her head. (Disbelief?) Too shallow.

“That pink mark looks raw,” Margarita sucked a finger & touched the skin. “But it must be a weight off your mind.” And grinned as she traced the curve of the wire in the cups below Astarte’s breasts. “Is that cutting in as well? Slip it off.” She pulled the lace fringe in the centre as she eased the bra up. Now they were on the slippery slope of caresses & the driver was distracted; we could try & see what’s coming round the corner by asking a clairvoyant what was up, but no, it was up to the fox to bring them back to the cutting edge of the present uncomfortable though it may be.

“I did think of asking Clare for an opinion,” The fox said, sniffing to express his barely concealed distaste for the occult. “I didn’t reckon that would give us much to go on . . . a few odds & ends . . . hilarity amongst them.”

“She wasn’t that bad. It had depended what hobby-horse Clare was on; some rides throw up quite a bright inspirational future. Remember she divined that great shag at the Zoo. [Etc . . . & with an elephant in it.]” There was not; it was a tiger.

“What do you expect! She had been conniving to be that intimate with the keeper for ages. There was nothing else for it. He was a workaholic but only with the carnivore.”

“One step.” Cried the giant enthusiastically. “And we could peer round it ourselves if we knew which way it was.”

“One slug you mean. But when the notion of things fail (when the wheels come off as they do quite often for the giant) we generally turn to art with its illusions (for comfort).”

“Not too sure are you? And I’d like a big A, please.”

“Is that the spectacular foreign ‘turn’?” The driver asked looking to see if the fox had taken to wearing an armband.

“Is someone dead.” The giant gasped & began a slow count.

“That future,” The Fox droned on, “The one suggested or mapped out by the clairvoyant may not be identical to the one we want or were going to get . . . or will get anyway.”

“That’s two.” The giant interjected, holding up two fingers.

“Yes.” They all shouted.

“Isn’t that enough?” He hoped.

“I made it three.” Astarte objected. She always wanted much more than plenty of it.

“Nowhere near. You need enough fingers to be able to cross one off as dead & then have more than one left because that first one is, I assume, symbolically you from the neck up. To be able to include all of us & the rest of you, you’ll need to borrow those fingers Astarte is waiting for minus one.”

“The one that’s gone dead,” Complained Margarita. “And is getting me nowhere near the mood.”

“And because of that,” The Fox continued droning, “The future must be detached from truthfulness when we describe it.”

“Do we get to witness this ‘turn’?” The driver seemed unusually eager to whistle, “I don’t care if it’s out of context or separated from an erotic environment by a gnat’s whisker.”

But the fox, even though he understood his friend’s interest in these exotic ideas, ignored him.

“The other way we could try, for the best, in the absence of a coherent system or curved path, is to take a powder.” He rummaged in his bag & produced several screws of coloured paper. Opening the red one with a deft untwist the Fox said, “I know this looks remarkably like the sherbet cut with sugar we used to dip a wet finger in & suck but any resemblance stops there; with this you not only see the future, you can crawl through the keyhole & get at it.”

“Provided some **other** quicker on the draw hasn’t beaten the voyeur to her.” Pearl was on her toes.

“Does it exist in that form? Or is it only what you could call the cone of make-believe going from the imaginary eye at the keyhole & encompassing the object of desire?”

“A pyramid of male belief; set on a foundation of delusion, the same as the one where they have tarts for heroines talking posh like angels.” Rosine cut the flannel. Margarita blew her nose on it & felt better while Astarte put her hand through the hole.

“But they did have that birthday party, Rosine, printed (in three versions) for very few people to see in black & white. It’s a bit smudgy I know & they all look blotto & one or two of the girl guests could have worn a pretty dress or at least something besides their socks & shoes.” The giant ended lamely but with what we think of as a good heart sticking up.

“Ah. Now I understand why you are such a stickler for form.”

They grimaced at Scarface’s inept remark while holding their seats in anticipation of the crash but the giant hadn’t heard.

The driver held out the rag (ex shirt) in dismay, “That wasn’t supposed to happen.”

“O.K. They were wearing their dog-tags as well.” Said the giant in a conciliatory tone admiring the shine in his own boots, “If you like we’ll go back to where you are caught slipping into a bedroom after the party holding a pair of fancy slippers with Astarte’s stockings dangling from your back pocket (so we know she was stark naked) your heart pounding. But before you get a chance to have any fun with the merchandise we whip you back here again.

“So that cone you’ve got does work?”

“No.” The giant confessed, starting into his latest theory before he lost the floor. “Haven’t you noticed that at the apex of the cone, where the eye looks in, is a very small hole i.e. zero. So in the case of the inflatable general purpose cone there is a slow but constant loss of air.” He was interrupted by Scarface who shouted, “A metaphysical draught. I knew it & after I expressly forbade it.”

“Well it can’t be helped.” Said the giant, taking most of the floor again, “It’s always been that way otherwise how could we know we had an eye in the right place? The cone collapses . . .”

“Obviously. And a good job too. Saves us listening to the whisper of a divine puncture.”

Scarface immediately bagged his part of the floor again.

“Have you done?” Asked the giant standing firm on his diminished bit of floor. “The question is . . . When the cone has reached its vanishing point lying deflated & all wrinkled up what has happened to the . . .”

“Zero?”

“Voyeur?”

“Point of view?”

“Mind behind the zero? No? Air?” The driver was persistent, admit it.

“ . . . Fabricator.” Said the giant triumphantly.

“Oh. Yes. Of course----- the liar.” Agreed Rosine wryly. She always happened on a normal word.

They were non-plussed.

“ . . . and her desire” The giant capped his edifice with a chuckle.

OR said Scarface

Unfortunately, a second after the last inky thumbprint is left on the plate Astarte stuffs the bouquet of flowers in the boss’s face & Margarita bottles her & you walk straight into it without knocking & spend the rest of this turbulent night making up for all the bad advice you’d handed out. We’ll leave you there in a sinister interior hard at it to make your own way back.

“Left in the lurch. Is there a future in that?” The giant liked to play by the rules.

“It’s positively full of it. Not quite as much room for personal progress as being set on fire or hung up by your feet; they require petrol, rope, an armband & initiative to release their potential, but there is certainly more chance of development in that lurch than standing about jingling loose change in your pocket enjoying the sunshine.”

OR said Scarface

Fortuitously, you’re broke; you don’t have the necessary three francs to cock your leg over a lady (I knew this all along that’s why I let you go) so when she said, “Tu viens?” Instead of raising your hat & giving the fitting answer you looked straight past her down

the dark alley, still clutching a plastic bag, & in that instant thought you saw someone you recognised trying to integrate a very disturbed childhood back where it came from.

“Stuff. I’m sure to have said no thanks. So to get to a different future I have to go back.

And let you pull the levers at the crucial points? No way.”

“I’m the one with superhuman strength.” Said the fox. “And I know which platform the gravy train leaves from. I’m the one who knows what to think about it.”

SO

Unremittingly assailed by an expert on the actual meaning of your own thoughts you request a transfer, the argument being couched in deferential phrases, the main prop of which is a theory of misunderstanding . . . to the precise centre of thoughtlessness.

Where, sadly, you open the wrong door & find yourself on another ephemeral wavelength.

“There could have been no one at home.” The giant thought.

See what I mean

OR said Scarface

Relentlessly analytical (Rosine sniggered . . . no that was somebody else . . . Rosine considered, with a faint smile on her beautiful lips, the start of this alternative) perusing the bewildering minutiae constituting an identity (Rosine winked . . . yes she did) we could go back right to the beginning before the third bewitching minute . . .

“Of a quickie?” The driver quipped. (No. Sorry Rosine. Really it wasn’t that short. It lasted four or five minutes or more. Scarface ducked.)

“It was that short.” Rosine gave a finger measurement. “Which isn’t much cop.” She said harshly & it hurt like mad.

And that third shot is before you forget that you let yourself in for the sublime one-night stand. [Scarface is determined to set the record straightish].

“No. It was after that shag.” They chorused a correction amiably.

What you think of your identity when you get it back isn’t what you thought it was before you let go of yourself . . . momentarily . . .

“Come on.”

“I’m pliant & naïve.”

“Still you did it.”

What you think of your identity when you get it back isn’t what you thought it was before you let go of yourself . . . momentarily . . . Scarface was having nothing else but . . .

Come on.

“I’m pliant & naïve.”

“Still you did it.”

. . . prudently missing out surrendering to animal forces you decide to stick . . . Oh Fuck, that’s a mistake . . . with the start at three in a time of the story (he gabbled but not quickly enough) when the giant . . .

Crash

“I’ll put this back in the runner beans.”

. . . had been mercifully released from his obsessive reaction to the word . . . by forcible shrinking.

OR shouted Scarface above the din

Sensibly, we decide to let you go directly into a credible future (see the FOG section).

Bypassing, by the way of world art, in the confusion this causes to our carefully plotted space, the awesome help by divination, di-vi-na-t-i-o-n, that the painted girl on a square, we were keeping under strict observation, was going to give you.

“The quicker the better.” Said Rosine flicking an ear ruefully.

Deftly fingering through reams of intellectual alternatives to find an unobjectionable but rough goal you are forced to pick at random. With resignation you acquiesce.

“I’ll bet you did, you cheat. Coming across a bird straight off the walls of Ajanta wearing more jewels than clothes.” Rosine shouted. “And don’t shake your head. It’s your feigned innocence that’s so infuriating.”

And without the baggage of the past, just the rags on your back you set out. Not a single poem of support pushed under the door at dawn on the day of departure.

“Stop. You’re starting to get nasty.”

“I thought it was the first time he had sounded realistic.” Rosine said. “Don’t you , giant?”

The giant looked up & blushed; caught cheating. Daydreaming about Dawn. He had nearly used the word ‘objective’ but left that for those who preferred their imperfections from a bottle.

“He didn’t give it a setting. Where was the door?”

“Dawn.” Corrected the giant unceremoniously. “Logically. In the east riding the faeces of the zephyr.”

OR

No 'or' about it. The giant was right, incontrovertibly; love interest is desperately needed to fuel the quest you undertake in the foreseeable future. It binds you to a foolhardy course of action.

"A series of early morning quickies." Scarface looked pleased. "With whom?"

"With errr." All eyes were cast down in a flash. "Let me see . . . errr."

1.Truncated bated breaths taken.

2.Spasmodic glances thrown.

3.Furtive contractions of bodily mass made.

4.Surreptitious mouth sweetener pill swallowed. (Foul. No artificial agents allowed).

5.Distorted facials endured.

A forbidding chain of unspoken events to assume absolute unambiguous non-desirability.

As the result of this equation shows, it would be futile sending you off into the unknown without the additional lure of 'love interest' a 'no change' policy is in order. "Who were you shagging last?"

"That can't be divulged."

"Bad practice that; one tends to overshoot the maximum allowance by yards."

"It would be sensible here to be prudent, a thorny issue, particularly after that last, albeit temporary, loss of identity . . ."

"Rush of blood."

"Only a momentary one." Rosine repeated her earlier criticism.

“Prudence was that donkey in a field of thistles,” Said the giant. “She rolled over from time to time . . . puzzling exploit.”

There was an icy silence from the vegetarians plus one hang-dog expression.

“There must have been a touch of self-doubt in that donkey’s make-up; although being marooned in a field of thistles should have confirmed her worst fears.”

“Right.” Exclaimed the giant amazed by Scarface’s perspicacity. “The boy donkey did have one like a spotty sausage.”

“It wasn’t fair to bring that up. He was noticeably self-conscious about this appendage & that should have been all that was necessary. There was no need for any soul-searching.”

“Something like hunt the parcel?” Asked the giant.

“A lost cause.” The Fox was overjoyed. “Surely we could use that . . . it’s so physical.”

Rosine eyed him stonily. “It might call for an actual case of vivisection to counteract any counter-intuitive conclusions. I’m ready to start when you are.”

“Let’s keep this soul going round & round in circles, it’s safer & more fun. Especially if you were thinking of using mine. We could sleep on it” Stuttered the Fox.

“We could not.” Snapped Rosine.

“We don’t want to bring in the problem of untying some difficult knots about my identity.” Said the Fox, “Or hit & miss transmigration. The giant may get the soul . . .”

“Before the end I hope.” Intoned the giant. Busy over a plate of beans.

“. . . thus reversing, in less than a day, millenniums of selective advance into the . . . uncanny destiny . . . damnation . . . abrogating the dreadful struggle which mankind has undergone . . . all done to eradicate giants.”

“By selective genetic testicular shrinking again? Sorry. Just wondered.”

The giant looked up with a smile of satisfaction outlined in sauce (having warded off any possible exchange or ingress of the Fox’s soul).

I’d say it was still a grin.

Still? O dear that means trouble.

And the giant’s mind is obviously so big, things being in scale, I think it could squash the Fox’s soul.

Then what will his become?

The giant emptiness plus a stick; nothing else in there but a stick keeping the lid up.

OR said somebody quickly imitating Scarface.

Inescapably saddled with the notions devised by the above idiot with an armband, backed up by violence & repressive law & with no respite in view you decide instead to take to the past with its fancy striped stockings. Knowing it’s a fugitive hope we wave you off.

“The arrears being large even when sub-divided by a cleft.” The giant was at the arithmetic again. “And a pretty heavy remainder which helps it to balance.”

So what’s coming, which looked like a pale reflection compared with that uncomprehending lot outlined earlier, now becomes a crushing burden. You have to get the picture right because we can check everything up against the undeniable facts.

“Brick by brick in your case, giant.”

“And block by block in yours.” Retorted the giant, perhaps involuntarily.

Is the giant the voice of reason? Wouldn’t this future we seek be better off without him?

He always repeats the same things (roughly) & is inaccessible to contradictory ideas.

“Thick?”

“His desires never get realised & he’s unhappy about that; he never gets rewards so he breaks things. That’s all.” Said Pearl on her high notes.

“I know he tried the elves once.” Said the driver shaking his head taking her analysis seriously. “Now he should try some other go-betweens (but not the aberrant sort). Say a sylph . . . a big one.”

There was a general murmur of agreement about him getting lost in the darkest of woods with no clearings & they left it at that.

“The one thing known about this future is awful; it is both limited & unlimited.”

“What a mess.” The giant agreed. “It needs a poke.” He looked at his pile of kindling wood to select a stick (he’s only looking) & felt a pang of regret as he picked out a combustible beauty. “What a loss is felt as we get, or rather are condemned to get, the first variety of future on offer only.” He put the stick on the fire. You could imagine him wiping away a tear as if he had lost a relative, but don’t.

Understandably resigned to the machinations of a clueless, but cheerful & limited, adept at the fait accompli they also knew it was imperative to rediscover ways of obtaining

1. The giant’s one-way ticket to the fairies, collect.
2. A turn on the organ of responsibility, minus monkey.
3. A disavowal of Swiss music, by drowning out the yodel.

“If I were the singer on that disc I’d head for the rim.” The giant tapped a boot often somewhere near, but not quite on, the beat. [Aside. Sorry again Switzerland. What beat?].

“Why?”

“The centre, well the hole actually, is getting old much faster than the rim. So that’s the place where the future is going to be played out.”

“I could be thinner sitting there but stay much the same.” Isabella excitedly nudged Margarita who was also on the verge of relative entrapment. The whirling edge of this disc, which, next to the circle of preening vanity established earlier & embellished with perhaps a silly flounce, was the hot spot to be caught in, for it veered very close to some of the futures outlined on the back of the lorry without actually getting mucked up by them.

“It’s a blessing when that needle gets to the hole & stops.” The driver (wisely) said. “Turn it down . . . he, she or it can age in peace.”

“If they went far enough into the future could they ask about the ‘after life’?”

“Say we call in the experts, a dozen initiates of the doctrine of ‘The Eternal Return’ to help construct a future with definite articles but no past tense. A telephone kiosk of undesirables & their clients could colonise it while we carry on with the present as it is.”

“It’s never the same. Look what they said happened to the poet’s identity after that one-night stand.”

“He plagiarised the entire Somethingoddothers the following night.” (Someone, who must remain nameless, misunderstood this & felt very, very inadequate).

“Cut it down to size?”

“Took every 5th word from it.”

“Out of a hat by the shape of the syntax.”

“No. He didn’t skim; it was a cheap method for saving time & effort. What a bastard.”

“There should be proper legal protection for endangered old rhymes not a loosely worded farrago that any bulldozer could slip past.”

“And the Dormouse & the Marsh fritillary need it.” The giant chimed in. “Very soon fairy tales will be happening in pill boxes on concrete slabs.”

“Home from home for you pal. I think.”

“Therefore you have to say it.” Said the giant. “Anyway, that’s a bit steep.”

---- (Stupefied silence. One uphill struggle).

“Sure he only borrowed a word or two & planted them in a lot of suggestive debris.

Anyone could make that mistake. After all the whole of the language was at stake. He had to do something to prop it up after the battering it had taken from neologisms.”

“The solution was simple.” Said the giant greedily. “He should have used the stake so that I can have the prop.”

Snatch.

Crash.

---- (Looks of disbelief mingled with dismay . . . no . . . several of disgust & a grin.

Sibilance from between many lips).

This present now could have gone several ways, some nicer than others, some with spice.

And there was a genuine one amongst them.

“That one.” Grunted everyone. “Is the final straw. How can imitation be genuine?”

“Search me.” Said Margarita thinking an erotic diversion necessary to rescue the sense.

The giant had counted the group many times but could only make it six no more. And that wasn’t enough. Who has been so negligent?

“I was born in the sticks.” Confessed the driver. “It’s my turn, isn’t it?”

The giant pulled out a compass.

“Over which holy spot they have built an industrial site.”

“Too late now.” Commiserated the giant. “Time’s gone erratic. Got the wobbles. Now we’re up against it.” He tapped the glass.

“It’s never too late to learn, giant.” Margarita lied through her back teeth. “But with a lost finger & all the numbers gone it might be difficult to fit you in a reasonable future.

Probably have to sneak you in after the lights have gone out (one by one European style).”

The driver remained calm & neutral above the chatter, his mind glued on a mute fixture sidelined in his own threadbare childhood. In a cloud thinking wistfully of her damp pallid thighs which had already lost their promise; her button nose above which, in grey hollows, the eyes swam & switched from fuckme to fearnot as rapidly as he had been fumbled then she had tumbled back & shagged him before her protestations had dried in his throat. He was going to get this sexual confession off the top of his head or burst. Our family never used the front door. It was always jammed by the damp. He yanked it open abruptly. And the memory of the actual attempt to open that door soaks away under the influx of more welcoming alternatives.

“Stop exaggerating. This is a farce. It doesn’t need forcing to fulfill its promises.”

‘Slip it in sideways’ she had murmured & shrieked with laughter straight after. No. His childhood was before that quick change.

It sounded like a cackle to me.

Her vaguely uttered excuse. She was searching for a shoe. Clutching the child under her arm, with its tight bubbly curls exactly the same . . . The driver slipped into reverie; his face like a gargoyle; mouth wide open, brain of stone. She hovered on the doorstep: the sweetheart.

‘Step through it sideways’ she had shouted as her dress fell open. He didn’t see it. She felt rejected. And, always remembering with these words that he had waited under the covers for the next instruction that never came, the driver was possessed by a spirit of disquiet which he found difficult to define or escape, unable to stay with the intense feeling long enough to grasp it, but unable to sever his attention from the pain it always caused. He was clear-sighted enough to know that the lost space, where this enigmatic conjunction happened, would never be filled; it was a barren spot. Yet her ghostly body frequently slipped into the empty place beside him, thereby pre-empting any other taker, but always leaving it bare, taking possession falsely. As a gale takes away for a moment the tangles in the underbrush.

“It does make an endeavour to straighten out the twists & ravel while not falling prey to its bewitching entanglements. That’s all.” Said the giant.

“Oh Christ, giant, stop sticking up for the North wind.”

“About to come; but not yet here.” The driver’s lips barely moved. “Near enough to come.” A heart-fluttering expectation lay on his lips. “But nowhere near.”

The scene painstakingly arranged around hope. Nothing happened.

“The answer was in his body.” Margarita clicked her fingers for emphasis.

“It’s that sort of irresponsible reflection which leads to ideas. Might get you as far as enlightenment (poetry etc.) Then what?”

“Lunacy. But nobody wants to touch on that.”

“Unreachable.” The driver barely spoke. “But near.” His head lolled onto the shoulder of Astarte, & as it slid to nestle in the curve of her neck, in a flash a shower of barely visible blue sparks jumped from the collar of her dress, near the tin brooch with only two initials, to extinguish on the driver’s face.

OR said Astarte we can forget the future & stay with this.

He was wide-awake with his eyes closed. He wanted me to caress him but didn’t know how to put it.

“Where to put it or how to ask for it, be clear Astarte.” Rosine said, then suggested slyly.

“But surely he could leave all that to you?”

“He let it happen. Just slipped into it with a deliberateness that was breathtakingly simple.”

“So you were dumbstruck & that put you in the mood?”

“No. No. No. I had to be in it, waiting, giving out the right wicked signals.”

“I suspected she was always in that mood, under the cover of innocence, just flickering around in it, like a moth.”

“Faulty connection.” The giant deliberated in the background. “With the morals.”

Wrong! It was . . . the choice is yours . . . take your time:

1. Madness. A clue which speaks volumes.

2. An Ulterior motive. It was a way of closing down the text & leaving the rest to the reader.

3. A Precautionary measure. To avoid the incomprehensible.

“Trapped in the cleavage.” Said the giant. “Dropped right in the dichotomy. Spent too much time talking to himself; recklessly didn’t look where his eyes were going & when the conversation brought a lump to his throat he sought solace in the first place his eyes saw when he opened them.”

“Wrong! Nobody listens to you & where have you ended up? Look at your feet . . . boots.”

“When you ask me a question I don’t think you want an answer.” The giant complained.

“I think you want to block me off from seeking something out. Something better for myself. And before the end.” The giant was solemn.

“Deliberately?”

“Obstructive?”

“No. It was the way he was. Stumbling about. Concerned about himself.”

“Knocking things?”

“Not always.”

A very hot flame was concentrated on the place where he wanted to begin the cut. When the metal was bright red he turned a jet of oxygen on the spot through a cutting blowpipe. This ignited the metal.

Look out!

Crash.

With a sprinkling of big juicy orange sparks the welding torch sliced through the last steel spar. The glowing break sagged open, red hot; for an instant the shape of a surprised mouth.

“We are through. Gasp. This is the fairytale ending.”

“You’ve got to be kidding. Look at it.”

----oo---- “What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing there.”

There was a momentary gleam, almost nothing.

“It’s an ending. What do you expect? Fulfilment?”

“A blackout is disappointing. It’s a shame they couldn’t provide an alternative.”

“Oh. There is one of those. I forgot it in the rush.”

“Just look at that!”

To prevent it being lop-sided we need a dollop of cement mix on the right-hand side to send it leaning leftward into everydayness.

“Who’s going to deal with it there? The giant asked in a plummeting lath & plaster voice.

Obviously not relishing being given the task (or the singing part). “Me?”

“Are you offering?” The driver wondered, amazed, because it was a mess. “Yes?”

“Can’t sing.” Declared the giant hoarsely. “And I’m not doubling back.”

“I didn’t doubt that for even a split second (borrowed from the RAIN section).” Said

Rosine. “Here we are practically at the treadmill of Karma within a stone’s throw of

Nirvana & I know you are about to go on & on about your throat.” Rosine also knew she

was wasting a good joke on the giant in that mood but it was time to slip in a rash statement.

“It’s particularly noticeable how much easier it is with concrete. (Than to get the giant to shut up everyone muttered under his or her breath). There is some weight about it.” Said the driver, doling out a spadeful from the bucket. “I can really relate to it.” He patted the lump down. “That’s good; should be enough to capsize the raft of the Medusa & clean all that human debris off it.”

“O. Right. Thanks a lot.” Said Medusa with a vacant stare wiping her mouth.

“Good for the bricks, too.” The giant picked up a trowel & studied the work plan. His face fell. “This is a copy (forged) of my design for circular reasoning. Some smart arse has added corners & squared it up but it’s not distorted enough to disguise from the understanding my underlying great thought.”

“Is that the round one you had, & I’m trying to be careful here, & nothing more?”

“Something like, & I’m being careful here as well, a bubble & nothing more?”

“No writing in it?” Prompted the driver with a carefulness that was exceptional for him.

“That’s how we usually tell.”

Head down the giant studied the plan harder.

To prevent the ending from being intangible or elusive or petering off into a ditch it will be necessary to give it a border of illusion. There is a catch but not one which is dealt with here.

“You are **not** bricking it up. That is out of the question.” Rosine was startled into emphasis & managed to clip & bruise Astarte with her elbow.

“I didn’t ask the question yet, can you believe.” Said the Fox. “And here you are drawing conclusions.”

“And getting paid back for work not rendered.” Astarte complained ruefully. Thinking ‘chocolate.’

“Ah. I knew that plan was complicated.” The giant sounded less woeful. “But if this is a threshold why is it being walled up?”

“A wall has a positive elevating intent; keeping them out while at the same time it keeps us in. Is there anything pernicious about that? It’s merely a procedure. What are you afraid of? A mystery?” None of the seven spoke. Except the giant, unable to take a hint.

“Who is in & who is out?”

“Oh. The recalcitrance of that giant. Can’t he leave well alone?”

“And as he conjures it up out of nothing where does he get it?”

It would take a fair number of hyphenated words & the manifestation of a couple of sounds without sense to explain the unfairness of that question. So, not wanting to burst the bubble, we proceed as if we hadn’t seen the insignificance of what they were rabbiting on about.

“When he pulls it out next time, ask him. Say ‘Has this got anything to do with Nihilism?’ Make him face up to it. Finally justify it. Doing that is called fore-sight. It is essential to have some when dealing with those sorts of problematic situations.”

“Is it? Well if there is such a lot of it about how did he get in on the trip, in the first place? Anyone discovered that yet?” Rosine knew it was time to take a pragmatic approach. She pulled the giant’s lug hard.

“Come off it, Rosine. You know only too well that he doesn’t care. Or he would have a queuing system in operation. As it is any busybody can butt in anywhere. And in any case, if used properly, the fore-sight prevents a trip, in the first place. It simply does not happen. Eventually, when you really get the gift plus some fore-shortening, there is nothing going on at all.”

“When you were both stuck in that queue you didn’t happen to see who was standing patiently at the end, did you?” Asked the giant not wriggling his toes in anticipation.

“Because it could well be that the end of the line is actually in front of us, in the future.”

“That’s pushing it a bit.” Rosine thumbed the book & dramatically handed it to the driver for confirmation. Scarface deftly intercepted & lost the page.

“The queue explains some recent tunes though, plays havoc with the protention.”

“I don’t remember it in one of the ones we have come across. Let’s see. Page 3, looks near the end of the line but aren’t those sort of zeppelins part of the past now?” The driver whistled backwards through a smile. “Unfortunately.”

“So, giant, correct me if I’m wrong, all that pushing & shoving, you say, is going in the wrong direction?” The Fox airily delivered the jab with the full intention of following it with the K.O. He took the book, but too late.

“How can it be?” The giant quickly replied before the fox could turn a page. “When we haven’t decided where the future is yet. Or who is in it. The driver jibs at most of the possibilities because of what happened in his past.” He leaned forward & tapped the book. Its significance was now unassailable.

“Always having to go behind his back.” Scoffed the Fox. “Is that the only way you can get round it?” He tapped the book.

“I only did that accidentally. “ The giant apologised in a round about way but with a grin that was suspiciously akin to an act of defiance. “If my thoughts weren’t so free-floating I might have allowed you in with a pseudo-question that you could have followed (after some textural shadow boxing) by a good punch line. But as it is you have to accept the plain facts; the driver always spots a sinister figure, real or imagined I’m not sure, slinking around a corner in the future we chose & immediately balks at the move to prevent someone’s feelings being hurt, usually his.”

The driver coughed. “For the time being that will have to do. Any clarification of a detail or two in my past must be sacrificed to advance the team effort into a future of some sort.” The driver said this changing gear, generously knowing that it could possibly only show a fraction of what seemed to be himself & that wasn’t what he wanted at all. “Let’s skip it.”

“More like. Tomblike. If you allow the wall building to carry on the outlook will be spoilt . . . if you care a rap that is . . . for mere appearances . . . a straightforward slam of a kitchen door would have done with it & we could have gone to that birthday.” Rosine knew her mind.

“Not so good for the nervous system.” The Fox had to let them know. “No matter how far away it is.” He squinted. “How far is it? Is it its right size yet?”

“I’m having lots of trouble with that ‘mere’ Rosine.” Said the perplexed giant kneading his hands. “Is there another appearance around? A better one for me, perhaps?”

“Nice shot. Nearer the end, Duckie.” Said Margarita.

“And there is the risk of error; did you think of that? Just imagine what it would be like to have some Charlie’s appearance grafted on; never mind the apparent good you might feel what about the incoherence you’ve been working on? Gone for good.”

“Good.” They all agreed.

“And think how badly you wanted to be top that time you were bottom.”

“Nothing could be as bad as that . . . no wait . . . a cocktail party . . . could be worse.”

They all agreed. (No hesitation that was an effect).

“That was a beauty. Absolute wooden tosh splendidly dished up in frocks.”

“They had to cut the dialogue with a chain saw. When I saw it.” The giant lied. And he threw in a wolf whistle. The driver turned to see if the giant had smiled & nodded his head. “Well done. It couldn’t have been more unconvincingly put if you had practised as hard as the fox does scavenging.”

“I merely try to fasten down the end of the guide line when I catch it.” The fox snapped back. “Does it matter whose it is?”

“Change of heart? You used to go for the flimsier sort . . . nebulous . . . sheepish stuff.”

“A concrete guide line to consequences. I’d settle for that.” The driver butted in fast.

“I’d like to know what’s behind that!” Scarface was quick.

But the girls were quickest (They all slapped their dresses at arse level & leaned over backwards but the problem still seemed recalcitrant).

“Outside of what’s going on, naturally!” Scarface was like lightning.

(They were not drawn in. But they were split about fifty: fifty over appearances).

Big, **bigger** & hurrah, just before the end: **Giant** size.

“What?” Asked the giant. “And is there only one of them?”

“One each.”

“I made it three.” Isabella eagerly sighed compliantly. “A free for all. And all larger than mine.”

* * *

A second after passing two council houses made of grey steel plates bolted together & just before a florist’s hut a red lorry pulled into the yard of a monumental mason. This dilapidated area was announced by a massive half-circular, illegible sign, on rot darkened wood, raised on posts serving as an entrance to the space that ran down to a sluggish canal in which a few perch punched the slight current for nourishment. Under the watchful eye of a marble caryatid (Clare) the driver got out of the lorry alone; whistled & smiled at the dog scrambling out from under the passenger seat onto which was strapped a chalky pale pink & ochre relief.

‘What have we here?’ Rosine wondered as she came from behind the tall shed to meet him, with her face of a chipped sphinx onto which had been bashed a look of delight, the one she had when taken in pleasure. Weaving through the stringy weeds & slabs of half polished headstones, her eyes shining with expectation, she was a carbon copy of the figure chiselled by light on the sheets of glass fronting the studio. “Hello Scarface.” Rosine said with venomous affection. “What have we here.” She lifted out the relief.

“There has been a lot of stone moved about on behalf of the dead & I see you’re still at it.” The driver dropped the tailgate.

On the back of the lorry were jammed seven or eight fragments of sculpture depending how you counted or where you stood to look.

“Looted or on loan?” Rosine wanted to know.

1. A huge foot (clean break at the ankle) took up most of the space. Toes intact.
2. A wooden angel. One wing gone; one wing bedraggled. But with both arms & hands (empty) & legs & feet. Metal Halo. Traces of paint on head.
3. An angel. Stone. Battered beatific face. Both wings intact. One arm aloft plus hand & finger. And a shoulder. Nothing left below the waist.
- 4, 5 & 6. Three, so called, Graces’ torsos braced with rusty iron rods. Comprising, between them, of one pair of breasts, one chiselled opening & one head (not the right one, probably male). One leg.
7. A Medusa’s face (plaster copy) lying in a scattering of various bits of animal anatomy.

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In the centre of the delicate relief, which Rosine had placed against a wheel, just the head of a dog was peeking through a double shutter slightly ajar. At the left-hand edge a dishevelled figure stood. Her nose was out of joint above an open mouth; a limp arm held or was held by loose ribbons amongst which a full, but loose, dress exposed her breasts. She was perched on a round boulder. The right-hand figure keeping guard, had a serious almost severe expression, tight-lipped, dress done up to a high, stiff collar. Standing bare foot on a cannon ball she gave no ground.

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