

**Book One of 'The Angel Maker' containing every
word beginning with 'i'.**

'The abortionists of unity are indeed angel makers, doctores angelici, because they affirm
a properly angelic & superior unity.'

p.6 A thousand plateaus. G Deleuze. F Guattari.

TANTRICK.

I could dream of luck & be able to hold the lark still forever in song as I stand in front of the window of the Fortress Drapery Store with its vertical rows of bras jutting into my three wishes. I might, like a moth alighting unharmed on a sharp saw blade, each tooth a lick of flame, get the beasts & stones to speak in this story. And I will, as Death advances through the paper-thin tissue of my world, tell lies to save my skin. But because she is still there in my heart, not described by daubs of paint but appearing out of its mess, I want to start on a pure white snowy day so you are sure I'm inventing what I say.

For, as I imagine the plastic window dressing turned to flesh, as I caress those full breasts, I am remembering trailing through pine woods with each tree creaking under that fall of snow, with you in my arms naked, & here again I am wishing **I wish I wish**

In this flight, two-faced, I tried to switch near the top of an irreversible promise

sing flame-kissed passwords

to clear the way, yet every time this other masked self wrapped around me as I hovered on a windswept deserted doorstep & held me close but still I felt I was alone. And another icy scattered night scooped me up, claimed me to begin the task of grieving again.

Downcast after seven years of an erotic wish not coming true but with snowflakes now hardening to crystalline stars on the tips of her breasts & tears now quartz rolling down

her cheeks, with a strange new woman to tangle with naked in the soft winter sheets & a wound to cherish & rub, I knew that soon a thaw would set in . . . & then I forgot. Or was it a fading escape made in that peculiar silence which follows any unforgivable interruption?

Tomorrow, I said,

with no singing sound to stalk

the writing is on the wall. I'm going to tell your story

where bluish ashes traced a square

And I did.

This first book

full of coiled ringing words

left a lot of pleasures still to tell; left someone only given an initial, hurt in the lurch needing to be named; left us all at a hazardous rendezvous so near an entrance to the underworld that we had to watch our step because we soon found out the stone fish can become anything as they swim up over our heads.

All sixteen of the fish fixed themselves in a circle in the roof & then in a blink each one changed to a celestial nymph. And these angels, well the ones still with heads, could seduce a viper with a whisper.

The place oozed a contagious treachery. Its story, with all the characters stripped of any superficial garlanding by the cold chisel, was intricately carved on the two doorways.

Shades were creeping so close, with their inviting looks seduction was a certainty, our only safety was to transfix them by . . . bravado? . . . Or starting another book . . . The first

really had been an Imperfect Fairytale. With the princess playing a dizzy virgin especially for me yet having more experience than a demoiselle d'Avignon. And because this wonderful romance became something else, a spiral into an untimely death, it was difficult to answer that I did care when I was asked if you were beautiful again in death although I told the truth & said, *No, she looked worse, more ugly than just before she died.*

Why ask me that?

You are beautiful.

I know now there is never the chance of a glance over your shoulder. You can't look back at pictures they have to be faced; the more you scribble in the detail the more blank spaces appear.

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So to placate a whim & give a wounded stare its design I am going to try & match the drawing books, page by page, with notes about another whirlwind love enduring.

Entangled as each minute is: as she waited & left & came back again with what should have been said but wasn't, what could have happened but didn't. Each number is sometimes counted twice or more to allow as much as possible of what there was to tell to gain entrance this time round.

Her first word was Rainbow.

Her second Snow.

Standing on a new floor that creaked ripe like her green bra I knew you were dead.

I tightened my belt & decided to lick the talisman skin

And begin again.

When she snarls doesn't she know my heart tightens into a knot?

What kind of knot?

The same one that keeps the gate shut on the terra-cotta Etruscan woman

Holding a dead child.

A rainbow like a boomerang springs

quickly out of kisses.

Your face remade around your eyes

when making love

like snow.

The snow is quickly nothing.

Hands over the birdhouse we only just tumbled out of bed & dressed in time to avoid being caught shagging red-handed. The next instant our seven visitors were through the door, stood in a row & glowering at us to get on with it. We just had got on with it, she retorted with a straight face, directing a flash of pale fire from her green eyes into their goggling stares.

What is that? She pointed behind them. It's difficult to focus in the garish, artificial light of fairyland, so as something slipped out of sight, it also slipped out of mind.

What, they wanted to know, are you putting us through next?

Follow me & keep quiet. The future is an ill-lit place. Not well lit, they didn't catch my smile, as I sensibly juggled nothing with an overpowering feeling that it was necessary to keep them happy. We tripped lightly chattering but keeping our heads down in case, into a cavernous space cut out under the concrete, a factory slapped up by a cohort hatched out of Piranesi. A dust grey & vast bare floor absorbed their footsteps. Mine tapped a stuttering heartbeat into the din. The unforeseen: it was occupied: a hammering man wearing & anchored by large chrome boots was up an aluminium ladder which stood beside a paint drenched table that had a tall mirror, also splashed with colour, propped on it reflecting a line festooned with grim faces. The trapdoor in the floor was open. Shall we hide? Should we declare ourselves? Do we pull back, secrete ourselves in a nook, & take one more look?

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There is no alternative. The humming noise rising & falling tunelessly is issuing from the artist Schlumper, busy in this workshop, who has set out to find, if we catch the picture nailed to the partition wall in the right light, what becomes when two hares boxing are mixed with a woman under a thorn bush on a hillside with a face. Can that be it? Look again at what happened. Who is that beautiful woman, with a gap between her slender thighs, balancing on a single house-brick mouthing some silent words out at the troubled onlooker? Why her? Is it a picture of . . . Trash & a stalking hunter mashed to one side with some melancholy caution, invaginations hinted at, sweeping detours into a murky landscape of smoky fires, hold-ups caused by the blown debris, giving the far-seers plenty to go on in the fog. Is it a stake-out? A lay-by? Could that be it? A lay? Heedless of the troublesome effect of its vibrations, the artist is droning on while balancing up a triangular step-ladder with a paintbrush clamped between his teeth. We observe him pegging out the seven masks made & painted by a child, to dry on a line. And while the jarring notes are an excellently chosen accompaniment for the crude objects of his task their monotony is deranging. After climbing down, Schlumper, muttering. "O.K. You win. O.K." Still unaware he was not alone, brooded over the skew-whiff alignment of the masks strangely feeling that not getting the order right would somehow involve him in a betrayal but of whom or what he could not say. With a fist holding a brush pecking the space, he counted them, lopping each mask off with a shot at its possible name:

Snow White looked a little uneasy next to her partner Frankenstein, who had his one cast eye on an emaciated Tiger woman burning bright, who shivered next to Moron (alone in his block of ice). Then he guessed a Rabbit (actually a bunny girl advertising the ride of the century) by a Bear (was there a what behind that vacant stare) and the last one's identity was very difficult to pin down. Could it be a Snake or a Skeleton? The brush hung poised ready to make the defining marks. Something held the artist back. Perhaps a skulking shadowy co-operator issuing orders, asking questions & giving advice in rapid fire & ready to jump out & flag down the action, decided, at that instant, although unanswered to break, to fade away.

Would the sequence they were hung in be important to the child? One mask, now called Frankenstein, both sides of his face showing at once, appeared askew at which Schlumper clumsily tried to straighten him by tapping a vital bolt with a metre rule. Did electrifying sparks fly? But he still had trouble with the round one. Was it a snake about to strike or an exceptionally beautiful girl holding level his steadfast gaze? Which way what way? He threw down the brush impatiently. Away. When taking hold of another mask, Moron a man whose brain had thawed from ice to slush, Schlumper had felt stranded, hollowed out like a Bosch tree-man, sent boating on a muddy pond. Why? Then he had released the mask onto its peg & the despondent feeling scudded away just like the shadow of a cloud before a breeze as soft as the insides of a woman's thighs. He looked at Snow White & winked. She pouted, keeping a fat cupboard behind closed doors. He tried one out on Tiger woman. She curled her lips into a snarl. Where lies man? But a wink at the Bunny actually won a smile. She had pomegranate seeds stuck between her teeth. Schlumper picked up his brush, stuck it in a paint pot full of black & dexterously gave the bear a black eye.

Shuffling by his painting (now teeming with flesh lines rotting apart & a woman, fur coat flung open on a cleavage, sewn up out of a hundred cracks, pumping, pumping a hunter now ominously vengeful mangling some poor beast on the edge) the painter, looking as if disguised by a malicious well-wisher to be an old tree-stump, winced & cupped his ear. A reporter's tremulous voice on the radio was saying, with crows cawing in the background, 'the disputed block collapsed like sawdust & everything got real dark like snow'.

Let dead men make their own touches randomly.

In one fell swoop this tower of dwellings far away becomes a bulldozed massacre of rubble mixed with blood on x square feet of clay. Unintentionally, at the same moment, the painter with that final touch had created the entry to the heart of a **MANDALA**. Slamming the door behind him a disconsolate Schlumper felt a savage tug, something ominous or unkind come into play. More work to do behind closed doors. But propelled with a lucky impetus that brought a rare smile to the watchful Scarface, he didn't turn back.

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Puzzlingly earlier: Using all the letters of the alphabet arranged in series in a symmetry called words hopefully by their shapes rendering this event immune to hijacking by malevolent forces & not being forced to take on a tree-like structure, Scarface, full lost in love awoke.

Under some mocking caution but to make clear what Schlumper had at that instant spontaneously stumbled upon, & also show why the events happened the way they did because of where he was, Scarface claimed it was necessary to deliver a brief explanation, to avoid any misunderstanding of what the artist had inadvertently finished off constructing, when he pegged up the seventh mask & dobed on the black paint around an eye & what doorway he had opened up with his incessant droning.

Schlumper now had let this miscellaneous bunch from the beyond loose. Irretrievably.

And here they were causing a hubbub, more or less ready to go; almost radiant. Scarface, whose concept of time was obviously rooted in boundlessness, spoke as if they were all absent & was lamenting to a pal that they were an extraneous irrational remainder, a left-

over from an important but unstated & superfluous sum. He wasn't complaining but wanted them to understand the picture (that by now had started to fade, copious gobs & flecks of light obliterating the woman under the hunter as she whispered, "I'm here love lost like a skull.") would have unfolded overwhelmingly in the same way despite everything Schlumper did afterwards . . . Take no notice of this. Fair or foul, he insisted, the future was shaped by the new dynamic of the workshop . . . perhaps the artist was trying to help himself & had been given in a clumsy creative outburst the gift of their valuable presence.

These others, who weren't there yet but realized Scarface hadn't noticed, had steeled themselves for a full-blown, recondite, bum-numbing lecture, wide of the mark, which would bring everything juddering to a halt & leave them stranded totally off the point. They were not disappointed.

[As they filed in Scarface pinned up a square picture with a stunningly protruding modern goddess at the centre].

"As you can see, a mandala is sometimes a spiritual circular matrix." He tapped the pin-ups circle. "It is also found as a schematic or diagrammatic wheel-like picture portraying deities in a set order around a centre on which the **mind** concentrates during meditation." He tapped the gods & their consorts' erogenous zones, an action of surprisingly stark banality. "It is an illusory yet external & permanent manifestation of cosmic energy to aid the adept in complex practices (by that it could mean unspeakable) to get ecstatic & rapid enlightenment." Scarface stood back contemplating the flagrantly posed nude with pursed lips only half veiling his doubts. "This is not a coherent system. But an attempt to

communicate non-verbal meaning. A picture. And all the elements could be rectangular.”

He added half to himself.

The others swiftly closed in, meeting each others eyes when studying the finely detailed little pictures crammed with every aspect of copulation & caresses, in every conceivable position & place, with every conceivable partner(s) in the animal kingdom capable of savouring . . . Scarface shoved in, pushed them away saying. “Not yet. Not yet. There’s work first.” & continued.

“Although the mandalas are usually painted on paper or cloth or in the dust they are also found represented in a relief form carved in stone. And a structural example is cave 12 at Ellora; these are consequently somewhat different from the pictorial versions.”

“Rock hard.” Murmured Eve, appreciatively.

Darling nodded. “I like the look of the spider’s web dance.”

“Round the maypole.” Eve murmured her belly in tumult.

“There, in the artist’s workshop.” Scarface impatiently indicated a photo. “The main protagonists strung out across a corner were made from a mixture of injection moulded plastic & roughly cut & painted cardboard. Although the mandala is only a temporary dwelling to which the gods are invited to descend to guide the adept’s inner visualizations in the attempt to gain what is auspicious: It becomes sacred ground.”

“Someone should have warned Schlumper to tread carefully. For this is where his desires will exploit him. Leave him wide open to penetration by evil.”

Scarface again forced himself to ignore Eve’s innuendo.

“The mandala which symbolizes wholeness is often manifest as incorruptible surface for an instant, like corundum or diamond; offering a place where special portions of thinking can be crystallized.”

“Is it a picture to unveil the absurdity of rules? Slicing away like a sword.” Asked the moron giving a potted version of the action.

Scarface closed his eyes. “Any questions? No? Let’s get into our places then. I’m in a hurry.”

“Veil them then?” Someone tried again.

“Surely not you?”

“You’re not coming with us are you? Mister Scarface.”

“No. I’ll stay in the wings.”

They looked around baffled.

The place was as bare as a bone.

Here, once more, Scarface ignored the facts & carried on as if nothing had happened.

Which was close for him. “We’ve been called in as an organized ensemble . . . downwind in your case Angel & upwind in yours Moron . . . but generally called on for action.

You’re all ugly enough to be cast as bad or worse in your case.” He didn’t indicate who that was. “But we’ll skip that. So which of you ugly beauties drops off the line first?”

Scarface demanded & glared at the row of Heroines & Heroes waiting for a volunteer.

They all shuffled their feet uncomfortable.

“Hurry up. We’ve been called on to act.”

“So we are call girls now?”

“And you, Snyder, have got to go over the line.”

“Again? Look what happened last time.”

“I hope I haven’t got to get rough.”

Reluctantly, they clambered into their seats & the plane took off.

Now when butchers fly and the rule of stars has gone

some city’s heart of cat and rabbit

glows cream underwing

a DIX

ELDORADO

edges

softened by bullets and money.

Your heart my heart bulldozed neatly wasted

between sausage-topped walls yours pristine mine daubed

nothing is the same before a massive blue gate

in an endless double wall snake wall

circled round dark watch towers

(with their guards beckoning me to leave you).

A woman one slipper on one off pants round

her mad ankles like the wings of death

pursues

your heart my heart

between walls.

A world wheel gives the place of articulation where we assemble for a few moments. Because of a violent storm, the plane landed with a bump on one wheel at Sidpe Korlo airport, with its passengers alive, to their eternal delight, full of energy in the midst of disorder & spurred on by Scarface's encouragement that doubt was unsuited to their role. And that they had got it on a plate. Endeavouring to be as nearly open as they could, this time round, they had decided while in the air to put a brave face on it & in all innocence declared an intention to visit their friend, the artist Schlumper, at the first opportunity when they arrived. After another bump the cabin was connected to one of the radial walkways & they shuffled out.

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Under the arch of most of the brick built railway bridges in London there will be found a wooden door. This is usually stoutly padlocked. The door, jammed above a concrete step, always has a large rusty keyhole. If you are able to peer through this, with its incumbent spider's web, there is very often a very different world revealed. Behind one of these doors which had been reinforced with a sheet metal panel was the passage leading to Schlumper's workshop. If the padlock was off, he was in; & it was possible to take the sharp right turn, down the passage into the artist's studio. In this vault under the railway there was scaffolding supporting a cabin high up near the curved ceiling. A ladder was propped against the planking that formed a deck.

Leaning idly over a table staring past a woman's stockings left untidily on the back of a chair, through the open window at that woman fiercely dancing with a dog, a sleek black

lurcher, her red boots kicking up the red dust in the enclosed yard, the artist had asked himself. ‘Who were they?’ --- a bell summoned up their names:

Lady Worm, was one; everything she wore was like a second skin. Flash underwear so tight you had to peel them off. But couldn’t. And she held her breath to make them cling even tighter. And wouldn’t. A seduction was out of the question.

When she breathed out the urge was long, long gone.

Crazy Jane was another; everything she heard she had heard before, she accused the world incessantly of doubling back on itself, leaving her looking at what she had already seen & it stunk. Deluded. Yes. She was difficult to convince that you hadn’t had the fuck she needed. And she didn’t like the look of that cock, either.

What thought informs her world? The words she had to use were not to be trusted, they tipped the spoon before her lips had sucked it.

“Surely to search out & list all their names is meaningless?” A voice louder than the bell called over to Schlumper.

“I know. I know. I read a book about how not to do it. But still can’t stop myself sorting & scribbling.” Said Schlumper aggressively into thin air.

Snow White caused Frankenstein to lose his bolt; he’d shot it that’s true, who then disassembling into the seven dwarves (from whom he had been painstakingly constructed), gang banged the plot while delving for her hidden treasure which they took. Hence her pallor.

Then they sent their German auntie to visit Snow White with a Turing apple as a gift, before reconstructing themselves into a handsome prince with all the answers.

A sly one tried to out do what they did & had done. On top, over the top, spinning like a top, the outcome never varied. This boredom drove her mad. She longed to drown her dreams in the mundane details that forever proved unobtainable. Were they withheld? Moron carried the can for all these mindless acts.

What is at the top of a skeleton's list? More, or at least some flesh.

What was at the top of that child's list? She who squatted apart swathed under earth coloured rags with a smudge of black on her nose. So apart in spirit that no one even thought to help her.

Habitually unaware, shoving the chair backward Schlumper stood up & tripped over the rags carelessly thrown down. With elaborate negligence.

"I'm overstating the . . . cry for help in this. Inspiration comes back stinking like a dead dog on the tide." He cried, stumbling against the painted board & as his loaded brush slapped on its surface immediately a ripe smile glowed in a woman's friendly face where previously there had been a meaningless jumble of marks & over-painted dribbles. Before he could regain his balance the other hand clawed & slid over another mess of wet paint & charcoal lines & as he pushed to save himself out popped the voluptuous breasts of this woman. And she stood revealed in beguiling outline.

Unwittingly Schlumper fell heavily, his shoulder smearing body colour on the woman's legs & with that she stepped out boldly into life, beautifully handled although her hair was a shocking mixture of green & black.

In pain, Schlumper was oblivious to the kaleidoscopic effect of his actions. Shouting in rage & knocking a can of red paint over his boots, he dragged himself up. Frustrated,

without catching breath, violently began to kick a piece of straw cardboard underfoot until he saw his own face appear in the mix of rubber scuffs & red pigment. Astonished at such luck delivered by his frenzy, Schlumper pulled the portrait off the floor & stuck it high on the painting. He turned walking back to take stock of his action, the normal run of things. Then instantly a grave figure loomed over the smiling nymph dressed in rags. A patch of grey had been inadvertently transformed into a passable male form as the painter carelessly smudged the surface with his elbow while he rubbed his sore leg.

“There must be an easier way to do it, Schlumper, couldn’t you stand still & draw it out properly, or even use a template? That way you would avoid all the nuisance & stop getting those cuts & bruises. We might get to arrive all in one piece with a decent set of clothes on our backs & have something to do. Furthermore, before you go.” The grave man boomed. “While I’m on the subject, you would be more likely to finish everything off properly if you were working on a more stable footing. Take these shoes, for example, I know it’s only a detail but they were scuffed on the toes by your clumsy handling.” He pointed to the objects dangling from the nymph’s hand as she dropped them in mock despair, “Please be more careful. Mister. Look at me.” The disheveled nymph was forlornly examining her once exquisite outfit. The only garments intact were her bra & knickers. “And do get on with the job; you have left some of my best friends behind, still lost in . . . the gesso?” She took hold of her torn skirt’s hem lightly with her fingertips & drew the remnants off over her head moving her body gracefully to avoid smearing paint onto her breasts.

“Don’t complain, Darling, this lunatic.” The lugubrious man, who had introduced himself as Schneider, drawled, inclining his tall figure towards Schlumper. “Hasn’t the kokum to imagine how many of us there are still stuck in the back of the abstract beyond in that board, buried in the mire. He was distracted ----- by optimism.” He pointed accusingly at the unfinished picture, stumping round in a circle quietly filing grievances.

“So you think I haven’t the deep reach necessary to juggle, successfully, the demands of reason & imagination? Schlumper asked phlegmatically visualizing a page of tosh, cocking an eye & carefully taking a few more steps back through the debris. “Well if you were to have understood then I wouldn’t have; but as you don’t have a clue . . .”

“We didn’t?” The darling nymph wondered making it sound like praise.

“You were completely in the dark.” Schlumper said scraping the pigment off the picture with his knife. His tone of finality meant he was also still in the dark & presumptuously wrong.

“Not for long.” The tall man said looking around quizzically as the artist’s blade revealed more & more colours as it pared away the layers.

“If we knew what you finally meant this piece of work to look like. Wouldn’t we feel better? Couldn’t you dash it off quicker? At least.” Darling added with a speed that left her breathless.

“Not without jumbling up the body parts in the blind haste.” Said Schlumper observing the new arrivals from behind his thumb. “I admit I’m groping around in the dark myself most of the time.”

“I don’t doubt your adaptability; you fall over yourself (& your refuse) with eagerness to solve the paradox but so far (with x number missing) you seem to lack the proficiency or skill to master the task & bring everyone into play.”

“**Hold your horses.** It could appear to be flawed, my free-for-all method, but I cannot see how you can deny . . .” Schlumper stopped short. There was certainly a cool breeze blowing through the place. Was there, or was there not, a contorted horse’s head snorting steam out of the left hand side of the picture. And then to his surprise he felt a stifflingly hot draught puthering around as he held his gaze searching for the body of the animal as the tall man carried on.

“Yes. Your life-long battle to gain a permanent state of precariousness could well have cemented together ideas of folly with idiotic propositions of understanding. It all crystallized a moment ago. And where were you?” The gaunt man held up a hand to forestall Schlumper’s non-existent self-defence. “You were rolling on the floor swearing.”

“Singing?” Angel asked incredulously. Luckily the man didn’t see her expression or realize the part she played. “I’m sorry I missed that.”

“Take care, Darling, sometimes those with the quickest . . . Parts have a tendency, & sometimes not only a tendency, to be the most penetrating.”

A Schlumper impervious to their talk was bent over low peering intently. “Can I make out another woman? And is that another?” He rubbed the paint with a rag saturated in turpentine. Out sprang the naked figure of a pale young woman with serpentine curls, somewhat bedraggled, her lips trembling. “Cut out all that flannel. Can’t you? Or was it

deliberate? I'm soaked. Pass me a towel." She was sopping wet although there wasn't a flicker of a wave anywhere on the picture or a bath-tub; half blinded by the radiant light, not recognizing anybody she wandered off to one side dripping puddles at each step. The tall man took his opportunity. "I don't want to drag you down the path of de/ni/gra/tion" (& he split the word up into its syllables to say it & he pronounced the first two vowels incorrectly & with emphasis. Why did he have to destroy this word?) "Or be obscure; but if he tried to do it on purpose you wouldn't be here. Not in one piece anyway." He appraised the newcomer who had found a still-life set up on the table & had helped herself to an apple. "Are you a friend of our darling nymph?" "Who? Is there another woman here?" She looked dismayed, fearing her wiles would be made redundant leaving her helpless in the face of competition from a full-blown fashion plate. "Did she get here before me then?" A look of mild annoyance fleetingly crossed her face momentarily causing shadows of emerald green to underline its pallor. "She is present but incorrect. Thanks to Schlumper, I have lost most of my outfit but I see you have come off even worse." As the nymph spoke she gave the new girl a very long appraisal which the new girl parried by placing a hand over each breast dexterously keeping hold of the apple, but not with a smile. "You are right we need to send an SOS." Taking another bite she offered the fruit to the nymph with a grave, questioning look. "Yes please. I'm normally called Darling" She bit into the rosy side. And said while chomping noisily. "We need to cast around for someone who can draw a decent dress." "Ha. Ha. You vindictive so & sos. You've stitched me up." Schlumper bawled. "What was I doing dabbling about with the fucking rag then? You've had it now." He threw the

offending object away. The rag splattered on the picture with considerable force & stuck while liquid ran down the surface. Schlumper chased over & tried to rub out the dribbles with his palm. "Oh. No. That was the best bit." Under his hand a multitude of figures emerged all shapes & sizes in an orgy of activity. He wiped his hand studying the crowded piece reflectively then lay flat on his back on a floor strewn with all the coloured pigments of his palette staring at the ceiling wondering how such a crowd could fit in. He closed his eyes but that didn't shut off the luminous images; as a ploy it had always failed to blank out of his mind what his eyes were partially but remorselessly filling it up with. Schlumper, slumped down like a corpse in a war movie, spoke in a matter-of-fact voice to the irregular cracks in the ceiling, which were incidentally like a star path map. "It is in the second stage of muddle, the one I'm in now, when the more elaborate mixing up of meaningless shapes happens, then I get the clues of who to look out for next." He scratched his head. "Does that help?" He folded his arms under his head, closed his eyes & lost himself in reverie.

"With all that concentration you put into the work on that passage, Schlumper, it's a wonder you don't go 'pop'." The tall man snidely remarked as he tried to stir the artist with his toe. "They must be deep fears to fell you like that."

"What a cunning touch for detail you have there, Mr. Schlumper. What next?" The darling nymph asked, pleasantly surprised by the speed at which the throng had appeared & amazed at what they had got up to so soon. She seemed completely unaffected by her discomfort or the nasty words of this man who was buzzing about like a trapped wasp.

“Detail?” Queried Schlumper. “You could drown in details, in fact have so many of them & still lose everything they claim to give you. Details should appear by themselves. And only a few. I don’t know what details are, let alone what they are going to be.”

“They are like gaping wounds.” Angel said & she gave Eve & Darling a dazzling smile.

“Why is he down? Is he drowning in blood instead of boredom?” Eve strolled over to the prone artist. Captivated & encouraged by Darling’s smile but more by his total surrender & vulnerability. Weighing up the possibility of sneaking a ride.

“How, with all that effort you are obviously taking concentrating meaning & energy into the picture, do you manage to lose it so often?” The tall man, sensing their growing interest, again tried to stir Schlumper, but was prevented by the two women.

“What are you doing? Leave our sleeping beauty alone.” They pushed the man aside.

“Is it a technical knockout?”

“Hit below the belt.”

“Or spellbound by his own dazzling virtuosity.”

“Flashy.”

“Couldn’t wipe them out.”

As these comments were hooted from the derisive horde, Schlumper heaved himself up out of an incipient sexual drama, glowering at the humping mass, determined to mess them about. ‘This lot need containing with a nice full black line.’ Schlumper thought & painted one, slapping the paint on in glee. And there, by accident, without the possibility of contradiction was the horse’s body bulging with promise. “Sorted. I think.” He beamed. “What a promising start for some of those beauties.”

“Never mind the serendipity keep to the rules. You’ve put that multitude of people in there. What was the reason behind that? Is it an intellectual ambush?” Shouted the tall man from somewhere behind the studio’s accumulations, sheltering from the splashes. “What rules?” Schlumper asked while looking around carefully in case an idea like the ‘plague of ornament’ had ricocheted off the wall. “It’s well known how easy it is to drum up abstract shapes & use them, they are simply part of the nervous system. Ask Mondrian, he’ll tell you. His is the perfect example of inevitable abstraction by the A.B.C. method beloved by Art historians called, not surprisingly, refinement. Where the abstract reference (no more than a grid in his case) they know is rooted in the concrete (an apple tree). And as the tree wasn’t doing too well it’s uprooted. That way they feel so much more secure in their tripes.”

“But wasn’t there a touch of imagination?”

“There was, it is claimed, perpetual penetration without touching a thing & a lot of weaving about to dodge the necessary act. And he was on a diet.”

“But . . .”

“But? Piffle. Imagination would have been lucky to get in by the back door. And without a wing & a prayer he wouldn’t have either, you could say. Dynamic equilibrium reached on the straight & narrow (not satiated in bed where I like to get to it).” Then Schlumper ominously supplied the antidote. “Except. There was worse to come. A kind of simmering down you could call it, that gave us vapour & an empty pan. In fact, the half-seen absence beyond, beloved of . . .”

“Do you think you can explain better what it was?” The man cut in & scowled his disapproval. He was boiling with rage.

“Order & boredom ruled in equal parts.” Schlumper shouted over his shoulder. “So that’s what we got stuffed down our throats. Because it was comprehensible.” And the man grimaced as he ducked his head back down.

“And bullshit about some mysterious light shuttling along the black lines & . . . back again? Whenever light is mentioned in that awe full knee-jerk way I wonder why they don’t come right out with it.” Schlumper added as he eyed the man who had stuck his head up. “Whatever **It** was, it was in the brain caused by some kind of sensory fatigue; yawning & praying, in that painter’s case, & should have been kept there along with the grid, cross & all the other entoptic phenomena visited upon us by all those willing hands rising to the occasion without the thought of a doubt.”

“Isn’t it the artist’s dream to rise.” The man fluttered his hands like a bird, perhaps unnerved by the continuing unsympathetic tone of Schlumper’s interpretation.

“And shine?” Schlumper finished contemptuously. “And all that kind of on off guff. Now you see it, now you don’t. Is it really there? Are you still feeling nervous? Stop flapping about.”

“To rise as if in a dream, I mean?” He was standing in a box tremendously inspired but still waving his arms. “Isn’t there an inner feeling to consider, a burning desire to be expressed?”

“The incomprehensible turned into a slice of bread & jam which you then inevitably drop on the dirty carpet jam side down.” Schlumper looked through him gravely then smiled.

“They can’t all come up with that anodyne stuff you want. They would have to be trained like you to gawp serenely at everything. Alienation would only be a word. Feeling nervous?” Schlumper roared repeating the question, irritated by the flickering light brought about by that idiot’s gesticulating, making him see hoofprints all over everything. “It’s time now to burn the paint off the picture. I wonder what we’ll get from the conflagration?” He lit the blowlamp.

“Ashes.” Angel sang so melodiously out of the blue.

Schlumper knew automatically he must go steady with the blow torch; it was a dangerous step & it didn’t take a half-wit to know that, considering what had been going on although within reach was quite out of his control. There might easily be a holy man let loose out of the flames with all the stimulation fire gave to an act. And some zealot of that ilk emerging from the burning strips of paint could make for an uncomfortable afternoon with the composition, probably fucking up the golden section with a splinter sect. Cause a conflagration in fact. The board smoldered as Schlumper worried the surface with a scrapper; charred lumps sizzled to the floor & sooty smoke wreathed some intricate lines over the picture. He didn’t have any feelings about the work as it was consumed & crumbled to a brown ash & he didn’t know what he was going to get in this external effect of what his internal burning meant. The artist was startled out of his venerable lack of thoughts & back to observe his result by the darling nymph wailing plaintively over the roar of the flame.

“Take care. You’re sullyng what little I had left on with that abominable smoky fire.”

And it was true. He had singed her dainty figure with careless sweeps of the torch & although now she had a lovely tan her scanty pieces of underwear were scorched to practical invisibility. The original bikini.

“Sorry. I could cross-hatch you something up quick if you wish?” Schlumper turned the blowlamp off & reached for a sable.

“But given the time you take to dash things off, when I got it, it would be just as lacy while masquerading as cover & still let the breeze in.” Darling cried sexily dancing a little jig on the spot.

“Don’t on any account let him get on the job. His vagueness makes his intent as transparent as a colour wash.” The tall figure loomed up shielding himself with a cardboard box. “And with his cross-hatching you would finish up wrapped in a Bonnard table cloth or a negligent piece of filling in by Rembrant.

“Skillfully done. Naturally.” Said Schlumper with mock weariness, his eyes glazing over, sucking the sable to a sharp point & jabbing the brush around stabbing invisible tormentors.

“You’d have more chance of getting by in the world with this on.” And the man hastily struggled out of the box hoping to pre-empt a rash agreement between Schlumper & the girl. Not seeing the sharp glance of disapproval lanced his way by Darling from under her sooty eyelids.

“I’m truly sorry I fried you. It was an oversight.”

“Well never mind that what do you call this?” The tall man stormed selfishly as he unwrapped a seemingly endless white scarf. He pointed to a large red suppurating lump

dribbling behind his ear that looked as if the artist had flicked the pigment on by mistake while painting something else. Whilst the man was concerned with exposing his neck, making a song & dance about it, Eve had found a cupboard stuffed full of Schlumper's paint rags. It proved a treasure trove, containing in fact, a puzzlingly large quantity of fashionable women's clothes, & Eve was delightedly sorting through them, discovering more than enough to dress herself up to the nines. And was being jealously watched by Darling as she slyly refused to catch her eye & share, whilst showing off the find.

"That is a waste of good colour." Schlumper exclaimed impatiently lifting it off with a vigorous finger leaving behind the ear a long weal of crimson over which he dabbed a rag, roughly pushing the man's head away.

"Ouch!" Cried the man & winced.

['That was Genuine.' Scarface said to himself. 'Now what?' Do we have to dress that wound to stop him thinking badly?]

"Bad thing that streak, in this light it is, I'd rub it off if I were you . . . it might dry . . . could leave a nasty scar."

"Hurts a bit & makes me feel only half here."

Scarface had to pinch himself; he couldn't believe what a muddle Schlumper had got into quite by accident. And now one of the girls was dressing up & consequently would not be able to return anywhere, as the discrepancy in the fashions would stick out like a sore thumb. 'What if there is a knock at the door.' He wondered. 'And the seven travellers arrive in the middle of this mess. Something would get pulverized. (And not just Space/ Time & Credibility). I'll lie doggo.'

“We should relax. That might help.” Eve soothingly purred smoothing the line of the sheath she had slipped into as if she had read his thought, only her remark was addressed to the man. “Wow. It does look bad though.” She twisted into an ‘S’ to view the back hem.

“Something good could come of that wound, Mister. Wholly different thoughts.” Darling said, startling them all, as she stared enviously at Eve sinuously revealing herself.

“It would save him having to guess what they are all the time.” Schlumper grinned.

“You get back to your distortions on the picture plane & leave us room to get on with our . . . make believe . . . and ”

“Yes?” Schlumper asked candidly, for he was beginning to wonder why they were plaguing him beyond the call of duty & hadn’t thought to address it till prompted.

“Get on in our own space undisturbed by your . . . your compressions.”

“Short cuts did you mean?” Schlumper, not totally absent but very close to it, wasn’t wounded by his jibe. “Or did you mean pondering? Go & get a plaster for your wound & leave me to it.”

* * *

Schlumper, with a dazzling apparition of a cake topped by a woman acting with scant regard for gravity dancing before his eyes, still stood by his painting appearing to deliberate. Then, without any more ado & not having thought a thing squeezed a tube to start the mixing off. A fecal twig of paint curled & plopped onto the palette & lay there glowing, just as it is going to lie on the picture but it will be transported there with strokes, a multitude of strokes tender brush strokes, like softly spoken words nourishing

the body of the work. But they didn't bring him comfort or satisfaction. What Schlumper, a bit touched like the picture, lurches along with into some unchosen future, is a ravaged structure completed by repetitive brush touches by which he will be made just as uncertain as he was at the start when he was given the impetus, the fracture necessary that traps his meditations with its colours (& it is here & only here the essential act takes place i.e. the tip of the brush, crayon etc.) & accommodates his vision . . . Schlumper never did have a clue what happened next.

What is this? Schlumper crumpled the sheets baffled by his own scribble. Drawn by his right hand yet mysterious & disintegrating. It was keeping its head down "What is beyond & behind?" He said in a muffled voice as he paced on a carpet worn so thin it looked like earth. Under a fan hanging motionless from a stone slab ceiling he spun round to face the picture. Illuminated by a Chinese lantern reflecting off a grim yellow flaking wall this composition, a compelling disaster, hung waiting the decisive moves.

Schlumper negotiated the sudden dip in the floor by the bedside, set to catch the sleepy, up to the door that could never have shut properly, to escape. To get a spontaneous reaction he had decided to use shock. It would have been surprising, he thought as the door flew open, if asking for a serious dialogue would have resulted in any sparks flying. And that's what he needed. Now what did she need? His own needs called out selling him suggestions like barkers on a coconut shy. Exit that flux of ideas, leaving Schlumper more bewildered & totally at the mercy of his imagination.

In the dark passage by the door, his mind still cruising in front of his picture, the artist kicked an iron bowl spilling its liquid but the thick dust kept the whole upset neat &

clean. So he carried on down the line focused on the noumena in front of the picture.

Shall I take my clothes off she smiled showing she knew she was trying it on as she took them off. Shall I curl up this way she asked rolling her knees under her chin showing off what she would like him to try on.

That, he said to himself, unfortunately, would mean there will be a quick surprise & a probable desolate aftermath, or more likely the monotonous dropping of hints until someone in the situation says 'Bang'. Either way the strategies feel uncomfortable. He opened the door. Not a soul to be seen. What had he heard? Looking again, more keenly, he saw two figures as if on a collision course shimmering in the intense light that made him screw up his watering eyes.

“Are you saying that it was the adventure of a thought? And that’s what you want to repeat . . . with me?”

“Worried it could land you in trouble?”

“What thought? The last time you had one we had to abort or perish.”

“I didn’t have one.”

“You did. It was abominable.”

He caught the last words of their argument. “Are you both idle?” Schlumper didn’t turn to face the speakers but stared down at the cows packed in the shade of a narrow yard beside the ring road. Their dung was piled high, an unusual sight, but a relief from the glare. “At a loose end?”

“We seem to be. Any advice?”

Schlumper felt he was at the grinding centre of a wheel, worse, the hub hadn't been buttered. They thought he grinned, but it was a grimace at the effort it took to extricate himself in one piece from that runaway thought.

"You could try." He fumbled out a pack of dog-eared postcards of his favorite paintings interlaced with pictures snipped from journals & magazines. "These are indispensable in a situation like this." He pulled off the rubber band.

"Like what?" The very thin one hissed holding back his well-rounded companion with a very thin arm.

"Like this." Said Schlumper, pointing at the card he had shuffled up. The two friends leaned over to take the picture but Schlumper flicked it over pegged between two fingers to show them.

"A blue guy, obviously an alien, nobbing a curvaceous chick with a lot of lipstick on & not much else."

"Yes we could try that."

"Why is he staring at the chick like that?"

"Like what." Schlumper turned the card dismissively. "That's normal in those situations."

The thin man straightened up & seemed ready to snap. His well-stacked companion gave a sideways glance & catching something in the man's expression kept quiet.

"Look at the landscape." Schlumper urged.

"Landscape where?"

Schlumper pointed again & as he did another picture fluttered to the ground. The thin one bent down & examined the bulging landscape throbbing with activity as it lay on the

sawdust. “Oh! I see. He was concerned about the bad weather blowing up. She’s made of sugar & his warpaint will wash off or worse, go streaky.”

“Leave that.” Schlumper commanded. “Concentrate on this one.” He shook it. Stuff drifted off it.

“What’s that?” The woman’s fingers stroked through the fine cloud of nebulous dust.

“Snow.” Said Schlumper. “It was snowing I think.” He pushed the card closer to her nose.

Beyond the lovers, beyond an overloaded ass trailing behind another overloaded ass, beyond the girl flying over the rooftops there was a tiny triangle of winter sky covered in minute specks of white.

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The same morning sometime later as the workshop blooms in a flare of radiant sunshine we catch Schlumper silent, looking swart & pensive over the row of all his worn out brushes. The brushes had been rubbed down to stumps.

As you often paint with them the wrong way round, as sticks, why consider the state the bristles are in. Does **it** depend on them? What could you have done that is different with a new brush? Does it matter that their shape goes? Does your expressiveness depend on the brushstroke’s flexibility?

Half statue, he had examined their frayed bristles while laying them out neatly. He had noted that they were all clogged up. How had he missed feeling this deterioration?

Reluctantly he swept them to one side. They were dead.

We can tell he is having a problem saying what he feels about throwing out these work tools although he is muttering something. Clink. Clank.

Despite grim sweat or divine inspiration carefully disguised, Schlumper knew these ravaged brushes had been the bridge over an enormous gulf as they gave him his pictures. So he was reluctant to discard them for he claimed sometimes they were also his best protection, denying a route out to madness by quickly covering over layer after layer of raw, unsheltered thoughts. Until they had formed into a safe net of colour a catch or a spill was possible. Even diminished the swiftness of the brushes excluded any opportunity for the mad grin to have its moment. So he thought. Or did they give a safe passage for madness, a helping hand? And was it as an extra that they took up the load of meaning quicker than the bat of an eye & were cheap & full of caprice.

It was because the brushes were the means to control madness, delicately moving it from a concealed den (tissue of ideas) where it was rotting, repulsively putrefying the fabric of its own existence, to an exterior surface where it could shine for a few seconds, that they soon became worn out. It was a rough job. And in the struggle of these ideas to be enabled as design beyond the confining decaying structure of his body, why was it just as the brushes gave him a foothold on the slippery slope they gave up? What was lost at that moment when being mad no longer mattered?

“It could simply have been the sand added to the pigment that gave your brushes such a hard time. That would solve the conundrum & shut up that implausible trot you are clogging my ears with.” Scarface suggested half aloud.

“Was that something like a voice? It could be attractive, but rarely was.” Schlumper puzzled to himself meandering inside these incompatible thoughts. Hearing something even thinner than a clink. A furtive shuffle. Schlumper cocked an ear. Was the text being

de-constructed already before he had had time to stoke it? His mind went blank with concentration. No. It was more like crazy paving which is worse.

Then a gem of a thought, exquisitely fixed by her body in front of his eyes, was opening up, spontaneously entangled into his heart & at the same time apart.

Illuminated by an erratic impulse to love, her warm, soft voice dense & fine like badger's hair brushed her opening lips. "This is the final time I'm coming out of the shadow of this book to aid you."

"Nothing about the appearance of this beautiful angel was spontaneous." Scarface said sensing the danger & interrupting in a flash. "I don't trust that description. He was unaware, I'll agree & still is. And he didn't need help. That was her play to get back in. He always appeared helpless. Susceptible to particular charms. Yet he didn't surrender control or lose it."

"He'd already lost it." They all shouted.

"No." Scarface shouted back putting an equal amount of venom into his retort. "He simply made mistakes unwittingly while selecting & sifting & rubbing & bungling about & when he had blundered enough he gave up. It was finished & so was he for a while."

"It wasn't redeeming."

"Is it ever?"

"It was a loophole."

"You think he could discriminate what he served up?"

"Something else was being freighted in. We could tell but couldn't describe it."

Some hopes.

“I am chopping.” Said an oblivious Schlumper his voice rising over the buzz of an electric fan. “Only the look varies the taste.” He carried on painting with an erratic action as if a brushstroke would give the game away.

“That disfiguring process is a bit chancy.” Said Darling. “And crude & arbitrary.”

“And irrational.” Schlumper added for her. “I wonder what else we’ve got submerged?”

He twisted his head round to fix her. “There are people still in there.” He pointed with a crooked arm back at the picture & dobed a lump of paint in the wrong place. “With their clothes rotting on them. What shall we do?”

“Escape from this daub. And snot. And dance.” Said the newcomer, for whom his inadvertent move seems to have been the trigger for her release, stepping right up to the artist wiping the dob of green pigment off her cheek onto his sleeve. She exuded a rank smell. “I know now what it’s like to get the chop.” She kissed Schlumper’s cheek.

Schlumper felt his knees go weak & it was lucky as he fell into her arms which is where they all agreed he had intended to get.

“Did she come across you on purpose for that kiss? Schlumper look at me.” Eve called as they sat round the table with the still-life nibbling the fruit.

“Hush! Don’t disturb them. This may be the way we get completion.” Darling giggled.

Being well below the stiffs

enclosed in x square feet of frost

looking up beyond

the ruined mountain church

at an excess blue puzzling sky

which imbues in a flash forsaken joy.

Our three hearts

Jump.

Out swoops a huge owl

From a hollow tree

Close by.

It was blowing a storm over Bell Green whistling through the struts in the gas works, tearing over pyramids of coke & lifting loose paper under the bronze spread of the Angel's wings as she patted down the cold wind with either hand as she waited, her hair dripping wet again.

Schlumper really fell flat on his face this time. Even as it happened he had the familiar thought running through his head that he knew it had been coming; tightly enmeshed with this was the notion that next time he wouldn't ignore the warning signals & take the detour. Actually he had his arms in the shape of an embrace & this space left for an invisible body cushioned his fall. A face appeared under his as he hit the floor. 'I hope

this one doesn't talk double-dutch' flashed before the metallic blue light of his eyes. Then without the slightest flicker of discomfort he was scanning a page of hideously dense prose trying to find a toe-hold for he was sure & sure he was sure this one book would give him the definitive answer.

"The question would be useful here, Schlumper." The newcomer said with a nice but naïve attempt at help wrapped up in a bit of an embarrassed grin which made her lips look like a frog frantically swimming in grease.

"It certainly would. But I think it might be easier & quicker to get the answer first."

Schlumper remained silent as he stared deadpan at the wood grain of the floorboards under his nose that had T-boned into the paint splatters & the scuffs.

Darling serenely rubbed her cheek enjoying the newcomer's plain discomfort, while she regretted her interruption, but nevertheless keeping close to her by smiling an appealing fluid smile.

"Yes. Why ask the question? What a cost it might bring dragging the truth out of things."

"Up." Schlumper adjusted the target for her.

"It could be hidden 'up' the same as anywhere else (& be in league with 'down') . . . but surely you must have forgotten if you ever knew?"

Schlumper grunted his agreement with both but signaled a disagreement to which he was by far the most attracted.

"And far too simple to pay attention." Darling commented as she mimed a strange flapping creature.

“I suppose I must if I am to understand the unintelligible! What is probably nearly unthinkable . . . but you will explain.” He rolled on his side the way he would when in bed to share an intimate thought. He didn’t seem to feel the hard boards; in this repose the newcomer snuggled against him gazing at his defenceless countenance realizing at once it will be impossible to guess at what seems so easy to read. And this was his attraction. To lay bare . . .

“To utterly lay bare.” He murmured in his reverie.

. . . And yet at the same time, without any intention of doing it, lay on another impenetrable layer by giving an imperceptible nuance to a softly spoken word. So as she anticipated making love it was as if accompanied by the sound of waves lapping on a foreign shore that she felt him fold upon himself as he embraced her. And in this delicate entwining Schlumper was wondering what loving thoughts have these thoughts of love crowded out over the years? And resolved there & then to think them back in.

“Easier said than done in that in between. It’s very likely he could dream right through his own funeral.”

“And remain inaccessible while touching everything & everybody with an undivided love.”

Schlumper thought he could see a glow on her cheek, the colour telling of an erotic need.

And that burning was wafting a brilliant spark into her eyes above the blush.

He had seen that light go out before. And he caught himself closing down the possible action by invoking a distinct image, so often repeated, of a woman hastily drawing away from his arms. It came surging into the space she had left, catching him up in its terror.

“Very near miss that time, Schlumper. You almost slipped the knot. It would have left you with a *difficult* choice.”

The newcomer hardly moved in the tender embrace yet both she & Schlumper felt the intimate touch warp & slip.

“Without anything really happening. See! Now you know what we are to be up against dealing with that clown. How can we make anything good unless we get out of that fantasy which always trails off nowhere & get on with it?”

What more did it take to be in harmony with the immediate? Its needs? Its calls? Was that Schlumper’s question?

While engaged in that tight hold she missed the chance to look at his hands. To watch as they picked some intricate knot apart while he drew their caresses on her body. It effaced, by denying a looseness, any hope of her being reached. For although there was no gap between them she was out of sight & Schlumper set great store by what he saw offered, as if only then could he believe what was in reserve.

“Stunning way round of putting a case for appropriation without care. Everything taken care of except her. Not that she’d notice. Not until it’s too late.”

“Keep everything fluid. Suits him.”

“You make it sound like hatred.”

“No. No. Hatred needs a boundary & there wasn’t one & isn’t one for these two.”

‘As there is no rejection, no distancing, no expectation.’ Schlumper thought. ‘Why is there no desire?’

[That is not the question.]

There is no mixing, perhaps that's why Schlumper is casting round trying to find who is at fault.

The artist's head sank lower close to the bare boards until he felt as if in a hollow where the troubling thoughts were soothed by . . . a shared thought. Schlumper was aghast. Then he was aware that the rank smell had gone. He was gazing into the beautiful wide-open eyes of an Angel.

The beleaguered figures from off the picture kept close watch on him curled up on a pile of paint soaked rags as they fingered the wax fruit without any appetite & wondered if he was coming back. Safeguarded by their gaze or lulled by the smell of turpentine he slumbered. The fruit had been stolen from his dream.

Here Darling was enthusiastic in a suspect way. Some parts of her body didn't join in with the movements ostensibly showing approval. Emphatically denied her smile. Her usual clear bright eyes were hidden behind slits. They appeared hooded. So her demeanour could have been taken as a feint before a strike. The others didn't care to notice her artifice as they pulled faces over the fruit.

Schlumper was in the dark. But the confusion had gone, spirited away by the proximity of this Angel's body. So closely enveloped, they were like a liquid in the same vessel.

"Where do you think I've come from?" She asked him, watching with her green eyes how he looked as she hunched into her knees.

"Search me."

“I’ve already done that.” She opened her fist, a black stone shone on the flattened palm. It was a keepsake from the artist’s childhood that he hadn’t seen for years. The radio began blaring nonsensical numbers of bombs dropped.

“Listen.” Cried Schlumper. “We are not going to play games – are we?”

Her face clouded over. She tossed the stone to him. It was astonishing.

“So heavy. Too heavy.” Schlumper mused. “What is it for?”

“It’s for you . . . from . . .” Schlumper pressed a finger over her lips.

“I know where & it no longer exists.”

Restlessly Darling pressed a button & the newscaster was abruptly cut off. “Piss in the same pot.” She said sourly & scowled defying anyone to contradict her. “You haven’t told us what you think she is here for. Why?” She threaded a finger into her curls, as she looked faraway over the heads of her companions. There was a slight surly note in Darling’s voice as if she felt overlooked.

Schlumper had become part of the bundle of rags. He was shyly stroking the delicate blue flecked skin of the woman’s thigh who shuddered as an unknown warmth flooded her body. Her feet twitched & kicked out involuntarily as she rolled on her buttocks, to spread herself open, to flaunt her sex. Schlumper’s hand trailed the blue vein the fingertips brushing her slit wider open. He moved closer to kiss the lips but her hands locked onto his shoulder stopping him.

“My hair is still damp. I need an iron.”

Dismayed by the abrupt change Schlumper reluctantly pointed to a shelf. “I only use it to flatten drawings. And keep out of the cupboard. One of you has already rifled it. How will I explain that?”

“It should iron out the wet.” And she took it up. Then, on her back again, legs wider than before she shook her hair back & deftly flattened it with the warm iron into the rags. A metallic odour dug into the pit of Schlumper’s gut, he pressed her knees down on her ribcage & while she continued to dry her hair he took a long kiss on the flag.

Does Schlumper ever stop dreaming?

Far-fetched

Head down

Talking to whom in the empty passage?

Asking what to whom in the empty room?

**Thinking farfelu in Spills & Squawks more is needed to pad this
present.**

Ha! Ha! Lover's laugh ribs death speaks of their sake shapes to kiss.

A self-inflicted wound more or less two strips of skin

Uh a wallow ruse . . a welter . . no . . a weave . . no . . a warp

Halt (I meant lame) don't stop & grin.

Birdslaughter Ha! Ha! Quite innocently rings out everywhere.

Undeciphered we hit up loose to aim a heartfelt careless . . Hoot . .

To cover himself? To cover us all? To cover you? . . . no . . .

**Usually, on a good day, 18,000 bombs have been dropped while you
write a poem.**

Bored, Eve crossed her legs & tapped a table leg with the toe-cap of her snake's skin boot. "We could help ourselves & paint while the artist sleeps. There are two or three people I would like to get even with before he does his flattering paint job on them. Put it all in perspective."

"Put one over them, you mean, take them out with paint stripper."

'Help ourselves . . . you've already done that . . . what will happen I wonder . . .' Darling felt a flutter of panic. She stroked the short hair on her neck & stood away from the table.

"You don't think he knows do you?"

"He *knows* nothing."

"He must know something to have got us out of that messy painting so accurately copying his dream vision & intact."

"Without a stitch."

"Well there is the bag of rags in the cupboard. Perhaps he keeps them in case."

"They belong to someone else. He made that quite clear." Said the newcomer. "But still I could use a few things." She dropped into a chair beside Eve who tugged the top of a boot with a pert smile. Darling took a pace towards them, placed a hand on either shoulder & pushed down to flip herself onto the table between them. "She's helped herself. So will we."

"Schlumper was put out by Eve taking those things without asking. It disturbed him but I couldn't guess why."

Eve gave an involuntary shiver as if a finger had poked an unpleasant memory in her spine. No. It was sharper, more painful like a stab in the back. No. It was love's arrow hitting its mark.

"He should have made a better job then." Darling snapped. "Although the tan is even."

She admired herself with a long vertical gaze. "We could give him a few ideas."

"That wouldn't be difficult, plenty of space in there as well." The newcomer tapped Darling's head. She pulled her head away. "Stop pawing me."

"You hit me. I'll have a bruise on my shoulder but I didn't complain."

"No worse than that touch you got from Schlumper." Eve scoffed. "I bet you're still swollen."

Angel was sure she sounded a little jealous. "I would say he was generous with the flesh . . . when he painted some of you." And she stuck out her tongue to rub it in.

"Mind you don't have a mishap doing that." Eve was playing the dumb blond. She reached under the table & pulled out a classy green leather handbag. Darling clicked her tongue & cried. "You've bagged the best of everything." Stopped short & looked crestfallen at her silly outburst as if an unwelcome & recurrent image had prompted her.

The newcomer, Angel, noticed something was wrong but deliberately didn't ask for an explanation as Eve hunched her shoulders defensively. She wasn't going to be a bitch blabbing. Let Schlumper fish.

Eve reached under the table again with a gleeful laugh. "Those snakeskin boots normally cost an arm & a leg."

"Normally wrapped round the wrong person."

“But this.”

“Cuts no ice.”

“It does sparkle.” Said a bewitched Angel. “Like nothing I have seen.”

“What did you have to do for that.” Darling whispered.

“Nothing.” Said Eve. “Absolutely nothing at all.” Her hand hung limp.

“You’re trying to tell me that was not a grease payment?” Darling smirked. But lightly dabbed possessively at the solitaire diamond.

And Eve stamped her foot. “Doing nothing is sometimes difficult . . . impossible.”

Angel’s mouth fell open but she held back her cry. She sighed. Darling put an arm around her. “Our turn next.” And looked affectionately into her eyes as Angel’s hand slid protectively over her cunt. Both women blushed.

Ah. So she was naked. Scarface was getting the picture. It must have been hot. Hot as hell. But Schlumper was deceptively quiet as if he was awake & didn’t want them to know. Or wake them up! Golden flashes of light winking through the window brought Scarface’s speculations to an end. Trouble in the area. He lopped off.

Just as his shadow lengthened Angel, Eve & Darling had all had the same thought ‘they would ask Schlumper for more’. And they were all equally sure that this request would meet with a glacial silence or infuriating stonewalling.

Schlumper’s ‘I’m giving you all I’ve got’ was spoken with a finality that would have made Death shiver.

“You could go that extra m . . .”

“Inch.” Darling butted in. Finality for her had to be orgiastic or it didn’t count.

“This will send everything haywire.” Schlumper objected.

“Everything can’t go haywire.” Darling parried. “We know there is nothing worse than a repaint considered & voted on by a committee, but we are it. Are harmonious decisions that awful?”

“This majority decision will not be harmonious. It will not be unanimous. I’ll eat my hat if it is.” Schlumper groaned inwardly. To satisfy what he already knew would be totally incompatible desires would involve designs by which he would certainly destroy the picture.

“We appreciate the risk in that.” Said Eve. “I take it that is a yes?”

“No.” Said Angel. “Because I was last to come you’ll expect me to be first to go or last to choose.”

“No.” Said Darling mischievously. “We’ll borrow that hat & draw lots. I might get what I want. And you might too.”

They waited for Darling to state her claim. She looked back puzzled & then with a gentle glance at Schlumper said. “The rest.”

“You want the rest?” The artist was sceptical but rubbed his chin to hide his doubts.

“And. Quick.”

“And quick.” The way Schlumper repeated this, making the two words sound altogether different, more request than ultimatum, showed he had grasped the situation.

“Any interesting wants to add?” Schlumper’s question was accompanied by a baleful stare as if the cupboard moaned at being empty just as it had grumbled full. “Want a

change! A dash of something sweet! Something light? Something dark?” Eve started to speak.

“Shut up.” Cried the Darling nymph nimbly stepping in front of Eve shielding her from the irate painter whose mood they now realized had been snapped not shaped & was so out of skew he would most likely begin to bawl them out. What a mess that could become.

“Out where? It’s nowhere to be seen.” Shouted Schlumper reading her thoughts like a book. “And you are asking me to do it?” He was amazed.

Wounded Snyder shook his head. “I could tell you. I had mine knocked right out of me.” Schlumper scratched his head showing Snyder in the considerate language of signs that he thought he was nuts.

“I can’t imagine wanting to see any of those things again (& again).” Eve hurriedly tried to stop the flow.

“It very rarely happens.”

Snyder shook his head. “I can see it happening most of the time. That is the problem. It leaves no room for anything else.” He struck a match & the end flew off burning.

Schlumper brusquely pulled a brush out of a jar where it had been soaking in white spirit & rubbed the debris off its grey stump. He took out a knife & cut away a few straggling bristles. “We’ll see about quick.” He said as he squeezed a fat tube & out twirled black pigment oozing oil onto the palette.

“Wait. Before you dash off another unwanted . . .” Snyder was stuck for the word or did he hesitate to use the one that sprang to mind. “Wait. We would like a say in this

masterpiece.” He was not quite convincing as he wagged his head towards his friends for support.

Schlumper raised his eyebrows. “Nothing *is* said.”

“If we picture what we want do you think you could get it for us?”

“Impose coherence.” Schlumper almost wailed in despair. Would they never listen? After all they had been there during his litany as he painted.

“So we can identify it.”

“A target? I doubt it.” Schlumper said crossly. “**It?**” He added as an afterthought. “**It** is not just handed over. **It** is a raft for all sorts of . . .”

“Shit.” Darling said unwittingly helping to keep it on the axial network & out of the mud of interaction.

“Sexual sins, I was going to say. Not cobbled together by wishes.”

“Last word?” Darling mocked him pointing to the dripping brush.

Schlumper struck the picture violently & a shadow sprang out under the scrubbing strokes looming larger & larger as his hand flew about & the colour flew as if from a fountain.

“No. No.” Shouted Snyder suddenly tormented by the image taking shape. “That is not what I wanted you to tap into.”

“It certainly isn’t for you. Shut up.” Darling gestured to Schlumper to continue.

“Tough.” Schlumper retorted. “Who can tell what will happen when some idiot snatches the wheel & commandeers the vessel. You asked for it.” He winked at Snyder as if he was

in on it & then he stroked on more black lines. “There. Who or what is that. Is it any good to any of you? Link up with anyone’s dreams? With anyone’s pain?”

[Not believing the contradictions inherent in the revelations of interiority, Scarface mumbled skulking in the background, they will now deny asking for it. This is what they get for poking their noses into the fantastical kingdom of ‘it’.]

By now the black raft of pigment had occupied almost all of the canvas. It was not a solid block of colour. It was broken & interwoven by a multitude of spaces & gaps shimmering with the canvass’s warm raw umber. This gave the raft its naked bodies.

“Can’t you sweep the landscape or where or what ever it is clear of bodies?” Eve nudged the artist impatiently. “There are enough of us stranded here.”

Schlumper stopped. “Darling asked for it. You & Snyder would object whatever came out. What do you think you would have turned up?” He pointedly rounded on Eve handing her the brush. Who dropped it as if it was a smoking gun. Darling retrieved the weapon. “I’ll have a shot at it.” She said. She had to elbow Snyder out of the way. He had crept close to try & figure out the mess. “It looks like a bomb has hit it.”

“When I have finished you’ll think it’s some enticingly abandoned body encased in frothy lace.” Darling offered brightly.

“How are you going to make out? The only drawings you have made were with magic markers on skin. And they were your own fancy signatures stealthily scribbled on backs & bums.”

“Caused a lot of trouble when they were discovered back home, I’ll bet.”

“The body is the work. As you will see.” Darling swiftly let loose a rain of loaded blows of the brush with willful energy covering the previous layer making a denser tangle into which nothing could penetrate & out of which anything could appear. Breathless she stopped for a moment. From out of the murky depths came a plea. There was in this voice the cross between a howl & a growl ground down by the heel of a boot. “Keep it up. Keep going. Please. Please. Please.”

Here either Schlumper should have speedily grabbed the brush or Darling should have taken her time & thoughtfully stirred the paint. Then Scarface could have given an erudite explanation for the need to hesitate & put the mockers on the whole lot of possible whatnots.

But Darling was too hasty, slopping more runny paint onto the picture before a word could be said. “Ooo. Nice. Ooo. Nice. Ooo. Nice.” Cried a tormented voice, a cross between a moan & a sigh. “Try Try Try to keep going.” Then they all felt *that* shiver down their spines.

“Is this what you had in mind?” Eve whispered to Darling, afraid. “Or do you think it’s him.” And she surreptitiously pointed to Schneider somehow covering her action with the brilliance of a football forward’s goal shot.

“There’s no need to be suspicious. If it’s mine it’s a new one on me.” But she shivered.

“On you?” Eve stared intently into the black tangled mass. “I hope there isn’t three of them. One would be more than enough to go round by the sound of it.”

“Now where is it? Because it sounds like trouble & we might be better off without it. No?” Schlumper asked & they all concentrated & looked very hard. Would an intense way of looking reveal more than a casual glance? I wonder.

Very, very slowly a bundle of tattered rags slid over the lower edge of the canvass, flopped squelching onto the boards & from out of these filthy grey sagging strips rolled a corpse covered in reddish clay. A dense cloud of choking dust billowed after it. Poo. A nauseous shitty stink blew up their snouts. Then rough chunks of metal, shrapnel still red hot & a horde of scrap crashed down behind it.

“Everything went black before my eyes. Any more of that pounding & I’d have been a goner. One minute more & that would have been it.” A voice coughed out staccato.

Darling looked quizzically at the mess & then at Schlumper.

“What a night. Every building malleted flat. Every position hammered into the ground. Every trench blown sky high. Every girder twisted.” It stared at them hungrily.

Darling interrogated the corpse wryly breathing through her mouth. “Every position hammered?”

“Everything else smashed to smithereens.” It said looking ardently into Darlings eyes, twitching slowly like a cornered rat. “Only the stink of the sap was left behind.”

“Phew. And something nasty got singed. Smells like burnt sausages.”

“That’s me grilled. Can’t shake it off.”

They took another good look at what was smeared over it & saw what they had thought was clay was blood & black grease.

“Made up. I knew it.” Darling exclaimed giving the body a kick. Twang! Clank! It gave out an unusual sound for a lump of limp flesh.

“I thought my number was up.” Wailed the corpse.

“Playing games at a time like that. What an imbecile.”

“I should never have joined up.” Shrieked the corpse.

“So that . . . it . . . was what was clanking in the night every night.”

“And you thought it was the bed springs.” Schneider jeered.

“And you hoped it was the bed springs.” Eve cut in. “Giving you something tangible to jerk off to in a bed that was as hard as iron & flat as a board.”

“Iron?” The corpse asked meekly wondering if it had missed out on something.

“You greedy swine.” Schlumper roared glaring at the corpse.

“I know. I’ve got an insatiable craving for it.” The abject corpse confessed. “How did you guess?”

“What?” the others asked.

“It gobbles up metal.” Said Schlumper. He looked around grimly checking up on the tools & noted the missing hacksaw.

“You bastard, Schlumper. How can you be so heartless?” Cried Schneider who would whistle a different tune when he needed a hammer. “Look at the poor fucker, black & blue . . . & . . . grey.”

“That’s with eating special steels & alloys. He should have stuck to iron.” Schlumper sounded knowledgeable.

“Yes. It’s very difficult to digest shrapnel especially when taken hot.” Agreed the corpse without the slightest hint of irony. It certainly wasn’t giving that away.

Heading

Away from I through if & it to Ivory black

Whether an iceberg or icicle

(mostly hidden white or mostly show of light)

The undertow of corrosive anxiety

Could not be revealed by a stone thrown

Into that black

Craving.

“Listen.” He said. “I can’t make that space add up to my hopes.”

Hotfoot

Pursuing a fugitive identity

When lattice versus shimmer

Jack out of it

Don’t ask but asked shrug off the fallacy

Of a half revealed way.

Everything that was loose & could bang banged in the terrible stinging wind that had sprung up out of nowhere.

It was time to up sticks.

Everything was sodden, drenched in a trice & rotting off its bones. A lattice half concealed the room half revealed the passage. Schlumper half guessed that to live in the present was impossible in this workshop. He glanced at the empty string, a still taut line across the corner. Quickly crossing the room & stretching an arm out high he ran his finger along the green twine. It sang or whined. It was a searching gesture. 'That wasn't the way I wanted it to go.' The thought surged out & so he also made the thought just a little like a wish for the story to have gone differently. 'But where?'

A comforting arm fell on his shoulder; the warmth of this was so unexpected that Schlumper winced as if the back door had been blown off his despondent feelings & all the shreds of hurts & broken hopes exposed. He glanced sideways to see a tear-stained face lined with shriveled gossamer shattering the illusion & for the first time in a very long time Schlumper didn't have to coax the warmth back into his being. And anyone who hasn't been dazzled by something like this can't understand.

She turned, struggling to grope closer, muttering vague cherishing words as she brushed his arm & sank beside his body. Her breath came in heavy gasps & rattles. It was a harsh unremitting sound. She grew pale as her lips became thinner & lost their colour.

Undaunted Schlumper stooped, still reeling, tenderly slid a hand around the soft, half-reclining form & pulled her towards him. As they pressed together he knew how badly he needed the consolation of those touches.

Abruptly the painful illusion faded. An inner voice gently berated him. 'Who knows where we would have roamed if you could have stood there longer; held out longer.' Stunned at the accusation he whisked the thought away. And was left bereft envying those who can accept & keep what they dredge up, again with that fishy feeling accepting he should have been turned to stone, condemned by his reflections.

Alone, he found himself standing in a trance in the workshop making meaningless gestures into an empty corner. A trance sustained by dribs & drabs of fantasy; by unrealizable whims & futile hopes, yet again caught out, baffled why he traced these paths, he wondered why he ignored the initial hesitation he felt placed before the introspection (like a Kota figure, mostly head, to stop him) why he delved further into dangerous waters (thoughts hazardous to the uninitiated). He postponed an analysis because it seemed simple & easy to do anytime; the steps were still there to follow. And so he interpreted these first images as interference when they should have been seen as gifts, obscure warnings but gifts. 'They may well be as impenetrable & as difficult to read as bark paintings but they are all I get. And like the sacred boards, scratched & perishable, lightly abandoned after a few days use.' Schlumper mused still standing stock-still. 'Too soon.'

His mind centred on those unbelievably beautiful abstract, random objects with their close, exact lines & patterns which looked so similar, side by side, but each one having a unique story usually dependent for interpretation on the artist's word.

A groan saved Schlumper from more puzzling understanding; it was the sound of satisfaction, as the corpse, with a grin pasted across its wan face, had found a big bag of

square floorboard nails. Delighted, not wondering where they came from, it tucked in as Schlumper darted a withering glance of disapproval below a frown but said nothing, vaguely happy to deal with a concrete image. “Now where was I? What was I about to do?” Schlumper spoke his mantra out loud twitching a pencil over a clean sheet of cartridge.

“You were groping over this way.” Eve tried an ingratiating smile but got it hopelessly wrong.

“Yes. That way.” Indicating Darling with a bony finger the corpse hoarsely whispered & shiftily slid the nails closer to the side of its wilted body with its hidden hand.

“You had your hands right round her & the bitch didn’t even flinch.” Eve added angrily stumping over the corpse & getting as close to Darling as she could without inching her to one side. She was slightly in front. “You could start again on me. You’ll find I fit the picture better. I’m more flexible.” She produced a sinuous pose. Schneider bit his lip. Eve stood swaying; deliberately brushing the nymph with her buttocks who had become rigid with anguish that she might miss out.

[You’ve got the figure of a Kakatiya dancer, Scarface agreed under his breath.]

Darling pushed Eve hard. “Nob off! He’s only just got back & I’m having the first go.”

Which action spun Eve into another provocative pose.

“I hope you’re not thinking of touching me after handling that filthy object.” She pointed to the corpse, who grimaced & retorted derisively in a voice that mangled every word. “I was just going to say the same thing with knobs on.” Blood stained saliva ran from the corner of its mouth in a thin stream. “I am the more urgent case. I should take first place.

And I'm not going to lie here patiently while you discuss who gets to eat his meat first like a pair of floozies."

"And we're not going to listen to your ugly mouth."

At this the corpse spat.

"Some hopes." Schneider seemed to be talking to himself.

"More than one – Hope – that's an intoxicating idea." The corpse giggled looking evasive as though it had misheard. Its jaw dropped. But rummaging behind the canvass pulled out a battered photo album which it later claimed, when challenged for ownership by Schlumper, it had carried throughout the conflict; stroking the tattered cover open it poured over the pictures.

"For what? For it? That thing forever grinding its teeth & talking in its sleep." Eve demanded pointing, while Schneider shuffled uneasily behind her. But Schlumper seemed impervious to the conversation as he watched the dribble run down the corpse's chin.

"Messy." He grunted to himself as he glared around. "Not quite like the Garden of Eden. But. **Hold your horses.** It can be improved."

"It's better if you simplify it." Said a voice out of the blue. "You can't go along with this madness."

Schlumper agreed it had to be war when he heard this clue & took up a large brush.

"None of that Mr. Schlumper. Please." They all cried in horror watching him dip it into the black pot again.

*

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[The refusal to go along with the madness of vouchsafing lofty obscenities was not engendered, prompted or teased out of any kind of thinking. Scarface's comment was that you could tell by the result that if you got it at all you got it from the con-text..]

* * *

The corpse screamed or shrieked. You couldn't tell which. And melted away into a sweet, untroubled memory & stayed there bleached, neatly abiding scrubbed out of the mind's way. Or so Schlumper thought who with his childlike wanting was easily beguiled into easy believing. And thus lulled capable of throwing into that darkness all he had. "See. It did not fade but dissolved into a murky cloud enabling more events to layer on top: to hold the bones of it under." He patted the dried canvass with a satisfaction the black tangled mass under his hand should not have given him because, quite simply, clouds float over things even in the mind. When Schlumper felt blocked facing one way, when all the space had been squeezed out, he often turned sideways & another vista opened up; the instant immediately had a new past & future. But Schlumper was usually clear-sighted when faced by a picture & knew it was going to be tricky to see much in what he stood before at that moment & require more than a usual amount of optimism to get going anywhere with what he had been lumbered with. 'Flirting with disaster. It is always a mistake to trust your own judgement. Bound to get your fingers burned.' He admonished himself. 'What sort of thoughts must have been floating around.'

* * *

One of the thoughts or thereabouts was how did he finish up tangling with this trash on the canvass.

Which one was his second self?

Which his counterpart?

What was the difference between them? Their gender? He felt the tug to clarify, to open it up & decide. But nothing comes from thinking hard. It was as if one strolled nonchalant through life & one waddled like a three-cornered horse. Yet they could be the same. This vague desire to know sometimes became concrete; an impassable object nestling in his mind, uncomfortably choking off any ideas from shooting up, withholding the possibility of a lurch to one side to get another angle or a swerve away into a different perspective, so he had often considered giving up the chase & simply lying in ambush like a sniper, picking the items off if they chanced his way. And he was able to fancy, when totally alone, that someday in a lucid moment the haunting clues would add up to an answer he could accept & the hunted items piled up beside him deliver a solution that would enable a resumption of his blundering without a constant nagging doubt, a need to be given a significant sign, a tick. These hesitant, nebulous thoughts were providential, they moved nothing, they moved him nowhere & they evaporated the instant Schlumper tried to grasp them. But that imagined gesture, although there was no movement, shook him out of his torpor.

Someone plucking at his sleeve galvanized Schlumper at that moment.

It stirred up the memory of a man who grasped his arm to get his attention during one of the frequent, unscheduled stops on the Lalitpur – Bhopal express. Schlumper, who had boarded the train at Sanchi, was swinging out of the open door scanning the dusky landscape. Quite out of the blue a man tugged at his arm & said he would give the artist

three numbers. Seven; sixteen; and twenty-five, with the seven as a special. Watch out in one year, he added & carried on mending banknotes worth 7p. with transparent tape. Schlumper, who had been perched on the mesh luggage rack along with many other passengers forced into making this journey late at night because the system had been disrupted by a derailment early in the day, a bad crash hundreds of miles away, in which many people were killed, wondered at the time what he could do with three numbers, in the middle of nowhere, but noted the date in a book: 3rd of December: watch out. Then as the express rolled slowly through the night all the passenger wrapped themselves inside thin brown blankets & huddled down except for one man who, wearing a worn dressing gown of dirty green, meandered amongst the cloaked figures reading a small book to himself.

Now startled, Schlumper posed the question as he thumbed open the notebook & checked the date which he already knew. Today. How could that man have known who to tell? He looked down around for a second time.

Her breasts hung heavy in their flimsy support. Is this in the same made-up story where she told of a woman rubbing against a man & after leading him on drops him?

How long is it since you've had a first kiss?

First kiss?

Tell the truth – a kiss. She rubbed against him but was surprised when he pushed open her legs at the knees with his knee, yet fell into an accommodating body-shape easily enough.

The kiss would have to make them breathless so when they relinquished their embrace they were panting.

While thinking she was making it clear she wouldn't miss a vital sexual chance with him; she was merely rubbing her lower abdomen against his mechanically, to comfort some completely extraneous hurt; but it fired an impulse, wildly off the mark, & into this gaping erotic rent he had imagined in the mundane fabric of life, he thrust all his desire. He could just as well driven the eggs full speed into a wall. A trail of red dusty footprints, newly imprinted but barely discernable on the floor, must have caught his eye as he wondered wide-eyed what kind of 'accommodating body-shape' he would want. Schlumper jerked his arm free, made aware, on the impact of his thought & the faint almost subliminal clue, that he was not alone. She slowly unwound from around his leg, unwilling to release him so soon although she had not been holding his arm & was thrown into a tighter grip when he flailed about as if fighting off an unseen assailant. "What does it take to bring you back to earth? Did you know what you were doing? You nearly hit me." She stroked his arm. Her hand left a rouge patch on his wrist where she momentarily held it. "Out of those tangled thoughts, derived by the wandering pencil from nowhere, you mean a form appears?" He dusted off the colour with his fingers & looked at the stain." And it takes skill." "Whoever she is." "Ask her. You are here as well. The other woman told you clearly enough." "Even turned down the page corner." She giggled complicitly. "To show me where to begin."

“And accepting her as she has you would be, at the very least, an unconscious agreement to go along.”

“Or even tacit.”

“Happy.” And although this word had inadvertently slipped out Schlumper knew it was the right one as he saw its effect light up in her face.

“That’s a word needed around this venture.”

A woman wafted past dressed in turquoise. An undulating sheath in which a Goddess could rest lightly. Schlumper was about to cry out & stop her but a quick, surreptitious glance at his companion made him keep silent for she was oblivious to the presence of this person.

“I am tempted to try it out.” She coughed, blowing out the acrid smoke of her cigarette.

“To forget?” He didn’t believe her. “Welcome her from the start. Impossible.”

“She has to become real. As she steps into your arms I am there.” Her hand was still flapping dispersing the smoke.

“That’s what you want?”

“Yes.” She was breathless.

“No possibility of return?”

“Is that what you want?”

“Yes.” He was emphatic.

Soaring above them the dancing female figures, in warm stone, every mouth with a different beautiful smile, scorched & pushed & blurred the couple together.

A faint gasp. And her smile looked strained at first but the hurt was smudged away, overwhelmed by the light rub of a fingertip on her lipstick.

“O.K. You say she must tell it all?”

He started to ask his question before she had finished her warning question. “I think it must have been the pain of the blood roaring through her heart that caused her to double up clutching her breast?”

“No. She made a crude attempt to cover up the disgust she was sure showed on her face. She didn’t want to sneer right out. Not just then.”

“You wouldn’t say she was laughing at the moment?”

“Not in his face.”

“But surely he would have caught a hint of the hollowness. Any fleeting ghastly thought from a heart of stone.”

“Face it. With that loveliest woman in front of his eyes. Never.”

“You are telling me to think of it as the longest betrayal.”

“It stayed his hand?”

“He didn’t know. Can’t you get that? She could have hit out any time & he would have been taken unawares.”

“Then are you going to tell me what kind of insanity you guess it was that so mesmerized him?” She tapped the toe of her red boot impatiently on the bare boards. She rocked back on their tall heels, as the artist seemed to consider his reply.

“The dizziness of small steps. He couldn’t act against what is love itself.”

“What do you mean? Are you kidding he seemed to work against it all the time.

Everything he did.” She stood erect & still, unblinking, looking straight into his eyes but he couldn’t gauge her feelings; she would either kiss or strike, either way there was a subtle venom in the look. “I met a man something like him years ago & rather liked him but I was right to be wary. Although you might see it as sentimental blame. The skies were soon to be full of clouds & I could tell.”

“What?” Schlumper was annoyed at letting her deliver the slight so cool; at being unable to decipher her regard after all this time & he hoped an abrupt question would cut the thread.

But she adroitly avoided this cut. “That’s how I felt. And still do. I couldn’t say it any other way.” She closed her mouth tightly around her cigarette then blew the smoke out between wrinkled lips as if she tasted the poison. The butt she discarded was smudged with crimson & crushed with a crimson boot into the thin pattering of dust.

“It sounds as if you had spelled it out to yourself in almost perfect detail beforehand.”

“True.”

[If this is all true why didn’t he smell her when she came in after playing with the dog?

She would have reeked. I know.

You are going to say there was such an impenetrable stink left by the corpse that

Schlumper, overcome by nausea, couldn’t have caught a wiff of anything else.

And are you going to say she trips over & falls into an embrace? Well you can’t you’ve tried that ploy already.

And you always think you can place these feelings accurately so when she said what she said you claim he felt a soft sensual comforting touch. But was it only contained in your thought & irrelevant? Yes.]

“That would be sure to turn you leaden-footed, mapping it out, trying to outrun fate.”

“Fate! Excellent. And I thought it was just a mundane mistake.” She spat the words back at him, hung her head, then turned away. It appeared that this move caused her pain.

Sakini felt the persistent ache in her old stab wound jab harder, augmented by the distress of an apparent rejection & pinched by the awkward twist she made to escape Schlumper’s look which she thought confirmed her fears by dismissing a faint intimate hope she still carried. ‘Should she explain?’ She asked herself dumbly. All Schlumper saw was the shake of her head & a tuft of her hair raggedly billowing out. He almost reached out to stroke it, to feel its silken flow through his fingers again. Instead he reached down to stroke the ribcage of a dog that had sprung out from under a chair. The lurcher turned its long muzzle to follow the hand stroking its side. When the hand stopped its lips flickered back to snarl.

Sakini could sense his disappointment & thought. ‘Do I like the feel of this meeting, the way it’s going?’ She contained a challenge in the stifled question, in silence, as he had denied his gesture, by shifting it instinctively as you would adjust your body weight while climbing a tree to accommodate a delicate but vital move.

In that tree where parrot & monkey meet to frolic.

Sakini arched her back & deliberately moved her body closer to the artist again. This was one thing she was sure of. She knew his mind often followed a single track, perhaps this

was the one time she could connect. She reached out. Just as she did this Schlumper remembered glimpsing a detail on an illustration, in a picture book he had idly flicked through, of a young woman sitting on the ground on a white sheet strewn with grass, with what looked like a large book tied to her shins; above her a voyeur, partially hidden in a tree was caught furtively putting something into his pocket. Behind him, another part naked figure, its sex concealed by the leaves, held a piece of paper to which he or she was putting a match. What was this troublesome manifestation? Schlumper's guess, after studying the features, would have been that this was actually a womanifestation.

Don't forget that these beings are frozen as they are, forever.

Schlumper caught Sakini's eye & in that moment recognized that she was the woman, the troubling effigy, from in the tree. He blurted out. "What did you wish, Sakini, as you burned that letter?" Startled, her body involuntarily swayed as if trying to keep its balance in an insecure place, Sakini's arms jerked out & grabbed Schlumper. "We've tried that." He said laconically, shrugging off her grip. "Tell me what was written."

As the strip of paper flared up the flame spat out a shower of ash, tiny white fragments that rapidly dispersed like an improvised sparkler. But it gave out no smoke.

* * *

So you can guess that as Schlumper asked Sakini the question she knew he was close to the answer & she replied deferentially, although angry because he had refused her capricious embrace, "I wouldn't want to worry you. Sometimes things never come together although they seem destined to from . . ." She cut short in a studied way.

He stared at her sharply for a second longer than was necessary, “Have you been sent to warn me?” You know Schlumper still wondered, you could tell by the marks beside his eyes, like little scratches made by a fingernail itching the words up & out. Giving them air to float in. And such misunderstandings are commonplace. She seemed to be thinking it up as she spoke, but perversely he believed she had learned her lines well.

“Can’t you feel it in your bones?”

“You’ll never know.” He felt cross.

So, as you can guess, Schlumper was under that tree, which could speak, as they do when we want them to, the way you & I do.

This shut Schlumper up.

Sakini smiled, fortuitously giving him, with the warmth glowing off her full lips which had caught the red of the flame, a strange something not felt before that allowed him to surrender to a tender feeling.

I don’t construe my whispering world the way you do.

Emotionally untrue: Schlumper’s mind shuttered down.

Listen. I don’t construe my world the way you do.

A stiff lock: Schlumper’s mind had sprung the trap on his suspicions. Now he would skin them.

Stepping backwards he peered into the foliage that had been block printed on the window blind. Behind him Sakini emerged from the cover of a black wood screen. This two-winged screen was old & heavy, still embossed with a Chinese landscape made from small, carved ivory pieces set in reddish paste. Amongst the trees choked with birds a

goose girl was chiding one of her flock, but why was she naked, glistening with a coat of laqueur. Sakini obviously had the answer. She, too, was naked. And was eager to spill her plan into his ear. It was conceived to rile him. And as she taunted him for trying to use what is familiar to get an idea of an unknown feeling, like treating the many stiff-winged fluttering birds cut by the ivory carver as a picture of his gnawing discontent, because she thought he tried this way to efface what was actually true, what he couldn't bear to hold, didn't dare to wrench clear from the tangle, she trembled. Now, because he couldn't resist the whim to enter the Chinese garden with her, they embraced under the shade thrown by the trunk of this tree & it cast a sharp bright line across her body which she moved restlessly straddling him, in & out of the pool of sunshine, changing colour from a sombre ochre to a raw orange in the flare of light. Sakini was keen to claim him, but dubious of his heart, so still hesitated as if at an entrance to an unknown possibly dangerous place. Could she share the thought that wafted across her mind? 'What did they share?' And answered herself silently, 'You can't imagine.' She knew he would be unable to understand why she had stopped at the threshold despite being impelled or engulfed, as she was, by a desire so strong it fixed a petulant glare mixed with a smile to her lips whenever she felt like harming him.

In this fleeting moment the geese cackled forming a menacing curve around the sprawling couple. Their guardian stood goggle-eyed amongst the birds clutching the long pole, with which she guided them, across her thighs.

How could she make an attempt at worldliness without pretence? She didn't know how to place a barrier between herself & others. What her somewhat blank look at this

passionate sight showed was, used to such silliness in the open, she wanted to hear the noise of their climax & thought a neutral expression best to give her leave & disguise any interest.

“**Hold your horses.** Does that mean you are imagining we are going to tumble into the feathers? Right now. What a nerve.” Unabashed, under the blue light, Sakini nudged him towards the sofa with polite but insistent touches where Darling made room beside the arm. Schlumper felt absent. An unpredictable part of his mind (what mind some would say) was out minding something important so he was not detached but reflecting on something unnamable (unspeakable) as he painted. “Is that what this apparition is about?” He stroked the back of the sofa as if the nap was delicate flesh, then slumped into it & folded his arms defensively. Anything could happen, he thought. How could he defend against any more . . . beings (spectres?) being transported into this realm. And at this instant Schlumper was inquisitive but about what he didn’t know because the whats had been very surprising. He adopted the look of stupor to tune in exactly with the workshop, to be at the absolute level of its sensations. To him the masks seemed to tug at their string. That was the first thing. So he sank lower into the cushion. Sakini took it as a sign & rolled closer & onto him. But given the place & him disengaging so was it a random act?

He was pointing over her shoulder. “Just look at that.”

Her knees go up & legs open inviting the undercurrent of touch.

“It could have been a warning.”

“What?”

“The masks dropping sequentially.”

“Nonsense.”

“They could have been a warning.”

“What? Who?”

“The figures appearing.”

“Do you think so?” Schlumper said to himself & set his spectacles back over the gaze that did nothing more than examine the wide open body next to him. And wondered. For the way the smile came to her mouth taking the lips by surprise as it tried to modify his look by exerting in its spontaneity a novel element, told of a promise yet to be made.

Schlumper thought he got the thrust of it. And the nostalgic warning. And the silent plea to be reasonable. And the request for him to be indulgent. And the feeling something was unfair also crammed its way in. And then came a strange odour seeping into his consciousness out of a crazy chase in a memory of a bright night. No this smell was real. Schlumper licked his lips to help place the sour perfume & shook his head in disbelief at the taste. He could still hear the fruit falling as they ran under the bowing boughs in the old orchard. He could still see the pattern of the leaf shadows playing over her face as she turned to smile at him as he caught up with her shouting his desire. He could still see the lips unfurl. Dashing past a plum with silver leaf he had pushed her down into a hummock of the rank grass. And parallel with this sweet hot vision came a shudderingly melancholy dark sad net full of treasure. The feel of her body totally without strength.

“Treasure?” Sakini echoed, puzzled. He must have said the word out loud. And he too wondered about the word as he remembered his abhorrence at touching the outside

fleshless bones under the dress. And wondered about the sense in replacing sweet ignorance with the shock of insight. You recover what? Because he could no longer discriminate & only taste iron much of that reconstituted world had become incomprehensible. Now he could hear something else thumping as well as their two hearts. Had he heard that noise at the time? Or had their heartbeats completely displaced the low sound & was he adding it in? (Compounding his remembering with a later grim deduction). How could Sakini make him call up all that stifled pain in an instant?

It was in the shape of that smile.

So coarse were the blades of the grass they fell into that you easily cut on them but still she drew one carelessly through her lips & bled.

“They never even kissed on that last night together?”

There was no answer. Behind them there was a twang & the last mask was fluttering to the floor. Schlumper craned his neck to see which one it was. What pleased in one form became confused in another, by even the smallest touch of any colour. Sakini embraced him as he rose pulling her almond coloured body up with him. She hung in the shadow of his body with her legs an undulating form beneath them. Acting as though invited to make a prediction on an event about which he did have some hopes but about which he didn't want to pronounce, Schlumper groped into this mass & pinched the swollen lips of her vagina together & rubbed the pussy until the moisture began to run through his fingers at which he inserted two sticky fingers into the pulsating slit. Indifferent to the shadow cast on the wall that detached from the figures like snakes he pushed these fingers further up her cunt & rolled in his thumb aided (not inspired this time) by a need

that didn't come ready-made & he fondled her slimy clitoris as she held her legs like the crook of a branch panting because she liked the pressure of his arm beating & thumping on her rubbery belly.

Here Scarface pulled a sheet of paper out of a thick packet & wrote: The trivial detail is my own because this can be a focus, bring us all (have you been counting?) to realize that we don't have any other time. I guess it is impossible for a language to exist in such a narrow slice of space as the picture plane (negligible invisible non-existent) & yet here it is on the page communicating miracles (I am taking liberties there but what the hell). In fact that space doesn't exist in the picture which is an invisible threshold between the real & the imaginary, between a corrosive madness & a healing madness & it can only be traversed, crossed over & once it is passed through there is no return. That is the vital fact; one step & the end & the beginning, both invisible, are fused on this vertical illusionary area by touch. Scarface stiffened & slowly turned his head to see who was tiptoeing up behind his back.

Schlumper slightly inclined his head as a greeting before blurting out. "Stop interrupting the sex & everything. Got that? You're turning it into an anodyne game."

“And everything? Interesting.” Scarface flicked out a hand, the gesture meant ‘carry on’ but the artist hadn’t seen it or ignored it & he too stuck out an angry finger. He was seething & shaking & in a flash capable of recklessly dashing off the rest of the picture. (Which was still practically totally black. A grunt. A few gleams & glimmers shone in its moonless fog.) He would do anything to get from under the leaden hand.

‘MANY HAPPY RETURNS’

“Here is a present for you: **X.**”

“What a smacker: **Hold your horses** let me get it off.”

“What an Angel you are.”

“You are such a liar.”

“Except when you’re naked.”

Take note that the disembodied voices are the HORDE letting off steam inside the HORSE’S HEAD, which is an integral part of the cluttered décor in this rough sketch of a sunny room. What this bit of a beast conjured up, after having been given an encouraging nod & brushed out on a free rein, is Angel, caught flagrantly riding roughshod over the Artist’s leg of mutton on a leatherette settee squeaking with the friction of the warm skin of her knees on wet plastic. So, assuming she is another one of the Artist’s classy girls like Darling free for fun, we can freeze the action & frame, for

later delectation, what she let loose. Examine each piece to see how well it was played to break our hearts. And also dissect each part at leisure to our heart's content. That is, if we don't find she is a real angel, completely spotless, slotless & useless. Wait. A dab of red. Good. An encouraging start, she kept her boots on. I knew she wouldn't fail.

Meanwhile, treasuring a moment of freedom given by this diversion, we are heading downhill as fast as we can towards the abandonment of necromancy, for this rummaging in the murmur of bees, had without exception proved unsuccessful in finding a way out of the tight spot. We, a plump little tart & a sourpuss painter, in the course of our descent, come again to a famous hollow tree into which I had briefly & unavailingly popped time after time in search of sympathy, to lie beside, hoping it would be manifested in the shape of an easy woman. In trying to gain access to this objective, by cutting through the wreckage of my luck, I am warned the operative words are figurative; bust & snatch for example.

"And the area of operation is the graveyard." Snyder said on cue. "Cradle snatching." He whistled. "And taking in the instructive frescoes. While taking out the bodies."

Prevented from reaching a climax by Snyder's untimely interruption, but chiefly by wonder at the amount of time lost selecting subterfuges to breach the defences of all the supine beauties, this ride had been deemed necessary to catch up.

'Take whatever it takes.' I had been instructed. 'But don't take too long.'

"Verbosity." Snyder challenged the means without the ends. "Should cushion the fall."

So at first blush, like Tom Thumb, I would loved to have smuggled a secret directive back into the Horse's Head by way of its ear rather like the way she used to plead in mine,

'Fuck me hard.' Yet I was struggling like a man (Schlumper) who has decided, for most of the above reasons, to make a loved one look as ugly a bitch as possible in the mind's eye to stop his slide towards a confrontation with his innermost needs.

"Prevent a bust up. Never, they'll pop out." A leaden-footed Snyder dolefully suggested the snag.

"See how easily the very words we had been warned about can fuse into trouble behind his back & can be slipped in, in the confusion." Eve stalked disapprovingly round a Snyder mesmerized by her beauty.

But, in a lapse of sensual flirtatious yearning, imagining his loved one in a beautiful combination of black & white, Schlumper gave in, picked up the palette & decided she should be beautiful still. Alas he could not succeed in his effort to snatch (I wink here at Snyder, clumsily) the collapsing order back from the brink anyhow; for the lack of a platitude let him down. Or, more likely, it was the loss of a potent dimension to operate in that thwarted him.

"You're dead right. We soon discovered that he lives between the lines." Darling declared. "And it's hollow there too."

"He fell into a drunken stupor. I saw him. Is that what you're trying to say?" Eve asked.

"A corpse is fairly unresponsive." Snyder blurted out, startled by the wink but keeping his back to Eve. "Even when it's kept alive in the mind of a deluded woman who claims that the cast off underwear from under the bed looks better on her than it did on the ghost which she nevertheless pursues. A figure that also torments her."

“And it did look better on her. She wasn’t swanking.” Darling said nicely, sure it was true & pleasantly uncompetative because of her self-assurance.

“You must be kidding. It was baggy on her. She was as thin as a nail. She’d be like shagging a bottle.” Eve said viciously lashing out.

I had to shout to hold them back, “Eve, Darling cut it out & who is that bulging funny looking fucker? Your anger calls up some queer bedfellows.”

“Horsey?” Darling exclaimed with delight & then her voice changed to become as hard as a brick. “Oh & you, Schneider? How did you get here?”

It was a very blurred picture now the sun had gone in & they were stepping into a darkening arena out of the doorway. Leaving the room bare & echoing with the grunts & moans of sexual excesses.

“If you could hold on a minute . . . or two . . . let me get my bearings. Put a few things on in order . . . here that’s mine.”

“You can fish.”

Scuffle. “Not there.”

“Ouch.”

“Wait. I’ve got him by the balls.”

“Let go.”

“Lost your marbles? Join the club.” Snyder said darkly, adding, “Without all that twaddle about who discovered the magic of Schlumper’s work first? And trying to guess who the beanpole was you were fucking. I’m not surprised you want out. Oh. Don’t leave any of the shit out of the stories on anyone’s account. Don’t iron out the wrinkles that would

spoil the fun. If you're going to tell anybody anything tell them this." Snyder made the universal sign. "Straight up."

"Just like you Snyder, no imagination." Darling's comment was lost in the rumpus.

I read here. It has been suggested that if Schneider's body could keep topped up with it (keep in the nocturnal emissions for a change) perhaps that might have an effect which would certainly limit the empty feeling of rejection he was given to & all the other dissonance back-firing between his ears.

Eve half tried to defend him. "He wasn't as bad as that. Was he?" But she said it deliberately without conviction.

"Are you saying he was a numbskull?" Darling was nonplussed & didn't care for it much & tossed her head. "And he dribbles?" But then, in a flash, decided she had known all along.

There were lots of heads twanging up & down. "Something is definitely missing."

"Confetti? Shrapnel?"

When I was up there

Day after day

I wondered why I had been so keen.

Think it was the Milky Way? You're wrong!

It was a ladder.

+

I don't know why it took me so long

To see animals filling out the starshapes,

To give the diamond head of Orion lips.

Although there was nothing between us then.

I can go on painting the picture – with colours she liked

Green & rose & creamy grey like bone

But not many others

She chose red & black some times

But not then. A black pillow some times.

Blue, yes she liked blue quite a bit.

I was glad because it is the colour of the sky

And not the only one.

+

I could spend days kissing her then

When nothing seemed better.

It might be the starry night of a month

When you can sprinkle their sugar on imagination

Finish the cake

And so on

I thought.

+

With the clouds so low we stayed

Pinned down in bed

And watched the Heron

Long enough

In its usual place.

+

A golden hair left on the carpet

Quick kisses Empty mornings

And any moment out in the cold

When the full moon cracks in half again & again

And you want want want without

Change or giving -----

Breath.

“You were saying it was a sticky incident.” Darling helped a complaining Eve to get into her tirade. They halted & gathered round huddled together in a knot. Behind them, out of

the shadows, a lemon-yellow temple gopuram glowed, its tower a honeycomb with every crevice full of beguiling maidens. A child with a hoop, rolling the Oom, loitered near the temple car. “He didn’t have to do anything. No mind of his own, no less; the wound was it, they said. You can have a free run of the body & do anything you want to. But you must take detailed notes. I can tell you it was impossible to have any fun while you were anguishing over how to put pleasure into words as you did it. You’re supposed to do that first.”

“A flop.” Darling summed up.

“Difficult numbers.” Snyder summed up. Eve stood against the temple car’s massive solid wheel, set her back on its vermilion stripes, lips swelling with rage. “How could it be so difficult?”

“Something was boiling hot under it.” Darling thought aloud. “Charged with uncharted dreams.” She glanced over at Eve to see if she approved. Eve’s nose twitched.

“You were too worked up, Darling’s right. Probably after studying the wrong sex manual you expected your initiatives to be greeted with relish.” Snyder’s helpful words grew lamer. “The corpse’s dimension probably didn’t have much room for play in it.”

“Shit.” Said Darling. “You can’t be serious. We are not going to play along with that kind of bestiality.”

“It gets you to **the** higher place quicker than any other way.” Snyder retorted authoritatively but didn’t seem exactly to be heading that way.

“Have you lost the plot? Snyder. Those dogs of war would rip you to pieces.” Eve really was astounded. This fifth step on the ladder was starting to look very dangerous.

Snyder shrugged graciously in the way, he was sure, they did it in olden times. It was ill-advised.

“Discipline.” Roared the Horse’s head resentful at being roused by the glimmer of an idea it didn’t have the faintest notion of. “Keep a hoof or two on the clay of that animal nature of yours. Master it.”

“March straight into the hail of shit.” Sniggered Snyder. “Face it.”

“Master it.” Repeated the Horde along with the hand actions.

“Spurn it.” Roared the Horse’s head.

“Spurn it.” Repeated the Horde, worn out.

“What?” Darling wanted to know. “Master it yourself. I told you it sounded tacky.”

“Can’t you keep up? S.P.U.R.N. ” Eve hissed. “ You’re as bad as Snyder. S for Gnosis. P for Sabotage. U for Cannibalism. R for ecstasy & N for Nirvana where Snyder is heading. Got it? He wants to take us along. The story is grinding to a halt here waiting for you to catch up & supply the sexual motivation I’m deemed to be lacking.” She stuck her nose in the air.

The Horse scratched his head & looked at Eve quizzically. “All the other tossers I have met, agree, more or less,” He moved from one shoe to the other & Eve noted it. “Agree that the real world is a meaningless illusion . . . but quite hard in places . . .”

“And not with knobs on.” Eve helpfully gave a smooth example of quick thinking to drive up the content. And to curl her tongue round an instrumental word.

“ . . . And what we perceive is not worth a piddle . . .”

“Utterly.”

“Can someone keep the rest of this fucking Horse quiet? Please.” The Horde asked. “Clip Clop Clip Clop all day. Now it’s starting to pontificate. And what’s that strange tang in the air?” It looked enquiringly at the Horse’s head.

“ All feelings are a big, big trap”

The massed ranks looked directly at the reflection of the whole Horse & measured, with stern runny eyes, the length of its muzzle but their precise interest lay in the length of the hose pipe out of which streamed a steaming yellow torrent.

“ From which we must prise ourselves free . . . & that usually takes”

“And takes the aforesniffed piss?” Eve, taking the higher ground, was eager to show she was following closely so butted in.

“However, Schneider, in preferring a quick fix to cut out the guff, took the corner through the graveyard gate to bliss & associated condominiums while at the same time bleeding, thought it better to fabricate a phantom self, in the manner of the Existentialists, to deflect what was going on or coming next (Lust, for example, or more practically a knife or bullet) to some other whom buggering about in a different ramshackle elsewhere”

“A phantom self.” Eve was astounded, “What knows all about itself?”

“Tut tut tut.” Mumbled the Horde. “We hope Horse’s Head denies that.”

“Don’t worry.” Eve skillfully stepping on the isolated islands of dry fact brought another convoluted ‘butt in’ to reassure them, “It didn’t come to pass. We shut the gate on that freeloader’s scheme & stalled his attempt to destroy the escapade’s integrity.”

“He fell apart?” Darling, eyes glittering, missed the catch. “How many pieces? Two?”

“No. He was committed to elsewhere. Didn’t you hear that?” Eve hadn’t been taken in.

“Is he going to be able to do it instantaneously?” Darling doubted that & tried to exploit her doubt. “Defying all accepted norms?”

Eve was unabashed. “**Hold your horses.**” And slyly added. “Relax. He meant *just* what he said.” They knew Eve knew full well that was not the case. Especially Angel who just happened to be passing by at that very moment but kept out of sight not wanting to interfere.

“He is the lowest of the low,” Grumbled a fair number of voices lodged inside the horse skin. “So you can see the problem we have with formulating an interpretation of Horseness. The outer Horse might be expected to be transparent to the open eye but the inner Horse, with its damaging split, who knows? How does one get a handle on that.”

“Oh. No. I can’t accept that. **IT** is more than skin deep.” Declared Eve, patting the Horse’s flank reflectively & not without an occasional lingering, caressing, fingering, curious touch. She had never had any trouble with cleavage, except once, which we shall come to sooner or later.

“ . . . this phantom on an inextinguishable quest . . . ”

“Hoy. Fingers. There are seven of us in here. We are not a pantomime horse.”

“ . . . feeling with each throb. . . with each stab of pain . . . Ouch.” The owner of the voice winced, hobbled around & was forced to fade.

“They should try to find a hook to hang it on. Something. A nob.” Darling mused with the resourcefulness of a kitchen cabinet.

“Try a wing nut?” A helpful member of the Horde piped up. “I was inside B. the other day & looked out & saw what must have been a glitzy Angel dressed in a black lacy

cardigan manhandling a giant sized tea-chest, using a hook; the gauzy wings were strapped on its back, & it looked by the way it tossed the box around as if it could have easily solved your problem.”

“A wing-nut.” Said Eve who was not without guile, “An Angel with gauzy wings but not, I imagine, with the powers of a specific body?”

[Take note. Because we need this Angel badly for the story. Everybody with fingers had them crossed. Scarface crossed his. Then a peculiar smell like naphthalene pervaded the area.]

“It was quite big.”

“I thought they had to disengage from the flesh?” The Horse’s Head wasn’t exactly emphatic but sounded cock sure. “Split.” Its white diamond shaped blaze glowed whiter than frost.

“Uncouple!” Alarm bells began to ring in Eve’s gorgeous earrings. The clock started to tick with a nasty herringbone tone. “I don’t recognize that kind of love.” She gasped. The bleak words flew like angry insects out of her overripe lips. “What a tedious mess that would leave & you can’t overlook that there would be a permanent stain on the Psyche for sure.”

“Indelible & what’s worse, unmistakable.” Agreed Darling, brushing a hand swiftly over her bum.

“You can never never be absolutely sure . . . can you?” Horse’s Head asked. “If you are dying of love.”

“Not when that difficulty happens.” Said Eve stiffly. “And obfuscation didn’t help.”

“Are you suggesting his problem was all caught up in the demystification of boot fetishism with its accompanying loss of sales of merchandise? The solution to that tangle is usually a frenzy but that can lead to murder.” Darling was both alarmed & alarming. Scarface felt vaguely threatened. Darling thought she might have laid out too much. On the boots, that is.

“That might help the movement towards a secular rationalization of shopping or other kinds of window dressing where we could get rid of the contradictions along with the inhibitions.” Volunteered the Horse’s Head. “And perhaps one or two of my fellow travellers.”

“And all the fun.” Darling was becoming convinced she had overspent.

“What a cavernous flaw that would expose. It’s bad enough having your boots hijacked for poetry (‘nonsense’ some of the Horde growled) & having to show up for innumerable nightmarish operations in them. But why continually ask questions which presuppose an interest that is blatantly lacking?” The Horde grumbled & twitched. “Here we are under an unknown big arse, what are we supposed to think about? Boots or. The big questions? And when we reach our mind boggling solution to everything how do we communicate this conclusion to those appealing for our help?”

“Oh. Those four.” Darling was genuinely taken aback. “Asking for it?”

“How do we put it into effect?”

The Horse’s Head gave an apathetic grunt.

“Through here!” A fist shot out of the hole representing the Horse’s anus that hadn’t been zipped up tight. “And where does the punch land? On thin air.”

“There must be one listener.” Eve contradicted what she too believed. Her feeling was that to agree with the Horde would have been a giveaway & anyway she didn’t want to do it on her own.

“What did she say?” Darling asked turning to Snyder. “Are you with us?”

Snyder looked down his nose at Darling’s new boots showing he viewed all this delving into what formed an attraction in a harsh light. “Eve said she agreed with you. That a big arse is a blot on the universe . . .”

“Universal suffrage.” The Horde cried out of tune with practically everything.

“. . . and if there is someone holding the strings she hopes they’ve got a peg on their nose.” Snyder’s eyes hadn’t left the shiny boots. “And she’s right. Say, where did you find those boots?”

“A fright.” Eve misheard & gasped with resentment. “If that’s so how could I have done what I did?” Had she been caught off guard surreptitiously preening herself?

The Horse’s Head lifted itself & said. “No amount of money or the threat of a hay-maker would compensate for my lack of co-ordination & its devastating affect on my presentation.”

“What is that confounded appendage on about?” Asked the Horde in unison.

“Nerves.” Darling suggested.

“No I was not.” Eve shouted, out of place. Well. Put out. And now looking like a fright.

“First it’s evasive; then alarmist.” The Horde rambled. “Then let down.”

“Then superfluous.” Snyder continued as if belonging.

“Superfluous.” Eve became peevish. “I was the key.” That struck a chord & Snyder rubbed his neck dreamily.

“Without me Snyder would still be up to his neck in mud in that trench.”

“Safe.” Snyder agreed. Eve’s eyes popped in disbelief.

“And warm?” Darling wished him well.

“Snug.” Snyder helped her out. “But, thanks anyway Eve, I did sort of enjoy that trip into the sky upside-down etc.”

“Got him out of his shell. It was like a blow of fresh air.” The Horde had been there.

“Except much hotter.”

The Horse’s Head dropped contemplatively. “It was a sausage machine with Eve turning the handle. We were never the same after that.”

“You did.” Darling cried in admiration.

“I never did.” Eve replied. “And you were simply reconstituted, inside a different skin but inside a skin. Think yourself lucky. You could have had a raw deal. Bit parts, here there & everywhere.”

“Oh. What did you think happened? Nothing?” Shouted the Horde & it nearly tailed off into a scream. “Is that possible? What are we waiting for then?”

Snyder looked bemused & tickled the Horse’s Head’s ears. “It’s like bones crying out for glue when the world has become disjointed & they hope, & don’t we all, to be stuck.” He gave that nasty wink at Darling & she didn’t like it.

“Stuck.” Eve grimaced. Darling held aloof. “I powered out of that mental blockage years ago. And I tell you it was so so easy.” (Neither would claim to be a clothes horse).

“It was tough on the rest of us waiting for you to turn up & tend our wounds.” Snyder’s voice almost broke as he drifted back on a slow tide of verbalization & untidy conceptualizations which left him stranded in sentimentality.

“Are you suggesting I was flighty?” Eve’s voice was haughty. “I wasn’t there to mop up. I was the inspirational figure.”

“Slipping from every embrace.” Darling showed with a sniff what she thought about it.

“At the judicious moment.” Eve said.

“You were meant to be the object of our desire but somehow we couldn’t get to grips with it.”

“But face it, you shrank away from the image, took off after a frumpy old bag (more than likely another defeated man dressed up as a woman. The Horse’s Head recognized the spiteful jibe totally & kicked a few of the Horde.) What did you expect to get?”

They were all stumped. Not having got it.

[And yet, here goes, you know you can imagine what you want, amazingly. Scarface sighed.]

“I only wanted an indifferent hand.” Snyder said quietly. “To take mine. It has so rarely happened I’m beginning to think it’s impossible.” The Horse’s Head secretly cursed its hooves. Both Darling & Eve examined their nail polish for blemishes. Snyder’s hands hung down. The Horse, back from a break, was indifferent but not on hand in reality.

“Should we call it quits?” The Horse’s Head tried to put it gently. “If we’re all on the same side of the fence, & we are; let’s make up.”

Darling was not persuaded. She thought some of them should be locked up. “And the key thrown away.”

Snyder rubbed his neck as if soothing away a disturbing picture & blinked as he was confronted by a steaming heap of entrails which flashed away with the second touch of a different hand.

“We didn’t have a chance to call the shots before. What happened was we were bundled into a bare truck, slammed up, & had to get on with it.” Eve’s description fitted like an old boot & she tucked in the last option like it was a ray of hope. “This time round we should unite & not be pushed into a corner. It would mean a few changes.”

“Get it over with.” Snyder corrected avoiding the mention of a collective effort.

“Is that when you conceived?” Darling counted on her fingers & gave a tut of annoyance.

“Don’t think so.”

“Get it over with.” Snyder repeated.

The Horse’s Head began to uneasily settle its muzzle down in the metaphorical oats ready for a long winter & rats. But reincarnation didn’t happen that suddenly. It never does. Red dust blew about. Their eyes smarted. Tears jerked into their eyes & trickled over their cheeks.

* * *

“Those are the temple horses.” Two grey beasts were tethered in the shade of a wall, the plinth of a ruined mandapam on which stood a rickety wooden table. An old man saluted us from the shadows amongst the many carved columns. The cobbles scorched our bare feet as we directed our way to a vantage point. We approached the guard who scurried off

into the gloom between the sculptures stopping several times to turn & salute us. That was the last we saw of him. A black stone giant turtle (an avatar of Vishnu) polished by the touch of millions of hands loomed, supporting several worlds at the centre of the temple. Many nymphs danced. Every pillar rang pure when sounded, like their laughter; except one where a Portuguese soldier clad in armour guarded the entrance to a holy tank.

An Angel suspends

A head-like lantern

Grinning love light

From a whale jaw arch

As she sings a bridge

A sparkling way mainly glass

A grey step

To you.

Remembered woman Real woman

I slip between their bodies

And a stolen rope takes root

A spine

To you.

“Changes.” Eve demanded staring about the place suspiciously. “To start with we must demand to know all about it from the start.” She looked up at the sky. “Is the weather the same?”

“Changes.” They echoed. Wondering & wanting to know where they stood.

“Demand? From whom? So it doesn’t depend on us?” Snyder was rattled, immediately suspecting a sell-out.

“What about before that . . . you know . . .” The Horse’s Head couldn’t come up with a suitable euphemism for the last blowout.

[A cough was old hat. And there wasn’t a railway tunnel in sight. Scarface nodded sympathetically.]

“Well we do know it went badly as soon as we knew. So shouldn’t we try to skip that enlightening bit.” Eve continued to encourage the crowd.

“Or do it in the dark.” Darling closed her eyes to demonstrate this strategy.

“How?”

“We could skip that dark dangerous part & land on another even more dangerous fully lit bit further on.” Snyder cautioned. He knew the world was a minefield or most of it was.

“We could make out we didn’t believe what we knew by saying we would like to know out loud.” Darling demonstrated a credible rendition of dumbness & to underline it twisted her hankie.

“Yes.” The Horde was swayed & cast its block vote. The Horse’s Head knew it didn’t know & knew Darling didn’t have a clue but would go along with Eve for the possible ride. Snyder was the one to watch, it thought, the odd man out. Snyder wasn’t supposed

to have the wherewithal to know but showed no signs of knowing this. In fact, he seemed to know something all the others didn't have a glimmer about but didn't know how to explain it to them. The Horse's mouth mentioned this quietly to Eve hoping to save Snyder's feelings. Eve thought all that empathizing was academic bordering on tommyrot.

"Snyder never did know how to put it or find out where to put it." Eve said bluntly & thought that part of the Horse had thought enough. "But this time, wherewithal or not, he's got to know how to put it."

"When & where as well?" The Horde wanted to know so it could start a stampede or impede him or mass an attack against it or steamroller over everything or rally round viz. anything what required lots & lots of mindless jobs . . . they were ready.

Darling insisted. "And us too."

"If this is going to be perfect, when we know it wasn't, how do we get to fit in the imperfections so we know that it is perfect." The Horse's Head was determined to put one over the Horde this time round & give itself plenty of adhesion. It needed it.

"We'll all need a bit of sticky tape, this time round." Snyder asserted. "If we are going to stop at nothing. To know & denying we don't know."

"Or was it the other way round?" The Horde had a penchant for muddle. "If, in truth, there was one." It raked its files & drew a blank. They had all been zeded.

"But if we know, do we get any fun?" Darling honed in on the fault line. "We don't get any surprises." At this revelation the Horde wasn't far short of becoming distraught & in danger of breaking up. Incidentally, that could pose the problem of whether individually

they would be able to know what was what, because they only knew before, what it was, as a cohesive lump & what they knew might have become incoherent in the disintegration & separation of the lump.

“You’re saying we may have to side-line the Horde this time round?” The Horse’s Head was overjoyed. “And piss on them?”

“No. We have to sort out the surprises & neutralize their effect by parceling them up in brown paper & pretending we don’t know what’s inside waiting to disturb our knowledge but not spoil the perfection by being unknown.” The Horde was determined to make itself useful.

“Amazing, a present with no element of surprise. As flat as a pancake.” Darling had always preferred unwrapping her things to wrapping them up.

“You can’t have that. It would be too easy to guess from the outside what it was, or was going to be.” Eve liked surprises & felt she had to put her foot on this line & squash it flat before it grew out of hand.

“It could be a plate. The one from under the main dish of the dinner. Has that partial explanation of unbidden thoughts & rude action served up as metaphor come round yet?” Snyder, always Snyder with a contradiction. “That plate might count as being able to be sprung as a surprise & have to be disallowed on the ground of ill-conceived notions.”

[The double entendre rule. Scarface cursed.]

Their simple looks appealed to Eve for a ruling. “Disbarred.” Said the Horse’s Head sheepishly.

“I suggest we take up our positions to see how they feel.” Eve said briskly, (as a diversion, no, that was last time round) punctiliously. Or was she becoming overbearing?

“**Hold your horses.** We know how they feel.” Everyone else shouted exactly the same as before. “Exactly the same as before.” There was a strong breeze.

“Hello.” Said Angel. “What’s up? Are you in a bind, a fix or what?”

“I think it’s time to get out of here.” The Horde generally quoted the first words it had heard from its mother when in a tight spot. And this urge generated a vague but uneasy feeling in the Horse’s slightly frozen Head that it was sure it had felt before. The Horse’s Head snorted as beads of sweat appeared on Snyder’s forehead who felt he had had this claustrophobic tightening centred on his guts, before.

“Didn’t you say that although we knew what was coming up (& coming in fast by the sound of it) last time, this time we were going to be able to get it perfect. Right? In that case why am I still here? I should have got out ages ago.” Snyder coughed

They could all hear a distant whistling throbbing drone now punctuated by ack-ack fire.

“The future sounds just the same as it did in the past. To me.” Snyder looked around for verification. The Horde was vigorously nodding the Horse’s Head. Darling & Eve were in the dark & they remembered that is where they had been before they took that step then, but were certain this time round they wouldn’t stay puzzled. There was an almighty flash.

“The same.” They all shouted above the din.

“No, it was a little bit early.” Said Darling. “Last time I’d got my knickers on.” She tugged her skirt up to prove it.

About half the Horde saw a flash of silver & gasped. "It's last time again." The other half saw black pubic hair & gasped. "We are through & going round again." The Horse's Head was blinkered by a repressed desire & so couldn't bring itself to say what it didn't see. And Snyder, as we know, didn't know **What** he was looking for so it must have been the first time again. Unless there was an inexplicable snag & a lag & later he would catch up & declare whether the knickers were on or off. Eve knew what Darling was up to but thought, on balance, that she would have been the same the next time round from any previous time round so whether her knickers were on or off wasn't really a clear indication of where they were at all.

This rumination took place in the afterglow of the explosion when the bits & pieces of their world were raining down on their heads & hats mainly engendering tiny thoughts of reproof for Eve on whose Idea they laid the blame. They needed an umbrella of responsible circumbendibus & nothing less.

"Nice." Said Snyder. And, foolish as it seems, sounded as though he meant every word.

"It doesn't look, from this look at it, as if we get much time for a rehearsal, Eve." Darling remonstrated. "So you can hardly expect us to know our lines or get the feel right. And improvisation is all very well, but."

"Yours is clear enough." Snapped Eve. "The easiest part, you don't have to change one iota, & you haven't."

"I wasn't given a chance to reinterpret the really moving scene." Darling spluttered reproachfully, feeling badly let down by Eve's reproach. "This time I have to play it naturally if I am going to get on."

“And you’re going to need all the help you can get.” Eve started to push it.

“A sham?” Snyder’s nose began to dribble as he looked at Darling.

“Don’t look at me. It was her big Idea & we aren’t even sure that we got a break.”

“I got plenty of those.” Snyder rocked the Horde. They rattled accordingly. “Yes. Them too.” He confirmed Eve’s suspicion that they were thinking of ganging up on her & this rehearsal could become an explosive cocktail.

[Again! Scarface was alerted. Shit Eve if you don’t get any further than that scene stealing there will be nothing left to know & have known etc.]

The Horse’s Head whispered. “You have done enough damage (mostly colossal & one-sided). You must have known the danger inherent in your plan.”

“No.” Eve answered with a smile. “I didn’t know did I the first time & by the time I did it was too late. We’ve been through all that, concentrate.” She tugged its mane. The Horde shied away from this playfulness. “We hoped you, above all, Eve, would be able to wangle a way round the seeming inevitability of not quite knowing enough in time to avert a permanent not knowing. Could we try tranquilization?”

“We could try.” Said Darling looking round for a partner.

“But.” Snyder objected while taking Darling on his arm. “I bet if we didn’t try it before; because we haven’t run this round out yet, it will prove just as ineffective as it will the second time round unless this is it. And it will be just as ineffectual again.”

“We could try sedation, abduction, deduction, the lot, you name it.” Eve clamped the Horse’s head’s lips together. “Would they help? No. And we’d still miss the whole sad

scene. The narrow slot where we get to choose. We need.” Eve cut off short, her eyes lit up. “We could start a Zoo.”

[I think at this point Snyder gave up the ghost. Scarface’s marginal note.]

The Horde formed a queue. The Horse’s Head’s teeth shone in a wide smile. “Yes. It would be such an easy step from there into a fairytale.”

“One with a knackered horse in it by any chance?” Darling asked roughly. “Forget it. There’s always a lot of hard work involved & only the very prettiest bird gets laid. All the rest of the girls are left, still running around cleaning out the fireplaces. And trying on awful shoes that pinch”

“Etc.” Said Snyder who like the one with the tin soldier in it.

“Too much costume needed to put on that rigmarole, then, dressed like that even getting undressed for a shag could take an entire act & a quickie would be practically impossible, out of the question.” She breathed deep.

“Why?” Darling wasn’t going to go along with that like a lambkin & wasn’t going to be caught with her pants down either.

“No one would be able to locate the correct anatomical parts quick enough, silly.” Eve sensed she was being drawn in & scowled. The Horde shuffled, caught thinking. “I’m sure some of the girls don’t wear a lot.” Countered the Horse’s Head.

“Name one.” Snyder didn’t need a nudge.

“And not the obvious one.” Eve rose on her toes & narrowed it down. She secretly fancied gliding around in something frilly for a change. Yet she knew Darling would take it remiss. “And not one where they are too young or silly to know about it.”

“Where?” The Horse’s Head gave up with a groan. “We could be accused of trying to protect the pre-given location of the starting point with a ruse. Trying to throw everyone off the scent in a Zoo convertible. This time round you said we give & get the facts.”

“A slit trench in Snyder’s case.” Said Eve. “Off you go.” She pointed.

“A skin full in the Horde’s case.” Said the Horse’s head.

The Horde felt pushed out but also thought, as a mass, that Snyder’s repulsiveness was attractive although they couldn’t say who found it so. Or wouldn’t say. What it would say, when it was given a chance, was that the unchosen body (& who in their right mind would have chosen this one) limited their freedom.

“What.” Said Snyder, getting in on the act. “About me? Did I choose that hole in the mud?”

“Yes. He knows all about defilement.” Darling had peeked at his case notes when wrapping the bandage round Snyder’s head. “Of the most mind boggling kind.”

“And I thought an actual block gave the all-but-sacred imagination its special position by rationing inspiration to momentary enchantment. Hypothetically. I know I might be blurring a few things. But we can’t waive that fact in a fairy tale.” Eve rocked on her heels. Darling stayed out of it but rocked too.

“Here we are, as Snyder says, sidestepping the non-existent centre so carefully that as we circumambulate the circle goes ‘pop’ & we have to start again from scratch. We must face up to it.” The Horde dealt the deft ill-defined blow, re-jigging the set while carelessly trampling all over everywhere before anyone had had the chance to get to know the positions of their chalk marks.

“It would have been a piece of cake, otherwise.” Said the Horse’s Head. “I can see it now.”

“I thought that was what Eve was after.” Darling reminded it. “A stricter recipe for the steer of the mind.”

[Is Snyder still in the Stone Age? Or was he knocked back into it? Scarface’s dilemma.]

“I thought we got that animal rendered down in a tin can.” Shouted the bonier dismayed sub-section of the Horde.

“We should have stood our ground. Not been so sloppy.” Snyder said. “Held out for better conditions. Dug deeper.”

“We did that last time, if I’m not mistaken; but must have been in the wrong place, this time round the good & the bad will be marked out clearer. And we already have an example of the ugly.” Eve had poise. You had to give her that. Unruffled, Snyder was trying to remember the answer to a duff question no one had asked, knowing if it had been asked it would have been very, very important. And as they had obstinately kept on asking for an answer he was sure he had been asked.

“That’s O.K. If you’re meaning our progress, not looking like progress, I can take that.”

The conflicted Horde knew how to sugar the pill & this annoyed the old war Horse’s Head who hadn’t forgotten the remarks about Snyder’s ugliness & wasn’t buying it.

Snyder had bought one already. Darling couldn’t get that picture out of her mind either.

Snyder, if asked, would have accepted having this attribute, described as ugliness, as

quite a tribute. Eve was still poised, she could tell the times were good & said so. “We’re

very lucky we can hang around & do this.”

“What?”

“Think.” Eve smiled benevolently.

“It’s fatuous as well.” Said Snyder. “And that means it’s doubly tedious & rewarding.

Come on Eve, we need something to do.”

“One of us could dive into the refuge of piety & see if they could sort some action or give us a lead, there.” Darling proposed, pointing at the temple gate. “We might find

something to use.” But then remembering what happened to Manon L. thought it better to

stop half way where she was & said hesitantly. “Oh no skip that.” Snyder, who thought a

lot about the spark of life with good reason as he had been hit by one, also wondered if a

diversion into a fairytale, if taken gently, might be a better alternative than an expulsion

or a dive. He sidled up to the Horse’s Head & said. “Make your proposal again while the

Horde is preoccupied with beauty etc.” What a cruel smile Snyder’s request prompted

from under the Horse’s Head’s large lips. “The full circle.”

“Not quite.” Snyder was quick to dampen this premature claim. He pointed round about

them. “There are one or two bits missing still.” The Horse’s Head’s eyes glowered

through the red dust, beginning to swirl up on the gusts, at the scattered debris.

“Don’t be down-hearted. I know it only looks like Firewood, nicely arranged by some quirk of fate, but it might plausibly be called art, if we took a photo. Is that any comfort?

Shouldn’t we try blowing it to pieces again & see how it lands next time?” Darling’s

tactic was crystal clear, she really didn’t want to get mixed up in a fairytale, none of her

sort did. Eve could pull off being the princess for a while, handing out medals, but in the

end she would blow it with a chance remark or an idle unthinking act. Like the question

she posed them now. “So those Battlefields, & I’m only talking about the spectacular ones mind, were works of art?”

“The photos were.” Snyder chipped in. “Get your facts right. The disposition of the severed limbs, charred bodies & twisted pieces of metal etc. is fortuitous. The event is nothing. It is the record (‘photo’ they all whispered hoarsely) that is the real work.”

“That should get the Horde steamed up.” Jeered the Horse’s Head. “But they’ll still pay to be mugged by the experts.”

Before you pitch in about the necessity of technical intrusions, no matter how arbitrary, I want to discuss the duress under which Eve took all this on. She held the yardstick, at least that was the presumption, but didn’t go around poking it into places at random. She knew, by close observation, that the best part of the brain had an affinity for straight lines. The whole biscuit of all the half-baked cults that ever were was based on this fact. Her job, as she saw it, was to run that perishing lot into the ground as quick as possible.

“Dust.” Said Snyder. He rubbed his hands.

Darling was designated the capricious role, but, spurred on by other ambitions had other ideas; & she it was who persuaded an Angel to take it on, to tempt the stragglers onto the ‘killing’ ground to be butchered. There, after the debacle, they had found Snyder for all the world like dead meat & had nursed him back, as close as possible without straining credibility at the seams, to sanity. He would vehemently deny this forever after. He was cross. He had snapped the yardstick & after that they were on their own. Then they tried to nail down the reasons for their repeated mistakes & apart from Schlumper couldn’t come up with a culprit. That left Art. Radiant art which they agreed to repeat. And get it

right. Once & for all. No messing. At that we were back amongst the lumber. Backs to the wall.

“The circle is vaguely a halo which Eve thinks suits her.” At Snyder’s words they stood further back to take in the figure & ground more comprehensively. Eve placed her hands on her hips facing the group. The temple rose like a cascade of gratuitous nights behind her with enough denizens on its ledges & in its niches for a 19th century novel. “You won’t remember this.” She stuck out her tongue. “Does that ring a bell?”

Bell isn’t the whing word of its chiming.

Eve’s nipples shone as red as her tongue had done that night in the lorry cab. Snyder’s neck ached as he remembered the embrace. “You know that is not the correct effect we’re after now & you know it’s no use asking Darling to step in & try to spin it right.” He rubbed behind his ear.

“Wrong shoes.” Darling agreed. “One of them has lost a sole.”

“Time’s short for some of us women.” Eve said savagely. “Take your time debating suitable sizes & shapes for your propaganda you’ll find they’re all redundant in the end.” She slinkily spun on one foot & presented them with her undulating backside. “You can class this as a near miss.” She said over her shoulder. “And stop licking your lips Snyder, this is art.”

“That’s the wrong bodily demeanour, Eve, it’s going to cause trouble. There isn’t a straight line in it.” Darling appealed to the others to make Eve stop or at least straighten up.

“We must take a snap; there could be a vogue for arse again. Visionary stuff. Hold still, Eve.” Snyder took several stills & Eve obliged for the last one by bending over & pulling apart her cheeks. “This one’s from the heart.” Her cunt shone as red as on that night. Snyder shouted. “Last one.” As he felt sweat trickling down his neck. His collar was stained grey & pink by the dampened dust. He put his hand on Darling’s waist. “You should have shouted ‘cut’ earlier.” Darling corrected him crossly, without any hesitation brushing his hand away. Stiff as a lath. “We have had enough of that body-line art with soul in it. What we needed was less.”

The Horse’s Head had seen nothing less than an elusive form flitting in & out of a dust cloud, it could barely make anything human out of the shapes. The Horde were right behind Snyder poetically speaking & got the red droplets of sweat & blood sprayed all over their eager faces & when they had wiped their eyes clear it was over. Eve was standing next to Darling with an elfish grin under innocent eyes. “You see how easy it is to become art. I could do that again.” The Horde rumbled & bumbled about this but couldn’t quite say how it had felt to be in the line going up to fight for Arts’ sake & the Horse’s Head was just about to protest when Snyder slipped it a sugar lump spiked with a drop of acid.

[That was the Horse’s Head off on a trip. I hope it has a soft landing. Scarface said.(see index for the page number).]

Darling took Eve’s hand & squeezed it hard. “No. This is confusing but it proves you can’t repeat it now or ever. Look at Snyder. What do you make of that?”

Snyder looked raw. He looked like a ham boiled forever amen.

Eve took a guess. “A plucked chicken?”

“He couldn’t be allowed in any sort of story cooked up as long as that. The popularity ratings would plummet. There would be more defectors to hardcore than there are half-baked perpetrators of nauseating ‘factual’ documentaries.” The Horde was emphatic even as it stood dripping. Knowing there was a toss-up in that, Snyder breathed out noisily over his thin dry lips. Then croaked. “She came in without knocking. She looked haunted & confused. She wasn’t wearing much.”

“Eve was inspired.”

“By a phantom?” Snyder wheezed. “Get out of it.”

“It’s true. I was naked under that silk wrap but done up to the nines. I knew as soon as I gave him the hint he would take the bait. After tiptoeing up to the door I slipped in like a shadow; he was leaning over his desk & only the faint noise of his sleeve brushing the paper disturbed the silence. But when I lightly tapped on a small table as I picked up a few manuscript sheets he turned to greet me as if he had known I was there, as if we had already embraced.”

“That threw you, didn’t it?” Snyder said, but he wasn’t sure. There was no flesh & blood in the sound of her description.

Darling leaned towards Eve & lowered her voice. “Silent, Schneider silent?” She covered her mouth to emphasize the mock laugh. “Even when he sat quite still & said nothing there was more noise coming off him than out of an old-fashioned farmyard.”

“Something felt as though it didn’t add up but I didn’t realize at that moment. Those subtle hints although registered immediately take time to set the alarm bells ringing.”

“You had a different agenda which blinded you. The opportunity to finish it was there.”

“I made it.” Eve retorted. “Only I could decide.”

“You didn’t take it. Sweetie.” Snyder sneered.

“I decided not to.”

* * *

Eve sees a river in the background of our picture

As possibilities.

Venus says now couldn’t be any other way

Chaos wouldn’t allow it.

Darling feels the soft wooden spine and paints it

Cruel black.

What do you conjure up with your amazing predisposition

To corner fragility

When you are again heartbroken finding

YES or NO or MAYBE written on a ten-pound note.

My predilection Angel

Wink red boots.

Her ‘plane circled

His feet kicked me out of sleep

An old man is chewing a violet flower

As she enters the seventh room.

“I like the look of that chick. She’s got that extra little something, looking good.” Shouted the Horde signaling with certain parts of itself to other soiled parts & pointing at a curvaceous, though guileful woman gliding past in a frothy ballroom gown deliberately revealing & concealing at each swishing step more & more until the onlookers, craning their necks, could hold themselves back no longer. They rushed the apparition. Noisily clambering & jostling for a closer look they banged their heads against a wall onto which an image was projected. “Off you go. She’s yours for keeps. Get tucked into the pleat, grab some pussy before she disappears down the aisle.” Snyder scoffed, he wouldn’t be so foolish to try his luck so soon on anyone just breezing by. Such as this incidental Venus working the long run. He knew trouble when he saw it trussed up nice like a turkey ready for the oven. He guessed who was smirking behind the lamp flooding that illusionary gift up for grabs onto the wall & without doubt she would switch the light off at the very moment when a cold draught had at last permeated the wonderment of their overheated lust. There was more than enough area of permanent shade in that overhang for a lunatic to practice sciomancy & the lines of those frills & folds falling over her voluptuous curves could accommodate all the spectres for a host of Gothic fantasies. And he didn’t want to be there when she flicked the switch & shook the pack loose. It was a sure sign that the swindle had come full circle when the Horde began whispering around that it had had enough of the Horse’s Head’s bossiness which they knew was a cover. Also Snyder could tell by the way things stood that the body of the Horse had long

had enough of both the Horde inside & its own Head on top holding it remorselessly down. While Scarface thought out loud the darkest things which concerned no one. It was obvious that even in their direst moments of need Eve & Darling had had more than enough of Snyder from any angle. Snyder didn't exactly disagree or agree but tried an obnoxious smile. Eve & Darling told him where to put it in no uncertain terms. And so on. So the time had come to part & push off. Get off each others backs as amicably as possible. They agreed that to avoid distress this dislocation was best done in an imaginary world; the one where you often find a philosopher grubbing around for a red (generally the one they all used as an example on boots or as dust & then carelessly mislaid) or less often than not someone who had knocked at a door & run off, or if they hadn't bolted had never been there knocking. Or, rarely, some other person who had not been exactly eager to leap-frog into view at all.

In that place where glaciers also drip & move they were sure to find a glut of evanid objects stacked up like cabbages waiting to be dished out to all-comers for sixpence & consequently the disgruntled lot would be able to stock up & those who had broken up would be able to take their pick, from the well stacked throng, of whom to knock off next or nest with & vice versa. And this gimmick was not bound to be a raw deal or a giveaway if everybody got something or someone they liked in the rough & tumble.

“A bargain. Not really? A present. Do you think so?” Questioned the Horde shyly surrounding Snyder who beamed at being singled out as an expert. “It's not a sell-out, is it?”

Snyder winced. “Cut it out. When I’m not here you’re in charge. And I won’t be here long.” His hand cut the air with a ‘long gone’ gesture. The Horde stared down the perspective straight into the wide eyes of a woman.

“When you’re not here; we are not here.” Venus slouched forward & embraced the two women around their necks setting their nerves jangling. “Are we!”

“**Hold your horses.** You can’t just abandon everything now without warning.”

“Watch us.”

* * *

In strode Angel, her red boots gleamed as she pushed through the hordes of people flocking around the departure lounge, stepping over the bodies stretched out like dummies on the ground, up to the three women hanging onto each other at the bar. She glanced at the board. No gate number up for her return flight. Schlumper tugged her sleeve. “Why are you in such a hurry to be off? I need your help.” Angel pointed silently at the three women indicating he had more than enough female content to cope with without trying to hang onto her. Before Schlumper could open his mouth all three said.

“We quit.”

“But does Angel have to go with you?” Schlumper sounded mystified.

“Perhaps not. She never belonged.”

“Where else? We agreed to carry on as long as it took.”

“We did what? We did not.”

“Too late.” Said Angel.

“Restraint?” Schlumper misheard. “When did Darling show some restraint.”

“Right now.” Darling pivoted on Venus’s shoulder to face him.

“We were coerced into working for you. While you stood aloof.” Eve quickly said to prevent Darling revealing in an outburst of temper any hint of the true picture.

“Having to be honest hit Darling bad.”

Angel shook her curls in disbelief & quickly glanced at the flight board. “What.” She took Schlumper by an arm & pulled him just out of earshot. “I have to leave, but it’s not on your account or theirs.” She squeezed his arm. “I have a job to finish. Urgent.” And she jumped about as if she needed to pee. This was so unusual Schlumper read it right & ignored it although why they had linked arms wasn’t clear either, though he guessed it would act as a vague signal to the other women.

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“I know this sounds abstract. Without you in tow I’m left with a sinking feeling. I know it sounds cold, but there it is.”

“You’ll get used to it.”

“What about the tendency towards . . .”

“Deformation.” She laughed. “You seem to have inherited it. Correct it with a touch of natural contour, you have a predilection for those . . . vivid lines.”

“You know I can’t abide ‘stick’ men or women. When they say a horizontal line represents a recumbent woman & a vertical line the penetrating male. Take it or leave it.”

“You like the decorative overlay. Enhance them with a few curves. Then they’ll look fine ---- untroubled. And they won’t give anyone anything revealing to think about. Look at that pair.” Angel pointed & then her hand fell limp. “Are they there by chance?”

Rapturous lovers in a lifted kiss were clinging wrapped around each other in a circular embrace, completely closed.

Pearls of sweat broke out above Angel's upper lip; the story was always revealed in its totality. She didn't like a closed circle -- the noose. She needed to feel that the possibility of being in an unknown, uncharted place & staying there was possible; & that it was so made impossible to return. That she could leave forever & stay away forever far away. That was her desire & her necessity. And she felt it was being challenged by the mute lovers

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Listening intently Schlumper rubbed the Xandu balm on his throat & wrapped a black scarf round & round to keep the heat in; sat & took up a pencil. Wrote a greeting & crossed it out. He looked up wistfully at his companion. She smiled back. "You've got to ask yourself why you were in that affair so long. It was drudgery."

"I must like being a drudge."

"Forget everything else. All the tedious recrimination. Concentrate on that stark fact. You were in it up to your neck. Even after everything that makes it worth being with someone had long gone."

"Was it ever there? I felt the worm gnawing very early on. I must have been compelled to stay by those things that didn't add up. The agreements that were never fulfilled. The half promises. What was I up to?"

"The loose weave suited you."

“Gone.” Schlumper said abstractedly as he stood up & stirred a brush in a heap of crimson paint, loading it. “Could it ever have been there? Surely even the possibilities were just dreams & never existed.” The paint dripped off the tip as he lifted the colour up. Angel looked puzzled & tugged her sleeve straight. “What you described of those early days sounded brim full of promise. Enchanted. The most thrilling thing that ever happened to you.”

“Words.” Schlumper didn’t say the word abruptly but the denial it carried was absolute. “I was made totally susceptible by all that death. I was unaware of my vulnerability & it might be that so much hidden anxiety meant I could be seduced by anyone.” He flicked some of the paint off the brush.

“Open to any predator.” Angel added underlining his feelings, but added. “It does seem you invited them in. In some unconscious way. Why else did they flock to your door?”

“Perhaps they felt they had a chance (given by some fremd notion) to exchange their trap for a deeper one.”

They both shook their heads in silent disapproval of entirely different things.

Across the narrow street down a side turn a crowd of men like a ruley swarm of bees formed a cylinder, compact but not touching, arguing something obviously serious. They only slowly separated when the police, pushing with their rifle butts, stirred them.

“Broken up is the way it is put.” Schlumper slashed the loaded brush across the picture again & again leaving marks like weals over everything & everybody.

“I suggest that you let the statement be made by the camera chasing over blood smears on the floor & ragged bandages, showing the people have fled.” Angel underlined a few words.

“Nothing is said?” Schlumper threw the brush over his shoulder.

“I am here not only to witness the violations & record the evil acts.” Angel said with a determined voice.

“Aren’t we?” Schlumper wondered.

“No. We are here to stop them.” Angel said emphatically.

STAR woman pisses laughter straight off a boat gunwale

Scum outlines her slit from an unacknowledged kiss

In fine silver, honey & concrete, smashed under a toad

Black night ----- Kebabs of hawthorn blossom phosphorescence

Glitter on outstretched thighs as kick & crocus reply.

Turbulence in a Rousseau sky of tulips say more than this.

Ordinary cares, makeshift siren calls, bad knives

Hack well known knees apart & I tear out to see

A stab of beloved eye

Horse woman's toy rabbit ears poke out of her dress

Crucifix pinned on her bra hurrying to the earth bump

Maze of heartache yet stunned by tumescent bones blocking her way

Dancing sideways reappearing ready naked a slither of silver cunt

One scars worth gone.

She grows bigger drips a waterfall of rotting meats

I spiral out & hear clipping metal

Fish woman insistently bawls back at a deadly roundabout past

About seven fear burns the future

Its fugitive shade seems to move from brown to purple

Its mark could be a heart or horseshoe what a whirlpool

Blackening

Her persistent stare cannot colour beyond grey shadow.

A finger of sunlight gives the first rung, but owl of day blinks

Abandoned

What scribbles might scale clay could tell

I need an anvil to clout memory blank.

Where to look?

In the back bork a smoldering stick sparkles our fire

She glistens through green the bier is trudged belly to belly

A last hug from a grinning stranger fingers grasped

Sets an icicle stake in dreaming flames a pike's

Voracious jaws fasten a glowing ladder in shade.

So I straddle the ash alone again working from the margin

A lick parts the shards a fist of twilight left

To dash through.

(I need a twin to engulf the chill

To exalt each girl in Swallow twitchel)

And bliss

Star rides a horse

Fish swims in fire

I give myself back to myself.

*

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*

I am told to follow several roads. As other paths are possible how do you choose? You don't. We follow each somehow.

One way is by Triangulation of the Delta of Venus.

The first to speak but not the first to move was Venus, a girl whose pliancy in the act of love-making had been enchanting, as much as her moody indifference to it all had been baffling. Shattering the quiet of a cool morning she had blurted out her complaint about lovers carelessly without repair, the harsh intensity of her distress loaded in the words.

“But I have had so many brutal moves made on me now I have to pull out of . . .”

“The game?” Schlumper suggested rudely.

Venus, with a disparaging grimace, wondered how much more shit Schlumper had suppressed till now.

And Schlumper, catching what he thought was her hurt look which she quickly concealed, grinned & tried “. . . the dive?”

“What are you here for?” Venus asked with deliberate coldness. She wanted to wind him up & put him off his venture. Whatever it was.

“Something you’ve given up.” Knowing how much she always kept to herself Schlumper had never harried Venus with questions. And had never given her straight answers realizing that was the way she like to play it.

“Powerlessness. How do you give that up?” Venus said curtly without interest.

Their talk drifted on the wind up the remote embankment as far as a figure attempting to blend with the landscape, camouflaged by leafy twigs & plastered in mud & grime.

From the safe position in a ditch Schneider had chosen, at a distance that distorted their voices, he believed he could make out what Venus was vehemently complaining about, to a deceptively attentive Schlumper.

“ . . . that’s right . . . time after time, whether I had willingly or unwillingly shagged a man, all it had got me were . . . Rebuffs.” Venus was often vague.

Under Schlumper’s disbelieving eye a weary looking Venus did admit that sometimes she had joyfully straddled her man. But insisted that after waiting patiently time & time again, for an unpromised & very often undelivered climax, something had slowly & shudderingly dawned.

“I am going nowhere with nothing at the end of it.”

“So that’s why you’re moaning in my ear right now . . . Doing nothing.” Schlumper agreed in his way.

Getting upset & angry seemed futile, but Venus, marking his lack of response, added.

“And things must change.”

Schlumper nodded vacantly. Knowing that the intricacies of her duplicity had also caused Eve & Darling alarm, Schlumper decided now was not the time to delve into Venus’s

attack of melancholy. Briefly taking in the lie of the land he cradled a fist in his palm, before he rolled closer to change her.

Schneider kept a close watch on the three bed sheets, printed with intricate designs stolen from Tantra, hanging from poles set in the long grass of a steep embankment, which gave the couple shade. He wished he could crawl unseen under this flimsy shelter flapping gently in the breeze off the sea & watch Venus & Schlumper as they lay on the bent, scorched grass. With a stained bandage wrapped round his temple, he strained his ears listening as Venus explained to Schlumper that she was pissed off with a bold man who had, naturally, propositioned her because she had left herself wide open again by being so friendly. And so she had reluctantly agreed to this man's proposal. He asked her to seduce a man; she was to be paid, but it wasn't the money & it wasn't on an impulse that she accepted the job & she had never been up for it before like that . . . she didn't know what it was that drove her on.

He [Schlumper] got the drift. While Schneider, cramped in his foxhole scratched at the bandage behind his ear & gave a low whistle sounding like a shell at the end of its trajectory.

It's well known that the search for certainty in the uncertainty of language is given up when this search extends into the body; when the body itself expresses the desire (search) for certainty.

Lying like a snake in this long grass, well hidden from the pair behind the screen, Schneider was now the first to move. He stalked closer to catch every word & satisfy an inclination to spy on what they did. Then, slithering to be concealed close by he had

groped the slender resources of his mind trying to find the right words to use to intervene, eager to get a turn. Though he searched avidly, it was fruitless. And because he didn't know the game was up he listened while dexterously inching forward & picked out a helpful phrase to remember for ammunition later in the pursuit of Venus.

Every hope has an appropriate counterpart & this seeding of a new language was to be rudely repaid in Schneider's later forlorn attempts at seduction. Something other than flummery is needed to get on hallowed ground. Some sweet words are too delicate to survive being learned by rote.

It was a tenacious but wounded Schneider who lay stock still fascinated while observing Schlumper fingering & sporadically sucking various parts of Venus's body; he watched with rapt concentration, intent to see if it were still possible to gain her regard that way after so much use. But he couldn't tell.

This exploratory & clumsily disguised sexual fondling from Schlumper appeared to confuse Venus, so unused to such a tentative approach; as her head shrank back & her eyes rolled up useful words of desire bubbled over her lips as she rashly thrust out her pelvis inviting more. Venus babbled even deeper secrets when the nectar began to flow.

Then, as she rode Schlumper's pitching torso, pinching each nipple between thumb & finger, she calmly looked straight into Schneider's eyes, through a slit in the sheets & winked. In his confusion Schneider nearly forgot himself. That was just about the end of it.

In a flash her look of contrition had frozen lust right out of the picture.

‘Don’t come any nearer. Don’t touch me!’ The shots rang out & reverberated throughout the building.

Schlumper heard them as a whistling noise as his finger followed the words straggling the blue line on the page. His eyes darted expectantly around the room. With slightly parted lips he murmured. “I must have stolen this. I couldn’t think it up.” Seeing no one his finger again took up the quest. ‘ . . . this is a fable woven around a casual affair.’ There was a rattling like a sheet of corrugated iron in a hail storm. Schlumper frowned as if the noise had been stolen from his own memory. ‘ . . . the ghost must be laid & so the story is told extemporarily under the pain of loss & fleeting desire . . .’ Mmm. Lost me too, said Schlumper, where are we I wonder? Venus was flailing around trying to get an answer or find a clue so it was certainly not here & it can’t have been anywhere. Schlumper wet his lips. “Shall I continue?” He seemed to ask himself. They half stirred. Schlumper waved them quiet. “I might be wrong but this could be about simultaneous annihilation.” They rustled & stretched. Schlumper’s head dropped. His eyes closed. He scarcely dare breath.

“Are you sure you want to be in on this? It could be about close coupling. It could go the full circle. It could run away with itself.”

Schlumper started up, startled as a voice he knew so well from the past spoke.

“You smiled.” She said. “When I said ‘we must finish this affair’ you smiled. You had achieved what you wanted.” She shepherded each word out from a disordered memory.

“I didn’t say a word. It was more like a snarl as far as I can remember. The reaction you get from a cornered dog.” A man whose voice he also recognised replied.

“You weren’t hurt. I remember clearly you smiled.” The finality of her tone sounded like a stick idly whacking mud.

Schlumper stumbled back into his chair.

“Please be quiet back there.” Schneider demanded. “I want to be able to hear the whispers. There’s more to falling in love than I thought.”

* * *

[You had better take this list. They are the names of his partners. Schlumper replaced his spectacles on his nose & read out loud in a querulous voice. Vidyutprabha – one with the glow of lightning. Sarpasya – snaked faced. Koteri – lives in a hole. Schlumper tailed off. This could take forever.]

“Here wait. In that pause we’ve just been made to endure, listening to the incomprehensible outline & that list, you know the event collapses. There is no way that story can be taken up again. So why are their names the same?” He (at this moment the writer) was puzzled & he hadn’t smiled.

Darling shook her curls as she appeared.

Eve held a finger to her lips & tiptoed up to him, blew a kiss, & passed by to give Darling the kiss.

Snyder just laughed as he sat & held his head.

The fool as usual arrives uninvited. Schlumper sighed & continued reading ‘. . . loss of certainty was a prime factor in the harm to our affection . . . now I admit there were wonderful moments when we found the source of this fugitive feeling & stemmed its damage & seemed to be able to use it . . . constructively . . . unfortunately . . . as you are going see . . . or perhaps have already seen . . . we came to know even that sweet instant had been an artificial arrangement to galvanize us . . . then to set us up & get between us . . . Oh eventually . . . then . . . then?’ Schlumper glanced round to check they really were who he guessed they were & if they were paying attention as he stumbled over the hidden meaning ‘. . . so the beauty I most surely believed true then suddenly seemed false . . .’ Were they still with him? Schlumper peered over his spectacles. ‘. . . felt as if it had been drained away . . . by a few words . . .’

“Staggering.” Exclaimed Eve with her melodious voice. “And you expect us to do the same things?”

“Was this repeated unfolding contrived or ordered by somebody else? A best friend whose envy often urges treacherous advice.” Darling wondered opaquely in her usual sensual drawl, “Or was there an illustrated manual? To try to help make the inevitable moves have a less lethal outcome.”

“It was phony whatever it was. Or merely a sleight of hand.” Snapped Snyder, all head & no heart. “I could recite a list of those euphemisms in my sleep. I’ve been dished up plenty. For ‘moving on’ read ‘being nasty & leaving someone in the shit’.”

Eve, easily moved, choked back her tears. “Don’t you see why we think we were misled?”

“No. Duped.” Snyder’s voice cracked out like a whip. “So when they realized we had found out it was a put-up job & said nothing they were wild; & when we made something of the mess against their wishes, that’s precisely when they wanted to kick everything we’d built together overboard. And came in with the dead hand of convention so quickly.”

Eve dabbed her eyes.

“Before we had barely got round to deciding where the spot was going to be. Or who was playing.” Darling implied with a shrug she could have filled in the detail.

“A rush job. No wonder it’s such a tangled mess.” Said Snyder. “With so many things missing or doubled up how can we sort it out without someone getting hurt?”

Darling looked puzzled but dare not admit she’d missed the duality. She thought you could usually substitute any one of these vital things for any other without any harm, & in her case, reflection. “It’s not as difficult as that? It could have been anyone anywhere? Though I thought in this instance they needed someone . . . special . . .” Darling didn’t exactly avoid looking directly at Snyder. But she did have a way about her. This wasn’t waywardness although Darling wouldn’t have claimed there was any systematic thought behind her distrust. Not yet.

“Shocking. We are pitched into an argument on **day one** about a silly physiological point. And everything goes down the drain. That was a short honeymoon.” Snyder slithered his arm around Eve’s bare shoulders. “And who paid for it?” She shrugged his arm off & shivered involuntarily, saying “The money made things difficult. It was practically a bribe.”

“He would have been a push-over anyway. The money was incidental.” Snyder disagreed with a leer. Eve gritted her teeth, “Off. How many times do I have to tell you?”

“And we were up against it. I can tell you.” Said Darling. Who hadn’t been there.

Out of nowhere come their voices. Crying
shame at the violence done them by the
words.

[Mad? As early as this? Schlumper was taken by surprise].

Peter Snyder looked over his shoulder & saw a glowing lump of whistling light speeding towards his head & wondered at the poetic feeling this burning fragment aroused. He winked at Darling as it hit him. There was a distant solid reverberating thud. They both ducked. Snyder shouted at the top of his voice. “There is no such game. Where are the rules? You know I didn’t agree. I haven’t had what I was promised. She gypped me.” He pointed at Eve, who, the bitch, mockingly winked & said quietly “You didn’t really think you were going to have me, did you? You were stuffed the moment they stopped you on the street & you wavered & started to talk about yourself. The way you were wounded. And all that crap.”

Darling, on her knees, always favoured with unsurpassable simplemindedness direct illumination. “So he was with an accomplice? Where would they be? We have to know so we keep a straight face when we bump into them . . . accidentally.” She added, but hoped that meeting could be avoided.”

“Safe. Between parallel lines on the page I expect. Nicely tucked up.” Eve was having no gyrating goings on just anyoldwhere. She wanted Darling back on her feet & she wanted the story back in the groove where it came from.

Snyder was bending over holding his scalp as he spoke. “One on one. Darling. It’s called marking.” Blood dripped through his fingers onto his boots & trickled into the dust. He offered to lift her up. She grabbed his arm by the sleeve, avoiding taking his bloodstained hands.

Eve side-stepped the coagulating mess to show she would like to keep quite some distance from the trap of this event, a wounding, which seemed to be plunging the action into a dark softness that was suffused with the faint metallic odour of warm blood.

“Any pretext not to do the dirty work.” Said Darling. “I know Eve & her one trick.” She brushed her knees. “Little Miss Perfect.”

“That is out of line.” Eve shouted. She was certainly taking it all in but was it her fault she was constantly misunderstanding a whole lot of things.

“She even thought the ‘I’ was him.” Snyder brushed a bloody hand over his temple. “Very silly.”

Eve pouted. “I did what I could & given that material could you have done better? Try if you wish.” Darling noted the challenge. “I suppose the excuse is that anxiety made you seem ungenerous. That you are so highly-tuned no one can be other than deceived by the swiftness of your reactions?”

“You are so self aware.” Snyder broke in. “I can see the pinch marks.” He gazed at the blood on his palm.

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Now Schlumper maintains that this second attempt at reconciliation would be a way of skipping the something difficult about **day one** & getting on with it but, of course as usual, he doesn't know what. (Though he's sure it's not an operation involving touching or blood & earth, as described above, as likely as not to produce a travesty). Then he said any coherent build-up of facts inevitably resulted in a pile of rubbish. And who wanted to disagree with that?

“Scotch any line like that. And quick.” Cried Snyder. “You could get into an endless loop of intercourse & as usual I expect I'd be left outside counting the bumps.”

“The minutes for your turn?” Said Darling placidly as she held up the fingers of one hand then closed them down individually with the other until there were two left to wag at Schneider.

“Think of infinity & double it.” Said Eve. “You'll never get Venus round.”

There was one stranger with a satisfied smile on their mug thrown into the melee very early. Schlumper is still wondering how that came about. I suppose it was the prelude to an insane but golden moment of description, like the way wars start are explained away. Schneider's chance was explained away before it could happen. The flame of passion tugging under the burned meat is always ignored until it is too late, i.e. until it is a bollocks

[The psychologists decided that the best way to find out what was what was to experiment on a living pair & for the sake of argument decided on a male & female, one with no desire left at all. And the other paid to play. One participant incredulous & naive

& the other one fearful, but needy. Schlumper gagged the comments but believed playing with them & expecting that kind of sacrifice was over the line].

“He claimed he was so out of touch he didn’t know it was a betrayal?” Darling found this explanation of Schlumper’s behavior hard to believe, half-baked, even more so when she repeated it. He must have been incapable of feeling.

“Ambiguity. He was a dab hand at getting us to lap that up. Creating meaning out of what everyone else would call bewilderment.” Eve shook with rage at the thought, “All those whispered hints & what did I get . . .”

“Nothing.” Ventured Snyder. “Not even a dress. You’d have thought he could have run to a pair of knickers.” He tried to catch Darling’s eye.

“Nevertheless, ambiguity.” Said Darling brightly but not without a glare of withering reproach at Snyder. “Is a much less nasty form of behavior than equivocation.”

* * *

I felt, at the time of her departure, something like the dummy in a knife throwing act, who gets nicked time after time but never seriously hurt. Yet after years of dumb co-operation eventually counts the accumulated wounds & the tally causes a defiant rupture, a sudden withdrawal.

I crossed

a triple bridge guarding black

forests & sands

I found

a few golden strands of your hair

left here & there.

If there is a possibility of some ready-made exchange of signs, decodable & explicit, without the touch of a hand on hand getting in the way & scrambling it all again, we are going to chance it. Anyway, can there be a fight about rashly spoken words without other more instinctual motives to push the protagonists into the circle? And when you take them apart to examine the supposed causes of the conflict don't you find they become massaged as flat as a fish by reason, rubbed down to the wire of common sense.

Schlumper shuffled the papers & although it looked absentminded, I had my doubts. I saw him slip a picture away under the pile.

"We'll play a dummy hand." I suggested, reaching at the same time to pick out this hidden picture. "And that way get to know each other better."

"Are there enough players?" Snyder now had a bandage around his head. "No."

"We are one short for a full rubber." Said Darling primly, "Pull whoever it is lurking in."

She pointed at the closed door.

All right an eavesdropper will do, arms folded, seduced by the play of light on the flesh of their faces. But leave the voyeur there. Leave the cards unturned.

"No. I'm not having that. Bring whoever is peeping out in the open." She turned a card Darling was like that. "We must get them to show their face." And quickly added to further underline her interest, "I only said that in fun." But we weren't listening, just staring at the card. What we didn't know, because Darling's card only showed a jack, was that Scarface wasn't alone in the corridor. Later, when the picture was closely examined, we were able to discern that he was in a close embrace with a woman.

“Hello. Scarface.”

“Well. Surprise. Surprise. It could be a mirror image if it wasn’t so solid.”

‘Exactitude’ Eve wonders for him in a neutral kind of way. Yet made her expression look remarkably like a sneer as she observed the doomed moment.

“Thanks for the warm welcome.” Scarface shook his coat off. He understood the possibility of closure & took his cue. “My knees were beginning to ache.” He blew a silent prayer for patience into his cupped hands & eyed the action.

There was a sharp intake of breath. I know you have the same anticipation as I did for you knew something was concealed & repugnant in the being of these players, something hidden forever. And you know all about the randomness of discovering it.

“Notice our agreement or consent to this package isn’t requested. It is airily waived, Darling, as we pass swiftly to inequality as usual.” Eve spoke softly, as she dealt out of a shadow, not in a malicious voice. She turned to Scarface. “It’s just like you to think the same way as the ‘One on top’”. See above. “And I didn’t see a kiss I saw a knifing.”

It is an empty process.

Darling had missed that as well but didn’t ask thinking it would give him a way out through the space between the parallel lines.

Thanks for ‘nothing’ he had said while directing a great deal of attention on it.

I can let you know that now & again Schlumper favours a triangular shape. Because he thinks he always knows where it is or where he can find it. (Put his hand on it easily).

And there are its three sidelines of defence. Scarface defiantly cracked his nice biscuit into two triangles. And said. “All the same your sensitivity is a careful imposition, closed

like a triangle. A ruse, a sentimental exercise to block, to enable you to bully & not to respond.”

“What better defence than boredom?” Eve yawned closing her mouth slowly under a hand letting her fingers linger on her lips.

“You cannot bear to let on that you notice when you are disliked.”

“What piffle.” Eve retorted, immediately goggle-eyed with rage.

“What condescension & animosity.”

Darling felt they were in danger of losing the neutral space they needed to breathe so clapped her hands sharply before everything slipped away. “You are both being tyrannical. There is no need to confide these feelings. Keep a safe distance apart.”

[They should never again arrive on the same page together said Schlumper].

That would involve a lot of crossing out.

* * *

Eve thought about this, looking like some archeologist in the future puzzling over the layer of glass fragments embedded in late twentieth century roads, & she came to a similar poetic solution. “Venus should be allowed back,” Said Eve. “We could spread the load.”

Eve favours the ancient plop clay, squeezed to a voluptuous beehive shape like the Venus of Willendorf’s hairdo because she knows who is in it. Who gets the buzz.

“Now hold on. You know you can’t have that infernal plan again. Obviously it will make the whole *varmacari* caboodle we are working with dodgy.” Snyder felt he would be edged out. “As if it isn’t bad enough.”

“If that’s pasta I’ll pass.” Darling declared. “And that’s not what gets spread & you know it.” She glared at Eve.

“It’s pretty unacceptable as it is.” Said Eve tersely. “And I’m the one supposed to take the brunt of the machinations, learn on the job & try to look innocent at the same time.”

“Quite.” Said Darling imitating Eve’s terseness. “Get on with it.”

“Quiet. We’ll keep a struggle going behind the façade of normality, I’m sure it’s obvious but I think it’s necessary to indicate that there is more buffoonery coming up later by playing it straight, word for word.” Snyder sounded as though he was deteriorating rapidly. Darling thought there wasn’t much to say; it was all body language & passed it on to Eve.

“Still? It’s all that highbrow tripe he reads don’t you think, Darling.” Murmured Eve with the hint of a defensive lisp. “Covering up fuck knows what.”

“It makes me feel very prickly to think about it.” Darling agreed. “It would be a change to deliver the goods standing on my feet.”

“Jagged.” Snyder prompted from an entirely different context. “That’s how it feels . . . on your back.” The two women ignored him & left.

* * *

[Now can I get back by erecting a triangular pyramid onto the triangular plan? Schlumper sketched. Musing on a favorite theme. It would have to be a fluke. Something we can own, something tempting, something frothy, a sensually organized theorem.]

“An orgy.” Darling & Eve, all zips & clips, simultaneously cried. “We thought you had forgotten the basics. O.K. When?” They waited with baited bodies. “Bye the way. No acrobatics on a pole. No rivalry. No superiority. No No No.”

[Is a geometrical problem looming here bursting with possibilities? Or is it a badly drawn family tree disguised as a cactus. Or is there going to have to be one indefinite article borrowed to get it to make sense. They simultaneously read what Schlumper thought they should try & were no clearer.]

“What’s he trying to do?”

“Get it to hold water. Darling.”

[That’s it. A sieve. Schlumper thought.]

“No. We’re going deeper than geometry.” Snyder coughed. Had he read the abstract & perused the alternative version after the cries of ‘ No no no’? “Into unlikely territory.”

“If you are involved we’ll have to fake it then.” Cooed Darling, matter-of-fact & autobiographical, nose tipped up, tight-lipped, uncute, peering intently poised for the exit light to come on.

[O.K. I’ll let you have parallel ropes of D.N.A to shin up with one line available for each sex. Schlumper was reading the wrong book again]

“A work-out & that will be stretching my brief.” Scarface hinted at some supposed hidden purpose with farcical ineptitude. This blatant subterfuge for total separation was unsuccessful. They turned it down flat. Darling’s descriptive list of what they were not going to do or have done silently continued. But she did say. “He knows that’s trouble.

What can’t be faked gave us our starting point. And we are sticking to it.”

“And what & where was that?” Scarface smiled. “Would you prefer a single horizon line (with a real dot) to start on? You see with no horizon & all spread out it is so open it is unintelligible & so can’t be faked.” He paused hopefully. “To the eye of the observer.” He paused again less hopefully. “That Soutine painting should fit the bill.” [With four poles instead of three you might have been able to build a shelter & had total concealment. Schlumper thought. And a chance to get away with it].

“Sounds closed off to me.” Darling couldn’t disguise the disappointment she felt & yawned. “I’m surprised you let that chance elude you, Snyder. You were never modest.”

* * *

There was a lull in Venus’s tirade against the lack of love in this world of his.

I don’t know why but Schneider felt encouraged at this & so he stuck to his preconceived (violent) plan despite her claim that she hadn’t even thought of the problems for consummation posed by the lack of cover. He pounced on top of her hard squashing the unsuspecting, unprotected rounded body into the angular grip of his arms & legs. Taken by surprise by the dive which overpowered her, Venus was openly struggling to defend herself against being penetrated from the start.

“Get your fingers & things out of my hole.” Venus screamed with anguish. “Please help me, Schlumper, now.”

Their bodies were powdered by the clouds of red oxide dust thrown up as they rolled & fought, each trying desperately to gain the upper hand.

She bit the scar on his neck.

He scrambled up to free her.

Snot & sperm mixed with the red dust dried in a crusty rim around her cunt.

Schlumper blew his nose on a rag & stuffed it back into a pocket looking forlornly at his damaged picture. I'll have to touch up the space where those two have badly muddied the colour in their scuffle . . . wait a minute . . . what is that?" He asked the empty workshop.

A ray of sunshine caught the side of his picture bringing it to life. The Horse's head snorted. "This abrupt turnaround in what we are expected to believe we saw is going to be a very difficult & uncomfortable manoeuvre to accomplish & the Horde is not as accommodating or acquiescent as you have been lead to believe. How am I going to sell it to them? As this turn looks like the road straight to the knacker's yard in the bat of an eye, that sexually explicit fight could easily be transformed into a painful wrangle or a sticky mess depending on the arrangements inside the skin." The Horde rumbled its approval.

-- Of what? You idiot. Darling stormed. What was there to approve of? Tell me.

"You want that haunch of dog meat to come out & say it cold? They were fighting. It had come to that Darling." Snyder was dismissive & eager to vent his anger on them. His eyes flashed from face to face. "And you all watched & saw Schlumper did nothing to help her. That wasn't funny."

"Blow for blow." Darling said & took a sip of spirits & held it in her mouth.

* * *

She knows there will soon be an interchangeability of focus. That when he insisted there was a dissonant point in the fabric of their world to concentrate on there would be a triangular rent with a clear view to the horizon.

Schlumper thought that was all background.

She knows the triangle will inevitably collapse into a thick one-like prick shape. Not the nice bubbly huggy lump she was after. “I was not.” Eve stamped her foot. “I was for out. O. U. T.” She frowned & ran a comb through her hair, stopped & held her throat as if that was the only way she could hold back a flood of words.

Darling gulped & gave a puzzled smile. “You were there. You hadn’t been waylaid. Not yet. Force? Where was that?” She took another nip & held it again.

“I was exhausted.” Eve said.

“And excited.” Snyder bowed slowly. “And that was potent.”

“I had a blackout.” Eve said.

“You could still move & did.” Snyder’s voice sounded as if he had spent a dozen solitary years repeatedly watching a few minutes of someone else’s stolen pleasure.

“I actually think my heart stopped.” Eve said.

“Beating or hoping.” Snyder ferreted out an unsympathetic comment as quick as the knife he would like to have plunged in.

“You were really done.” Darling was unusually tactless & showed great technical skill at it. “Ladylike enough but really . . .” She took another swig this time filling her mouth.

“Even if my heart didn’t stop. I wasn’t in it.” Eve said.

“It looked as if you were right into it.” Darling said in a breathless voice after appreciatively swallowing down her last drink.

“You weren’t paid to lose it.” Snyder wouldn’t have known what to do with a heart even if he had been capable of winning one.

“Would she?” Eve pointed at Venus.

“I would have turned the proposition down flat.” Venus breathed in very slowly & threaded her forefinger through a vacant button-hole. Snyder watched fascinated. His eyes lit-up as they seldom had before. She, too, was in pain.

Darling stalked across the narrow space separating them & clamped a hand over Snyder’s mouth. She half turned, half stumbled as she did it. They appeared to be movements previously traced with dotted lines on a prompt & assiduously learned. But it would have been difficult to explain why.

Darling blew a dense spray of spirits from between her tight lips into Snyder’s face.

* * *

He knows there’s no space in a number two. It is self-enclosed. Although it is elegant like a swan, most things bounce off it. (Get it in the neck. Or get the thrust of their endeavor deflected). Two stands there & stares.

She knows who the other is going to be in the triangle when it forms a pyramid.

[Clarification: Schlumper pencilled in a footnote. She thinks she knows whose other is going to be the other third party given the choices available]. “It couldn’t be clearer. No need to explain. Read this.” Eve thrust the letter at her friend. “I guess you knew all along.”

He knows nothing of the sort.

“This list of possibilities must be a joke?” Darling angrily screwed up the paper. “I could cobble together something better to do than that working out of a hollow tree.” She threw it away.

[Who would have thought that, thought Schlumper.]

She knows it will appear to them that she isn't going to take it but will & this is the renewable miracle.

"That her & his intention is precarious & absurd. We knew all about that didn't we Darling." Eve shrugged towards her friend. But Darling barely acknowledged it.

"As is the world in which they are made to operate with us." Snyder cut in. "Thinking in a spiral they never get to the end of it." His eyes fixed the ball of paper & he put a foot on it. Whatever the drivel, he managed to give it a valuable sound & even though the sense trailed in the mud you were left with a feeling of endearment for the idiot & his affectation. Snyder retrieved the paper.

* * *

He knows by the sound of their hearts beating close together that he is being made aware of something, vaguely, but she can't come out with it & he can't quite get it.

She knows for sure something was up. She knows it 'off by heart.'

[e.g. Some violent physical tragedy turned into a farce by Art by numbers. Murder gilded by a stupid & avaricious person, not a fool; & backed by fools with money. With a splodge of something whitish to keep Lacan going at it. Schlumper hopped around madly. Or there could be lots of splodges & the artist will call it light. He thought dismally.]

"No, she hasn't got her number. Darling. Or mine" Snyder snapped annoyed by Schlumper's increasingly irrelevant spin. He stroked the crumpled paper flat & couldn't see a list. It looked like a leaf off a calendar with a naïve illustration for the month of April.

“Why not ask?” Scarface suggested. “Don’t settle for mere clarification with the mind’s eye? Why not ask her to round out the figure, even give it a decent catchy number or failing that give it a name. And then when you’ve breathed life into it – fuck it.”

Snyder snapped his fingers impatiently. Had he been tackled later he would have denied doing it. “I can’t find a list on this.” Snyder offered the note to Darling who snatched it back. “Can’t you read?” She pointed at the worm in the bird’s beak. Each segment was a finely cross-hatched sign. Snyder tried to take it back but Darling recovered herself & folding the worn paper to a spill tucked it into her belt. “Maybe I’ll need this.”

“My voice needs a sympathetic listener. One who is concentrating not fumbling around looking for an opening to pass through like the idiot I had to put up with.” Eve wished she had given him a hiding.

“Why. If he isn’t attentive.” Said Darling, as a challenge certainly not a question. “Box his ears.”

“Because that would keep them at a distance. Out of reach. A pass can be grasped easier with the mind’s eye.” Snyder said coasting close to vivaciousness as he reckoned events had now justified his lack of action although he had missed the boat.

“But you don’t get the feel of it that way. Do you.” Darling wriggled to get more comfortable. “Better give him the boot.”

* * *

Scarface looked uncomfortable at this point because a fantasy figure (crossed out Being) had crept up on him & Venus as they made love & he felt he had been taken in. Cheated in some way by Venus sharing their act without asking. He was sure someone was

pointing a finger over a wide grin & foam flecked lips. The thin shadow of the poles fell across her torso. A slowly shifting exterior framework patched onto her ribs by the sunlight.

“Whoever’s mug you saw it wasn’t mine. Darling. Better things to do.” Darling straightened up rapidly. This flimsy grey support fled at her movements.

Eve grinned grimly & said ‘look here’ & was having none of that. And then shrugged realizing it was she who had let the future edge in. “After only one bite of the cherry. I’d say.” Said Darling. (Discrete glance at swelling form. O.K. the triangle is a symbol for the womb). He had slipped up. Venus thought he had fudged it. Or conveniently forgotten it. So she took a chance & invited herself back.

He was too busy fabricating an excuse for an incident in the past to notice.

Venus quickly slipped ‘any’ in instead of a ‘none’ for what **she** was prepared to have (take). Aware, no doubt, that the possibility of endlessness quite seriously undermined her position. Gave it away, in fact.

[The any has, since then, been called by many names. And swopped about. Scarface noted].

“This substitution caused a free-for-all, actually.” Eve broke her reverie. “It was claimed that struggle would lead to enrichment. Ha. Ha. But that was exactly what they called the pretty pictures stuck on the walls of the clinic.”

“Blandishments.” Snyder knew. This curt interruption told the whole of his story.

“For what she was prepared to have taken?” Darling was intrigued but gave a know-it-all mute look to neutralize the effect. “I understand, but what do you mean?”

“That’s not difficult it could be almost anything.” Said Snyder. “Makes it nicer. You know the way jelly wobbles makes it a jelly.”

“Put away? That makes it nicer? I don’t think so.” Retorted Darling with a drop of acid to completely restore her composure.

* * *

Meanwhile, on the embankment Schlumper had brushed clear a patch of red earth with his palm. Then he had broken off three straightish twigs & had constructed an open 3D (3 sided albeit with non-existent planes) **pyramid** determined to dispel any doubts or hint of deception by giving a complete (unassailable) background for the whole of natural life.

Venus noted the apparent transparency of this fresh start was only given by a lack of precision. And frowned at Eve who while pointing out the glaring lack of a communications network was threatening the whole project. With that much space slapping around they would need a barker to get heard.

Schlumper said that the indeterminate inside & outside of the ‘faces’ of the pyramid could be imagined. He rubbed his chin & offered ‘construed’ (who said better?) with the more or less clearly defined edges. N.B. Not entirely correct.

Venus observed the straightish twigs & smiled. It was more or less crooked.

Schlumper claimed he was constructing a place, within a horizon, from a rare plan discovered by chance, of a setting in which he felt at home. He had to blow the dust off it several times.

[Now these bodies seemed to be flung far & wide & I heard their voices only faintly.

Schlumper had dozed off momentarily].

Venus asked. “How come he’s able to open up space he’s already situated in & then by reducing its vastness to a boxed-in site claims to have worked wonders with colour?

“To something he could take in. And believe in. I know how he felt.” Scarface argued fully awake & immediately thinking about that unstable square with one side missing (left open).

(And that generally means himself). Venus generously placed that all-embracing thought silently in parentheses.

Venus lifted a flap of the sheet & called out into the void occupied by Schneider’s hopes.

“Never mind that, we’re there already waiting. Are you coming? Darling.” She discretely didn’t stare into his eyes. But did catch a glimpse of kaleidoscopic flashes of pink flesh as he pulled up his trousers.

(Schlumper thought quite a lot could be fitted into the nominal space of his construction).

Bye the way, Darling, Schneider can see Venus looking at him intently through the gap she has pulled in the screen.

“As distinct from the actual obviously cramped living space into which no one could fit, without being forced to lie on top of one another.” Venus murmured reading his thought.

“And the lack of air.” Darling flapped a hand.

“Would a touch of dampness have been an advantage? I think so. Although it did mean everything became smudged.” Schlumper wanted to see if it would irritate them being reminded of their eternal dampness.

*

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Schlumper wondered. Could the spaciousness (I am including a split) be verified? There was a snag & that was in the very act of verification.

If you saw it you couldn't believe it. And then asked yourself why you had been allowed a glimpse.

If you felt it you simply had to see it. After wondering why you had been allowed a touch.

If you smelled it (& how could you avoid that) see above & below.

If you tasted it. You had to sing about it. Etc.

“There's nothing to see. I'm starving down here . . .” Darling indicated the fluffy line of hair below her navel. “I'm ready to gobble you up.”

“Well believe me that would be an adorable act, Darling.” Venus tried emphasis to cover her confusion.

“Whether you believe it or not, I'm ready.” Darling repeated, the unfamiliar ring of Venus's voice not lost on her.

The lack of headroom could (& was) easily demonstrated & made evident by bumps on the forehead & bruises on the thighs. Eve & Darling refused to tick that box. And stopped Venus.

Schlumper claimed you could read too much into that kind of contour, but, nevertheless, studied his doughnut intently before biting a lump out of it.

“The triangle is verifiable (sigh of relief from behind her back) but does bring some tricky baggage with it. Like eternal & holy.” Venus drew a vague shape in the air with a

finger. The Horse's head watched that finger very carefully. Yes. As carefully as a dog watches a wasp. Then it ticked a box.

[Sketchy, but it could be filled out with a bit of intuition. (To be used sparingly.)

Schlumper screwed up the questionnaire & took a bite out of his cake].

“Darling. I would favour ‘mere’ imagination.” Eve was trying her best to go along with the return of Venus but you could tell she was put out by the way she attracted Darling.

“Venus was a thorn in her side criticizing every independent act, even the ones Eve had no intention of doing.” Darling had tried that trick & got nowhere.

“I know.” Snyder grumbled. “She put her spoke in my chance.”

“It wasn't quite like that.” Darling said. “She was under orders. It was up to you. And you didn't.”

Snyder looked aghast. The Horse nudged the Horde to be very very quiet.

There is no doubt that there is a difficulty here. The very best intuition is practically undeniably correct except in the mind of a mad man where it can cause some complications. For the rest of us; because intuition, existing on the sharpest knife-edge & only valid there for an instant while the thought gathers itself up incase it is left behind & thereby becomes mad enough to say something thoughtless, is the most useful & extraordinary gift we possess, we ignore it. And consequently continually blunder.

“Here we take our bearings with this gadget.” Scarface unpacked a contraption he had been told would do the trick. It was as seductive (& long) as a horse's dick]. Then

Schlumper said:

This wigwam is nowhere near the truth.

He claimed he perceived the rigor of something behind it.

“Smoke?” Is that what the snake was made from? We know it was a propagandist. Just as we know Eve to be an agitator made from flesh. Put them together & bingo. It was as simple as that. Call a few numbers & the door was open.

He claimed also he perceived the certitude of something in it as he stared along the flexible tube using some of the above muzzy thoughts after having ground them to dust & mixed them to the consistency of mud & yet he complained that still the basis for all this truth was still less formed, less outlined. The clarity needed was lacking. A match flared. Snyder’s head was enveloped in fire. They all ignored it.

“Understandably. Darling. If you nebulize everything what do you expect? Contact of the third kind.” Venus had had enough of all the makeshift, now was the time for a startling move. A joint act. Now where? Someone blew the flame out. That let everything & everybody back in. They set to on two. They lost the place. Now where?

“In a howdah on an elephant’s back?” The Horse’s head wondered. “There would be a certain compelling rhythm.” Its eyes blinked, out of sync unfortunately. “Or perhaps with a woman tied to a horse?”

“Etc.” Said Snyder.

“Something like that.” Eve nodded, for the whole Horse understood easier if a head was moving as it spoke to them. “But perhaps less exotic. Say a sofa.”

(Starting with two). Scarface shifted uneasily at his hidden thought. Had he been there before?

Eve caught the look & from her angle it appeared shifty & the brief smile that quickly followed it confirmed her doubt. There was no time to be lost in conjuring up a room with a table, a bowl of fruit, a door, before every tangible aspect went up the chimney. [Right (1st time). Schlumper averred & put a match under the triangle of twigs. But even as the kindling took & the flames danced there was still not enough space in it. Eve's thoughts were all frantically being joined up but with no reciprocity, no touch, Venus's world would begin to disintegrate.] Eve seized the moment. She reached over to a bowl & picked up an apple.

“Look.” Said Eve, taking a bite out of the apple & handing it to Darling who took a bite.

“This shows we can start differently.”

“Where? Darling. There is no room here for a distant view. Nor is there anything to be gained from a face-to-face encounter. There is no way out. This must be it.” Venus said coldly, peering into the untidy shadows & noting a scrap of paper under the curtain. She thought she could hear footsteps approaching the door.

“It is. Darling.” Chuckled Eve.

“Is what?” Venus felt lost.

“Alienation.” Snyder said pushing Venus aside as the cog flew past her ear. It left a faint pinkish afterglow.

[Suggestion. Schlumper are you listening? Or just goggling at it. Go for presence in the detour of writing. Remember furtive scribbling belongs to theft. And lock the door this time.]

“Anymore of that behavior should keep us all dangling between the parallel barbed lines way past the final whistle. Also bumping our heads in the night & being kicked by g’s & y’s.” Snyder drew on his Stalag experiences to bolster his point condemning their scrap. “Sticking it in on the fence.” Darling remembered the crush with a wry smile. “You were always susceptible.”

[Suggestion. “I’m listening.” Schlumper snapped. Go for the fun they could make out of manual dexterity with *angles & direction* & serious consequences under lumps & folds]. Scarface felt compelled to reply. “Having, during a lifetime, been force-fed intentionless arbitrary demonstrations by myself this is a poor moment to expect the revelation of a solid construction or concrete ploy. Or, for that matter, feeling.”

“Play. Darling.” Eve had retrieved the apple core & was taking aim again. Snyder’s head was the obvious target.

“You say he wants to reconstruct everything again up till now? Based on an incident about to take place?” Snyder made it obvious with a slow shake of a hand he was having none of it. He pointed to the singed bandage with his index finger. “Never again.”

“I’m sure he hadn’t got anything quite as far reaching as that in mind. And, incidentally Darling, I rather thought it would be an event for you.” Venus’s voice became as dense & low as river fog.

“Using an Outsider. Some kind of foreign crisis?” Asked the Horse’s head anxious not to be included. The Horde was apparently ready to hoof it.

“O. Yes. Some silver-tongued snake in the grass?” Eve, too, was on home ground.

“I didn’t say that. I wouldn’t give it that much significance. He has been with us from the start. I wouldn’t claim to know what you felt even if you told me. He would claim he did. I’d guess you were holding something back that is intrinsic to us being able to understand & probably didn’t know you were doing, deep down.” This was as close to a snarl as Venus got. Was it a snarl? Or was it as close to a defensive smile as she could manage as she slipped out of her underwear?

“Where else is there for those feelings other than deep down?” Darling was startled. She was so impressionable.

“Skin deep.” Eve barked. And threw the apple cog.

“I like my feeling there.” Darling stroked all the bits down the front as she swayed back out of the line of fire.

“You could be mistaken & actually not be feeling anything.” Snyder was at it like a terrier on a rat. “That would be misguided though.” He adjusted the bandage which had unfurled.

“You’re so good at knowing other people’s feelings. What about your own?” Eve shook a finger at Snyder.

“Read the list.” Snyder replied dryly.

[Sure right now, then not so sure a minute later (Smacks of Dualism) but I’ll buy it.

Luckily Schlumper alone thought this mess.]

? ‘We are waiting’ their looks said.

“I do have these feelings. But they’re like yours . . . non-existent . . .” Snyder guffawed.

“They can only be induced . . . by torture & wounding & . . . what the Hell.”

This reminds me of those times I woke up with the feeling of having splinters in my fingertips. When you sensed some part of you is looking on from elsewhere. Everything stops. Everything fills. Scarface blew in his hands. The cards slapped onto the felt. Eve spread her hand & Darling glanced sideways at it.

“Deadly.”

“Whose lips turned the light out?”

Darling kissed the dealer. Venus stealthily kissed the dealer.

* * *

Darkness came upon him as stealthily as the kiss as Peter Snyder turned onto a dark, uneven path strewn with spent coke. Every pane in the windows of the derelict factory close by had been smashed into shark’s teeth. Its brick walls were tagged with boring sprayed signs as hollow as the yawning floor space glimpsed beyond a sagging corrugated iron fence. On the other side huts that had been thrown up for migrant workers were humped under their scale-like cladding of blue-grey slates; abandoned amongst the winding dirt tracks connecting their tiny allotments. In one more intact dwelling a fire shone through the windows.

“I never thought till now. Has my heart changed too? She kept me waiting too long, too many times . . . now I enjoy the waiting not the meeting.”

“Tell me. Was it so unendurably long?”

“So it seems. Look at what has happened.”

The wind was so icy cold the sparrows were twittering in the hedge all night. “And before you say it any bird name would do, he didn’t have a clue that the woman watching him from beyond the flame, loved him.”

* * *

I can’t believe it. He is going to start again.

I told you it was a treadmill.

I thought you were attempting to be poetic.

Mechanically denying a suppressed anger Scarface turned a page & began to write in the margin.

‘Is yours a Heart of stone? Your fingers poke & prod denial into the air of your words as I wait while you warble & drone proofs out of texts from a Freudian horror comic with the same longing as that hydraulic freak. You seem to have all the prerequisites necessary to belong, a lost (absent) father in each snap of your jaws. An attempt at a blue rinse mother haunting your thighs.

There is no ground beneath my feet you implied. I know I lost ground with every jibe I made, truth to tell, against the cult.

I wait for fun to take the creases out of writing madness.

You can wait for the door to be opened. You to whom vomit isn’t yet a clue; suck on it.

Yes. Suck on it like a maggot, in pseudo earnestness.’

* * *

Snyder picked out in an instant that both of the thin girl’s hands were bandaged into scruffy white stumps & made off quickly. Made up, she sat up tartly sheltering in a

swarm of flies on a pile of earth beside the gutter. A youth threatened to hit her. She squealed at me as I passed. Had I paused I could have bought her. Swerving, I turned into an alley & just missed Snyder pushing through the crowd stepping carefully on uneven stone slabs covering the drains. He hurried to meet the others muttering to himself. “Who is she? Is she an angel fluttering around? Does she think she is one?” He picked his way warily through the slime spilling out of the ditch. “Will there ultimately be a surprise for me? A refusal wouldn’t be one. Desire isn’t one. Debauchery? Is it possible? That was reckoned to be one way, a short cut, to Nirvana. I’ll tell her that. She’ll smile showing she knows I’m trying it on.” A grim smile set on his mouth laying the lie.

“You’re done for.” I shouted across the shimmering haze. I stayed back under the fluttering printed awnings. “The parting was planned, timed to perfection with cutting precision.”

“Yet she almost faltered.” He shot a keen glance into my eyes. “And had I not prepared myself for weeks I would have slipped back at that moment. I refused to express my hatred of death for a second.”

“Why?”

“Because it has become my companion.”

*

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FULL MOON letter of LOVE with

a woodpecker tapping on cue

thousands of sleigh bells grasshoppers

millions of kisses

sharing my room with - - - -

Bats.

I have that funny feeling you are

not coming here even though

we can fuck until the stars shake.

I imagine you arriving. Can I kiss you I wonder?

Or have you gone to another land

So that I lie & shudder in disbelief.

Then I realize that land has no name either.

I'm cutting the 18th window in this house can I do it with

A woodpecker tapping the roof early in the morning and

The wheelbarrow squaring the circle?

Under the firestone there were two oily brown scorpions and

I had that same feeling of being in the right place

But with someone missing.

To avoid getting embroiled in the above Eve & Snyder took a diversion & stayed at the Shangri La (The initial S.L. on the note had 'shithole' pencilled after it). Snyder was sure he saw the hop boot a rat off the stair. Through the greasy window screwed shut they could see a huge black pipe section resting on an embankment. A neat door closed off the end of the pipe & from this a baked clay area, kept swept clean & raised a few inches from the surrounding earth, formed a yard. Sprayed on this home in white was the graffiti 'I love you G.'

Snyder took this in & said. "Keep your eye on Mr. Mustard." While the hop slapped the table waiting for a tip then left empty handed with the agility of a rhino.

[In this attempt to erect a triangular pyramid of stasis, tinted, on the facet catching the peep of dawn, by self-delusion, I am going to be both opportunist & instructive. With the description of these assaults of pain on the totality of Schneider's being, & his reaction, I shall show the way he tried to exploit the unpleasantness to escape, understanding that with it came the emptiness he craved. You can take it that Scarface wasn't interested in the view. He played from a highly-prized but slightly threadbare diagram of the action which had served as a template for many repeats.]

Eve over-dressed for bed. She finished up by pulling a floppy sunbonnet firmly over her curls, tucking stray wisps of hair in the hat-band & slipping on a pair of kid gloves.

Snyder expected her to sit it out on the chair. Eve lay in one position on the top of the bed cover & kept rigid & it was impossible to tell if she slept or not.

Snyder dreamed, fitfully, of crawling many times into the pipe house to find who loved whom & on having been stopped many times as he incoherently tried to pronounce his name starting with a G. woke up at last no wiser.

They got out passed the hop who challenged them with a blank stare. So as not to disturb his lassitude he was paid without a word.

Eve stopped & said, "This bodes well. First thing." She glowered at a black pig rooting into the mud of an open ditch filled by stagnant grey slime cutting the path. To one side under a flimsy shelter a cauldron was popping with boiling fat attended by a man waiting to drop his mixture of barley meal into it. They skirted this & took a dark brick passage under an embankment barely lit by the weak morning light. A chain set swinging by the vibrations overhead clanged against an iron post as they emerged into a flat plain with dried out parcels of land separated by low mud walls. Beyond the fields was a swamp dotted with motionless white herons. In it, at irregular intervals & with no obvious order, reason or use, three & sometimes four flat stones were stacked up. Yet it was on these piles that their gaze fixed because although they had no apparent purpose the piles were fragile & must have been frequently rebuilt.

Now they had walked up the broad road to the station & on a covered platform of the down line waited for their delayed express. A long train rumbled in on the up line.

Opposite, each woman threw her tall bundle of branches onto the buffers between the mail's coaches, sometimes more than one woman shared the space, & climbing onto the precarious perch lay along the rough pile for the journey. The train clanked out. Snyder counted the wagons. The number X must have triggered a faded memory.

“As usual, I forgot the key word given in a dream. A word that, because of the confusion deliberately engendered, I was deceived into believing was vital.” He rubbed a scar above his ear. The rails had glistened like clear water in the afternoon sun. Snyder remembered the herd of white cows beside the track that he first thought was a scattering of tombstones.

“Fulfillment seemed possible if a little bit more was done to find that key word.”

“Anything interesting this ‘little bit more’?” Eve asked sounding as though she didn’t believe it existed.

“Anything.”

“And when it had been done. This anything? Any more ramifications?” She made the questions sound like a left & a right, two quick jabs to soften him up.

“Fulfillment seemed possible if a little touch more was added. Although it was never admitted.” He ducked low.

“And when it was added? Whatever spice it was?” Another punch.

“When I asked, ‘Now?’ She became angry. Something more was necessary.” He parried.

“What?”

Snyder bit his lip. “This & that & everything.”

“And when you supplied the goods were you rewarded?” She made that question sound very ugly.

“A pay-off was hinted at.” He said in a muted voice.

“Fulfillment.” She said flatly before sneering the question. “Was it exactly anything this inexpressible promise?”

Snyder's hands silently admitted his defeat. It was always & only in his own silence that he admitted the despair he felt being baited by this inexistent lure.

“You were dilly-dallying with a shadow, a travesty & you knew it.”

Ugly lump

A double head weight on my forehead

Your song rubbed out.

Old newsprint opened & inside a young swallow

Trapped.

Impenetrable girders opening to let you pass

As we shouted your name.

I remember you.

I turned on my left side in bed

The first time in nearly 200 days

And sat up amazed

I had kept away so long from your warm body.

A bare wall & Scribbled message

Go to bed alone.

I got my love letters back

Tied in black

Kisses forming a ribbon

From the first day.

Few words cut clean.

A knife blade thro' dark clouds of bees.

As I wiped my feet on the rainbow wondering what petition I could spell out to gag a nauseous mouth I remembered her lip was always split in winter by the intense cold wind. A kiss smacking of blood, indifferent or heartless it seemed all the same. And the blame's caresses wrapped around & completely stifled the beating heart. I remember those bleak, hostile days, they came round every year, when in each, the hour lasted every counted second & any harsh words were better than the wound.

My body, taken hostage by that most gruesome part of the brain, was unable to maintain any feeling. I thought I was knowingly going the best way, I was bolstered by fantasy. But reason isn't kind. It hasn't the smothering touch. Its delusion is soundless. Swollen to push out, push away any voice fatal to its purpose. It is devoid of music. Fondness & anxiety culled the peace, squeezed its space flat. Called on worry to help flog it with colourless denial.

"What do I want to see?" She came a step closer. "Do I look as though I'm waiting for proof? Out of nowhere." She placed a foot sideways to give her stance the equilibrium she didn't feel.

"I'm doing my best."

It was a step taken as if moving into another time.

Bending an intestinal path in the SHAMBLES, elbowing through my smoking drivel into the tripe & inconceivably finding my passage from secular to sacred made easy by this rough mixing, I was left musing upon the bait wending its way towards me on a float. A pretty trapeze girl in a little silver tinsel & nothing else, dangling off a crane above our gaping mouths, was attended by a group of voluptuous winged insects whose artificial sparkles were neatly & discretely placed on their nipples & cunt. As it grew dusk their tiny lanterns flickered & they offered themselves playfully around the scene. While the crowd took pleasure for a time kicking the guts out of its phantoms this soon paled, it became bored, turned to cracking its bloody knuckles on the ribcage, wading into each other & kicking shit out of its shell just for fun. So lobbing the shots of love randomly like scattering limbs punching in a fight not caring where they stuck, the collective head & heart, smothered or struck by these aimless hits was made to throw up a solid bridge of bones, tempting me to run across. The near misses had made a river of steel rails under it on which to shunt off the rippling reflections of sadness.

Aimlessly, that evening I left this desolate place, with every explanation & excuse wide of the mark. I had kept nothing. Yes nothing, Darling. Only paper & pencil at finger tip for use & re-use to keep a natural history of absurdity to pass back over the brink as a keepsake. Relieved of my baggage, I trundled over the bridge. To give the backward leap a consistency & purpose fate insisted on, I tried by way of a new persona, a disfigurement. I am called, behind my back, Scarface.

Hapless, skidagglng from a place I had outgrown, slumpshouldered shoving the shadows back where they belonged into the past of a shuttered concrete landscape & taking the

present by the nose, I was rolled & didn't know it. Unmuzzled, I bit the sustentive hand.
And surreptitiously embroiled the crowd as companions with ready money. The words
that had, uninvited, invaded my brain I took as said.

I am an odd job man.

My hat with nothing in but candle

leads my head which knows the world is not.

My heart like 2 bricks tied with sisal

(beaten drummed no) slammed by dustbin-lid emotions.

My hands skim thorns with paint

to detonate dumb colour

Inside.

Outside

My feet all enormous conceit wait in line

to skip the scythe.

Ears; arse; knees; nose, add to the rest

Oddly – superfluous.

Over board at last. I gasped with horror in the icy isolation. Soon that frigid cold had put some spectral distance between the important other & myself & with no safety net to save any insane notions as they fell off the imagination's tightrope, I was overwhelmed by the offer of indescribably tempting choices. But, flummoxed by my indecision they were fucked because I wouldn't spell them out & take them on. By the way, in the deep blue sea I got at loggerheads with the devil about the time it took to boil out the stain of blood & argued why it was a long betrayal between her & I. And told him roundly why his explanations were impossible to live with. So knock it off. He offered nothing more, no comforting sin to flounder about in. He said if I was truly lucky, but didn't look hopeful, something nasty should turn up. So fuck it. And see. Off, & take her with you, he pointed out a stunner tanning naked up the beach. Disheartened I realized he was right, there was no other cure. Sink or swim, had I known, it would have paid to have kept my mind a blank. And balanced better. I took his point. I did inveigle the three curve girl to come along.

Later, I dried out on a claustrophobic ride through the night on a forest road twining like entrails in the ribcage of an endless python. Before dawn, yet throbbing in the heat, we pulled into a wide-open parking lot of baked earth beside a temple. The first thing I noticed in the silver light was that an unmounted blue winged horse had recently been stencilled as a logo on a lorry's dingy green bonnet still steaming in the drizzle. The driver's seat was empty. There she was again, spent, sprawled all over the cab chattering heart-smitten into a mobile, & oblivious. Her silver slip the size of a tongue as smooth as a lick was all she wore. Her long legs controlled the wheel. A necklace, bangles &

earrings were spilled on the dash; shoes tossed off in the frenzy lay on the ground outside. She spun, her body glistening with oil, on a flimsy dress that had turned to rag in the heat & under the weight of passion. Slipping away from my companion's grasp, sidling alongside the cab I blindly gestured a readiness to take what it takes. I meant give what it took to you-know-what if she could see her way clear.

“Out with it.”

“Ask her nicely.”

For the bulky lorry was blocking my road out. I needed to negotiate with the temptress to clear this gloomy dirt-track which skirted both sides of a steep embankment holding the canal. Confused, under the moon with its howling light, I came along up to my neck. And now alone, I add a smile.

“Vinegar face.”

“Bitter.”

Their taunts were still following me, winging me; I took them, no boundary could contain the vicious words. I tried to head them off. I shook a leaf of paper loose & scrawled a note.

“You were begging for it.”

“I bet you were, but couldn't spell her name.”

That's not fair. Clay was lying cold in my head with its steel splinter embroidering a tender, cyanide consciousness. After the last abortive attempt at romance I fancied to improvise a casual love on paper before trying the moves. Describe a cunning pitfall & cross it safely. Take a few cutting rejections & get over them happily.

“Delay. Delay.”

“Wanker.”

“And?”

And I came to believe she had smiled down at me as she swung twirling naked.

“Wooden.”

“Blocked.”

No. It was a horror of stillness that kept me dancing crazily, from foot to foot, as I tried to commit, if at all, to the folly of love with zest. I knew ding dong wasn't enough as I struggled for trivial pleasures. I still had her last metallic words of rejection ringing like a bell in my head as daydream woman arrived in a blue woollen dress ready for the kill & nothing less.

“Alone?”

“Are you kidding?”

(Someone in the wings, she sneered. Someone with wings, I retorted.)

No she is not kidding. I, too, thought the rule of disengagement stated clearly that there had to be another. And I wondered, with a cold presentiment of having mishandled the affair, what, whoever the stranger could be, was he or she up to in the background. This, at the same time as a dread of losing sight of the main objective: love: what can't be faked.

“At which you were. No good.”

At this censure I felt my boat, shaped like a bloated corpse rolling on greasy waves, was adrift & quit; or its detestable crew hit by contagion, had chucked the cargo overboard & snuffed it. At the very least I was marooned.

“Complaining about all this is groundless.”

“That’s right the rule said he had to put up with a surrogate. It’s known as the first impediment.”

“It certainly was when you saw her.”

Was this shambles a place of special sanctity, a ‘tirtha’? I wondered as I wrestled with the image of a werewolf born of a subterranean midnight in a remoteness reclaimed on that track twinkling under a hard frost in amongst the black bushes. Was she a rotten consolation, unable to forge more than a honeycomb tie, better forgotten quick than allowed to shrivel by neglect? And I shuddered at the loose-limpidness of my imagination as she swiftly parted with my wishes as if she’d been forced instantly to swallow them whole ready to pass on. I was in a fix it was so easy, as if every loose sentence spoken had then been fabricated & made to fit my desires like a glove.

“Half of everything off & in there with a chance already. Can’t believe it.”

“What luck if he could live with it.”

“Slack work by the Fates.” [Who the Hell was that? Schlumper wondered].

Or had I gathered with a sinister gang being haunted on a rotting hulk with its wheel lashed, a floating Hell gutted of its vitals, stuck with banners flapping brightly to the last before it burns & sinks?

As you can tell it weighed me down to find it all so lightly stitched & tossed away without regard. It shouldn't have been made possible by external thought.

“What's that?”

“It was so easy it appalled him.”

“I don't believe one word of that. He must have realized it was set up. Didn't he see her shiver?” [Schlumper alone realized this voice was being electronically modified].

* * *

He stood back. She beckoned him to her. “Are you coming?” & placed his awkward hand on its slot.

“Get on with it. I'm nowhere near up to my quota.” She spat over his shoulder. “And I don't want to get beaten up.” And carried on chewing & blowing gum.

Enticed. Encouraged. Entranced. Enter. She winked. Splat. A spoonful of his blood mingled with the mud. He lived still tick tock.

Dusk. Dew. A mistress of many others. No matter. When you are Mr. Zero what else can you hope for? That from a selection of grubby, wrecked shirkers willingly reeling him in, he had chosen the scrawny one with phosphorescent bones painted on her skirt served him right. Gauzy red sleeves flapped out behind her revealing bare patches of mottled flesh. Her clapping hands were chapped.

“He means with ‘feeling’.” She did an arm action & added the leer.

[Fending off the Blank stare & hearing No comment. Schlumper nearly asked. What happened to the other silver girl? Left dangling.]

It wasn't an enchanted dream where he coped it in the head as you can see. Embodying the fickleness of a pure commercial product he got again & again what had already been sold. And when this phantom was observed, immediately, with a quick flick of its tail, it swiftly disappeared. But luckily the starved wanderer who enters our dream is not indelible. Or paid for.

Satiated & shelved, I looked up through her black tuft of hair & saw the silver ring in her navel glossed by the dim cab light, took in the well-stacked pin-ups stuck on the side window. And understood that loveliness, the intoxicant, is only half-written, it needs a sensitive hand to complete it.

[And a stage set painted with hearts where the trembling fool does best. Schlumper was jealous.]

They were hooped together like one of those metal puzzles. Raw & tossing & panting on trash strewn in a circle in the weeds in spent cinders & that weird red dust blown about powdering everywhere around them. They mingled, the frenzy unconfined & by this fluke the liking grew.

I slid. My head came close to kiss the stagnant water. I turned a few pages (in my mind's eye) as I hurried under her thighs to converge & blot out. In, there was heat brooding like a summer kept in a bag.

Darling bent her body, slack at the knees, trying it out. "He was twisted on his back by then. No, it's impossible." She concluded, pulling her arms back in to hug herself.

"Or doing the scissors. Or dead." Eve caught Darling as she flopped over.

He was. And blasted out of the slit trench. And the mud was heaved out in a fine cloud & his boots blown off sailed up above him. And the fence behind which he had sought protection was splintered all around him. Also, the cooking fire had disappeared flapping like a rag.

I had practised all the intricacies of lust with a pencil, cheek in hand. I had seen it done perfectly everywhere it could be done. And he had lived tick tock.

Darling & Eve reddened.

What did I want now as I crouched (balancing the tumultuous waste of pleasure against the happy gasps of delight) smack on the trine?

“More tail?” They shouted with glee. We were spreading wide the O embracing nothing.

“Just about down to the rump of the bestial but caught in the . . .”

“ . . . the nick of his pants.” Eve & Darling were falling about.

In turbulence & at that juncture, that is, at the sinew by the thigh giving onto the cunt, the two girls decided to show this crack-pot the game by pretending to limp then winning.

[Listen Sweethearts. Behave. Schlumper thought out loud. He could change your names to something awful.]

“Something a bit loopy about him. Don’t you think?”

“Are you kidding. I spotted it ages ago.”

“It’s called the collapse of the alternatives.” [That slip raised a few eyebrows according to Schlumper].

“He’s straight.”

“Yes, due to overstimulation.” They cracked up again.

I let them ramble on as I extracted myself from the smashed wood & mud & thighs wondering what was to be done as I'd dropped unlucky with this plumpish little persecutor blowing bubbles & laying hands on me in my susceptible state when I was needing bandages & salves for the gangrene of the soul with its itch to keep running. I guessed something was happening when she jumped down beside me & handed over my battered heart on her palm fluttering like a bird & seeing at each beat its power being eroded. "Here's your ticket." She clambered back into the cab & hung onto the wheel jamming in the key.

"It comes to you sometimes in a flash." Eve smiled into the wing mirror as she presented her svelte bare rump.

"I'll swear she was bulkier than that." Trumpeted Darling with her usual cut & paste detachment.

I passed their comments off with a shrug. They weren't really all there. Her weight had very little to do with it you could see that through the lacy vest. She was slumped over the wheel holding her own & you were given the feeling you could run your thumb up it whenever you wanted to if it was the kind of want you felt as strongly as that. She made the box grind as she put it into first. I knew then that this love was going to be fleeting. The engine spluttered up to a roar shaking the truck into life.

In the distance there was a group of friends sheltering on the tow-path shrouded under one side of the hump bridge sharing a spliff; reeds & balsam of a swamp fringe up to their waists. They were keeping an eye on a large pike slipping through the reeds. Beyond them a horse with a small head & a red circle on its dappled breast was tethered close to

the side of a wall. The old truck rumbled, trundling over the ruts towards them backwards as they waved a black & red flag. It was the signal to advance. To roll over the razor wire separating reason from improvisation & lies.

* * *

Alone, in the dusk I stood rooted to a spot which was now a long way from anywhere I had known. Here, too, there was red dust being whipped into the piles of dry bamboo sticks by a capricious wind. Awnings held by strings slung with cheap Halloween masks hung low like garlands across a narrow market street in which a cow resisted a constant buffeting with a pole to scavenge the courgettes thrown at it. Through an open window, behind a plank counter, above a vat sat a plump plastic Ganesh, his shrine of gold, vermilion & apple green held three coconuts & a banana. In the distance beyond a formidable iron fence stood the huge watchtower of Londa. Its massive bulky superstructure supported by an open network of steel girders absorbed all the light around it. And glowed. Huddled around its base on the patches of bare red earth & withered scrub were scattered tent-like shelters made from blue plastic sheets surrounded by multicoloured patches of drying rags. A leaning concrete post tethered by two strands of barbed wire & a slack piece of string completed the perimeter in which a nomad was aimlessly packing a sack kneeling by a plastic bottle. He cast two shadows on the burnt up grass of the embankment, the shapes of two birds alighting. Taking in this sign I could say it prompted me to think it would be prudent to take steps against disaster in an obviously unlucky place. And that I knew before I took them they would be futile. The

truth is I didn't get it, the trick was in unloving which I hadn't learned. Unlocking a tumult of luck on my side. Unlooking.

“And you didn't do any of those things, whatever they were, either?” Darling interrupted & conveyed her puzzled astonishment with the question. Eve grunted her agreement with Darling's tacit disapproval.

“After being taken for a ride? **Hold your horses**. How do you do that in a dust heap?” I started to excuse myself. I shouldn't have said it.

“You need help?” Angel took out a thick book from her shoulder bag after knocking the red dust off her pants. “This spot is described as transitory on the main inventory. Not a place to stop.” Angel's gesture enveloped the area. “Check it out.” She ended her movement, giving him the book & squatted. “Because it looks as if you are permanently stuck in this God forsaken place . . . unless . . .” Her piss sizzled into the dust. The pungent odour of mothballs drifted over.

Schlumper opened the book & pulled out a diagram the size & shape of an apple & pinned it to my black vest as a hub. Its intricate silver lines gave out a faint glow by moonlight & the figures painted within this delicate web awoke.

Angel moved close to examine it.

“Nice work.”

[Colours transforming rags to fine clothes. Schlumper wondered about the profit in that.

And dabbed a few dapples on the horse's hide.]

At that moment a double-header, lamps glowing then flaring in the grey fog, came shunting down the lines out of nowhere. It was coupled with a line of cars by a gang of

men using poles tipped by twisted steel snakes. I sweated down the way for my number. Checking the list posted on the side of the railway carriage by the door I found a scrambled but passable stab at my name.

A girl with a round flat face hopped over the piles of baggage towards me fluttering & peeping like a fledgling. Darling looked closely at the picture.

“Does she change? Yes? I hope so for her sake.”

I wondered about that but Darling had always been cruel. It was inadvisable for me to ask, as the question would undoubtedly defile the object of the query. Had she already changed?

“Hold on. And look it’s come to this.” Snyder pointed. They stared intently at (this).

Schlumper coughed apologetically, “Looks about the same as they always do I know. Sorry I couldn’t brighten it up.”

“Dismissing the random lunatic conception & the strained deductions what are we left with?” Snyder squinted at it.

“It’s a ticket.” Darling wondered at their puzzlement with her easy guess. “Is your destiny going to be decided by a seat number? Looks like it.”

“Can you help me? Please.” Xax sang from an unknown quarter as she threaded her way through the dense crowd, ducking under the line of pretty girls holding garlands of yellow flowers she ran straight into the soldiers who smiling at her consternation gently guided her to the train.

At this point which way do you step? Backwards? Remember you are still there & still very near. I held out my hands welcoming her into the dappled world under the spluttering flames hardly illuminating the ashfelt platform. We embraced.

* * *

Buzzard cat-calling surprise drifting

above us three

each having a turn with a brown forked stick

on a silver ladder

in the Fig tree.

+ + +

Strangled klaxon peacock honk below as we

each took a turn to find & suck

the fallen fruit.

Choke on a Spoonful of **DIAMONDS**.

You got diamonds?

Yeah.

Sure?

Yeah. Look. The dealer palmed them. Snyder paid & took them & sloped off.

Look. I've got diamonds.

The pills were round. The colour of a pill counts towards its effect. These were white.

“Are you tossing off? Still?” Eve sat peering at the shape of the bed & slid a hand over her gusset.

Draw a snake with feet added. We will listen.

* * *

“So you see there was an openness we both enjoyed.”

“Yes.”

“I felt I enjoyed.”

“Yes.”

“He enjoyed.” She glanced down at her own shadow. “Except when I get to remember what went off. You don’t believe me?”

“Yes.”

“Really those memories of that night immediately poke a hole in the happiness I know I felt & am up until then sure I am still feeling . . . enjoying.” Xax frowned as she sought an image for the words ‘pleasurable shagged by lacklustre’ a monkey flicked in & out of a tree in her head. “I know this is too simple. But I had Schneider’s face in my mind all raveled up with Schlumper’s.”

“Tough one that.” Said Darling. “Must have been like staring into the abyss.”

“The good feeling got lost through the hole?” Snyder gave her a wide smile, “And left the bad one behind. That’s a puzzle. Did enjoying it hurt much?”

“You are intolerable. That wasn’t possible. It’s only a figure of speech. The event happened. I was in love. It’s the replay that turns out sordid instead of happy.” Xax looked at the ground between her feet strewn with leaves. “If an unrecognizable memory

of it happens. That is not the love. I get a hideous unfeelingness, yes, foisted on me in its place.” She shuddered. “Is it possible to make friends with a bad memory?”

“I bet it would be a tight fit.” Snyder was hopeless.

“Admired & mistrusted. That is a difficult fit.” Darling said soothingly. “But it’s commonplace enough. Can that night only take its true shape there, with what you care to remember? We’re after a secret here & you aren’t coming up with it.”

“It can’t be faked, love, & I’m not sure that your feelings were love.” Eve hesitated.

“It wasn’t possible; it was beautiful yet this happens every time. Does it have to be perfect?” Xax’s rancour, if she had any, didn’t show in her round unblinking eyes.

“You’ll start to cry in a few minutes. Why? Is space & with it hope imprisoned in the present & future? And the past had all its creases ironed out? Maybe your memory of him is the reality. Maybe your memory is jinxed.” Snyder was happy.

“But the memory couldn’t change the colours of the light or that sensuous touch, could it? It was overwhelming. Wasn’t it?” Darling took the pass.

“Does it?” Snyder probed.

She wouldn’t answer.

“But it did.” Snyder continued. “The memory lodges the real feeling irretrievably beyond reach just by nearly getting the act right, not quite but so near; & by keeping a flattened picture it’s taking you back without giving any opacity to the feeling; the flesh has rotted off the bones; the bones are splintered . . . There has been destruction & murder since that time (Even if only symbolic or in a sub-text difficult to decipher, I don’t want to spoil the story). It’s hollow . . . hollowed out.”

“Oh. Yes. And how am I supposed to work with these mutilated pieces ripped from the web . . . jumbled up for the rest of my life?” Xax’s shoulders dropped slightly.

“How are you what?” Snyder asked scornfully. “After tacking together an appearance you can hardly bear; then tagging it with another name you float it up into the world as a memory & you expect to be able to handle it. But at the same time you know it’s true that unless you alter it you would soon sicken of it & withdraw. You dress it up.”

“You didn’t let me finish . . .”

“Because I know what you are going to cook up will be as incoherent as the version you are trying to kid us with.” Snyder whistled. “Adapt them. They’ll come to heel.”

“Twist the . . . knife?” Xax didn’t know how, it was obvious from her downcast look.

“Yes lie.”

“Did you promise to fuck him?” Asked Darling sensing the pitfall.

“Yes. I lied.”

Darling considered a moment. “Saw through him?”

“And you’re still stuck with your illusions.” Snyder shook his head.

“Anyway are you going to listen?” Xax was hurried. “What I’m after is a way to check the crushing doubts those pictures bring which overwhelm me.”

“If you know that. Get on with it. Put another body in the way of the blows. Let them sweat over it for you.” Eve wanted to hustle Xax along.

“You can’t waft these corrupted memories about like a feather later on & always expect to feel the same way as you did.” Snyder looked at her, ramming it home. “Do it again.”

Xax was sure she knew the true story. And wondered why Scarface thought she always had had to falsify it; break it up; open it up. It must stay the same. Now she had it off-by-heart. And that's how she wanted to keep it. So why did she gut the feeling out of the experiences? She claimed she had agreed to pull Schneider because she saw the possibility of love.

“Fun.”

“Love.”

[On this convincing note Scarface decide he must continue to eavesdrop. It had been set up. She was paid to entice him. She couldn't arouse him.]

“She felt desire. The miracle came after.” Darling laid it out.

“After what?” Snyder gave Eve a second wide grin. “But I agree it would have taken a miracle.”

“That's not true. Yes, they did promise a reward if I performed with him correctly . . . got it right.” Xax looked away.

“They? I heard you were approached by one person only.” Snyder snuffled after the facts.

“And he didn't lose interest?” Darling checked the line of her skirt stroking her thigh.

“Not that I noticed.” Xax closed her eyes.

[It can be useful to wait before re-touching a picture until it has thoroughly dried; then when the liquidity & spontaneity has hardened into a firm surface you can attempt to infuse it with a non-functional life again & again. Schlumper's fingers curled into a fist under his chin as he grimaced over the text.]

“A glimpse of his side of the subterfuge might have been useful. Did we get one?”

Snyder wondered, eyeing the length of Darling’s legs exposed by her split skirt.

“With that head on his shoulders we were lucky to get a grunt.” Darling flicked the slit in her skirt shut. “The pig.”

* * *

The other side, with the herons shrieking louder than the wind, had a woman seated somewhat clumsily on a high-backed chair guarding the way in. Her hips were narrow. I leaned round the open door jamb & took care not to smile as she glanced towards me for I had been warned it might offend her. Strangled by the past the future weaves about in a sickening way & its resulting shape is a failure.

“I will have to search the bag.” And she took it off my shoulder. The guard placed a small tissue in the detector plate of the hand scanner & swept it round the inside of the bag; removing the tissue she put it in a machine to check for traces of explosives.

“You are clean.” She said in a disappointed tone.

I slipped through armed to the teeth.

* * *

“He let himself be carried away without a second thought? Never.”

“I blame her.”

“Don’t gloat over their misfortunate meeting.”

The shadows were wobbling like skeletons on stilts poorly paid to frequent a locality they would normally avoid. You glance back. This occasion of fantasy calls for help, reinforcing itself by that gesture, by a supporting warming quick check to see if it’s like it

was; it should be; it could be. Yes. All is in place. Two hearts pitter-pat again. We can go on. But not in the same way. Nor on it. Now there is neither one thing nor the other. They have both been carried off.

“Eve read this & thought you were waiting to meet someone?” Darling couldn’t believe her own question. And hesitated before completing it to look inquiringly at him. Snyder nodded encouragingly at her question. “Was she that unformed? Still? Then?” Darling ran out of questions.

Snyder considered a while & added almost under his breath. “We are left with the wrong time to play with. Out of joint with where we have been.” He looked squarely at them. They brazened this out with their own tough stares.

“This will call for something special.” His eyes challenged them, mockingly. He shaded them with his hand.

“Mobility.” Darling hollowed out a shape with her hands as if trying to conjure up some inert matter to work on, to sculpt a possibility. “Flexibility.” She transformed the space with a dashing cartwheel finishing arms akimbo, pleased with herself.

“You’re talking as if there was nothing left to play with but dancing shadows. There was.” Eve nudged Darling’s arms out of her way. “And it was a mess.” She started to unroll a large scroll that she had guarded by her side; it was covered in what looked like a finely woven carpet design. “A big bloody mess. This is a rough diagram of how I think it all finished up.” They huddled over it eager to see if their own plan had worked out, tracing across the spaces with their fingers. For all the world unaware of each others breathing as they concentrated.

“We finish up cornered?” Darling made it sound like a squandered chance not the dire situation the others saw in an instant.

“If we are alive.” Eve said dryly, watching Snyder’s finger worming towards a red splash. He alone refused to take in the overall (& obvious) message, concerned only with his own fate. “So when I was here.” Snyder jabbed a finger down & peered wonderingly at the little woven picture. “The triangular piece of shrapnel was here.” And he studied this place’s picture even more intently than the other one.

“Right where we were fooling about.” Darling’s gaff astonished Eve. Snyder wished Darling had kept her big mouth shut & squeezed his eyes tight shut. “Let me get this clear. This is the last position. Right?” The rest nodded. “So we could, I’m not saying we are, but we could be in that position now. Right?” They nodded. Eve started to say, “But we are not playing . . .” Snyder waved her quiet. “These two pictures tell something entirely different from what you have said happened.” They looked concerned. “Is it still happening?” Eve wrinkled her nose. “I tried to say we weren’t playing for keeps. The story is much the same no matter how you tell it.” Her voice sounded as though it had been kept in a pocket for a long time.

“Not from what I can see here.” Snyder countered, pointing carefully. “Look. Who is that?”

“Not me.” They all said.

“I’ve never seen her.”

“Her?” They all asked unable to contain their surprise.

“Yes. Her.” Snyder insisted.

“But Snyder.” Darling said quietly. “Surely you can remember her. She was paid to make herself unforgettable to you.” Her unusual gentleness affected Snyder.

“Paid?” Snyder’s mouth twisted ugly around the word. “Paid.” He repeated. “For what?”

And as he placed a finger on the spot to act as a sight for his quick glances at a naked body, added vehemently. “Not by me.” Darling thought it was obvious what had been paid for & who paid. “It was a triangular relationship.” Eve said pointedly & paused to fix Snyder who looked glum & showed he didn’t want to hear. “That’s what it could be called although there was a bias away from you. You only knew about a third of what happened. If that. Even if you think you got to see the lot. You didn’t. You were fooled.”

Darling giggled unable to suppress her embarrassment at Eve’s rude approach. “You never found out. Believe me.”

“Shut up Darling. Look at your line.” Eve tapped the plan drawing Darling’s eyes to an isolated figure. “Is that you in the boo or isn’t it?” It was at this point that they all became aware of how close they were packed together.

“Excuse me.” Said Venus, pulling Snyder’s right hand out of her handbag while taking care to prise open his clenched fist & claim back her lipstick before opening the bag wide to check its contents.

[You now have a choice Schlumper was alleged to have said. We can look at the contents of Venus’s handbag in detail or get on with what happened].

“And excuse me.” Said Darling, pulling Snyder’s left hand out of her pocket. “Do you mind.”

But Snyder wasn’t intent on taking anything he had left each woman a note.

*

*

*

Well you can see how it was. In that world you only had to shake your head to see a rabbit.

“And they did?”

“What?”

“Read the notes. Fall for it.”

“What? Do you think I’m going into that detail now? Forget it.”

“The notes contained no specific requests?” Scarface wondered at the sense of that omission.

[They had gone].

It was a burnout. In the interplay of the sheets of flame Eve was reminded of certain cubist pictures.

There was thistledown in a keyhole.

Nobody had been through that door in years.

They pushed out of the doorway. Eve grimaced as she stepped over a worm coiled like a discarded condom, waving the others to follow her, up the slope. The wind pressed her clothes against her body outlining her tiny waist in the flurries of sleet & showing her nipples raised by the cold.

It was a conflagration.

The others plodded on behind her (like thoughts from a drunken man). Complaining about this wild goose chase with savage dogs snapping at their heels. Was she sure the studio had been abandoned?

There was an atrocious disorder. Some women were flying kites. The blackened fields looked as if they had been scrawled on by a child with a green crayon & then had been peppered by a giant tossing boulders; a tree defying the rocks was loaded with leaves devouring the light above them. The populace came in droves to picnic on a sandy plain beside the river, disembarking into the shallows. 'This was another way to get started.' Eve thought. 'With a game engineered into utter chaos by hundreds of contentious rules. As soon as they earn a few pence they're off to play.' She tossed the pig's bladder in the air & turned her back on the crowd. She barely registered the roar of approval. Nearby a grey-haired man sat on a square of cheap cloth spread out for his pitch under a broly. He had a live hedgehog in a rusty birdcage; three or four hedgehog pelts in an earthen bowl; a thin blue box with 'Sidney dock' stencilled in white on its side & a duck-billed platypus skeleton. A few tattered books were balanced on glass jars at the four corners of the cloth & there were more small jars containing potions just behind the huge snake skin (python?) at the front of his display. Nothing appeared to be for sale except the printed slips of paper he handed out as answers for a few pence.

Eve gathered a bundle of rushes & swept a patch clear. With her companion she traced an oblong pitch onto the damp sand; squares in the form of a cross which they numbered from one to seven. On the right-hand side she scratched 'Rainbow' & on the other 'Waterfall' with a twig. The earth below & the sky above was also marked in. Having set themselves up the two women sauntered over to check out the old man's display.

“What’s the best larb you’ve got?” Darling enquired in as neutral a voice as she could command. “I’ve got a bit of a fuzzy head & need to smoke a good mixture.” He reached for a jar. “And I don’t want that stuff it looks like piss.”

“Gives you rum dreams cheap. And it’s easy to swallow.” He said. “So it’s good for the head.”

Darling shrugged. He put the jar down. And tapped it with an iron rod.

Eve said. “But difficult to smoke. What’s in that bag?” The man tossed her a packet. She felt the rebuff but its familiarity made it difficult both to assign the pain a specific cause or to take the reprimand intended seriously. Eve speculatively fingered the object before she smelled its contents.

“It’s kinnikinnik if you want to know. Not a bad blend. Sends you off to Mahiman. So they tell me.” The man said, looking over the specs perched on his nose checking something.

“Right.” Darling said dreamily. “As far as that.”

“Further; if you can stand the struggle.” The old man replied enigmatically, taking a meticulous draw on an untidy fag rolled in newspaper. The blue smoke bit the girl’s noses, making them flap their hands.

What did it smell like?

Smoky goodwill.

What did it taste like?

Mis-shapen.

He lazily shook a finger at the crowd.

“These people spend most of the sunny times playing & the rainy time sleeping, so they never get an idea . . . that comes from the graft in between.” His eyes twinkled delighting in his condemnation.

“With that?” Eve wrinkled her nose & touched her throat. He sucked more smoke & offered the brand to Darling.

“If you can’t drink, eat.”

“It might clear my head.” Darling excused herself as she sucked a lungfull through her fist. And immediately clutched Eve’s shoulder as she passed it sideways.

“Here. Quick. Clear your head.” She said hoarsely & fell over. ‘Oh the fool.’ Eve thought, she certainly wasn’t going to lift a finger to help. Eve took a long drag, closed her eyes in either pain or ecstasy & groaned as she tumbled down beside Darling.

“Long way to go.” Said the old man laconically as he threw a blanket over the prone figures.

It’s a full moon she said no it is not she said oh yes it is she said

It has its face on and sperm tastes bitter didn’t you know

Dark lips full of blood as she spoke.

What did she want over the iced

moonlit bridge spanning a smashed

black glass sea seeing cobwebs

from where she stood

by a still cypress

raveled around by nightingales.

With her first footstep into a foreign garden

Will your friend crumble to dust?

Eve & Darling arrived with only such pieces of dress as they could snatch in a single instant. That left Eve completely naked except for her snake-skin boots which she obviously slept in & Darling holding herself protectively between the thighs.

“What was in that cigar? My cunt is burning.”

“My cunt is raw.” Eve said grabbing Darling’s arms, pulling her hands away & pushing her fingers into Darling’s vagina to feel for herself.

“Hot.” She sucked her fingers.

“What did it taste like?” Darling asked & watched Eve’s expression closely.

“Bitter but better than that smoke. That hedgehog man had us both for free. Which brings me to the question. Where are we?”

Where they had pitched up or landed or dropped they couldn’t say (it depended on the sort of trip). It was important & yet they couldn’t tell. But they weren’t dismayed; they never were told where they would be from one pass to the next. But Eve did suppress a slight worry that it might be Healer Bend with all the madness & mercury that would have entailed.

“We could walk out.”

“Which way?”

As usual. It was as bare as a bone.

At least it was a beach & not a terrible mess. Sea & spume & the sky yawning above. Straight away in the distance on the strand a person appeared carrying a box. Immediately a strong wind got up. Swaying from side to side the figure hung on to the burden, a coat flapping like a broken wing trailing behind the stranger heading purposelessly, but directly, towards the two women. The tide turned & breakers began to roll up the sand with considerable force.

Darling looked around. “He’s setting this place up, getting melodramatic atmospherics going while we stand here like . . . well . . . stuffed (sic) dummies freezing. Who is that?” “I never could understand his obsession with effects of the weather.”

They sat down with their backs to the gale shielding their eyes against the glare & the reddish plumes of sand whirling past their thighs & waited for their guide.

Watching the dwindling, featureless space between them as avidly as they would a new release.

“Shouldn’t we retreat?” Darling asked thus indicating their nakedness obliquely not wanting to seem the prudish one.

“Yes. Into the sand.” Eve agreed; so they spooned discrete mounds over themselves. And found the damp sand deliciously cooling & soothing & such a relief to their aching parts. He came upon them in the midst of these stirrings & in reply to their quizzical looks which he took as an unspoken question said, “Yes it is not allowed & I’ve stopped saying it.” As if they had asked for a description of it, this illicit thing.

On hearing the madness of this Darling wished she had kept her eyes down & now smoothed the sand flat to obliterate the outline of the mound of her pudenda. But made it more obvious as the sand trickled between her thighs.

Eve leaning back on her palms, with stiff arms thrusting her breasts up, challenged this newcomer with a long stare. But saying nothing.

“Sorry Darling, I didn’t see you buried there you’re the same colour as the sand & from a distance, you understand, you blend . . . nicely . . . I didn’t see her.” He smiled charmingly. “That’s why I was sent.”

Darling, with her brow still lowered snapped. “You’ve heard of rarefaction, Eve, well this is his brother . . . come to the rescue attracted by your flesh . . . & bones. I can smell him from here.”

“Sent? Have we been here before, Darling?” Eve asked & before the man could fathom a reply “ **Hold your horses.** Sand. One man. Got it. We haven’t gone anywhere.”

“Not with my fanny as hot as this. And cheated.” Darling retorted glaring up at him daring a response.

“Sent.” Eve toyed with the word indicating that it needed a few companions.

“Sent back.”

“Back.” They uttered simultaneously & groaned under the weight of the same thought.

“You didn’t meet someone, did you? Yes.” The two beautiful women answered their own question automatically as the man squatted on his haunches bending his back to shelter from the blowing sand.

“And he said, ‘Try this’?”

“No. He said, ‘Fuck off & try her’.” Pointing at Eve. “I suppose it was you.” He addressed Eve. “I couldn’t see your friend but whose to say perhaps he could.”

“Take your pick, take your time, don’t bother about us.” Darling stood up out of the sand shaking it over him. Her slit sparkled with a dusting of damp sand grains.

“Try her! Oh right. What? Out? On?” Eve jumped up beside Darling showering him with more sand. She brushed her pubic hair.

“I bet he was paid to say what he didn’t think. Rather like you.” Darling pointed jabbing a finger very close to the man’s face. “Only this one sounds muddled up as if he’s been paid to forget a few important words. Like where he was & where we are now.”

Eve cut her short by a gesture, wanting to fix what his sudden appearance was about, if he could guide them to the next place & whether their meeting was as innocent as he seemed to be playing it. “Back.” She said & again left him a space to be filled by his resourcefulness. The warm sand stung their skin. By his look they could see he was trying to wrench a coherent answer out of the past like a beggar feverishly searching an empty bag. But it was clear he didn’t have a clue how to put it. Or unfold a lie from the words spinning around in his head. The massive driving wheels were grinding on the rails because of the sand scattered to give them an initial grip. Squealing, with sparks flying the engine slowly moved. As a piston clanged steam spewed a grey cloud over the platform.

“I appeared out of the steam.” He said wishfully. “As the night was coming on.”

You may have but as far as we were told you didn’t & a woman did. But we are not going that far back to fill in corrections. Nearer. Park your carcass.

They huddled together conspiratorially pulling his coat around them. Perhaps the clue was in the box which had been forgotten.

“I was asked to bring your things.” He whispered. And it was then the two young women noticed how skeletal he was.

A bag of bones love lost like a skull.

Though not equipped to respond erotically

Acrobat bones

And enter.

And still no answer?

I could be gagged by those maddening kisses.

“I don’t want to find out what you have dragged along.” Said Eve abruptly flinging off the coat & stepping back.

“Nor me.” Darling agreed. “We’ll give it a miss.” She spun around to join Eve saying quietly. “I gather we are expendable.”

* * *

The wind dropped. The air was clear. The grizzled old man was shaking & flapping sand off his layout with a pungent curl of smoke drifting up from his draw.

“Nice trip?” He wondered pleasantly at the two scowling women & cracked into a broad grin, the butt stuck on his lower lip.

“We didn’t get there & you know it. What were you up to?”

“Went places myself. Good company.”

“Yes. She was called Fanny by the feel of it.” Darling snarled.

“You should have took the medicine.” The old man reached over for the bottle. “Breath of the God’s. That’s free. And hire a boat.” He pointed to the broad green river. A dolphin cut the surface. In the reeds there was a row of craft with bamboo superstructures covered by cloth.

Eve & Darling nodded. “That feels right.”

“Feel right or not you must go before the wind gets up again. I might get blown away.”

He pushed the bottle at them. Darling snatched it ungraciously slipping it into her bag without a word. Even corked it gave off a rank odour.

“You’re plan was a good one.” He gestured at the blank sand. Their pitch had been obliterated. “Gently – gently. Go when you have thawed out.”

Although the old man wouldn’t have spelled it out he was used to someone hiding their vulnerability with rudeness, so his voice carried the hint of gentleness to sooth Darling’s monster, as he wished them well.

“What if we turn up on that shore & again meet that youth?”

“You won’t. The damage can’t be done twice; not knowingly & coldly. You will be on the river. It is impossible to imitate . . . that place . . . there.”

Eve felt a chill & making a farewell sign to the man that also prompted Darling they flitted away into the reeds.

* * *

So you were shafted?

I told you.

He wants to hear the juicy detail all again.

GETTING GOING.

“That’s the way we’ll start,” She whispered in the low husky voice kept exclusively for these occasions. “With our eyes levelled into this penumbra in the place where voluptuousness is squeezed into action.”

“You were on the bed at it behind the screen in a velvet darkness.” He agreed. She crossed out ‘velvet’ for him. “Doing your job.”

“I was sent to haunt you.” She laughed. “To help out.” They rolled together into a warm embrace.

* * *

So you can guess why we missed more than we saw while getting ready to go but as nobody wanted to look after our dog we lay awkwardly on the bed in an uncomfortable altogetherness pondering how to off load the animal kindly. Oblivious that we were lacking the guts necessary for this proposed visit to Hell & not only that.

We were at the Echooy of our dreams just short of the Yoni when one child piped up, cheerfully, that the hammer was a bird but it still wouldn’t peck the dog. The other child held a small crumpled plastic bottle to the side of his head & spoke into it, nodding at the replies.

“Is that the portrait drawn similar to a mekon?”

There was a real ringing. “You’ve got it?” Eve nodded she’d got it.

“A woman?” She repeated with undisguisable astonishment.

“A Honeymoon! When was that?” Eve repeated for Darling’s benefit who had crept close to listen in.

“On it?” She stared out of the void & into it.

“Alone?” Eve said, perplexed as she covered the receiver & turned to darling. “On that convincing note”. She replaced the handpiece.

* * *

The other side of a wall our neighbour, Mr. Cutter, sighed like a north wind rushing through a wood but we couldn’t ask him to take the dog because when out shopping one day he had thrust a cucumber into a plastic bag & hadn’t noticed it had shot straight out & was dangling through the side. Anyway he was so trustworthy he’d been left behind to look after the wounded. And in this story there are going to be plenty.

While the wind got up ripping out trees by the roots, we were still lumbered, because it only took the chimney pot & unfortunately not our dog that lay under the bed noisily grooming the tufts of hair in between its paws.

So as a diversion, Eve carefully picked up an empty yellow & black & grey sparkplug packet out of the dusty fig leaves & stuck it, while naked, with wet clay as the cover over a new raw saw cut. An ornament to set it off nicely just to please him.

That started a real blaze. “When you finish an almost perfect job for someone & that someone alters something without a bye-your-leave what are supposed to do?”

“I thought it might help.”

“What?”

“Might be more tempting.”

“What?”

“Not so much like a meat counter.”

“I give up.”

“Why?”

“It took a lot of thinking to devise that slit.”

“It looks like a wound.”

“And shows you’re made out of flesh not clay.”

As he added, “Right.” Eve glanced across at Darling giving her a sufficiently clear sign that she wished her to make a contribution. But the unexpressed call for help wasn’t taken up by Darling, extraordinary as she was usually keen on embellishment but it seems kept quiet because she was aware of other things:

At that same moment, in the main workshop, as I opened the door, the first of the plastic masks pegged out high on a line across a corner dropped off their string --- it was Frankenstein (I couldn’t believe he was so damaged either even though it was a trial run). I examined the mask while the other boy carefully placed a blue plastic disc marked with a 2 on his sandwich & took a bite.

The next morning Tiger woman’s mask fell; again just as I entered the space & stood in the doorway. And the next morning a Bear mask fell.

I was prepared for it in a way. I had heard Eve say that in the cosmos there were terrible numbers to juggle & anyone could drop one. But this was retaliation for sloppy adding up on a hitherto unknown scale.

“So with a week & a day left there are only the masks of Rabbit & Moron to drop off the line to complete an entirely improbable episode?” She asked, not eagerly but vividly, with a smile. “Then we can go?” She raised both index fingers pointing them in opposite directions.

“You think this ritual didn’t happen, don’t you? That it’s a figment of my disordered mind. That perhaps it did but not in such an ordered sequence given to the events by my imagination. Well this did take place & exactly as I described. I opened the workshop door & hesitated slightly the way I always did to get my bearings in that world; & each time I opened it a mask fell & they fell in the order from left to right in which they were pegged on the line. Some things simply cannot be borrowed or deduced but are finely chiselled & carefully shaped by simply happening. Obviously the string from wall to door was one of Hell’s gates.”

As slight as that? I could only believe it was so flimsy when I realized later there was really no gate at all to speak of.

“O.K. But there is the dog.”

And in an exercise of unapproachability I saw that:

The clueless man over the fence (Moron who we called Mr. ½ past 2) had thrust his mighty rusty tool right down in the earth & was sawing away. From the word go (that’s line 9 page 1) it has been so & so not exactly drivel but . . . just look at him sawing away. So, more or less on a whim, I took the boundary fence down carefully that night, crawled through & pared a bark ring off his sycamore tree to kill it, painted the sappy white scar brown & then put the fence back up. I stepped over the flat black rain beetle on the house

step (carefully). Next day it rained. An iridescent ring of white glowed in the grey air.

Again Moron sawed the earth his head bobbing oblivious to the tree's wound inches away from his eyes. His baggy brown check suit jacket folded neatly balanced on a spade. His baggy pants flapped.

Moron mask dropped.

A note came stuffed through the door complaining about the yammering of the two dogs.

And I shouted in a voice crackling with rage, "Damnation it's out."

"Two dogs!" She asked slyly. "So." She said slowly. "Difficult to place, like two of anything. I can see you're soon batting on shit with a nuclear family if you want to cut the anchor & run."

Before I could reply &

With one day to go a child cut three holes in that green wall with a mouthorgan & a key. Shrewdly, on the last day when it rained & rained she creamed all the hairs off her pussy & baked a cake. That gave me plenty to keep an eye on.

She appeared to be as bare as a skinned rabbit.

Rabbit mask dropped.

"There you are another one bites the dust." Said Eve, as if this fall had not been on time & expected, "Now there are endings lying about all over the place. That's a good one."

She selected a sheet without a word on it, only an intricate geometrical pattern. "There are so many they keep on getting mistaken for beginnings & unfortunately picked up, put on & started off again. We are knee-deep in them." Eve smiled & held the design in front of her. She was enjoying showing off her naked pudenda.

I flashed her a card. She shook her head. “No. This is a ‘one-off’”. And giggled.

I blew a kiss.

“That’s no good. Use the beginning we agreed on.” And she blew on the candle flame.

“So far has it all been true?” Darling asked. “How can it be when it seems as if some feverish activity to square it all up has taken place behind my back?” Truth is an equilibrium which persists as long as is necessary.

“Yes.” This is true.

“I could tell.” Said Darling emphatically & remained quite still staring at them both.

Holding the photograph close to her face. They didn’t see; but she kissed it.

“Except the care.” Eve added dismissively. “You could tell that wasn’t there.”

[Here are a couple of notes so you can catch up while Darling, fascinated by something, keeps the photo flattened against her breasts.]

1. Very often, quite often, usually, more often than not you have to borrow something to get started.

A tool.

A utensil.

An idea.

A word.

Eve glanced at the list. “Can you borrow a word? I thought you’re allowed temporary use of it.”

“If you hang on to any word too long you’re deemed mad. Past hope. And locked away with it.” Snyder spoke from experience. They felt his passion.

“I doubt that.” Said Darling hesitantly. “Are you sure we must return each one?”

“You have to guarantee its prompt return.”

“We’ll come back to this later. I note that he said ‘natural objects approximate to generalized cones.’ I assume he wasn’t really fascinated by the female shape.” Said Eve screwing up the list.

“Or dogs for that matter.” Said Darling disdainfully.

“And you believed it can’t be true because it doesn’t make sense . . . to you?” Snyder was getting agitated. “It really happened.”

“It did not make sense to me. I spent most of my time fighting that downward drift.” Eve retorted. She had had enough of Snyder claiming to know all the ground beneath her feet.

“You didn’t get the joke, did you? Darling.” Snyder shouted. “Hell’s gate is as fragile as a piece of string. Haven’t you watched someone die? They are through without disturbing the cobwebs.”

Eve puffed out her cheeks & said. “That’s because it was hard work ignoring it.”

“Is there a plot left vacant? To squeeze a few things into.” Scarface wondered hopefully.

“I imagine so. Use your eyes. Look.” Said Venus. “As a utensil a sieve might be useful.

You could put the idea through it. If one arrived on time.”

“Quite often, to get started on something, I imagine you have to borrow.” Snyder had never imagined anything of the sort.

“A sieve?” Scarface felt he was being taken for a ride.

“When you shake the words in that sieve what gets through?” Darling wondered. “And anyway don’t we know all that stuff? What’s left in the dross is what I want to know.”

“You’re reading it.”

“Say you had been approached & offered a fancy bribe for the details of a very private event in which you had acted badly & worse you knew you were doing wrong.”

“Like stealing someone’s heart do you mean?” Eve asked.

“Sell.” Said Darling. “And deny it.”

Eve sucked the dregs of her drink very noisily up a straw. “A payment to get to know yourself. Although you are constantly denying it.” She sucked. “Afterwards. Forever.” She sucked. “Allowed to be yourself, but pretty much as an object when you think about it.”

“And denying that.” Darling said. “She’d be crazy to go along with it.”

It is a precarious existence borrowing everything from a man’s world. (This sentence is marked for deletion & so no one will claim it).

“A ‘one-off.’ That’s their world.”

“I imagine it is.” Eve sucked. “But I would.”

“What?”

“Sell.” Eve spat.

[Do we, I & he, together borrow the world from our body? (ref. P of P. p.254) Scarface tried to puzzle it out. If so she’s safe.]

“As always with you, Scarface, everyone lumped in together? Can’t you keep that highbrow shit out of it? Haven’t you got rid of it yet? Hadn’t that been agreed?” Eve snapped.

“How would you describe it then?”

“She’s more likely to evade describing it but give it away reacting like that.” Venus looked coldly around the group.

“Then why is perception ‘deceptive’?”

“I haven’t got an inkling.”

“To enable us to live in the world.” Darling held Venus’s look, implying she had the advantage. “Because we borrow it? You’ll be telling me next you’ve never done anything but pretend.” And as she said this Darling wasn’t being vindictive.

“Yes. Darling.”

* * *

“How do we get them from the table to the bed?” He was right, it was a puzzle. She could clearly remember groping & horsing about over the meal but then there was a blank. No, there had been a telephone persistently ringing being left unanswered because he was fondling her tits. That didn’t move much. Why am I stopping myself from telling? Does this experience of a negative tooming unable to reconcile betrayal & lust hollow into my memory where the hard-wired spiral spine of fact is eluded & a sweeter fantasy breezes through, waving farewell to a stuffy time.

“Flying in blue.” Snyder gazed at the wraiths of smoke under the ceiling. “Behind the waterfall.”

You could guarantee an esoteric but totally useless clue from him. He works with mutilated fragments. Like the rest of his sex.

“Bound. Yet flying?” Snyder said with a faraway smile. “Through the hypnotic effect of the illuminated grey curtain of falling water drops.”

See. There's another useless clue. (Just like the rough patches of print that appear from nowhere).

* * *

"You know when you think it's the end & there couldn't possibly be a sequel. Or part two. When someone has been given the last cutting word." Eve wound a strand of hair round a finger.

"On the doorstep?" Darling was being rigorous. "Or where?"

"Everything blown up. Bombed." Eve stacked the heap up. "And worse."

"? Jellied?" They both fixed Snyder with malevolent glares.

"Well they come up with an escape. A let out. And the main protagonists . . ."

"? Oh. So there can be a sequel."

". . . lead players appear again younger."

"Bit thinner?" Darling was ever hopeful. "You could keep going further back."

"Yes. Well I've just thought of how to get past that last ending."

"No. You can't do that. They had had enough by page page . . ."

"You never read it!"

"I've been listening to you."

"And I have to listen to you."

"From above?" Darling wrinkled her brow.

"I am up there." Eve pointed.

"So you must lie on the carpet with an ear to the floor." Darling's crooked grin of disbelief asked for an explanation.

[Clue. When the 7th veil was removed & nothing showed there was a lot of shuffling feet. And you wanted your money back. What happened Scarface? Nothing. Scarface snapped back]

“Yes. Betrayed by my own need to fabricate an impossible love which inevitably becomes threadbare & disintegrates. The usual one. I have to try to overhear an authentic one to get up to speed with the twists & turns . . .”

“Don’t try to wrap it up you listen to them fucking.” Darling grinned.

“I listen to what goes on before & after as well.” Eve protested. “If I’m going to be able to get on with it just as they do I can’t afford to fumble as then it will be made impossible . . . beyond my real need. So I weave from a stable of stock answers a way I hope to thrill him along those certain lines.”

“By riffling through those notes you take would you really find an essential clue to follow unless it had been planted? No. And the symbolic link, the key to the castle of evil, had been rehearsed so many times, was so pat before you were allowed to listen in if you had really got it you should have heard everybody singing along.”

[What is the point of having the masks ripped off revealing the bestial nature of your opponents? Scarface wanted to know.]

“The ones on the inside?” Eve shuddered. “I never wanted to see them.”

“The ones who know. By doing it.” Darling said. “Even though you’re given a spell to recite very early on . . . does it transform the world . . . never.”

“But you enter every new door chanting it.” Eve insisted. “Or so it seems by the way you walk.”

Year by year by year

enduring sleepwalking

uphill deterioration & nightly lying like a log

back to back with a hedgehog

I sit shaking memory its luminous dust hits me hard.

+ + +

One day in our dark corridor

a shooting star fired the end of a key

about to enter the keyhole.

A sort of 5 crows awkward door

opened

& I left, curved a street corner

by uncertain perspective see that padded present

painted by tactile limbs on a hump of raw earth.

Even leaving a goose shade brushed my head & disappeared into an embroidered

purse

& I found a lost note –

Poet in your garden sing to stop your journey.

[And every answer initiated by a questionable question, suggested by the construction of that question & masked by the voice asking the question. Scarface.]

“You’ve lost me.” Said Darling.

“Don’t try to track the story too closely. You know, Darling, my memory is hazy about those days.”

“Yes.” Darling said sharply & the word dropped like a stone. Eve’s picture of the scene was crystal clear. She was naked & bored waiting for him.

He didn’t ask me to try on a few things, I found them lying under the bed & thought, well was tempted, to see if they would fit I’d heard so much about her figure & he caught me attempting to lace up the most gorgeous & silly piece of rubber.

“Is this a test?” The garment was at full stretch & wasn’t slipping over her hips the way she imagined it had done for its previous occupant. He squirted oil round the rim cutting into her fat, pushed a finger under it & slowly spun her round. The basque went on like a song.

She leaned against the green speckled white wall, head up, eyes open, flat back, vee legs. Her plump breasts resting on a roll of belly were offered to him by her look.

Soon you’ll want some more, I know.

He took hold of her boots by their heels & tugged. She slid wide open over the sheet, her head riding down the wall, eyes closed & when the boots came off her legs, bent at the knees, flopped over his shoulders.

After a lot of cynomorphic wrangling Eve had persuaded a very reluctant & sheepish Darling to help her with an intolerably difficult task. She wanted to tie Schneider down. Collar & corner the scum-bag. Bind him with an inextricable promise of good behavior, so that for the rest of their short time together, in the leaves, he would lay off the sickening charm & lose that wolfish grin. And make no more moves on her.

Darling, shifting uneasily on her seat, had looked askance at the proposal, pointing out the difficulty of beguiling Schneider with any bauble except you know what, after all like most of his sex he'd been genetically modified over thousands of years to act the way he did in the first place & extracting his word to come clean & lose that crooked smile & stick to it, wouldn't be an easy operation. Darling had paused & added after giving Eve a shrug, that she was not hopeful, not with his head wound & all as an excuse & no hostage to take to keep him honest. That she was trying to express in a nonchalant way that she had wishes as well & an amorous entrapment of Schneider wasn't one of them, went without saying.

But Eve had had enough; she was determined to pin him down. A slap-up invitation devised out of all the erotic numbers with their power to awaken a yearning for fantastical positions, thus impossible to refuse, was drawn & sent, hoping to provoke Schneider into a mistake. They were pretty sure he wasn't going to miss a chance to get a shot at the impossible as he was always hanging around the pitfall hoping for **it** to go snap. Waiting for the whenever if ever possible to turn up had left him with his tongue hanging out. And never was taking a long time coming for Schneider so an alternative titillating bait might, just might . . . hook him.

Again at Hell's gate I started to dig a garden

She passed

A toy figure of the Good Shepherd & lamb stuck on the bike's front mudguard.

Then I found a piece of chocolate egg buried by a fox in my bed of Stars of

Bethlehem

**And like a sick woman seemingly compelled to scribble flower drawings until she
died**

I continue to put up with myself.

When I touched my leg to show where his stitches had been

He pulled out a packet of Haricot beans.

Better just stick to 'Hello'.

+ + +

She wrote 'which killed me,' but meant her father.

A memory – thin black tissue paper –

Once more walking backwards in snow

A numberless child playing by candlelight

She passes

Leaving us stranded outside that charred world.

+ + +

Needing to procure a binding oath with the maximum amount of backlash available Eve & Darling knew it was necessary to create perfect conditions for blackmail.

Consequently, they ransacked the bookshelves together searching for the right story to follow.

“How about one on Caspar Schwenkfeld? That name should convince Schneider we mean business.” Darling pulled & pulled. “Stuck.”

“Good sign. Leave it.”

“Shouldn’t I prise it out? It has to be a scripture or something like Horbiger’s ‘Cosmic Ice Theory’.”

“Utter rot!”

“Heavy.”

“We need one he can’t scoff about. Ah! Look at this cover.”

“Wow! A picture book. Who is that?”

Eve could barely suppress her glee. “What luck! This is an incredible find. He will never suspect until too late.” She opened the covers & leafed through to show Darling. It read like gibberish to them but they considered every illustration & diagram with growing interest & lingering enjoyment. “I haven’t come across anybody capable of doing that.” Darling held onto the page transfixed by the intricacies of the woman’s position. “She was . . . very good. Very.” And Darling wondered if she could become an adept, solitary, & strive for that ultimately releasing position.

“This is the very leverage we need. Just watch him squirm. He’s as good as in the bag.”

Eve rubbed her hands like a child about to choose a treat.

“Did he know her that well?”

“He claims to have had a friendship with her.”

“Friendship.” Darling licked the word over her lips. “Or trauma?”

[The book by Van C. Ver was an encroachment by contortion on the art of love by a looser member of the gentle sex. Scarface’s note].

Eve dropped the sex manual into her bag, winked & linked arms with Darling. They set up a ‘tryst’ with Schneider.

* * *

In an eerie gloom created by a string of fairy lights, in an unfamiliar room, they met.

Eve laid her bare hand on the book.

Accordingly, Darling placed her fingers with their vermilion tips on that part of the book still uncovered.

And Schneider obligingly raised his right hand as he transfixed the remaining spare corner of this book with the point of the hook on its stump of a left arm.

Eve’s palm had casually deliberately covered most of the picture.

“Will the left . . . hand . . . do?”

“Left hand?”

“Yes. Left hand.” Schneider exclaimed without allowing the question a second’s space or the slightest hint of doubt to furrow his brow only frowning at what he later called the unnecessary delay before the carnal delights were made available; he then caught Eve & Darling staring incredulously at his hook.

“I know when something, in this case a lost hand, is recast by a hook that certitudes can become incertitudes. But it will have to do.”

Darling buried her head in her hands to hide the grin.

“I can tell you are not going to swear anything solemn or binding with that . . . claw.

Where did you get it?” Said Eve. “Don’t bother. We aren’t going along with it. Especially as this pact has almost everything to do with how things are going to turn out for us two women.”

“And you’re not going to lay it on any part of me, either.” Darling shivered. “Take it back to the spare parts counter.”

“What difference does it make?” Schneider was terse, not defensive. “We can swear to stick to the same story together with anything, but we will only stay stuck together if we mean to.” He sniffed. “Stick.”

“It’s not part of you.”

“It is. How else could I hold a fork or undo buttons.”

“Can you?” Darling was intrigued. Eve shut her up. “I doubt whether he could.” She faced Schneider & frowned. “It’s not a true part of you. You could claim that later & play us false; declare you didn’t really mean it & suggest we must have known the true state of your heart. It must be easy to break a promise sworn on a hook.”

“Dead easy.” Echoed Darling.

“Don’t you consider that ring part of your hand?” Schneider pointed to the glittering jewels on Darling’s finger, it held out hope displayed on the book. But Eve wasn’t so easily duped. “You’re doing this to provoke us. There’s something else up your sleeve.”

Mockingly Schneider pulled up the least crumpled part of his derelict overcoat & showed a thin arm bare to the elbow. “See the ace? No. But that should be in the hole by now.”

The women grimaced.

“Hook or hand?” He tapped his skull & it rang significantly under the hook. “Or one in the head?”

Darling & Eve had heard his story of being wounded & where, many times & groaned to each other. “And one in the head. That’s all he had needed.”

Eve took their attention from his scar back to the book breaking into the lapse with a sudden clap. “But here we have got to have the authentic body part. Not a meat skewer.”

“Would it do the trick if I pulled a glove over it?” Schneider hooked up a pair of woollen mitts conveniently folded through his belt. “Or took it off.”

“Sorry. We know about the hook now.” They could see he meant to cheat them.

“What if you hadn’t seen it? Or it was covered in cotton wool.” He was still clumsily rearranging his sleeve at the wrist.

“We would have been careless. I know what you’re getting at.” And Eve looked absently at Darling’s breasts which were impossibly falsely pointed & Darling stared wistfully back at Eve’s laced waist. Schneider took this in, but would they keep their promise to him so tantalizingly wrapped up?

“Does it have to be a whole left hand & nothing else?” Schneider’s thoughts hopped back to the job at hand, he considered his right hand just as good as the left for it transmitted considerably more feeling. “Who is going to know?” His gesture embraced their little circle.

“It says so.” Eve waved the paper & shook her head turning to Darling. “We must count him out even if he gave the vow to us written in blood everybody is going to know.” But Darling, pointedly pretending to be squirming with embarrassment at the mention of her support & wishing she had left her fallacies in the drawer, was far from keeping her mind on the attempt to get Schneider to honestly join them in a pact of silence.

“Look. Why all this bother. We’ve clicked. You know that.” He raised both arms in an attempt to create an illusion of warmth. “Both of you. What else do we need to be true?” Schneider asked with a feigned brightness. The invitation had explicitly offered him a night of bliss (& the video) no holds barred & it was beginning to look as though the deal was slipping through his fingers because of his play with the hook.

“We never got on. How can you try & claim that & what for?” It couldn’t be said that Eve spluttered, because the words came over tightly compressed lips, but they were spat out. Darling pretended to tiptoe on the spot attempting to cool the situation. Schneider sat down heavily near the book. He idly picked it up, gave the women a baffled look. “This can’t be right. Look at the cover. She looks rough. How could anyone swear to be anything with that under their palm.” But Schneider was ruffled. For somehow the edge had gone off the offer & although the two women looked as though they could do the delights what they said they would do, it now seemed as though they had forgotten it, quietly. He straightened his cuff, pushing the book away.

“The choice was significant. Purposely made for you.” Eve tipped the book back towards his face. “The girl in yellow carries a pistol in her belt, not a knife as was previously

thought. Think about that Schneider. While your hands were busy elsewhere you missed the weapon.”

“How could he?” Darling blurted out, then studied the picture. “Oh. Of course. Cleverly positioned nowhere near an erogenous zone. Although.” And she tried the spot on herself. Schneider lowered his eyes & studied the cover. “Are you saying she posed for this? It looks as if she was taken unawares by some snooping bastard while she was defecating.” He affected to be concerned. “It was certainly taken by a flash.” Then caught sight of the date. “Or she was pasted in afterwards from a shot taken at dinner. She had been dead some time by that year.” For once, unusually, Schneider sounded right & his expression was sincere.

“Slipped in.” Darling glanced provocatively at Eve. “At dinner.”

“She was often dressed like that. More often than not.” Eve flicked her hand disdainfully, dismissing any doubt. “Dressed to kill.”

Schneider rubbed behind his ear reflectively & pursed his lips. “Whenever I saw her in that get up, & it wasn’t that often, she had a dagger in her corset for effect.”

“Or under the mattress.” Eve added.

“And it was razor sharp.” Schneider retorted.

“Not that time.” Eve’s finger isolated the gun’s muzzle under a magnifying glass & moved to the top of the butt lodged above the woman’s encrusted belt & spelled out ‘GESICHERT’. “Was it a 9mm slug, Schneider, that did you? Did they tell you?” She had recognized the weapon (Luger) from the safety catch.

“I never asked.” Schneider lied, for he carried the bullet as a talisman & never moved without it. Rising from his chair he imagined he had covered the lie successfully enough to brazen out a refusal. “So there is no need to carry on with this . . .” He pointed to the book & swallowed the word charade. “Formalization of a pact of silence. I’m in the shit for keeps anyway with you puritans hounding me.”

“A wanton hand.” Darling said solemnly. “And you were blind. If you hadn’t been so impatient & needy Schneider she wouldn’t have succeeded in bluffing you. She slipped through. So how far can we trust you?”

“She was fully ripe. How was I to know that perfection can be blemished.”

“Money.” Said Darling, her boot hardly ever missing the balls. “Nothing mysterious. She was paid. Nothing roundabout tainted your apple.”

“To kill him? No.” But Eve had wondered as she watched Schneider’s lips twitch.

“No.” Schneider agreed wistfully & smiled as if still under a spell like a smitten but sorry sweetheart. “There was more to her than that. She came to me. Don’t you see what that meant to me at the time?” His head was tilted to get both women in focus & the way he looked gave his words less feeling.

“Are you making out there was a twist in the story? I don’t think so!” Eve clearly rejected his act. When had Schneider cherished anything? Then Darling’s fingers lightly touched her arm as both of the women caught the moment & kept silent. Schneider almost babbled the rest to himself. “I didn’t like her but wanted peace so didn’t show it, ‘we can talk later’ I said, hoping to put it off completely. ‘You don’t think I’m going to suffer

love, do you?’ She replied snottily. I didn’t nod but she howled abuse at me for something she said I did. I didn’t.”

Darling interrupted. “That’s not like you Snyder. You always used to do it. Did she blow you out frequently?” Schneider shrugged. “I wasn’t paid to act like a freak.”

“No. She was.” Darling snapped.

“How far? Schneider, that’s what we need to know. So we can decide what to do next.”

There was a hint of sharp steel in Eve’s statement. She could tell that Darling had another agenda which she didn’t want them to follow. She did understand her need.

“We know she was paid to act with a freak.” Darling closed in. “So who were ‘they’?

These others.”

“Leave it alone, Darling.” Eve had to stop her blurting out the offer, if they were to have the slimmest chance of getting their way. “I don’t want to know. He was a plant.”

“Plank! You can say that again.” Darling agreed saucily swinging round in her chair.

Anything to avoid a sermon from Eve.

“You know what I said. Normally you could say ‘cross your heart’ to someone & that would do. But what could you get Schneider to cross?”

A surly Schneider moved towards her with his index finger raised, but Darling cut across his stride & closed the finger back into his hand. “She doesn’t need any suggestions, get back & wait.” Schneider shambled back to his seat, shamefaced, swaying as if balancing on some high scaffolding in a gale, & slumped into it. His language was always provocative but he was not a violent man in his quarreling; often the words carried no more than the frustration at the contempt he felt for himself.

“O.K. It wasn’t as if I wanted to dance.”

A bell rang.

Although a space between them seemed to rapidly close up because of this sound, they kept their distance. Schneider looked relieved, with an unknown visitor around he could drop his aggressive act & so sank lower in the chair & furtively picked up the book, quickly flicked the pages & soon became engrossed muttering denials while shaking his head, a reflex to silent accusations. With a pessimistic look he asked. “Are you using extra-sensory perception to see whose at the door? Or making an educated guess.”

“You’ll find out soon enough. Perhaps too soon.” Eve retorted ominously.

Schneider sprang up shaken. “Bad thing saying that. I felt a cold shiver down my spine.”

A door banged shut.

Banged up. “Are they in or out?”

“I don’t know, Schlumper, are you here to try again?”

Schneider appeared to have dozed off. A smell of turpentine permeated the room. “Who came with you?” Eve asked, casually looking over his shoulder blanking him.

“No one.” Was Schlumper’s terse reply into Eve’s ear but she could clearly see a strange black figure of a man hovering close behind the artist.

“She looks like thunder.” The stranger said, who seemed familiar, leaning towards Eve as he added brashly. “As you can see, Honey, I am skipping any introductory bargaining for a position by trying to quickly block in most of the picture so you get the overall feel.

Events may appear precipitate at first but you’ll get used to the pace, catch up & enjoy

the special twists enjoined by the speed, in time. If there is any exotic time left, that is,”

And he laughed seemingly merrily but his mouth had an ugly twist to it.

“ ‘Most of’ so you’re holding back? Hanging onto the important facts.”

“Has the other one gone for good?” Schneider asked the room hopefully.

He laughed even louder. “You wish.” And blinked. “Get back to your book.”

Schneider hung his head, embarrassed by the dark man’s spluttering & uneasy about his message.

‘What was the way to shake these two harridans off? Dare I ask him?’ Schneider wondered.

“Charm.” The stranger uttered into his crowded thoughts.

“That would make them think I was trying to seduce them again.”

“But surely if you are accomplished in that skill it can’t fail to work admirably.” Then cocked an eye at him & his face fell. “But as they say they have never travelled under that flag & would be an easy take for you.” He coughed & gave the world a sly look. “It would need something more than endurance.” A hopeful smile broke the face’s fall that followed the fit of laughter. “Do you find her repugnant?” He looked as if suddenly taken ill, the question giving in to a strange mood. “Sometimes the spark will not glow no matter how hard you blow.” The stranger pulled on his ear as if to save it from a bite & stood up. “Someone steer me to the next site.”

“Down the stair & out.” Eve advised & also pointed. “He can go alone.” And the hand that pointed held Schlumper back. “I want something from you.” She said in a lower tone. And he glanced down at her for he very rarely heard that tremor in her voice.

The past can also be a malevolent Jack'o Lantern with memories caked round its
arse ----shimmering in your eye ----- stinking to me.

A cunt purse wonderful miniature whale lip smiling

Slit yes Slit no

Wearing away mad attachments

Sand bagging itself

Until

Fire sounds seem to come crackling

out of the cupboard.

Above a broken poplar tree under a hawk

I walk a square of tar on a spoon

meet a strange woman on the shore.

She lives she dies

pretending she was never a friend

so I can bump into myself again - - - - -

And love

the disguises she comes in.

The monkey turned somersaults full circle along the roof terrace under a spreading tree, under a grey tinged violet sky filled with swallows, a myriad of them swarming around the three or four kites tugging at their string. An idiot in starched white marched a haphazard line up & down the terrace raised above the river in the smoky twilight to scare off the monkey. Peter Schlumper lingered at his table until the chill of a deepening dusk shifted him. He stood noiselessly. A rosy light hung over the still water with streaks of emerald cutting across from three unusually bright lamps. To the delight of a round faced woman leaning on a balcony the red full moon popped out of the sooty gloom & slowly flayed the river. Schlumper swiveled between the blood light & the gold flame to his right as he heard gasps of pleasure amongst the shadowy walls below by the river bank & wondered if the letter he had sent had set in motion the actions he only vaguely hoped for. Was this moon auspicious? Had the message even got there? One last hurdle, I hope, he said to himself, & I'm out of the wood. He had been buying womens' jewelry, although he didn't know any person to give it to, pieces he didn't need; perhaps the drive for this pointless action came from a desire to recapture some insatiable love he had lost years ago. And he was troubled again not by the mess he made of it all, he had known that at the time, but because he had stayed in it. Deep in the middle of that love he had hated part of himself for being there. For taking the cold-blooded insults.

"I stood there for years dazzled by the heat coming off that body. Blinded by a shape I never saw." He said to the back of a woman in the chair he held. "Entranced."

"By what?" She was terse. "Nonsense."

And he shook his head in disbelief at the times he had gone back on his resolve to flee. “I wanted to escape. But where to?” And with this he owned the weakness, it must have been a grave internal deficiency that made him stay put. What was it that gave sense to the constricted feelings he had of this life together? She had never demanded much, but lived a life fragmented into inexplicable episodes causing hurt & despair by her need to embellish, in it, the memory of a long decayed corpse with wonderful acts. He sighed again at the way he had devised excuses to avoid believing what he thought. Perhaps he had been transfixed by those acrobatic flights of fancy & so able to cloud over the bleak horizon. After the first erotic jubilation had deadened the pain of grief he had been sure the sky was always going to be blue. But soon there had been insidious conditions, narrowing impositions & a variety of ploys & excuses difficult to finger but negative, that had destroyed any attempt at establishing a momentum, so the affair had seized up; atrophied into the exchange of a few pleasant phrases. He had talked these pleasantries out of his head & back again countless times. They came round & round & round spinning in his mind like a mad dog.

“Clarity & artistry were absent.” Xax’s low voice immediately rang true. “You had to put them in abeyance. Then you stopped painting. You were frozen. Where was it going? Don’t answer. You always knew!” The round-faced woman who had clapped her hands at the red moon took his arm without a word & pulled it close to her body.

As they strode towards his room the top step dissolved & he stumbled against the terrace iron-work, banging his forehead & bruising a finger that took the full force of his fall.

She gasped.

As she helped him scramble to his feet Schlumper remembered hearing a voice from the past close to his ear. ‘You said many times, I can’t find the same place twice but I am rooted to the spot. You always asked aloud ‘What could have been?’ your cry was always, ‘What? What?’ Schlumper rubbed his head wondering why he had fallen. He had always been surefooted.

* * *

Eve listened intently. Scarface had returned briefly to visit her while passing through the city. “If you want to solve the puzzle. If there is one.” Scarface was never sure of much. “I would return to the view you gave of the table, as a set piece, the same place for each person. The repeated defensive chatter tossed about that smoothed over their anger. If I were you I’d examine all that. I hear you say again & again that you were driven to the conclusion that Angel was so eager to find him in error that she ceased to care what absurdities she spoke. Asking herself senseless questions to which any senseless answer could be appended, coupled with a belief that the ‘I’, no matter what was said to disprove it, was really Schneider. There was more to it than that.”

“Rigid designations from a rigid pathology.” Eve tried a suggestion & coughed discretely. “Rigid.” Scarface repeated but did not confirm. “When you don’t want to write a poem any words will do.” They stood up & shook hands. Scarface trod silently to the door & smiled back at Eve.

* * *

The morning’s sunlight’s yellow glare was laced by twigs in a rectangle between the pink wall & a tree stump which slowly faded as Schlumper leaned on the twisted iron rail of

the balcony. This morning air was sharper than he expected, cold enough for a frost. He saw Xax stagger in a heap of trash & finish up sitting on a zinc pail. Schlumper whistled to her & vowed at that moment he would solve her trangam (for what it was worth) & trash it. Angel moved beside him following his gaze. “Unable to shift until you do this task you stay & eat your heart out. Why?”

“It doesn’t seem worth saying.” Schlumper put an arm round her shoulder to comfort himself. She felt the need.

“Stop peddling the same tripe. You never believed it.” She kissed his ear.

“Did you slip?” Schlumper shouted, the triumph in his voice obvious at Xax’s discomfort.

“Unlike you to bother.” Xax exclaimed with too much vehemence.

“Inconceivable as it may be to someone as sweet & loveable as you are most of the time, I can come to loathe . . .” Angel had cupped Schlumper’s mouth.

“A fraud? I’ll say it.” Xax cried back waving her fists, taking a steep jump to land beside him. And at the same time as pushing Angel roughly out of the way embraced Schlumper passionately. Angel, who stumbled but hung onto the rail, cried out in anger.

A stumble serves the same purpose as a word. Sometimes it’s better to fall.

From the moment he had entered her room Scarface had been eager to be gone. Although he had willingly answered Eve’s call for help, it was a matter of habit. When Scarface had faced her, every attempt to say what he really thought tugged at his throat as if a disembodied gloved hand had deftly slipped his own needs over the clear explanation he wanted to express. And he complied with this suppression by methodically tapping the

fingers of meaning in place, then, guaranteed a sure fit for each comfortable fantasy even when the cold reality dawned, it gagged him & made him gag even as it crossed its fingers & held them up for a respite. For a truce that was inviolable. And in that unforced state regained for him the equilibrium of creative madness.

“You were invited along to serve as a nobody in temporary diversionary part, to cause trouble, & expected to get lost as soon as you had served that purpose. She found most of what you said incomprehensible. What you thought wove the fabric of love. She thought was fabrication. As it’s hidden somewhere between, when she started to unpick the weave love was the first thing she lost.” Eve shuddered at his words. They cut. Was it true? Had she fallen in with their devious love without knowing? Or without a qualm?

“No one is blameless.” Scarface seemed to read her thought but joined himself to her complicity. “Sometimes you just have to go along because you were going that way anyway. And why not make the ride more interesting?” He rubbed his knees as you might rub a magic bottle. Eve’s lips made slight pop as she opened them. “Did she know I loved him?”

“Did you.” Only Scarface could have cast these words in a neutral way & yet convey in them the force of her bewilderment. “Can you? There is still time.”

* * *

“Playing with her fat purse. That should do the trick.” Xax was hopeful on her own account that’s why she made the suggestion. This took Schlumper miles away. Fat purses with beadwork blossoms for sale crowded the shop window. Ah, he remembered the glassy haze of smog a few yards up the road crowded with frantic traffic & a road surface

that reflected the sunlight like razor blades. It also brought to his mind her sharp glassy stare with its rancour that told it all, she had decided there was no longer any profit in the relationship for her. “Good fun. Then the lies harden.” He murmured.

“You threw it away?” Xax was curious. She wanted to learn.

“There was nothing, absolutely nothing left.”

Behind a tree with many kites tangled in its spreading branches, Schlumper & Xax took refuge, sheltered from any prying eyes. He whispered as he slid his hand onto her cunt.

“Whenever anything delusive came our way we snatched at it; gobbled it up. Claimed blatant nonsense as clues. As if the stars could fall.”

“As if starved.” She whispered in his ear, turning onto her knees to straddle him.

“We gorged on it. Until the thread of sense became fugitive. Difficult began to mean right.” He rubbed her fat purse open gently.” She sank down.

* * *

After that perfect day when the line dried up in a circle we stop. The SQUARE pipedream happens along & we can forge ahead, blowing bubbles into any complication, but only in sleep.

“Why choose this dream with an awkward shape?”

“I didn’t. It is the one we happen to be in.”

“The only one with the door lock the skeleton key happens to fit.”

“The skeleton flits through the awkward lock.”

“Where was the key?”

“The key happens to be under the pillow on which the head is dreaming.”

“So to get in we have to wake up & when we wake up . . .”

“Can we all wake up at the same time?”

“When we wake up we will have forgotten?”

Melancholy, because the dream was comfortless like an empty cupboard & filled with echoing leaden noises & a shrill voice, Schneider exited from it as soon as the rumbling gunfire propelled him close enough to snatch at waking. He rubbed his neck. And just as he checked under the sand bag for the rifle he heard her voice coming from behind the screen & that finally tugged him out of sleep as he separated her insistent question out from the nagging chants of complaint ringing up from the dusty yard below the window.

“Where in all this mess, did he think, were the terrible numbers coming from?” Eve asked expectantly, staring down at the elongated shadow cast from Schneider’s seated form coming & going as the clouds raced across the sky intermittently covering the sun. Clacking clunking crunching doing their best to stupefy him & derail his best aspirations with a demand for pointless calculations of interminable length. Building up a backlog like the list of possible survivors still missing. Devoid of form yet booming relentlessly & provocatively creating an invisible bank of formlessness as permanent as an enemy concrete bunker. Entrenched, he shredded the newspaper in his fingers as he debated the choices & then let the tangled mess slip over his knees onto the polished floor.

“Right here.” Schneider tapped his bandaged head.

“Because of his claim that, by suppressing any desire he had possessed, with a worthless complexity such as a hail of bullets, **they** had willfully destroyed any hope of anything adding up, been culpable of stealing his individuality away & countless other things that

came to him as numbers; I have to ask, if **they** accepted this revelation, what reason had **they** to trust that he had proof the Gods knew the future?" Eve stared expectantly over the page at Schneider's fading silhouette on the white gauze screen.

"By observing what?" She prompted him.

"I saw that most of the smart ones had got out of the slit trench fast. Earlier. Before the bombardment. Before the light. **They** must have got wind of something but didn't tell us." Schneider rattled it out borrowing the emphasis, then grinned with a slack mouth.

"How did he know the ones left were more interested in real inclinations?" Eve cocked her head as she read the question.

"Pass." Said Schneider.

"You imply they were very often naked?" Darling imitated Eve's pose.

"Always. And very often dead." Schneider supplied the essential detail as always in a subdued voice.

"He was guessing." They whispered amongst themselves. "Bluffing."

"Were you there?" Eve's mouth snapped shut.

Fidgeting in a cold numbness impossible to warm up. Counting on nothing; nobody. Kept forever busy isolating the contentious bone from the rock bottom line he didn't have time to scratch about to waste away in this world of senselessness. "Do I pass?" Schneider wanted to know in his more characteristic harsh voice.

"It seems not."

Snyder realized it had been better in the pipedream.

"And went back." Darling gasped. "Taking us with him."

Why had he been so passive? Because he had gone through that horrible wounding scene step by step many times & felt it was inevitable that he would be hurt.

With books in better boxes than mad people can find

To live in

Upside down

From wild wood comes a clown

Passing a fox eating plums

As a snake collects a bed of oats

Under a line of tiles Over a dead toad

Dropped like a stone on the curb

A tinkling bell is my only defence against

Your Biting

Absence.

On my radio I hear

Unusual troop movements in the Ivory Coast

~ Up goes the price of cocoa.

As I watch a child fill his socks with rubbish while wearing them

I come to realize it is grief

Remembering a fuck in fine detail

every day &

Unbelieving bitter laughter.

The sound of this **BELL** can make you especially good at forgetting. It is just in tune for digging up the right word to fit the fossil red to a blushing cheek. And the bell's shape has caught the hollow of an overcast day giving to the ring an intangible absence, the emptiness that swings meanings out of that void. Rung close to Snyder's ear it has a power to concentrate his thought somewhere unknown at any other time. As the sound faded he lay in bed with a pained grin, because he had just forgotten again, the perfect phrase he had dreamed again, which had summed up exactly the way he had always felt. One day, Snyder was sure, those words would be so easy to call up they would be meaningless.

'Her head is again poised to sing, to clang our life together in the bell bed' Snyder laboriously scrawled along the blue line of his notebook, thoughts like golden straws in the wind impossible to collect except by painstakingly inscribing every fleeting word he could catch. The few he caught glimmered with the fugitive rainbow iridescence of a landed fish. They always had & yet he didn't trust them although they had been freely given.

So as Snyder wrote, hunched over the table, he muttered abusively about each word the pen scratched into the light. He cursed the choicest bits as roundly as he accused them of clinging tenaciously to the darkness. 'That sentence came out like a fancy luminescent worm' he sneered squinting at the results, both eyeballs bang full of detail like a Rousselesque decoy bubble 'Why have I got that one?'

"Why have you saved that one?" The jibe was also echoed from a rude stranger observing Snyder oddly, positioned so that he seemed to be looming out of a large mirror across the

room with a sinister twist in the lip not lost on Snyder, but ignored. Eventually Snyder stood up & limped over as if to confront the visitor. Gritting his teeth, which gave him fleetingly his singular wolfish grin, Snyder halted & after a moments reflection pulled open a drawer as he abruptly asked with no apparent purpose. “Who invited you in?” “You did.” Scarface replied just as rudely. “And you know it. No need to be derisive & hostile because you realize the rot has set in.”

Snyder guffawed. “The world is sawdust & your head is stuffed with it.” Snyder stopped, perhaps another word had shimmered for a second on the surface. “Look at the shit you landed us in.”

“It was what you said you wanted & described in your own words. It was uncertainty that all of you bickered about endlessly until I had to call it *the day* & make you get on with it. Win or lose.”

“What.” Snyder shouted, roughly man-handling the drawer shut. “Agree on a motive? How could we when we were constrained by our own hopes.”

“Living. Fireworks; flowers & copulation. How do you get a clear understanding of that?” Scarface muttered instead of graciously apologizing, which he knew was all Snyder in this mood, wanted.

“You knew some of us were scruffy & unreliable. And if you couldn’t take that you should have chanted columns of numbers to yourself & let us be. If you wanted something special you just had to keep adding up, simply that, & stayed above all the dirt & not got our needs confused with your aims. You might have been better off having hallucinations instead of trying to get everything to add up, since money couldn’t buy or

rescue you. They can be pleasurable & you would have seen a possible world working in a different way.”

“Falling apart in a different way.”

“I suppose it would break up under your scrutiny. Even a hair-line crack would gape wide open as soon as your gaze rested on it. How do you think we felt under that same hard, unyielding gaze?” Snyder opened the drawer again.

“Cared for.”

“Your error was to think we craved an answer when we just wanted a look in. Not illusion, not fantasy, no flaky data used to fool us. We wanted the real touch.”

“From a severed hand in a dream. That’s about as much as you could have taken. A real touch would burn you; scorch a mark forever on your mind. Look at you now.” Scarface turned away briefly.

That was a mistake, demonstrated in human form, as Schlumper came blundering back in his irremediable way with more intentions than a head in a bucket, to carry out an illocutionary deed with force. Because he had been woken up by what he thought were irate voices & not wanting to chance that they were connected with his dream he decided to investigate & at least shut a slamming door, if that is what he had heard. But as he stood beside the bed after stumbling in the dip of the floor, in the now still night he couldn’t make out if the banging had been in the dream or elsewhere. But resolved if he found a door swinging in a draught he would certainly slam it shut & if he found anyone arguing he would ask them how they had escaped from his dream & why they had raised their voices. With his dream in the background but permeating most of his actions

Schlumper made his way to the workshop & groped through the door. The acrid fumes left from the day's work caught the back of his throat. Spluttering he drank in the dust that made him hack. A thin shaft of moonlight gave a corny phosphorescent glow to a nondescript oval of floor. He splashed his hand across the moonbeam watching the oval space shiver & reform.

“Oi!” Someone shouted. “Hold off. That’s all we’ve got left to play with.”

* * *

We sat on rough stone steps next to a tree shoot protected by a beehive of thorns.

Knowing the feeling, I smiled inwardly. I rubbed the stone & realized this Yogini temple was built from similar granite to the Carloway Broch.

“Are you able to accept this separation?” Eve wondered as she examined the faraway look in his eyes.

“I was trying to avoid thinking about it. Yet I’m here in the wilds in it.”

“On your own?” Eve asked & watched him intently as he nodded & stood up reaching down to help her. “Where?”

Six triangular pennants flapped amongst the white painted boulders in a breeze I could not feel. “Oh. Everywhere.”

“What do you want to do?”

“I want to surprise you.”

The sunlight streamed in at seven as I rubbed my nose with Tiger Balm. I kiss her & she me. Then she says, that’s no surprise. I kiss her. That’s no surprise she says, as her knees

widen. I hold her. That's no surprise she says, as her knees widen. That's no surprise she says, as we made love. That's no surprise. I like it.

The faded gold pennant drooped behind the grey-white bole of a leafy tree as three small children, one carrying a drum, rushed across the bridge & arrived below the steps. Could they dance for us?

* * *

Darling squealed. She squealed, dancing towards him like a happy child as the shutter rattled up.

“ never do things by halves ”

“What are you doing here?” Snyder blinked against the sunlight streaming across the room.

“I came to see you.”

“Didn't we . . . last night is a fog . . . didn't we spend it together?” And he saw that Darling was clad (his mind shot past the word wearing without giving it a second glance) in the same few pieces (two) of lingerie not counting jewelry as when they had met.

“Again.” Darling added, putting a certain amount of hesitant provocation in to the word, but not too much. Snyder rubbed behind his ear. She was unsure how to act in the daytime. It was not her domain.

Darling always spent the day stretched out on a grass verge, by a main arterial road, wrapped in a white shawl covering her completely. Cocooned against the heat & dust kicked up by the constant crowd milling around she tried to sleep through the light hours,

out in the city. Working all night every night, she was in bad shape but it hadn't begun to show yet.

Now Darling had been propositioned. That morning, in her solitude, just as she had started to coil the wrap around her legs as she did every morning, a man had boldly tapped her bare shoulder.

"Go away. I only work nights." She had said without stopping her task to look up.

"That will be a good enough time for our proposal." A guttural voice had replied, "As long as you can follow our instructions to the letter & carry out each order precisely."

"Instructions?" Darling had queried with an offensive lilt in her voice, still winding her limbs carefully with the cloth, but slowing down & taking in the size of the shadow cast by this new customer. Fragments of brown flower petals were sprinkled over the ground where she sat & Darling stopped to draw a sign in this debris with her fingers, a parallel wave of four lines exposed the red earth. More petals were blown about around the man's boots as he stood patiently appraising the woman. He glanced up. At the main fork the silver grey bark of the tree was creased like tired flesh & large chunks of this bark were peeling away at the side of a huge scar where a branch had been ripped off. He looked down. Was she the right woman? Her hair was almost all braided with beads. He discretely reread his order printed out on the back of a postcard size photograph which he again studied. Covertly slipping it back into his breast pocket as the woman hunched her shoulders. He observed her gesture & tapped his fingers together as he asked, "Can we make an agreement here?" In a coaxing voice hoping for her to look up although there

had been no instruction about the type of face suitable to be chosen for this kind of work. He needed to check once more.

“Any daytime work costs a lot more as I lose my beauty sleep.” She sighed & rubbed an earlobe where its earring dangled. The man seemed to fall into a reverie, nodding his head slowly. That action fitted with a description in the notes.

“I haven’t heard a figure mentioned yet.” Darling leaned forward. A toe peeked out. She started winding again wearily. “Are you listening?”

The man nodded thoughtfully ‘assertive good.’ His head was still moving as Darling took a peek up at the stranger. “I have a friend.” He stared down, as he spoke quietly, “Not exactly a friend, a colleague he might be called. This person, we, no he, has needs we think. We would like to find out. We would like you to find out.”

“Oh. Yes. Can’t you ask him?” Said Darling vulgarly pushing her lips around the word ‘you’. “Hurry up & make your mind up who he is & what you think he wants.” The man stood woodenly, a breakwater before this woman’s prone figure. Darling carried on winding her body with the worn cloth. “We can’t strike a deal until you know who wants what & then I’ll know what is what & be able to say if anybody is getting anything. If it’s something I’ve got they want. And no monkeying about.”

“It is you who will be needed.”

“I’ve guessed that. It’s how I will be needed that I want to know.”

“You will have been given a free hand in order to enable you to fulfill our requirements.”

The man almost sounded disagreeable to Darling who immediately said, “Who says I’m doing anything with a hand until I know what it’s worth. You’re starting at the wrong

end.” She stared dismally at the exposed toe. “It looks as though there’s got to be a lot of money around for this trick to take place. It sounds nasty.”

“Trick?” The man was astounded & almost sounded hurt to Darling who quickly examined his face with the expertise of someone who kept one step out of harm’s way by acute observation. “Job.” She corrected, noting the distant look he kept.

“This task will require a serious approach. Almost meticulous, so very different from the way you probably normally work. Do you understand?”

“How can I understand anything until I’m told what the task is. I only really do one or two things most of the time, anyway, nothing dangerous. When I work.” Darling tried to make it sound as though she could pick & choose. “That’s all they seem to want.

Sometimes I do stretch a point or two. For particular needs.” Darling paused. “But it is expensive.”

“We will provide enough . . . to make it worth your while.”

“Enough what?” Darling was becoming exasperated, “Chicken feathers?” Unexpectedly she then grinned because she half expected him to make a serious comment about a feather boa. Darling thought she didn’t like being pushed into anything. This thought was made of lead.

[His mind was on Icarus, where else. Scarface tugged at his belt.]

“Cover.” He nearly smiled, quickly changing tack. “We understand you are acquainted with a man who goes under the name of Schneider.”

“Snyder?” Darling repeated baffled. But she let the cloth fall & leaned towards her only visible possession, a black beaded handbag, & her hand fluttered close ready to snatch it up & bolt.

“You saw him last night.”

“I did?” Darling’s lips curled over the question. “Did he tell you?” She could easily make out that she didn’t remember some of the nights & their occupants very clearly & accordingly looked dazed. “If you can describe him for me it will help.”

“Ungainly.” The man barked, as if that was the definitive picture.

“Ungainly.” Darling maimed the word as she sloshed it back out at him. “They nearly all come like that.” She was determined not to help him. “Or worse.” A tone sounded from the bag & Darling flicked it open, took out a mobile & gave the man a grave stare. He turned & took a few paces out of earshot.

“Eve.” Darling whispered. “Oh. How did you know? He’s here now. Who is he? He did what. He’s done the same. Did you?” She eyed the man as she unbound her legs with her free hand. “What’s he done? Nothing? Nothing.” Darling listened intently as she rubbed both of her legs. She licked a finger to polish the tips of her unlikely shoes. “Me?” She put them on.

Darling had known in her heart. It was time to go. There is a circle of the damned & now she had been touched by it.

“Good. I see you are ready.” The man pinched his cheek as if checking it wasn’t a dream.

“We can . . .”

“Not ‘we’” Darling remarked dryly. “You don’t get to see anything. I perform alone.” She stood up & stretched her arms behind her neck so he could admire what he had hired.

And then pushed one hand out clicking the thumb & finger, waiting.

“Like ice.” He murmured. “She will freeze him to death before we get any answers.” His shoulders twitched as though she had touched his neck. Uncertainly he cleared his throat.

“Not here. You might be robbed.” There was the hint of a threat. Darling dropped her arm & moved closer to him feigning a need for protection. He caught the smell of a metallic perfume on her breath. Her face was that close as she whispered. “Now.” Her hand slipped into his back pocket. He was drawn closer as his hand fell on hers.

“We could dance this way but you want me to do something else, something tiresome, a task.” Her mouth, so close, was robbing him of choice as she blew the strange perfume through her moist lips. “If you wish you can close your eyes for a while & we’ll spin a different web for a moment.” He released her hand & she slid it up his back. His eyes narrowed as her fingers came to rest behind his ear. She felt the scar Eve had asked her to check, tugged his earlobe & slowly disengaged from the embrace.

“Keep trying.” Darling pushed his chest away. “Just give me the instructions & an advance. I won’t keep you.” The man leaned his back against the tree & took off his left shoe. From inside it he pulled out two fifty-dollar bills & clamped them between his teeth. As he replaced the shoe Darling snatched them, rolled them into a tight cylinder & half bending over stuffed this up her vagina fixing the man with a set expression which implied ‘that’s as close as you’ll ever get’ & said. “Now. The job.” He handed her a small manila envelope without a flicker of emotion showing. “Everything is numbered.”

“Are you kidding?” Darling didn’t open it but tucking it safe down the side of her bra asked. “Does it say where we meet for the final payment?”

“Read it.” The man rasped impatiently. It was getting hot & the polluted air was beginning to irritate his throat. Working a finger around his collar, he started off. Darling stuck a leg out to impede him.

“So how long have I got to do your dirty work?” He didn’t reply or move but reached down & lightly brushed her leg to one side; there was a delicate sexual challenge in the answer to Darling’s taunt. An unsuspected facet, for Darling had just made her usual play out of habit, intrigued to find out how he would meet it, & was momentarily, taken by surprise. She straightened the leg on the tips of its toes.

“Don’t we have time for a diversion. Do we?”

“ ‘We’ only dance tricks for money. Yes?” The man was in the game.

“It depends how diverting it is”

“What is ‘it’.”

“I am.” Darling had never calculated about squandering a chance ever before, but this didn’t show in her delicious smile the two words were dished up with. There was a delicate reflection like a petal of cherry blossom on her upper lip which gave the fact an appeal unknown to innocence. Her tongue disturbed this touch of light as she waited, still swinging one leg free, without giving the man the slightest reason to feel uneasy. Or that she was impatient. Or that she was anything but at his disposal. If he wished.

“Do you want to think about it?” She caressed the words in a way that ignored their meaning but gave a new impetus to the offer. To the imagined feel of her body. It gave

this with that flesh so tantalizingly close as the leg again brushed by. Then Darling pulled the trick. She gently turned with the swing of her leg & dropped the shroud down over her back. He immediately saw the number tattooed on her neck, just as he saw the same smile this time over her shoulder. “Your numbers up. Shall we dance?” He turned her to face him again. “In your world isn’t the expectation . . . better, more valuable than the gratification?”

“You mean if I can get the money without having the shag or whatever, I do . . . think about it . . . bodily pleasure without arousal.” Darling’s voice trailed off.

“Being like a wheel without oil. I think.” He paused. “Binding or squeaking; both unsatisfactory.”

“No elation.” Darling murmured.

“None?” He didn’t want to believe he would be part of a lost cause.

* * *

A riderless horse. **Hold it.**

Who is that person? It is someone lit up by the sun, it seems. Someone we can lose in the blink of an eye. But turns up large, only more grotesque, as life in a fairytale. The voice faltered on this word.

“Someone furtive?” Darling asked, equally unconvinced, looking over Snyder’s shoulder as they stood, or rather as she had him pinned to the wall next to a slip of paper reading:

‘A grey eye longing to pocket its own mystery.

A shallow pool labouring with the cloudless sky.’

Ah! That’s the way. Unembodied. Unencumbered. And unconvinced.

While Snyder tugged at her arms, which she held stiffly like a child being dressed, he saw a swift flutter onto the light-brown pebble-dash wall opposite the window & crawl under the fascia board below the roof guttering.

“Why the struggle?”

“Because I like to be out there; just out of reach.” And she broke free & skipped away.

“How can you miss someone who isn’t there?”

“How long has that been?” Her breasts hung heavy in their flimsy support as she bowed, thoughtfully fanning her hand seeking a top. Were they being offered to Snyder?

Let’s imagine we never met.

Let’s imagine we meet again & madly don’t even mention love.

Let’s rifle guardedness & somersault abstinence for our pleasure.

Let’s pretend. What else can we do?

* * *

The stranger had waited. Darling was pleased to see as she leaned on his arm, pushing close to his body, imprisoning it with a serpentine twist of her wrist, clutching his fingers.

On her unencumbered side she could feel the envelope, it chaffed slightly against her breast. She looked at him, questioningly, without speaking, but began to breathe quicker wondering if he would respond. She closed her eyes, leaning back for a moment before opening them again.

“Are you deaf?” Darling whispered with a glint in her eyes totally denying the low effortless tone.

“You can stop pretending.” He said in a neutral voice. Then without her showing any surprise, not even being slightly astonished, he took the weight of her body in his arms, felt the lightness of her frame beneath her flimsy crimson shawl, as they embraced.

“It’s not exactly ‘horse’ Horse.” Snyder fumbled in the sweet bag & fished out a sugar lump that he rubbed in between his fingers under the animal’s hairy lips. “And not as good as kinnikinnik, but it is the only treat I’ve got on me & will have to do.”

“Nice.” Said the Horde. “Quit stalling & hand it over. Don’t bolt it down, Head. Suck it slow.” And they settled into the hay, with nicely polished boots in a row & grass stalks tickling the back of their throats etc.

So with that recommendation rumbling through the Horse’s Head, frozen in a questionable pose, it took a long & futile trip in a THUNDERBOLT tied to a bell. And only a few members of the Horde guessed that the trouble had started with the gift from Snyder melting on the Horse’s tongue. This was later when the Horde with its nauseous ecstatic body, exposed in its entirety, did say to the Horse’s Head, that it liked this little tip from his pal & the glow & the sweetness, but he should have given them fair warning of what difficulties the lump brought with it. “Yeah. The sound of that bell ringing all the time.”

As the Horse’s Head sped away round the corner fuelled by Snyder’s gift, propelled by brazen hooves & keeping a stiff tail, the first thing it saw was a old cow done up like a donkey from a tin pot army doing the rumba lead by a begging general with more medallions than it could count clinking on the end of their ribbons. One of the cow’s horns was red the other blue. Their tips had bells on. It was a get up designed to part the mob from their money. An inside job. With no music. Cheap & simple.

No sooner was the penny paid when there was a flash of sparkling light that blew this purple image sky-high; but the four split hooves were anchored firm & still on the

concrete stall staying small as its elastic body became an immense sheet & only started to fragment into thousands upon thousands of beast's shapes like a plastic fabric coming apart in a fire when the limit was reached very, very high. Then the light was extinguished. And we were left with a grey molten lump from out of which stared a doleful eye. "That was a rip off." Said the Horde. "We were bored shitless & multiplied for effect. We could be water off a duck's back for all you care." It was true; the thunderbolt carelessly kept going, riveting the Head with every cheap sensation it could wheedle out of the molecules without regard for the inflationary effect it had on the Horde.

"That was mega. Say, did the Ark hit a mine?" Asked the Horse's Head's mouth which felt miles from the head & even further from a vaporized body that had left behind just a bloodstained pair of pants all in tatters lying in the settling dust. "I missed the news."

"It did. And it's bad." With a half-veiled glance at Eve, Snyder was happy mixing it again. "The trouble with that atomic stuff is it gives you big Ideas. Look where they got Eve." He closed one eye slowly screwing it up as he rubbed behind his right ear.

"Altruistic notions; they are about as useful for getting on in life as telling the future by alphetomancy (divination by barley meal). And how was that done? I can't imagine."

Some of the esoteric cult members of the Horde helped him out. "They mixed the meal with rancid butter & poured hot water on it. The greasy shapes floating in the scum told the lot. (It was an early trial for the Rorschach test). That is if you were able to kid yourself that what they suggested resembled your future. Your future?" The Horse's Head hobbled around the thought when it thought about it.

“As you didn’t see it. Sure.” Snyder backed the winner. “You could, theoretically, get more spread in a saucer, I assume the broth was tipped into a saucer, & you read more future out of that whirlpool of movement than there is in a stormy winter sky.”

“Just so.” Said some of the Horde. “Sure fire.” Said some other elements.

“An audacious claim.” Snyder pronounced. “But what on earth could you do with the results you blot up?”

“That’s where you come in. An interpreter is needed to read the mess. Someone damaged enough not to care about their own skin. Able to lead a dash from the front.”

“Foolhardy & prepared to risk being dead wrong. What more could you want?” Snyder said but added to himself, ‘time & time again’.

“Damaged beyond repair that means.” The Horde gasped & soon was counting heads.

“A complete fool through & through.” Said the Horse’s Head thoughtfully, wondering how its brain had got in such a fog & promptly blamed the fixers in the Horde.

Swinging in for free, Darling enquired. “From a noxious breakfast you get all the information you need to kiss off any surprise in the days to come?” She looked glum. “A kind of free fall. Before you’ve had a chance to get up to any sin? It sucks.” And she noted but didn’t say that the notion that you could know what was inside every wrapping was a dulling one. “It must make some of them very grey.” She fluffed out her hair.

“All the days are if you’re stuck in a greasy spoon cafe. And you could get someone else’s plot thrown in too, regardless, if it’s their spoon you have to share & it’s really buttered up.”

“I wouldn’t sit on my tail like a rabbit watching the future curdle under my nose. I’d blow on it. Set the patterns flying.” Darling blew into Snyder’s face. Venus breezed in.

“I don’t want to squabble with you two but I’ve presided over so much divination, often up to my knees in mud, that I know all there is to know about the deliberate errors.”

“The deliberate errors?” The Horse’s Head repeated in a choked voice; anything with four legs has to be very careful.

[I know we’re still not sure why we’re here. Schlumper interjected. But we have to give it (Is that Art) the benefit of the doubt. We should not arse about with divination it could come true].

“You know.” Venus continued ignoring the fact that Schlumper had just tried to put her on the dole. “Starting off with wrong directions, given ostensibly without guile, sending an army the wrong way to an ambush. That happens a lot. Then there is the one where elaborations disguising a straightforward yes or no confuse an artless client into despair. They get stuck. And then there is an honest reply which has such a lack of sophistication that a devious supplicant, suspecting a hidden sub-text, hares off into disaster, plainly fooled by their own artificial interpretation, deaf to the facts.” Venus took a breath.

“Nothing is harmless.” Snyder said. “Being given a preview of your fate or a correct hint about the future could be far worse than a lie.”

“In that case, a lie might turn out to be more desirable.” Darling wondered. “And you wouldn’t want to believe its accuracy, true or false.”

“Yes. Take a case like this. Say you’ve already been stuffed by your best friend. Who cares who else stuffs you?” Snyder repeated from memory & glared at Eve who asked no

one. Never. Darling looked nonchalantly over her head at Peter Snyder trying to catch his eye as well as observe his reaction. Eve was going to push it. Never. Darling wanted to warn him with a nod to keep quiet.

“With a stroke of good fortune difficult to explain without invoking a God with at least two heads & a clockwork mouse running up its arse & a puff of smoke out the ears of it all . . . “

“Shut up you numskull.” Eve curtly stopped Snyder’s attempt using noumena to pull back out of the shit. “When I got back I did exactly as had been planned in my discussions with my friend. I saw him but didn’t let him say a word. I broke it off.” Eve’s eyes glistened but showed no remorse.

“Broke it off what?”

“Shut up Snyder.” Darling harshly cut in. “Let Eve finish her version.”

“She must have left part of it behind if she broke it,” Snyder persisted. “What good was **it** then?” Darling looked resigned & hoped Snyder would catch on & listen. Eve’s face was set full of shadows. As her eyelids drooped they showed a death’s head pattern delicately pencilled on with eyeliner. A crease had been emphasized on one side with green paste.

Eve continued in a grim voice full of temper.

“He said. Why are you looking like that?”

“How do you want me to look? I asked him.” Eve’s lips barely parted. “Tell me.”

“Not like that.” Eve lowered her voice for his part.

“I said. Think of my lips. That’s all. They are bright.” She pushed her face with its pale hollow cheeks towards him. “That’s how it started.” Eve was on tiptoes, Darling noticed.

“He said. Don’t think how you look in someone else’s eyes. But how couldn’t I?” She leered slowly sideways at Darling.

“And he kissed. You?”

“Why are you astonished? I wanted him to. I said. Look how these lips are parting.”

Eve’s hands stroked her thighs open & her eyes hardened on Darling. “Parting.” Her tongue darted out.

Darling squealed in anger. “And this is giving you another thrill.” She reached out & pinched Eve hard on the belly. “You cheat. You dirty cat. You stepped into my shoes.”

“Well, they were neatly tucked under the bed, handy, & you had skipped off with a funny twirl of your body trying to disguise your big arse. What did you expect her to do?”

Snyder took up the torch & blew on the flame.

Eve said she had arrived by chance & caught them shagging; taking advantage of her surprise had rolled Darling off & cocked her leg over. After being asked. Darling said Eve had forced herself in naked & with violence. And sulking would say no more.

“Unsurmountable?” Snyder pondered having forgotten the look & taken the insult without injury.

“Certainly not. She grabbed his prick & worked it & was slotted on him double quick. Bragging she would make him squeal.” Exclaimed an aggrieved Darling.

“This is an irreconcilable mess unless you both tell the truth.” Snyder cautioned. “Did she?”

“What? You mean agree with your version of events. Ha. Ha.”

Like a Goyaesque ghost she had appeared at the window with a newly frothed head of black curls, a slash of bright lipstick recently launched over the area of her mouth; & was tugging frantically to get her short skirt below the level of her fat gusset with one hand as she shook the other towards the locked door asking him to

“Open up.”

And she did. As soon as she was through the door & had slammed it shut her face turned bright red close to his but she still pulled the skirt up & off before she said a word.

“Up?”

“Yes. Don’t blame me for that action.” Said Schlumper. “I didn’t have a clue in those days how complicated a woman’s relationship was with the way things fitted on them, except socks. I thought later she pulled the skirt up to expose & offer herself totally, without having to plead for a chance while dressed & at a disadvantage thinking of all the defects she was convinced her body had or give him time to reflect. But at the time I didn’t consider it possible.”

“What ‘it’?”

“She was also hoping he lost most of his sense when confronted by the brazen delight she took in this sexy play.”

Darling asked astonished. “He did?”

Then she clenched her teeth. “You’ve got that wrong. She knew where the key was hidden, behind a loose brick in the lean-to, so let herself in.”

A moonbeam shines down the chimney

Shakes the walls

And everyone can hear.

‘That thin!’

I forgot her name & had to ask again.

‘Fuck me,’ she said. That’s true.

If you spend Sunday stealing

Snowdrops & chimney pots - - - - -

- - - - - that’s what you get.

The lake does not mirror the life here. It reflects back a set piece under the frantic wings of the kingfisher cutting a wide arc away from my reflection. And from its depths I draw up an imaginary world which dances on the golden ripples then fades. You pay for your pleasure & you get the exact amount you are owed & no more. The soapy water turned green as he washed his hands. She watched fascinated.

“The ducks are the King’s, the bunting is only up for the evening concert. Tomorrow the scrubbers will be back.”

The sunset is a tried & tested & failsafe event to watch. A must. It burns the lake.

As I explored the extensive ruins under a scorching sun all the lost moments I had enjoyed in love came together; flooding the present with delusive pictures, composites that never could have existed yet remained powerful & destructive images; a loss impossible to have had, a complexity impossible to reconstruct. I searched assiduously

for the carvings of the women mentioned in a book, but not illustrated, I found a soldier stretched out snug in the shadow alongside his rifle guarding the fragments. I was too late, the sculptures of the handmaidens had been defaced by zealots.

* * *

“In case you don’t know this story those who betray . . . the . . . their . . . inevitably . . .”

“What?”

“Also perish.” Was added by a stranger leaning on one arm reflectively, inviting me to join him. “Get on with it.”

Before she stripped she must have felt she had the time to beguile him because she started by sucking an ice-cream cone. No I’m not trying to skip any awkward moments or say she was the enthusiastic one & him the cool customer. No I was not taken by surprise. As one sailed through the door the other dashed out, just as I told you. There was no exchange, no vituperation. She came in acting as though the room was empty. Being plump but with small hard breasts riding high over her ribs, the gentle roll of her belly lapped up against these thin bones as she reached to unclip a strap.

I’m not trying to give it an inflexible context. There was no play-acting by either of them. She gave him a sign with her eyes for help & as he reached out she turned & at the same time as dropping the bra she thrust her breasts hard into his open palms & she slashed her free hands across his face. But he caught them tight & twisted each one behind & high up her back tying them with green twine before pushing his knees into the back of hers forcing the legs to bend out so her rump bobbed out as he lifted her arms with a loop of

twine to make her lean over open while he hooked the loop onto a nail freeing both hands to part her buttocks widening the open slit.

“She looked like thunder.” The stranger, who seemed familiar, leaned towards me & added brashly. “As you can see I am skipping an introductory bargaining for position by trying to quickly block in the picture so you get the overall feel. Events may appear precipitate at first but you’ll get used to the pace, catch up & enjoy the special twists enjoined by the speed, in time. If there is any exotic time left, that is,” And he laughed merrily.

“Has the other one gone for good?”

He laughed even louder. “You wish.” And blinked.

I hung my head, embarrassed by his spluttering because although it is described as laughter it was more an exaggerated snigger & feeling uneasy about his claim, couldn’t engage. What was the way to shake her off? Dare I ask him?

“Charm.” He uttered into my crowded thoughts.

“That would make her think I was trying to seduce her.”

“If you are accomplished in that skill it can’t fail to work admirably.” He cocked an eye at me & his face fell. “But as she has never travelled under that flag & would be an easy take. It would need something more than endurance.” A hopeful smile broke the face’s fall that followed the fit of laughter. “Do you find her repugnant?” He looked as if suddenly taken ill, the question giving in to a strange mood. “Sometimes the spark will not glow no matter how hard you blow.” He pulled on his ear as if to save it from a bite &

took my arm, as I stood up, to steer me to the next site. I shook his grasp off. “I’ll do this alone.”

As doubts ring in the yellow & blue mash of spring I think the intrusive monotonous whistle you can hear could be Schlumper's breathing, air barely scraping through his throat, as he concentrates hard, baring his teeth while staring at the once white sheet of paper now covered with a multitude of irregular grey lines that are forming uncalled for shapes, piles of figures active in a nebulous but parched golden landscape. There is a shimmering blue haze above a distant tank set in red earth. While sketching a place where he has been, he often hums a magical tune for inspiration. And there in the reference photograph pinned on the wall, he is at the mouth of a rock-cut cave temple looking up at the roof carving; we can see him gawping, a scarf protecting the nape of his neck, a camera to collect the multitudinous forms of the goddesses which so delight him with their sweet smiles & brilliant soft eyes. I think the snap caught him frowning at the depredations of vandals who, always occupied in thick shade, chip off nipples, noses & lips to grind up for charms. He isn't caught dreaming but counting the number of flawless angels clinging precariously to a vine their feet just dangling above the multitude of scratched lines, giving uncalled for names & dates.

Or is it the kettle noisily shooting steam past a metal pea lodged in its spout?

(Incidentally while forcing vapour out through two slits in the cap giving us the simple mechanical & musical example of psychodynamic power).

Schlumper trundled in, his dry lips taut in a wry smile, drawn away from the delicious forms by another hunger, peering around the room as if still blinded waiting to be delivered from their spell. Sakini lay asleep denying any negligence. "I've not split the flowers." The artist bit back a reply to the sleeping girl.

The noise wavers & dies as the boiling kettle is lifted off the gas. A foolish hand plucks off the cap by its black button & is caught in a spurt of steam, there is a quick snuffle of breath. The scalded fingers are soothingly blown with another quiet, whistling sound.

Sakini stirred, a madder colour renewing her cheeks, & said, now only half asleep. “What a robin!”

Give him a BREAK. He would break his neck to know, instantaneously of course, how to sit at a table & delight her.

Sakini Xax poured. Her tiny clenched fist rested heavily on the table. The big porcelain teapot, in the shape of a stupa, broke as soon as the stream of boiling water infused the mixture. This happening caused some consternation. Because it is well known that a porcelain vessel would sooner break than carry a poisonous liquid.

The kitchen clock clicked. Soon an alarm.

* * *

Having suffered deliberate wanton damage the stupa had now been re-built. A narrow bridge of scaffolding constructed from the best bent, curved & forked branches that could be found & intertwined had stood out at an angle from the curve of the stupa exactly forming a handle shape. It only needed some giant to grasp it & pour out a blessing.

Dismantled, that wood was now feeding many fires. A nasty gaping scar, caused when this funerary mound had been clumsily excavated by treasure hunters sinking a shaft to rob it of a relic-casket, had been filled in with rubble & faced. The dome re-surfaced. An austere stone fence with lenticular cross-bars re-erected, heavy & plain with enormous rounded copings, lacking other vedika's decoration & with very different workmanship

from the original balustrade that had been covered in flower patterns. But they were inscribed with the donors' names who came from all over. The four ornamental, carved doorways also pieced together somewhat haphazardly were stood back in place. They are surprisingly close to the stupa. Many pieces of sculpture from these toranas had been looted. They were traced; some were given back, others not.

“Hung on to. But not as delicately as the voluptuous Yakshi hung from a mango tree in the eastern gateway or with as much charm as the wood nymph reclined on the branch of the Bo tree next to an elephant on the north gateway.” Sakini explained, forgetting to mention the stocky dwarves some of whom were always groaning or that she was the very embodiment of this nymph, as she tried to delicately retrieve the fragments of teapot strewn over the table. Her attempted unobtrusiveness was irritating. “First fractured then renewed, as in love.” She murmured consoling herself. “I’m telling you, in the beginning there was a whistle of appreciation which that woman deliberately misunderstood & he denied. And I overheard her say: I didn’t expect you to break my endless sleep so soon or so rudely. Then the argument hotted up & it wasn’t long before they were tugging at each other’s clothes & that stopped it getting nasty. They wrestled themselves naked, pulled a sheet over themselves & fucked as a compromise.”

‘Blame the weather,’ came the reply from an unknown voice sounding distant, filtered through a bed of reeds. ‘A fall of snow.’ Sakini looked up & blinked as the sleet blinded her. She brushed off the flakes that had lightly fallen & thrust the damp hand into her pocket. Surely that was another day. (Today she was staying cool. She would give him as much of a chance to jeer as there was gry under her fingernail. She would not perform.)

This day the table with its geometrical flower carvings was set with the same spread in front of him, as it was every day. Things should have been added & taken away but they weren't.

It didn't seem worth saying anything, yet complaining in a gruff voice, so irritated by this clumsy attempt on his peace, the painter swept the table clear with a sweep of his hand.

And with a handsaw he was holding hacked away at the thick fold-up plywood shelf faced with light blue formica that formed half of the table. The wood splintered but frustrated his attack, resisting the blows from the tool unsuited to this work. The damaging swings rained down until his rage was spent & the shelf hung loose on one hinge which he then deliberately & foolishly twisted off.

Like the final blow of a sledge that opened a floodgate.

As if the Ark had grounded violently in his brain throwing its live cargo out.

At first, of course, with the animals piled into his head out of the wild the way they were, pitching about snapping each others tails & honking up the nearest arse; jostled & clawed they found it very difficult to communicate with a man like this & they never really really understood how it went. But by dint of examples 'Up like a bird' & 'Down like the rain' & 'Out like a light' & 'In like a lamb' the animals did reach a workable arrangement although they never got that 'out' one quite right, because they always sheepishly pointed to the door when they should have pointed to the bed.

"Should they?" Even Sakini was puzzled. "Something like 'light was shed' must have caused a commotion. Or did they all just troop off outside into the garden?"

“Well,” he said grudgingly, “With any amount of nagging the animals eventually got a glimmer of what was required to operate in his world. They became able to huff & puff.”

“New articulation, I suppose?” Scarface wondered breezily in an aside. “To get rid of the outrageous burs & twangs which they had been fortunate to be born with. Exercises which took out the duplicitous diphthongs so smoothing the roughness of their speech.”

“Mutilated. And deteriorated into estuarine. In a nut shell.”

“Nut shell?” The animals fidgeted uneasily avoiding eye contact with all & sundry.

“Sundry?” More fidgeting.

“In truth, they never got the hang of singing, but it wasn’t every time they saw a bird take off that they all dived for the umbrella & huddled under it waiting for the light to go out.”

It was an umbrella someone had forgotten.

“They were never tuned in?”

“No. To avoid this some of them were transforming all the time. [They said it was to fallstalll the monotony of knowing it all.” He said imitatively. “Having an el of a time etc.”]

Firstly what delighted but also puzzled the animals was that there was an inexactitude of expression which could be derided but had to be obeyed, in a roundabout way. And they could use the words more than once. Enchanted by finding they could be stuck together or disassembled, they stuck & unstuck words every way they would go. That some didn’t wear out in years or others didn’t break very easily was handy given their rough usage on the animals’ tongues. That the words kept their value even if they had to change their meaning didn’t worry the beasts either. The meanings had always been fluid in their

heads anyway. And they didn't mind if one got a bit damaged by a lip or a tooth in the wrong place as they spoke, because it tasted nice. But, it must be said, some consonants were like poison & words with those had to be spat out. The ass loved that. And endlessly repeated some of these thistly words. It was praised for its fluency but did anyone recognize the anguish of the ass.

*

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The seven friends knocked together from the seven dropped masks came back to the grey door under the bridge & found it locked. Schneider fancied he had met them just as they stepped back warily eyeing it up before they knocked. Some standing there had made the flight with him. Some flew a slower route, independently, & only just arrived in time. If happening on a firmly closed door was in time. Together again they agree to try & figure out a strategy. So. Top this.

You like to run: I like to ride

Carefree, but we collide.

Lifting cranes nonplus our city.

Look fatty & take your mind off

That jug in her prow.

You saw the photo & know where her mole is.

No! No! The boat's beached this shot

Mug

Shows how.

What's wrong?

No. You're not first to go carrying a bell for such butchery changed cudgel to cross.

Watch as new choppers chop blindfolding hell.

That man? Gutting. The smell soon blows.

And what is it about this puddle of water?

It's green water.

First of all it isn't water. How can it be? The murdered can't float on it. Nor those bitten by a serpent. Or those eaten by leprosy.

It's green water without any victims?

Cuts us all out.

There is a skeleton. And there are the select who can pay for the logs to make their raft.

For their departure.

“Sure he was inside but he didn't answer.” Angel's soft voice came to Schneider on the wind. “All of them were, I suspect.”

The seven walked back to the sunny part of the lot where a wall had been demolished.

Then, after a few minutes wait, they approached the bridge again only this time keeping quiet.

Gently, Angel stepped on the middle slab & looked obliquely through the large keyhole.

The felling axe was still there balanced on the black cover of the water meter, its head resting in cobwebs. She put her ear to the keyhole & thought she could hear a low

humming, nothing more, but then it was a silent world that the painter Schlumper

inhabited & reverberated in. She started to straighten up when a faint whisper told her to

return later alone. Behind her, in the dull flat landscape, in the far distance above the atomic power station they could see:

After the Fasach goose cloud the Moissac stone fish

swim up the door

while 17 stone heads lynched in the corbel

gob on us.

And I'm so busy with safekeeping the caterwauling

washrag mind fabric smeared with blood

As you are hesitating on frosty footsteps wondering what

had been damaged in the night

that we missed the red gladioli man just falling.

Starting from the zero

the nought of the cunt

with one or two we

piggy-back to the celestial door.

Angel shepherded the dejected visitors along & as they headed back, running the gauntlet of a pack of snarling dogs making it more than plain they were unwelcome in this warren, she wondered if she had really heard the invitation. Or had it been one of those instants when a silent wish shifts, slips & flits out of the head & in again as easily as a whisper, to interface with desire, just before evaporating; leaving the hint of a trace of a hope? The barking had more sense in it than any of their thoughts at that moment. They weren't

disappointed. Not to be welcomed was unexpected & they were put out but what did they expect coming unaware on such a dysfunctional character.

* * *

Sakini tilted her head back & touched her throat then took hold of the bare piece of string, with a single blue bead, she had for a necklace & slowly pulled it until she held the knot. She untied it. Holding this tight in her fist Sakini crept closer, almost without breathing, to the side of a man flat out on her bed snoring loudly & stuffed the string into his open gob. She danced back smirking with delight. He opened one eye, spat out the white string, rolled out of bed & stood pretending to menace her. She mockingly parodied his stance but her pendulous breasts made her look much more inviting than fearsome as she rocked from side to side. He leaned towards her taking both nipples tight between thumb & finger. And as her arm came round to fend him off he lifted them up sharply to stop her blow with his elbow. He tugged her breasts higher forcing her to collapse. He straddled her, took up the string & tied her big toes together.

So you refused to live with the painter?

I didn't refuse. You might say, looking back, I made a bad job of it. Then she rapidly scribbled a light line without taking the pencil off the paper. Something like that. She handed the paper over. But that flower was a mistake. It was insufficiently drawn.

It doesn't describe anything, I said. Not how you feel.

I believe you, she said & yawned.

Are these shapes you are using contained within each other for a reason? Like seeds protected by a pod? Her hands were feeling around blindly in the disorder on the table as if trying to find in the lack of arrangement of this mess, an answer.

Spoken words . . . Mar . . . Keep your hands still.

As the torrential rain sounded on the roof, what was rolling around in his head? Let's see.

Twigs! An absolutely mad tangle. Nothing could move in that. And what do they look like . . . is that a woman or an . . . elephant . . . both if you take it from different angles.

So he can't be all bad, he's kind to animals. He listens to them.

That's no guarantee. Maybe it pays.

The buckle on a belt that bit round her tiny waist was so big her breasts hung over it when she sat down to try & reason with him, with her clothes on this time.

To stem his madness.

To dam it?

But as it was already locked in silence it had to be released with a very special key.

That morning Schneider watched as the big pigs ran for a neat hole at the bottom of the mud brick wall surrounding a tussocky field. So did the tiny piglets, strung out in a line.

Three children balanced along the top, one carried a pot to serve as a drum. They had escaped from a young woman who rubbed the grey ochre design of her baked mud yard with a fresh colouring of cow pat after she had gently laid her baby in a blanket under a parrot swinging in a twig cage both in the shade of a tree with few leaves.

In the night a drummer had done her rounds at 4 am. He had appreciated her technique with an erotic dream. She squealed but he didn't know then whether it was with delight

or fear. A thunderflash had set three or four men off dancing in a tight woven square sealed by erratic arm movements & as he peeped from behind the gauze curtain Schneider blinked as they were enveloped back into the crowd. Bang. A horseman with a child clinging to his back & a smaller child in his lap rode past with two yellow lanterns waving on poles in front & behind the horse. Bang. A flimsy box-like cart towed by a tractor & trailing a pulsating generator that fed the strings of coloured lights adorning the half-open contraption clattered past followed by a closely pressed crowd showing their enjoyment of the parade clapping hands & smiling at the young couple lodged in the small box. The man dressed an ordinary spick & span; the woman a multi-coloured beauty.

A pig squealed. Schneider remembered she squealed. The day began. Inside eight strands of rusty barbed wire there was a Nandi with a smooth polished back; flags were fluttering above the boulders & yet he didn't feel any breeze & the tree leaves were motionless. As he straddled the wire & crossed the dried ruts full of stubble he calculated that the back of this Nandi sculpture would be just the right shape at just the right height for him to sit on face to face with Sakini, some other time.

Had she caught the mood & squealed in delight? A cow resting on the roadside had gully-gully birds hopping around it. One was pecking in between a hoof. In front, before the village the blue lake surface was broken by patches of grey lily leaves. He realized another half-baked fantasy was cracking through its shell & leaking into his life. But was it sweet? Was it a path to dereliction? Would it make a difference? He felt its compelling

urgency & felt the danger of that. Schneider understood that what is vehemently denied is very very close . . . to . . .

Sakini came up close behind him. He thought she rubbed his neck tenderly but she had made a sawing action with the side of her hand, a gesture to satisfy her divided motive.

There was a flippant curl to her eyelashes but under them there was an angry light in her eyes. She swung her foot.

Summarily kicked into action the tree blossomed.

Nine days after it blossomed the damson tree was covered with snow which thawed in a few hours. Sakini had flitted to the window at regular intervals that afternoon noting the stages. She watched the man. Her little finger was crooked round the camera strap to keep the box close to the white dress sticking to her body. Feverish, she was dripping with sweat. A wristwatch, more jewelry than timepiece, was half tucked up her cuff. It had stopped. She felt the warm drops trickle from her belly into the creases of her thighs soaking her pants. She wanted to end her vigil but sensed there could be an interesting something to come. Now she was chaffed every step she took.

Sakini clapped her hands over her mouth to muffle a shrill cry as she saw her memories appear in a sad room standing bare several feet above the snow covered floor; a vision of not what had been, but the mad animals were all there chuckling & gobbling, some with saliva still running from their gleaming but blood stained teeth as if they had devoured her mutilated dream yet snarling wanted more. Also what people there were seemed to shun her look in the same way as they had years before as if her glances were prying out their secrets or even stealing them. She thought she heard a bird trill in the damson &

craned her neck to spy it out. The tree sank out of sight its blossom blending in the swirl of mist rising from the thaw. Was that the man? She strained forwards & stood on tiptoe. The white dress all wet clung tighter, transparent, the number on her neck was showing clear, as was the thin strap of her bra & her nipples. Her twat stung, but she acted as though unaware of the change to her appearance the way she had claimed she was long ago. The camera swung out in front of her. She grasped it, ready. Would they show? Was this the chance she hoped for? Feeling as she had in the long queue stuck behind the mad ‘empty’ one who was always blubbing on about everything you wouldn’t notice until she asked her tiresome question so persistently that the victim of her gaze very often had to flee their place. “Does she like you to keep that nice yellow shirt on when you ride the moon? My dear.” She stalked each hidden fear. Hung around each limousine’s door to shout the limitations of tight-lipped prudence. She came out with it as if given a prompt chalked on the flagstones beneath her feet.

Each branch was now bejeweled with strings of limpid drops. The air was clearing. The memories rampaged across her mind stiff with incoherent desires leaving a slush, a mess & an undertow of fear. An arm came across her breast & pulled her back. Immediately Sakini was limp & dry. Bright sunlight shinning through the window cast a sharp-edged stripe over her mouth like a gagging plaster. An iron door clanged shut in her heart.

What was this? Schneider shuffled the notes baffled by his own scrawl. Indecipherable, yet once it must have been clear. He was searching for something specific but it hadn’t announced itself. It was keeping stum. Locked away by his own unhelpful hand. He glanced up. Her lips glowed, covered with a pink cream so thick they ceased to be red but

turned to an iridescent metallic green. Her eyes dipped into his, declaring nothing, searching for nothing. She stooped her head down looking into a swamp.

* * *

So, on a day with its message of betrayal secretly delivered as a parcel of snow, that if you guessed right what it was, it melted away & you were left sweet & untroubled but if you got it wrong you had to pay to get the very day back, Schneider looked into her eyes for the last time.

“And guessed right? Made the right move. I don’t believe it.” Said Sakini throwing herself onto the bed. And, sprawling languidly, hid a yawn as she pulled off her shoes. I stood concealed behind an open door.

When the heavy knock came it was no surprise to me but I could see Sakini was startled as she scrambled into her vest & skirt stuffing her underwear under the pillow as she stubbed her feet into a pair of cloth mules. I thought she was acting as though she had bagpipes for brains. Why answer? But I couldn’t tell her. Then I saw her conceal a short dagger, taken from under the mattress, in her waistband. I took this to mean that she had absorbed Scarface’s worries without actually openly discussing the problem that was about to be thrown up. What had once been fun was now dangerous & it seemed she had been warned.

Sakini hadn’t expected so many ugly brutes to be behind just one loud knock. She felt the hair rise on the nape of her neck for the first time in her life & she couldn’t help noting that fact as well as her fear which made her nipples harden but her slit close as tight as she had ever known. She got all this in a split second at the same time as she saw that

there were three women amongst the bunch of seven who looked as if they knew the street from close contact. It was to the women that she felt she could appeal. Before she had a chance to speak or gasp or cry the thumb of a hard hand pushed open her lips & held her lower jaw. Crushed it so tight she couldn't bite down as her head was forced back.

“What is she doing with Schneider?” One of the women snarled close to her ear as she frisked out the dagger. “What's this for?” She stuck two thin fingers into Sakini's tight cunt then a third to widen it.” “Quick. Be sharp. Before the knife asks the same question.”

The fingers curved onto the bone & the thumb pressed the clitoris. Sakini's body danced around like a dry leaf caught in a rough breeze & she seemed so fragile she might snap.

Twirling on her toes both hands clinging onto the bony wrist of the hand in her cunt she couldn't break free. “She wasn't supposed to be here. What's he done?” Asked a man

frightfully scarred about the face, with a mouth encircled tight by lips like a rubber band.

He thought he was smiling & apparently had no idea that he was gruesome & that the leer utterly betrayed his evil intention.

“Nothing up here yet.” Cracked the woman with a smile that pushed her teeth beyond her

lips. “But let's see.” And she dropped to her knees to thrust her fist right up between

Sakini's thighs, flicking her fingers out wide. A thin low squeal almost only a vibration

shuddered out of the clamped mouth, then the hard hand released her jaw knowing she

would be screaming silently inside as she doubled up & fell back.

“Turn her over.” Ordered another woman with a sting in her voice, first pulling Sakini's

vest over her head to act as a blindfold. And as they turned her upside down the hand slid

out of her slack vagina covered in blood. Two others took a leg apiece by the ankle, slung it over their shoulder by the knee & carried Sakini back inside dumping her on the floor then tossing her onto the bed like a bag of old clothes except she was naked & hooked her over the ends strung out like a side of meat. Now she began to howl, plainly whining. "I like to ride. I like to ride." As she twisted & thrashed up & down the brutes stood around impassively & waited their turn in the torture. And her pleas echoed & were lost, left flapping into a void like the multitude of prayer scarves attached to the twigs of a special tree somewhere in the wilderness. A woman, her dress slashed low to show her breasts nestling unprotected, pressed close, painstakingly rolled a toke with long fingers, glancing at the captive several times as she licked the papers & scorched the gum. While she delicately crumbled this into the tobacco she grunted her disapproval of something but didn't speak it, crossing her legs, poking both ends of her draw before flicking up a flame & holding the roll, gingerly took a long puff. Blue smoke trailed in wisps around her mouth; she rolled her tongue over her full lips. "Let me work on her." She took another long drag, her shoulders shivering involuntarily as the smoke bit her throat. And at this she exposed her nipples, pulling them out over the corset top with a tug of thumb & finger. "Ride? First I must feed you. Suck." And she leaned hovering close over a transfixed Sakini thrusting out her full breasts. "Come on baby. Suck." She repeated in a very belligerent tone. "And don't bite, Honey or I'll . . .mmm." Sakini's mouth engulfed the end of the breast & she sucked hard pumping with her tongue & blowing saliva out from the creases of her lips with the effort to please. As she balanced astride Sakini, her knees pinioning her victim

[You are going to ask why I didn't step out & save this victim. How do I get there?

No excuses Scarface. Try a slip of the pen.]

GETTING READY to FISH.

Schlumper's angry voice with an edge of broken glass crashed down & resonated off every angle of the dark corridor behind the partition. This shouting surrounded Darling as she stepped out of the lift cage & pitched into a corner for refuge expecting to see the man rushing at her. "The first thing I do is spill blood-red paint over my feet & that accident decides my future. Why?" She pictured him flailing his arms wildly. But perhaps in his chaotic studio he had frozen momentarily. Had he forgotten their rendezvous?

Darling began to walk slowly towards the door. Something was dashed to the floor. "And you check your slit for blood every time you fuck as if waiting for a sign. Why?" Nobody heard his sigh. "We're wasting our time." Was he murmuring to himself? "And we can't skate over it any longer." She strained her ears to catch the words as he blundered about.

"Look. Look we're two of a kind." He stormed into thin air. Switched on again.

"Deception made it easier to live with myself in the banal sentimentality you demanded. You thought I had a lover. Paradoxically, that's why it lasted. And yet I still imagine scene after scene of interrupted bliss, a picture that could be put right. How? The dream doesn't tell. Or rather shows there's not quite time to achieve fulfillment between us. Never the clear run unless I remind myself in the middle of being fooled that it has been possible. But somehow not with you. And then I get a brief respite to examine being fooled. And yet." There was a series of clicks as he sorted along a shelf or opened some locks. "And yet at the end the tag declares that it wasn't really like that, a possibility was there, but with regret she must say you weren't the man. Or rather were but didn't know it

at the time. Or did but didn't care." Some light objects were thrown one by one across the room striking the wall & exploding like crackers. "First Heaven: then Hell. And back again. Never in between. Always in your head. Get your feet on the ground." There was a flapping slapping sound. Was someone beating raw meat on a slab? Then in front of the door Darling stiffened intuitively knowing he was going to play her work disc by mistake. She waited & as a song blew through its intro. she relaxed, happy to be wrong. 'Howlin' for my darling hum hum hum Pretty baby Come on home I love you If you hear me howlin' Callin' on my darling Oh Oh Oh eeeee'

The disc squealed & a guttural voice cut in intermittently, indistinct, then clear. She was seized by panic. How had that happened?

"Did you get what I wanted You only had to do what you are used to The problems? Let's hear them They say it's quite a list if you can believe it [Pof P page 155]. I would say you could change the sex in this list & be much closer to the truth."

'Here it is.' She heard her own voice ring clear.

1. S. no longer seeks sexual intercourse of his own accord.
2. Obscene pictures, conversations on sexual topics, the sight of a body do not arouse desire in him.
3. S. hardly ever kisses, & the kiss for him has no value as sexual stimulation.
4. Reactions are strictly local & do not begin to occur without contact.
5. If the prelude is interrupted there is no attempt to pursue the sexual cycle.
6. In the sexual act intromission is never spontaneous.

7. If orgasm occurs first in the partner & she moves away, his half-fulfilled desire vanishes.
8. At every stage it is as if S. did not know what is to be done.
9. There are no active movements, save a few seconds before the orgasm which is extremely brief.
10. Nocturnal emissions are rare & never accompanied by dreams.

How do you collect this 'information'? The track was cut the voice lost. "Fuck. Faulty." Shouted the painter.

Apprehensive, on tiptoes against the wall when she heard the crashes. As he'd shouted 'fuck' her guts had tightened, she had to breathe down an urge to flee & bit her lip hard.

Howlin' Wolf's wonderful voice boomed in again. 'Every time she kisses me she makes the lights go out'

She pushed the door very gently. It gave.

. 'I'm too young to die If you hear me howlin'' The disc was still. It lay in its tray looking like a brilliant modern copy of one of the most ancient sacred objects.

The room was empty & still.

* * *

Still silver morning, again

I lie alone on the summer side of bed thinking of China.

My children bring a few feathers in a folded cap

& a very long slug half as long again as a furled umbrella.

The jagged butterfly dodges a swift by default, again & again.

Beside a deranged Hoopoe the snake icicle brushes a broom bush.

Frogs sing enough monotony to snap off the top of the hill.

& the ship-shaped garden heaves up

& tosses us out of Cuccagna.

+ + +

There was a tree at Kew with hundreds of green

heart shapes stuck into the trunk

each one next to a thorn.

Luckily it was only growing at Kew.

Where lips looped

to kiss.

& limbs longed to entwine.

We picnicked first

under a still silver morning tree

at the end of a year again without Hollyhocks in our garden.

Schneider had to admit that a serious thought sometimes even led him astray, shifting his mind back to a time before he got his dreadful wound & leaving it there stranded. His body naturally desiring the earlier wholeness lumbered after the baited trap seemingly not concerned where they pitched up. Now it was one of those hopeful thoughts that closed the wound, temporarily, as he waited expectantly at the rendezvous he had been given. Paradoxically, Schneider was also aware he was about to be exploited.

Is it possible for one of these healing thoughts to be given a form? For it to enter the speaking world made of something? Resembling something previously only hinted at. As a kind of connotation imposing another slant. A link to what Schneider had never even been able to dream of.

A beautiful thing or person perhaps?

Or must they always reside inside a story told inside another story? Be protected by subterfuge or disguise just as they protect the wound, as the dead thorns protected the living shoot of a tree beside the ruined Yogini temple. If we follow Schneider closely perhaps we can discover what they were after. Pierce this screening layer.

To begin with, to find out, I have to draw the thought out.

At first an incomprehensible loose show of lines gradually allowed the cold & clear spaces between them to be filled, without evaluation, full of the traces of the characters in Schneider's story. Slowly sense, junked or otherwise, appeared in the dreamlike matrix. He knew it was an accretion of what Schneider desired that bound the pieces together. A silting up into a tapestry where nothing could be disentangled without destroying the

structure. Where nothing needed to be deciphered. Where nothing needed to be limited.

All the fluctuations were there but hidden like the current of a river.

All the same Schneider knew he (continually) fell into the very traps he set to protect his world. He imagined the steps he must not take & took them; the words he must not speak & spoke them. He blundered. He was obtuse, indifferent to the obvious way he should go. He was obstinate with no self-reproaching feed-back to soften his challenging modes.

A frivolous thought was even more likely to heal this wound & give it air to harden the scab. But Schneider couldn't distinguish between frivolous & serious. He tried them all.

So it was without hazard that each thought swayed him this way & that to soothe & make him peaceable. He didn't choose the fantasy to slip into up to his neck but followed any one that came along, exactly, with all its obvious flaws, obliviously. Only when it was too late did he look around & realize that to have stayed deep within himself had inexorably left him stranded. He shuddered. He needed to know but he could never 'read' the literal message. Not in a satisfactory way. So when Darling, propelled by a large cash promise & fuelled by an advance, advanced. He was taken in.

[Afterwards, because of the initial deceit, to him the project which engulfed them all, whatever they might call up as excuses, was an empty process, & left him mute, devoid of goodwill & with a trace of a feeling for revenge.]

WHY REVENGE?

Schneider always maintained that nothing serious or frivolous took place. There was no chance. It would have to have been devised & Schneider didn't have time for all that.

He didn't have the nous.

That is possible.

Not even when the names changed? Wasn't he given a little extra something sometimes?

Why should they have done that?

Wasn't anything made easy? Did they have to make things difficult?

Well. Yes. It is useful to know who will turn up when a name is shouted out.

Didn't they sort that out?

I had to guess which Schneider would turn up – think of that. And remember where we had left off. It was all up to me.

SO WHY REVENGE?

Eve questioned herself as she hovered by the house trying to decide whether to go in & finish it. A pathway had been made across the muddy plot by a flattened cardboard box held down at the edges by a few russet bricks with a shovel full of gravel dumped on it. Eve's wig, a mass of frizzy red hair, bobbed as she passed a dirty rag wagging like the tail of a bedraggled dog on the top step, blown by the wind & took the curved steps down to the door. She lingered again; Eve stuck a hand into her bag & fumbled for a second, not finding a key she brushed away the honeysuckle dangling from the arch of the sheltered window beside the door & searching in a crevice unhooked the duplicate key. Sweet & silent it worked in the lock, so she slipped like a shadow over the step. Not a sound to greet her. Not a grunt or whisper. Not a wail or wheeze. Neither a hoarse breath nor that sawing & rasping in the lungs you get before death. An inner door, a real wooden one,

blocked her way to the front. It was newly fitted. Eve could smell the resinous sawn wood & something else; a metallic odour nearly masked by the soft pervading smell. But this other smell was insistent & made her temples throb with the memory it carried. She made herself concentrate on each step towards the door although her mind was reluctant to give up its quest for the place where she had first encountered the perfume. As Eve took hold of the new handle the memory presented her with a picture, whether it belonged to the hallucinatory odour was of no concern to Eve; she accepted it as a fact & whistled softly to signal her surprise. So it had belonged to that prick-teaser. Was it at their first encounter? Eve wrinkled her nose & surprisingly her face took on the look of contempt it had assumed when she met Xax, as if Eve had come across the stink of fungus on a pleasant woodland walk. That gave her the clue; the stinkhorn only grew in profusion near the Hermit's cave, a shelter carved in a low sandstone cliff in which she had played as a child; a cave where there was invariably a large turd in the scorched twigs of an abandoned fire. So the clue she sought was in a cellar.

In dark solitude concealed by a corner, observing the crowd & watching the door, waiting for the fool to show up, Eve remembered how she had stood cool. When she got close to her date, Eve had been drawn by an insuppressible urge to touch the woman's neck, to wipe off the harsh fragrance which enveloped her while noting the blond down on her chest between her breasts & a discoloured patch on her rump like she had brushed her buttocks against a salty wall. With the desire still unsuppressed, Eve had maintained a calm throughout the night.

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She pushed open the door a crack. The scent should have been overpowering for a naked body was lying on the bed, but it was fading. As it was an intrinsic part of the animal had it died with her? She moved. Eve's hand flew to her belt. The girl stretched out in an unmistakably inviting way & from a hidden corner Schneider stepped towards her.

"I wouldn't use an egg to hit a stone so I stopped trying to persuade him to let me go. Now I just go." The girl spoke in a perfect & clear voice.

Schneider laughed. "You wouldn't run against a brick wall! Liar. You never stopped trying."

"Here I am. And I go." The girl made the bed rock, bouncing with her whole body.

"With plenty of cheek." Schneider bent over her. Xax rolled away from under him. "No dallying." She was fully dressed in a few seconds to Schneider's astonishment.

* * *

That's not the way it went. She didn't have a stitch on her back when she opened up to Schneider & she never put a stitch on for days after. She didn't have much of a chance, he set fire to them all.

Peter Snyder blinked & groaned.

One look: She fled.

Dawn cock mounts a golden girl in lego waste.

Sunrise

sows a whirlwind. Demanding plenty not asking for the moon in fact we part.

If I'd written it down instead of trudging

over & over the whirlpool of the buttocks
with you that poem would have gone down like a minnow devoured by a heron.
So in my arms
I cradle you like moonlight is held on water
anyway something tender
I reflect as I read your letters
& decide I'll stay silent.

* * *

A few days later a stone coach arrives
with a traveler & in sleep
this once, rain on the window sounds like a key in the lock.
All those mock tears, a fortress of forgetfulness, avoiding the black comforting
door
giving the vertical void a wordless message
rattling the clay head biscuit box
and branding your cheeks as a child.
Your flame dies
someone calls you about a suicide
setting fire to themselves or kidding.
I know that moment
as my lips
touch the sandpaper

skin of your hand the weight of gold.

I'll stay silent with the moon on every page like my best smile.

Eve missed the rest of the feast.

“She didn’t know that the unconscious is only the plate under the main dish of a sumptuous meal laid on a bare table.” His hands made labyrinthine knots between them as he explained nothing by way of an excuse for Eve failing to arrive.

“Ah. Fish I see.” Said Schneider. “Cod?”

“She didn’t know the whole spread is what works the being . . . most of the dishes are untouched . . .”

“Untouchable.” Schneider said.

“. . . untouched by the unconscious.”

“Untouchable.” Schneider said.

“The main dish can decide the menu.” He said plodding on, determined to defend her as his hands clenched into fists.

“Cod?” Schneider asked.

“Some people don’t get to the main course but blow out stuffing on the starters.” He said, gritting his teeth glaring at the gash above Schneider’s ear.

Schneider laughed, he had caught the glance. “That is if the table hasn’t already been blown to smithereens.”

His main excuse was that the mention of cod fish created more confusion than a queue of codebreakers set to crack a controversy by reformulating the unknown in a more

accessible way. He knew they had rules which didn't help the search for clarity or his auxiliary excuses, as our temporary guests not knowing where they stood had cast questioning looks at each other to further the doubts. Scarface floundered around wondering why they had been scooped up & where they were to be dropped off. [The next stop will be Oval]. And what they had done to deserve the promise of such an intangible destination, the only one he could provide. All he had to work on was a sheet of graph paper stolen from Schlumper. It was covered in scribble, of course.

While the fan whirled above the table keeping the centre of this boxed-in mandala cool they took their places again; keenly feeling the absence of Eve. Bewitchingly poised on a corner seat Darling watched Schneider sharply as she asked. "How do you want me to look?" She felt she had to serve up enough of what it takes for two bodies.

"How do you want to look?" Schneider's reply wavered & closed with a deferential hand gesture but he wasn't indifferent. He knew what it took. There were truckloads of books on the subject. When Eve was absent the unevenness of Schneider's voice became accentuated exposing his real thoughts far clearer than the words. Darling, understanding this, raised an arm off the back of the chair to salute his plight.

"Only in a dream could we move this slowly." She stretched out & flicked the shoe off her foot. "From desire to love."

This is not the place.

There isn't a place.

She said we are in a dream.

That was last night.

Is she a stand in?

No. She is a look-a-like.

What an exquisite feast for the eye--- if it can see her.

* * *

[Another silent pause. Are these * * * three stars important? Scarface shook his head in disbelief. Surely it was too early for anyone to make up their mind].

“You claim that kind of omission is not a rupture, stuffed with silence, to disguise his failure to explain what was seen. But you don’t say what it is.” Eve immediately tackled Scarface on his failure to give out the facts when she came back.

“I only said it was crucial to give them time to realize they can’t think up a different start. They are stuck with it.”

“They are trapped but can’t have a different start? Who says so?” Darling cried.

[Or end. Scarface promised silently].

“In it up to their necks they couldn’t see further than each others lips. So the mess was their own fault.” Eve sucked her lips impatiently. “Is that what you’re saying?”

“It is nothing more than an innocent pause.” Snyder suggested absently. “There is probably nothing in it.” Showing he thought there was more than likely a lot in it. “I can’t answer for what is needed. They get a break. That’s more than they deserved.”

“They need a hint to get on with it. If those stars are seen as an undesirable break they will claim they were cheated.” Eve insisted.

“They were.” Snyder said, adjusting his box of tricks.

“An absence! That’s impossible. They can’t be given one. We wouldn’t have been given that much time to make up our minds & anyway I don’t believe a word that came out after it.” Darling asserted. “It was a disaster.”

“That is no reply. Especially from you. What do you know about taking your time? You can’t get on them quick enough.” Eve scoffed & added vindictively. “Sorry I meant get them off.”

“We must get on.” Snyder yawned. “Shut up. Write. Love knows no destination except a heart, something poetic & enigmatic. And sign it.” Snyder jabbed a finger at the page.

“Sweetie.”

“Will X do?” Eve thought of sucking the pencil to complete the farce but clicked her tongue instead & wrote.

“Slight, a bit frozen, unreliable. Rub it out. Try ‘nightingale’.” She rubbed.

“Just that?” Her pencil was poised.

“Fuck it any bird name will do except robin, just write.”

“This wouldn’t fool anyone.”

Snyder grinned wolfishly.

A man on the radio said politely, ‘We now have the situation where it is estimated that 10,000 robins are singing to a false dawn.’

“There’s a bunch of pretty little fuckers who are fooled everyday.”

“They still have enough time asleep to dream & practice their notes.”

“We could keep boiling this down to a bisk.”

* * *

A scrawled note on crumpled pinkish paper fluttered on the carpet under the curtain of an open window. Crossed out was – ‘try eliminating the bothersome anecdotal content – give expression to each individual value – a context would be a help’ -It flipped over to reveal a child-like drawing of a bird with a fat worm in its large cruel beak. I didn’t realize until I examined that drawing what a burden it was to be the only source of her self-esteem.

The perversion of pouring all that effort into it.

‘Keep your hands off me! You worm!’

Until that weight was lifted off. It was a struggle.

‘Don’t touch me.’

[Scarface read the note & believed he was ashamed to have lapped up all the adulation.

And was struck how unformed she was revealed to be by her writing, yet what a murderous undercurrent the praise carried. A sub-text in which her intent to crush him utterly was evident. And why didn’t she? He had been head-over-heels in love. Scarface didn’t know what saved him; later he was shown to have been totally unaware & that was surprising.]

* * *

At the edge of the plain flames rose & fell. Three or four people huddled around the quick paper fire. Then it was dark again. A freight train lumbered through & a few sparks flew as its wheels crushed pebbles left on the rails by the bare feet of travellers crossing the tracks. An official struck a well-worn dangling section of rail with a long but bent bolt. An express was possible. It was rung again later. Still possible.

Now, with an uneasy heart, choking in a red dust thrown up by these past phantoms, I have to come out with it. And I know when you cum there is bound to be a darkening & a clouding over with sparks flying round the bed. Take care. The shadow of a hand edged over a picture book on a table. Too late!

He blew a piece of fluff off his lip. "What are you looking for?"

"We both know what --- That." Eve said as she glided across the room to take up a manuscript while he rinsed the suspicious look off his face in a white bowl as it filled. No doubt he knew she had arrived when behind the gaudy screen he hawked up a gob as grey as the dawn, as grey as the world with your eyes tight shut. Spitting it out. Evidently this was to be no spiritual journey. 'So I, whoever I am, am not the whole of it or the half of it. Was Schneider still alive for her?' He wondered to the head down in the depths of the mirror as he caught her frown concentrating on the papers she held.

"How could you tell?" She asked, her lips flickering with a smile still touched by fear, wishing he would turn to look at her.

"What?"

Eve threw out a hand, palm up.

"Sometimes I know he smiled when I didn't know it was happening until I saw the smile reflected by someone's response. I could never explain that although there was no intervening boundary, there was no sharing." He paused. "There was always a crumbling distance." He paused again. "There was no one I could tell. You were never available."

He expected a denial.

“We both are aware of that. We had agreed to be silent. Something you always seem to forget.” She said, tucked the papers under her arm & silently clapped her hands. He still wouldn’t look into her eyes.

Across the rippling bed Eve observed him quizzically. Took a guess. She usually knew where her lover’s heart had slipped off to when she caught him half baring his teeth to his reflection the way he did now. She imagined what she habitually saw was always the same slice off a melon from a faraway country. The cut that made the mouth.

She tossed the manuscript onto a chair. “I couldn’t believe Peter Schneider was so damaged.” Eve slipped it out as she slipped out of her clothes & just as naturally she hoped. “What was he always bleating about?” She sighed this question as a complaint as she squeezed over naked to pull the stocking ball off her toes. “Schneider was around a long time ago.” Her soft voice haunted the past, poked a dark corner. “And made a mess of everything he touched.” Eve licked her knee, staying bent. It was difficult to tell whether the black design twining around her neck was a ribbon or metal. The spectacles fell off her nose as she straightened up in the fragrance of crushed apples. “He hardly said a word that day.” She pointed to the papers. “I bet it was the same every day. Did they make out he replied to all their questions?” She tapped the papers. “Inventing these answers for their files?”

“Sometimes.” He replied mechanically. “He couldn’t write.” Then feeling the tug of her curiosity said, “They say he sang with burning eloquence.” It sounded like burning elephants.

“Through his nose?” Eve showed she had thought he was half-dead. A goner unable to . . . well . . . do anything. “Still? Don’t they harp on that a bit?” She had to be sure. But her lover’s head was enveloped in a towel & Eve couldn’t check his eyes as he replied grudgingly, “It seems when you asked Schneider a question at least you got a straight answer.”

“Yes. That was because he had no sense of humour, each query was treated exactly the same & his replies were as automatic as a military salute. He must have been a special nut case, no? For all the rest of **us** to put up with that.” She caught her breath. Had he missed it?

“He didn’t know any different.”

“He did at one time. And he was never late.”

“But he didn’t know he was on time.”

“He appeared to know, however, that was before he was told to peddle a different story.”

Eve’s clear voice didn’t sound reconciled to this explanation. “Was that possible? To make him tell lies.”

“Right on time.” He repeated. Eve felt the chill.

The experimenters had known all the answers before they started to grill Schneider; before she reported back & handed over a notebook filled with scrawl. They had curtly dismissed her observations as ‘abstract’ & ‘inappropriate’ while pursuing their own sentimental agenda.

“I know this sounds crackpot but this report makes it appear as though Schneider’s body didn’t absolutely coincide with himself in anything most of the time & it took him quite an effort of mind to come up with himself at the right moment.”

“Was that possible?” He provocatively mimicked her question. “I didn’t exactly mean to say he was sidetracked.” Eve felt this sounded automatic.

“I never said you did.” There it was again. ‘Sidetracked’ Eve would take him up on that euphemism later. A word she would have used, if not wounded or maimed, would have been mutilated. And she would remind him of his muffled voice.

“Why didn’t they try to make Schneider laugh? She asked tentatively. “Loosen him up.”

“Why do you want to know?”

“Because.”

“He could look as though he was laughing but wasn’t.”

“He was laughing inside?”

“No he was bleeding inside.”

“Because?”

“You more than anyone know he was wounded.”

“With that you don’t get anywhere near the way he was.” She smiled certain this was the right track to open things out.

“Co-opted?” He tried almost to himself. “Enticed? Would those words do?” But just as he knew the words were loaded so did Eve whose eyes narrowed, resentfully, as she continued deferentially, as if quietly amused by his clumsiness.

“Surely not by the momentum of those abusive questions? And it is said, by some.” She added slowly. “That no one could have resisted those temptations, those sexual enticements. What did they expect to gain from them? Other than the abysmal results.” So Eve knew the answer. “What did Schneider think about this project? Disgust? We never hear his voice.”

“No he agreed with it. He said he thought the whole idea was mad & this suited him. Not exactly in those words but that was the gist of it.”

“But . . .” Eve murmured. “The degradation.”

“He went along with it.”

“Did he know?” She whispered.

“It plucked him out of the flames for a few moments to conform & then he was pushed back where he belonged.”

“Was he able to say this? Didn’t he find it bewildering? Didn’t he loathe being manipulated?” Eve watched his face closely. “He didn’t know?”

“Yes he knew he was being tormented.”

“So it was more as if he was looking back at himself, and despite the bleakness of his landscape not recognizing himself, only seeing a stranger & he grinned to protect himself from a similar fate. He didn’t see me?”

“That sounds right.” He said flatly.

“You know the interrogators liked the results; they had fitted into their cock-eyed theories snugly like a hand into a mitten & in the same way it didn’t matter which hand went where.”

“He was indifferent.” He tried evasively.

“Then why did he begin to do it more & more. It seemed willful, pulling a face, almost ignorant. He hadn’t just gone a little cuckoo, he was brain-damaged as you’d have to be to agree to take part in those tests.” She had always thought the money would have induced anyone as poor as he was to do & say anything despite everything.

He looked at his hands. “You still think that grin was meant to mislead you, I know. But I’m sure he wasn’t aware of his deformation. You never grasp that.”

Eve added ‘deformation’ to her list. “I didn’t & I don’t!” Provoked, she was getting exasperated. “It was beside the point.” Eve also knew she was being sidetracked.

He ignored that. This was a place for something else.

“I don’t.” She continued, “But it was always a grin & whether it was artificial or real seems unimportant. I couldn’t discriminate. Who would have been able to? The same teeth were bared. The same feelings flew to my throat. I know you claim he was really wounded then why did you continue to ask him so many stupid questions? Couldn’t you leave it? Who hasn’t betrayed or been duped by themselves . . .”

He ignored this. “So by the time I get to hear of his extra peculiar behavior you are going to make out it was too late to do anything about it?”

“I didn’t say that.” Eve was shocked. “It was out-of-place. That’s obvious.”

“By then it was.” He knew.

“I didn’t say that. Get off my back. Any attempt to clear up this mess always falls through this way. Comes to a misunderstanding.”

“Eve. I’m sure you knew his grin was directed away from you. And I know you wouldn’t bother your head about it, knowing immediately it was vacant so what are you getting at? My mistake? I know I may be imagining that I need to know what was between you two but even now that desire feels as if it were real. And the fact I still wonder if I made the wrong choice while knowing if I had gone the other way, entered another door, I would still be feeling exactly the same doesn’t help.” He paused for her to speak.

So this was the place.

“Why was all the information concerning this given to me as you were mimicking someone else’s voice although I didn’t know whose it was? Not mocking me but using it with fun to move into this stranger’s world by imitating their turn of phrase to tell how close they had become in such a short while?” He asked harshly.

“You know I wasn’t afraid of being mistaken. I felt there was, behind that grin, something to be unmasked, a different look that would help me decide . . . just as you both were trying to decide.” Eve suddenly felt her nakedness. The words she had never meant to utter tumbled out the way a flimsy dress falls off an over eager body.

“Something horrid?” He wondered, as if he had been absent.

“I hoped for the return of an innocent.” By Eve the bed lay open at a corner, like a creamy sandwich with a bite taken out of it. She climbed into the filling. “Schneider had suffered understanding,” he explained, “And come through.” His hands hung limp. In a deferential surrender. A surrender to propriety. Let’s say this is how they clash face to face – that’s all. They nearly meet. It’s always the same time after time. Nearly but not

quite because they remain poised & maintain a distance. Close but arranged. And nothing happens. They get nowhere.

“Yes. But what state was he in?” On the pillows she posed it as a question already answered, “Fucked up . . . completely fucked up.” She looked at his hands. “And how much did they pay the woman, was there only one, to perform with him? Who could take that?” With a man who couldn’t button-up his fly-hole, she thought, but merely curled her lips.

“She plied her trade.”

“What?”

“Desperately lonely he . . . I . . .” He started to frame an excuse, but gave up. All the words he could find would only give an indistinct contour to the way the contact had shaped up. She was right. Schneider’s agreement to take part in facilitating the acts was indefensible. But did he agree? Schneider, with his long face like a horse, loomed close in their dreams. He was paying off the girl in notes of a currency that looked like flattened sardines. And every time the girl sang the line that finished with ‘weren’t ever to be.’ He always heard the word ‘inevitably’ as well. And the girl? Eve could hear them arguing & it sounded very urgent & important but she couldn’t understand a word.

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The living always seem to wish to hurry the doomed onto their fate. To rid the moment of its stark reminder of death with a callous stare of disbelief that belies description. But when they have pushed a victim through the almost intangible threshold into invisibility are consumed by fear of their own vulnerability & eagerly seize any chance to send a few

more unfortunate souls along in front. As if the gates of Hell could be stuffed shut with shoals of the innocent.

Behind a door with a twisted key casually stuck in its lock by two frustrated sods, & left stuck because they were too ham-fisted to fix it (“That is TRUE.” Scarface shouted with delight at the blank wall. “I can tell.”) They lay. Most of their plans were laid in bed while a child tried to pick minute white specks off a dark green wall. For many years a stupefied pitchfork stood sentry by all this horseplay on the bed. A battered toy jeep was parked on a window ledge after the ride (up there in Scotland) in amongst the photographs of the journey, very near to a stone approximating a horse’s head lodged on an oval, empty mackerel tin. There was usually a dog on its back under the bed whining & groaning & twanging the springs with flailing paws but ready to lurch out in a second should a stranger step uninvited onto the page. They could all turn up sooner or later & make an arse of it trolling for the past with a rusty spinner. Perhaps they have. But here & now we are inside the incandescent covers where a soft, soft hand was visible & busy ages before the nest was allowed to appear with its crest parted & lips with a fleck or two of white scum. Then she is spread on her back, buttocks tense kicking up up up in a fury as the achievement was engulfed by a desperate convulsive need for more. “Here it comes.” Lamb dressed up as easy flesh to sacrifice. Burning meat giving a wisp of grey smoke to tangle into the weave of the bare twigs.

I remember our fire roaring against the wall yet still having a stone cold back.

It was as if her warm body had been snatched out of the comfort of its casual dress & mocked. Her bones hurt deep in their marrow with the dull grind of a whetstone on a blade, which sharpened stabbed with remorseless & piercing accuracy into every soft spot of her open body. Bled & left, a pale rag without a cushion of flesh, she was a bauble

& it was being shown to her unremittingly as if in an indifferent vengeance . . . for what?" Her fingers spread wide but caught nothing. The shape of her world had gone. A callous stranger's fist pushed into her groin buffing up the swollen internal organ. She groaned piteously. And I told him quietly with murder in my eye & heart – That is enough. And the repugnant stranger fled out of the door with a grin fixed by fear. But I, too, was damaged by her tears.

Schneider remembered the wound. And keenly wanted to help.

Outside, rushing on a wall the north wind had turned noisily & fiercely thrashed the undecided orientation of the tree leaves into order. A dusty window was made pretty with its collection of sporadic reflections & kept them close so only a pale gleam touched their hands occupied with these passing shadows. Later they lay silent under a white sheet watching the sunlight of late afternoon dividing the table top to give on one side a yellow slice, while on the other it left a slab of fading grey irregular shapes as a background for the downcast eyes on the face in the photograph on the book's dustjacket. A pink buttock suddenly obliterated this face. Someone then compulsively flattened her bursting lips onto Eve's lips. The identity of the stranger was lost in the grey blur as their hands searched for the book under her rocking bulk.

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She was pursuing Darling relentlessly (Came after her is the way to put it). Wounded, Schneider followed them after their paths crossed, hoping for a glimpse of something extraordinary during the chase; he had seen nothing. Now, peering out of the shadows he was in for the kill.

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The table collapsed under their weight.

“You bastard. You never let anyone finish their fun. Why did you have to butt in? You must have known that gimcrack piece of furniture would only just have carried the load, it was shaky enough without you jumping on.”

“Who asked you?”

“I’m telling you.”

“Did she ask for it? No.”

“She was unable to resist.”

“You suspect I planned it.” He guffawed. He would have been delighted to be accused.

[The assailant pushed fingers & thumb into Darling’s vagina & pulled out a paper cylinder which was tossed to the floor. Then, forming the fingers into a cone, forced a hand then part of the forearm up inside. Darling began to howl when the assailant’s fingers began to probe & pinch inside her womb.]

When I thought of each word as a BETRAYAL (or what the scribble on the last page added up to when it came into range showing the scar where an end is described as a beginning) while using every word beginning with 'i' to light this page to get beyond the point where **it** is a manner of speaking, into that imperceptible event, the placing of a touch of colour which banishes ambiguity I was still in the subterranean passage linking a kind of irregular wilderness of the city to an almost symmetrical one where the people roaming around were just the same crowd that had absolutely nothing to do with the others. Then I was struck by the ruin's painted walls & roof covered with unusually coherent (perhaps even significant) lines that had an ingenuity the secret of which it was not necessary to get to like to look at. And as I passed the blindfold man where disused tramlines run smack up to the wall he had sprayed his name on, with an ingenuity the secret of which is not necessarily easy to get, the word this maniac set to burn had sprayed, was nothing but another illegible graffiti under the thunder of trains.

So, happy to escape a welter of meaning, up I strode, up the white-washed up to pristine, renewed white steps again up & out into the air. 'Cum cum cum drum on the black hole.' I hummed. 'Contrive yourself again to fail to understand to exaggerate a validity that has eroded, little by little, side by side with those who, unlike me, are not deceived.' In reply. Awful sirens yawled close by. Their flights of hostile sounds flailing & ripping the backs of the crowd I'm concealed in. We part. And take to our heels. They part exposing a vagina dentata, a yawning hell jaw bomb blast cunt.

I think the word blocks out the picture.

The word blocks out the picture. I think?

I think: The word blocks out the picture.

Try again working on a borrowed inalienable presence

With irreversible love to spin to penetrate

& so go on lurching in an indifferent world.

You know lots of hazardous trickworks disguised as play.

Beware a multicoloured thought

Made in an effortless way.

My eyes in liked silence

Ride some other fluke made by the splitting of a shadow

Dance in a blank silver light lined space

Of a photograph

Glitter

Spying on the love scene years underground now rolling illuminous in the black

asbestos forecourt.

Faded, ill & squat perhaps night steals the bursting wish?

I couldn't quite make out what was in the crook of that dawdling child's arm from long ago, peeping over the parapet of that forsaken parking lot. A catapult? A sparrow? Had he seen the smashed bodies? I remember the child grinned, not affectionately not brassy but like an idiot joining a queue to take a flight to leave the airport as soon as he had arrived. And I know that flight is it.

"Is it the one we came here on?" A voice whispered as I took my place on a bench.

A lecture started. "I don't talk about philosophy." He snapped briskly flashing up a quote on the screen. 'Everything that is said has been said already' & as he read it out loud the host jumped up & said, "I think there is an echo in the microphone." And fiddled about. Not looking completely puzzled the lecturer continued feeding on a vision of elimination propped up by jokes.

Leaving, I glanced at a straw coloured plastic chandelier stuffed in a waste bin with its still pool holding sharp droplets standing up like segments of a crown ripe to puncture, & hesitated. Immediately she was a pace in front of me. Mechanically I hooked a finger into her belt at the back. It was fastened tightly round her waist but as she leaned forward against my pull she held her coat closed as if fearing she would hemorrhage if she let go of the collar flaps. There was another denial of the illusion of my belongingness to chew on.

Although the words fly over the humdrum & change its look, they skirt what is there staring me in the face. Or take it for granted rendering it invisible & impossible to reconstruct the same as it was. This is kidding yourself there is a correlation or flow between lovers when it could all be coincidence. But how can they be implicated with

such a different feeling of the shared moment? Then, by running through the scene again in my head, I saw someone negligently nudge him with an elbow & press their knuckles hard against his bones. I knew I was right because she shivered. “Show me.”

Nevertheless or more. Now if you are fading stay long because that same still pool reflects her desire. It awaits her, to prise open unopened sensations & carry them off, to steal them.

“Come away?”

The two girls who looked like sisters didn’t hang around long clinging to his arms. They said they’d have every stitch off & we (they said to themselves) can have it. However they also said to themselves, it’s not me it’s only my flesh so it doesn’t count as anything. You didn’t hear that right.

I did.

Having reasons but no love isn’t anywhere near good enough. They put the whole of life in jeopardy because they are nothing but a sweeping motion.

* * *

Clutching a single envelope coated with honey & brown sugar, socks like kippers, I stood in the Monday queue.

She said she’d start out when the frost had thawed.

Wistfully I listened to Schonberg’s romantic music thundering over the sound of running water. The notes floated away up the chimney. As I hovered around she had dwelt on a description of the holes knocked in the walls of a wrecked house; the impenetrable

darkness beyond, being unable to tell the depth & of the unquestionable horror of being there alone.

I felt I should console her. Why was she so attracted to these ruined places? Remember her reluctance to leave a burnt out mill?

* * *

We met at Waterloo by the sunken island underpass above a row of hidden cardboard shanties. In the glow of the hobo fires. I think I hear her say, It is going to be an indefinite honeymoon. And think no more of it. I should have. I look around & say, What do we do with all these possibilities only for the rich rich rich & richer? They have them covered, she gave a middle finger sign dismissing any thought that 'they' care.

I still puzzle about that sign.

Then she pulled me to one side of the abandoned brown-stained hospital, as I am sanding my new boots shiny soles on the gravel & pointed to the east at the green evening sky.

Expecting a star I can just see the top of Canary Wharf above the mist. Thinking of mad cow's disease crossing over the species gap, I said.

And off to the ball?

It was like taking a crowbar to a spider's web.

But then I got waylaid. She angled each knee out to flip her thong along her legs & off.

Rolling on her back just enough. A stall. I could choose anything from off the table to use. My hand hovered over the goodies. The imprint of your bare arse on a damp serviette caught my eye. I picked it up. She snatched it off me calling me a fool to hanker after keepsakes. But she pocketed it. Smiling glassily.

We sauntered beyond, by trembling river light, to a steel ribbed cage café. And shivered shrinking into our sleeves for it was growing colder. Goodbye February with your knifing wind. I can hear the stamp of iron in her voice & wish to change it but as love is weird & isn't a feeling I rustle my mind around the unknown subject & dream of holding a warm lover's hand while I don't listen.

"Precisely." She banged the table with a blue veined fist.

I edged closer. "What did I say?" I asked eager to know how I had got it so right, my fingers trembling on the edge.

"Nothing." She thundered. "You said nothing."

Possibly this is the moment or opportunity to gauge the mood, I spoke softly to my head.

Your heart will be more accurate it replied, try that. Did I dither? No. I. Was it a question?

"Are you listening?"

I looked down at the sawdust beneath my feet. "How can I not?"

"You daydream that's why not. Diversions & fillings they show on your face like the wind in a tree."

"Tell me again."

She almost howled with frustration. "I haven't told you yet."

I must have looked both nonplussed & relieved. I clasped my hands. And said nothing.

"What makes you think I'm letting you in on anything?"

"The location?" I guessed.

"Wrong. You would only catch on if every word began with an 'i'". She came back in her deliberately enigmatic way.

“Come again.”

“Impossible.” She glared over the word as her mouth set around it

‘I spoke. I speak. I croak. I squeak.’ I said to myself.

“Try one.” She challenged. “Now.”

Was she expecting a swift response? I grinned at the thought.

“You see. A silly grin is the best you can do.” She said out of a wooden look.

I was never that quick on the uptake. Sometimes it took me years to get it. Think how much stuff there must be queuing up out there waiting for me to click, so it can become flesh & enter the world. Now you know why I jump when the bell rings. Wondering who or what I missed is on the step this time dying to fill me in.

I drop my gaze under the maja’s gaze & look instead at the raw patches of decaying skin patched with a red ochre warmer than the rest of her colours. I missed her pitying glance chasing after my eyes.

Meanwhile in the demolished area she had taken possession of & destroyed even further. She handed me a black & white postcard of a cityscape, with a blank white label stuck over the street name & said, It had come to that. Someone had floated the stamp off. I scratched at the label.

We cannot tell where we are.

Over the way by a wall stained with black lines from the leaks & dribbles off the street, beneath the trundling anomaly of an overhead underground railway I dream, note, & keep my mind milling around fish tank luxury while she fixed me with a glassy eye waiting for a reply.

My response, hemmed in by her intense interest, is lame & adds to the deterioration in progress. “Where are you trying to get to? Because you won’t get there this way.” I shuffled a hand gesture out into the draught as the door swung wide open. Some snowflakes swirled in around our knees. She didn’t speak. I can’t describe the glare that flitted momentarily across her face, & shook my guts, as she sprang up & headed out into the sodden night. “I’m going there right now.”

I hadn’t believed it was a destination.

* * *

[Scarface watched her leave following the reflection in the plate-glass catching with it sticks of moonlight on the water. And the many questions which remained unanswered for him that night were going to stay unanswered.]

Out in the capricious wind she swept along the riverside, drifting amongst the errant festive crowd like a leaf.

In the river a massive baulk of timber floating past the trailing willow branches suddenly up-ended & was swiftly engulfed by the treacherous current. Several yards downstream this railway sleeper appeared again rising out of the river rearing as if at the climax of an encounter with a submerged monster. Then, its symbolic play finished, it sloshed back & continued to bob placidly without a ripple. But that wasn’t the way the story went.

* * *

(After Scarface left. Or did he discard me?) I found her again. Obviously there will be no eloquent way to console her amongst the debris of anger she had built the nest in. It was like climbing down into darkness although there was less room. Part5s of her waxen body

looked & felt like putty; dented by each jab it got & retaining the mark as another & another were made.

Nothing special flew into that mind sewn up like a black pocket & so it was eaten up. Disgruntled? By the gloom? Nothing but coloured cloths & string exposed by the removable shutter of sunshine.

No just appeared & disappeared as indifferent as that. It is a complete cover.

“But sometimes with a helper?” She wheedled.

Xax came stalking in against the flow weaving her thin body between imagined insults (remember how she walks) but there was a perplexed look as well as she said. “There’s room for something else before you say the word.” Down every scattered garden, on every rough stone, under every root there was an arching space, a large curved arrow of wishes & choices multiplying.

I knew before she said it, having shoveled ordinary prose out like cement rolling down the mixer spout. And said so.

“Ridiculous.” She shrugged him off. But felt she was always there for him, too available, too ready to please. She swept her hand over her eyes brushing thinly pencilled eyebrows, two curves on a dark arch of plucked skin & sighed after the word. I would have preferred ‘radiant’ but what can you expect from a parasitic imagination. A wayward wriggler. But.

“Never mind, you wait & see.”

With this attempt to neutralize her shrug she didn’t smile like an erotically charged gold-digger but looked grim watching him as if waiting for cockroaches to crawl out of his

arse. And he stared back as if seeing butterflies flying out of her ears. It was a smooth setback. It was not a thrill. Not a ripple on it.

As they locked in this glare Xax's neck stiffened as she spun round like a fan-tailed peacock with an expression of hatred decaying on her face. She sheared close to him her eyes already fixed on a lengthy crossing to some delicious meeting.

I know it's useful but mechanical workmanship is likely to get in the way here. Watch it. Cruel flirtatiousness is never frighteningly meticulous but it is shifty opening up the promise of more beyond – but is it satisfying? Only a bony shadow trying to fatten up the bait would try that on, try to snaffle the remainder which sometimes has been rubbed away at too much.

Rocklike, in a flash, S. had it

S. understood,

S. knew,

'I think now what came first.'

And said. "Love made it possible to discern her in amongst the mass: To be swept away by it."

"That 'love' was a useful word to say. It must be a word to hold in their mouths." She mocked his flight into an initial.

Today.

Past fucked deadly ghosts suddenly brought into action by emotions obvious scorpion
sentinels stinging dust with reason we choke on explanations that are worth nothing but
unbalanced emptiness cruelly constructing steps backwards into thin air today trashed
coaxed into a concrete boat by the futility of painting words making sense and despite the
child's voice tinkling bell stalling time rampages unrest unlove the future like a dead cow
belly slit and full of stones that still will not sink in the head of the loch as I lie & wait by
a never to exist quagmire and lie.

A STAY- AT – HOME.

Although fascinated, Snyder ignored what Eve had said & carried on working on the
'machine' the single page the single plane the vertiginous mass being built from rubbish
they had acquired. Where he stood ankle deep in debris was not an easy position to hold,
he said to himself, as he drew a charcoal line & wrote 'cut' on the protruding piece of
wood but never cut it off. As he sighed 'sky' he chalked a swarm of blue marks above the
main central plane of the construction & then rubbed them off. Some blue still remained
especially in the part nearest the half figure (no gender yet). Before fixing a D section of
black painted wood he painted twelve light violet dots on the rectangle of green below
the half figure & stepped away in disgust. Snyder bent low saying, "No better." His eyes
were level with & squinting at two round yellow plastic counters each with a hole in the
middle like Chinese cash that were looped on a double length of shiny white easily frayed
(like nerves) twine which served to hold his inner workshop door shut. To do this it had

been tied to a nail in the jamb at trouser pocket height then wound as many times as it would go around a cuphook in the door until the counters served as a very unstable stop or catch. The door was padded with four inch wide strips of pipe insulating cloth, a loosely woven brown string stuff, full of grey dust.

“Concentrate Snyder, all that junk is starting to come apart & pull you along alone with it. Throw it away before it’s too late.”

“We were fishing from the boat & Eve carefully took her knife out of the sheath & threw the knife in the sea.”

“I know. I know. But Darling helped.”

Snyder noted that there were three of them in the boat in Darling’s story. There had been six people packed in & the dinghy was down to its gunwale. Two of the girls sat rigid clutching their arms not daring to move thinking they might capsize. They looked as if alone & Schneider grinned at the moon while Scarface fished over the back.

* * *

Schneider tied the sheath on with soft white wire. It was the last thing added to the construction before the yellow twine & the blobs of paint. He drilled three holes, two at the right, one through the top strip & one through the bottom strip & then drilled the third through the top strip at the extreme left. He then threaded the yellow twine through all three to form a large loop to hang it all up. Knots in the twine held it blocked in the holes. This twine was also threaded through the flattened loop on a tourist trinket cowbell as far as the counters & then tied to the rest of the piece. The small gilt bell had an edelweiss painted on one of its flattened sides & squiggly scrip on the other.

“I don’t know where this bell came from,” Eve said. “It rings?” She flicked it with a finger.

*

*

*

Snyder had used a small hand-drill to make the holes & when he had finished gave it to another child while he mixed a lump of light blue from Flake white & French ultramarine. Thinking that even when it turned grey that would be O.K. . . . length of time it would take . . . parallels etc.) He brushed the paint on the top edge of the protruding piece of silver ramin at the bottom left-hand side. He unstuck an old label reminding him to put a figure’s head on (i.e. draw a head onto an already drawn figure which involved drawing it all out again he remembered because the neck came right up to the edge of the board on the right-hand side.) Was it a woman? She peered at it.

Snyder ignored that & picked up an irregular snippet of a photograph that kept fluttering off the wall where it had been fixed several times by two tabs of tape. It had the figures’ outlines already cut out & was only showing the rails of a ladder into a swimming pool, part of the pool & part of the tiled edge.

He rang the bell that had a flat spoon-shaped clapper swinging on a similar loop to the exterior one through which the twine ran.

She looked up. Snyder ignored that glance & cut the first piece of board to its shape & as he sanded it clean faint pencil lines & black shapes appeared from an old painting. Were they words? He decided to varnish that piece & use the rest of the rectangular board to stick the fragment of colour photo on.

The bed spring was leaning against the wall over a tap with a blue spout. A tiny painting of a woman waving was balanced on the tap's wall bracket. This picture was one of a pair.

Before applying paint to the sisal Snyder squeezed four patches of yellow paint, two lemon & two permanent, onto the yellow bottom corners of the square. Then he scribbled with a yellow painted pencil stub in the bottom patches until both yellows had mixed & then added a dark green to the patch & moved the paint with a flexible knife into a wheel shape around a complex faint white, red & yellow patch about the size of a ha'penny & felt he had seen a flower's spring summer & autumn in a few seconds.

Snyder scrapped the paint off & wiped the square with a rag. She ignored that.

When he had tied the cowbell & counters onto the ramin where it showed between the left-hand square & the negative second irregular piece, the twine had continued a few inches & was knotted to a length of sisal which in its turn was tied to the wood in the gap between the right-hand square. The sisal was then daubed with yellow, green & red paint. He decided to put a face on either side of the square & see how that looked.

Then he took four small identical rectangles of white primed hardboard that had been lying on a shelf for months & stuck them tall-ways onto the two parallel strips from left to right. He pinned a note to one of these to remind him to get or make a detailed picture of a liner.

We know now that after a few days Snyder decided to draw two heads for each side & wait & see.

And that the next morning Snyder repainted the black parts of the three central strips, starting on the central one with a small stiff brush loaded with black oil paint. Almost straight away he disliked the texture so started to transfer paint onto other areas on the two adjacent panels. Dollops of paint dripped onto his canvas pumps. Black paint rained everywhere.

Some nail holes caught his eye on the left-hand side so he tried to fill them with a few splinters covered in paint, they were half cerise half fawn. He had to glue them in.

He decided to draw & then trace two heads on transparent paper so that he could stick them over the painted surface with P.V.A. & keep the colours & have the drawing as a subtle detail. He chose some squared tracing paper & finished up with a faint scribbled woman's head; an ass's head & a part of a cow's head all indistinct with green, red, yellow & blue marks in crayon under them that could have belonged to a skeleton.

Later he painted a light green horizontal stripe on the right-hand side panel & immediately wiped it off leaving a green mark over white & grey.

He added another lighter green lump of paint on the string nearer the apex (it was hanging on a nail).

Snyder took two very small pictures each of a figure waving (one a woman one more a girl) & glued them at either end of the two parallel pieces of wood painted with aluminium. Placed a length of yellow doweling behind them along with a toy jeep (dug out of the garden). He put a corroded hand whistle that looked as though it had partially melted in a fire on the shelf & propped the picture up against a white lump of rock that

vaguely resembled a horse's head near a neat white box that contained a folded picture of a leg & half of one side of a man in a parachute & two unreadable notes on pink paper.

The bell tinkled once more as a strong gust of wind swept through the workshop door. He heard a faint rustling, a negligible sound & an almost imperceptible bump.

Summoned. He had to go.

* * *

Schneider shuffled his shoes on as he reached for the catch of the door. Then held his breath & listened.

“Who is the ugly looking fucking squirt we are supposed to be seeing?” Someone held up a crumpled photograph in the dim light.

“Snider. Sir.”

“Snider? What kind of a fucking name is that?”

“It's his. Sir.”

“He can stay behind.”

“He can stay behind? Sir.”

“Correct. You've got it in one. With a name like that he should have been left behind & given a medal years ago. Leave him behind.”

“Yes sir.” They turned abruptly as the photo fluttered to the ground & marched away from the door. S. didn't open it.

