



VALERIAN  
TEA

I  
jet of silver hits the line  
dark it flows out and back again  
whatever you said was taken back  
a guilty face staring on the train  
lichen on red tiles  
cryptic secrets born in doorways  
lost but found again it must have been years  
transformers hum and crackle  
she let it happen here first time  
worship the spot  
every sacred temple has it's mark  
this one is the sign danger  
blood samples wait in rows of white fridges  
it's affected her psychologically you said  
she's still in gladesville they won't let her out  
don't worry she believes in an afterlife  
they'll meet again  
i'm going away soon  
train noise the rushing disturbance  
no i'm going to see dave  
they might accept me they might  
let me be in let them let them  
her hair reaches down her jumper  
black and slack as face white  
never trust once out you've never in  
no luck the samples wait  
suspended red and silver in  
their fridges i only wanted  
the thing spark accept graph mode  
front line edge tone drive  
never there and gone now  
rock me to sleep shaking  
the train takes me there i only  
say they drove no effort  
the tracks run all the way to  
the watch band  
never mind there is nothing  
out there to keep me going  
romantic novels always collecting dust

don't shut me, told you once  
it's life not art  
art is what you make it  
life is what makes you  
they put it in the fridge  
how ironic god must be  
let me know when you've finished lord  
ugliness comes to claim us  
at last it was about time  
we were looking for you  
dry sticks of lantana  
bush grass trees high tension tower  
bats swirled up there the sound sparking  
don't touch they're shorting it out  
you'll get a million volts  
i don't care touch it once just to show  
did that all your life fool  
the pain comes in again  
not allowed to shoot it now  
soon the end it's so sad  
who will be there not  
my parents i hope please  
don't let them come i could never stand  
the shame of that last encounter  
pull up the sheet of snow  
back on the train they talk to me  
all my friends going over to her house  
where is it look in the fridge  
you've sure to find it there

## 2 SUSTENANCE

There is a girl called Cyndra, living in Sydney. She may be seen in many places. Sometimes one might catch a glimpse of her at the local shops, buying fruit or bread. She would seem short, slightly tanned, shy, not very old. Her hair would be worn up in a short ponytail. For clothing she favoured the local second hand store, and she wore what she bought with the correct degree of flair to look good, mixing old clothes with expensive new ones in an interesting, attractive way.

If one were to follow her home from the shops, her small flat would be found to match her style perfectly. It was in an old building, in an Eastern suburb, Eastern enough so that the sea breeze could cross the horizon from the distant beach and blow the curtains with a fresh scent of salt water and seaweed. Waiting for her would be her tiny black and white cat, sitting on the concrete landing next to the front door. It would jump up when she arrived home and rub itself between her ankles. She would pat it's head and let it in, and before unpacking groceries she would pour a bowl of milk and take it out onto the veranda. There she would sit and look out over the teeming city in the distance, the rolling waves of red tiles and brick that ran from the city towers to her home. The soothing sounds of traffic, of millions of people working, would relax her.

Later, and she would be inside, drinking rosehip tea and watching the news. Or perhaps reading the papers with her big reading glasses perched on the tip of her nose and threatening to slide off. The cat would curl tightly in her lap and sleep. It would leap off when she stood up and went to fix dinner. She would chop vegetables in time to a song on the radio, and put them in a pot with a can of tomato soup. When it was ready she would grate a little cheese into it and eat it. Some of the cheese would be saved, to feed to the cat in her lap while she ate. It would take the grated slivers neatly from her fingers.

Sometimes, not very often, instead of making dinner she would decide to go out. Then she would take her good

clothes from the wardrobe. Usually she wore a long black dress, and a blouse under a black leather jacket with silver zips. She dressed carefully, with carefully chosen earings and antique jewelry from a large collection. Later she would adjust the large hat on her head, smile at the mirror, stroke the cat and lock the door of her flat.

It would be a short walk to the taxi stand, from there a minutes ride to a good club or hotel. The sort of place where the rich would come, to play, to talk, to admire one another and enjoy their wealth. While her appearance did not suggest she was rich, she would be able to fit into the crowd completely, her dress and manner being perfect for this. The other patrons would be eating and drinking, and she would join them, maybe buying a drink at the bar and turning to listen to the band, or sitting at a small table and ordering a meal.

It would not take long for her to be noticed. From across the room a businessman or merchant would see her, and decide to join her. Her beauty seemed to increase on these occasions, and she would shine through the crowd like a unique gem. The man would sit at her table and introduce himself, and she would smile and dazzle him with perfect teeth. They would talk and laugh. Maybe he would ask her to come over and meet some of his friends, and she would agree. They could sometimes form a large party for awhile. Everyone would comment on how lovely she looked and she would thank them for their kindness.

Later she would leave in the company of the businessman, going out into the cold night to his car. They were always large and expensive cars. She would sit beside him while he drove back to his big house or apartment, talking languidly, seeming tired.

There, he would park the car, turn to her, and kiss her. She would return it undehatedly, and listen as he told her how much he loved her, and how she could be very happy with him. She always listened very solemnly, looking into his eyes with her own large and deep. They were very large and deep, those eyes, and a man could fall through and be lost forever in what lay behind them. They seemed to open

onto other worlds, strange worlds vast and deep, lonely as hell. Looking through them, he would see things; snow drifting silently from a dark sky, a sunset over a heaving green ocean, or mountains silhouetted against the full moon.

Slowly he would stop talking, and only gaze back at her, while she began to stroke his face, running cool fingers over his brow and his cheeks. His eyes would begin to fade, and close, until there was just a small space between the lids, and his breathing would slow until it seemed he must be asleep.

Stopping her caressing of his face, she would reach into his coat and draw out the wallet. Carefully extracting the cash from this, she would replace it and draw his keys from the ignition. Then she would leave the car and approach the house.

Inside her fleet form would dart from room to room like a shadow, carefully harvesting the things she found there. Money, jewelry, watches would find their way into her pockets. The moon or streetlights would flash from her teeth as she moved from room to room.

Back in the car, and the keys would be replaced in the ignition. All this while the man remained in the trance like state, waiting her return. She might smile at him a last time, perhaps stroke his hair, before raising his wrist to her lips.

Her razor sharp incisors would rip expertly through the skin and flesh, and sever the veins underneath. With the wrist pressed firmly against her mouth she swallowed the warm blood that coursed from it. The sharp smell of copper would fill her nostrils and sometimes, though rarely, a single drop of blood would escape from the corner of her mouth and run down the mans arm into his sleeve. The rest was swallowed, at first in great gulps as it ran strong, then slower as the heart weakened and slowed. She would feel a deep inner rebirth as new strength flooded through her, and a feeling of joy.

For an hour or more she would remain, while the last life drained from the figure beside her. At last, there would be no more, and she would leave the car and open the drivers door, and tenderly lift the body from the seat, displaying great strength. Inside it would be propped up on the toilet, with the wrist lying in the sink besides it, and a razorblade left neatly on the soap rest, smeared red.

Or, she might move the body across the seat and drive to the beach. The corpse would be carefully committed to the surf and the car abandoned. Or else the car and body would be left burning at the bottom of a cliff.

In the morning she would be home in her flat. With a breakfast cup of Earl Grey she would gaze serenely out at the horizon, while the sun rose and lit the city. Out there someone would be missed, or a body discovered. Inquiries would discover nothing, no-one would remember the night before very well, and for some reason no-one would remember the young girl they had all been entranced by. It would be surmised that another lonely businessman had taken his life quietly after a night spent with friends. It would rarely make the headlines at all. Later she would sort the items she had taken, deciding what to sell and what to keep. The money would be put in the teapot on the fridge.

She would go and sunbathe on the beaches of the city, and read in the libraries, and visit the art galleries. She loved to walk through parks and gardens, or cemeteries, where she would look at the gravestones and wonder about death. It was a mystery she had never resolved, and she knew she never would.

She also liked walking in the native bush, and listening to birds. She loved concerts and attended many. She would see films and dance in clubs. Sometimes she met a young man she liked and spend the night with him. They would see each other for awhile, then move apart, and he would soon forget her completely.

So it would go, until she again felt the first signs of time weighing upon her spirit, the first faint touch of mortality, and she would again dress and go out into the world. In the morning perhaps another news story about a death. And she would stroke her cat and play

records and maybe read, and later go out shopping and buy vegetables and bread at the local shops.

③

### END

Things said will come to pass  
As they surely must,  
While all our worldly mess  
Will crumble into dust.  
Only you are pure enough  
To live beyond the day  
Of sorrow on the wind  
And running human day.  
The sky can meet the earth,  
The sea pressed out between,  
And roaring crashing surf  
Observe all we've seen.  
Beyond the light of day,  
Rising like a cry,  
Whatever words we say,  
Blown to the sky.  
Floating into space.  
Distorted by the sun,  
Crashing in the waste,  
In the great beyond.

#### UNDERSTAND NO MORE

Fresh french bread, fresh butter  
Fresh olives, fresh salmon paste I think  
I bought today, here on the table  
And in the fridge in their jars  
We can eat them later, I dont mind  
It's all the same, call me when you wish  
Let me share some with you  
I will put on the good record  
The good song, the one  
Which makes the goosebumps go up  
And down, I felt them, remember  
On your arm, those marching hairs  
It was good, I remember  
That is true, one of the many things  
I know which don't change.  
You change all the time, and now  
You have changed again, but I  
Don't know why, but if I did I would  
Do anything to change back

I changed myself, remember, I threw away a lot  
of things I really loved, for you, I stopped watching  
those movies, reading those books, gave away my  
cat, where is he now, he gave you rashes and the  
creeps, my best friend, he used to sleep on the doona  
between my legs, before ever I slept between yours, he  
had black and white fur, I loved him, a perfect being  
no conscience at all, only desire and satisfaction  
but that included me, excluded my presence, he liked  
having his ears scratched and his jaw, and his eyes  
rubbed, things I was happy to do, happy to do for you,  
you liked having your eyes rubbed to, having your  
back stroked, I could almost make you purr, we did it  
all, I always made sure, when he was gone and it was  
you that needed me, I looked after you, made sure, and  
when you showed me your three page articles in  
the magazines you bought, the ones with bound spines,  
glossy pages of watches and perfumes and clothes that

you were supposed to like and want, or what they said  
you were supposed to want, and I believed too what I read  
and always made sure that you had it, there when we  
fucked, I drew it out and made it last as long as I could  
so you would like it and like me, so you could tell your  
girlfriends about it later, so they could smile and  
giggle when they met me, and you could feel proud,  
I wanted you to think you had made the right decision,  
it was the same reason I did what I did about the books  
and the cat, the love had to be right too, right to make it  
right and bright and good, Diet Coke good, shiny  
wooden floor good, Reebok and Penneer good, American  
movie good with batman stars and cars and wholesome  
love scenes the censors would like if we invited them  
in to watch, they would OK them for the big screen  
so everyone could see we had it right, did it right,  
filmed in slow-mo with drops of moisture on our  
foreheads catching the light and our eyes shut tight,  
your hair streaming down your back, filmed through  
gauze, glossy highlights moving slowly, a line of  
wetness running down past your collarbone where  
it pools in the little hollow where your tendons on your  
smooth neck stand out tense...

I would never say this to you, never let you  
know, but you remember how I would always open  
up for you, reveal my true self under the reserved  
exterior, all my fears, all the stories from my soul,  
my dreams, I would open them up, all the fictions  
and falsehoods, all the repressed bullshit, I made it  
all up for you, it was my art, my crowning glory,  
who knows but if everyone doesn't do it, that front  
behind the front, the new layers we create, the false  
heart at the centre, I made that for you alone, it  
was my greatest gift, the gift of a creatively inverted  
soul for you to unwrap, I watched and was glad  
when you accepted, you believed and took it, like a

trophy, my bitterness, those things I said when I was tired, those flashes of the hot core, my power, my halo I gave to you...

Maybe I well, maybe this is a mistake, maybe not. The sound of bottles rolling down a bitumen street, late at night, a sound in the silence so evocative that when I hear it I stop, and on a windy day at the marina the ropes on the yachts, with metal pulleys, that strike the aluminium masts with a sound like Tibetan temple bells, a sound of power, of grace and positive flowing emotion, when I hear these I can see things too hard to explain, when I hear wind in cassuarina needles at the beach, and the thunder of a dumping wave at night over the popping of the fire, and a clear river running, rain on red tiles, all these are my totems, there are no more true things than these sounds, no honour, no real emotions, no style or pattern or hope, only sounds which mean nothing and are not charged with value judgements, just things...

There are things which cannot be said, which have no words to explain or name them, not related to any emotion, unless it be wonder at their actual existence, things which are beyond, no senses designed to shape them and therefore no way to describe or depict them, not objects or poems or situations or scenes, not even light or dark which are basic within and without our minds, they are beyond that, they exist, I know them but I cannot put them where you can see them, there is only this to explain them; some songs, some paintings some books bring them closer, but they always retreat when concentration lapses, they are closer to me now than before...

If I ever told you this you would not understand, I know this instinctively, it is not as though you were vicious or stupid or slow, but when I look at you and we talk and move and things happen and we go along in time, I know one thing, that your mind is as barren of these things I have attempted to describe as mine as full of them, I don't mean to imply any lack, it

imagination or art or anything, but these do not correspond, they are outside...

All that is left is sex. The lifecraft. The glue. The magnet. All that is left is the body, and the other body. Personal possessions. Then there is habit, and custom, and convenience...

I hate my soul. If only I could be rid of it, we could be happy together, forever...

## 5

### OBSIDIAN

The people of Obsidian  
Live in blocks of glass,  
Like ants in a bottle.  
I see you there ...

A singers voice  
Can break a wineglass.  
I want to smash you.  
I want the pieces.  
They are cold as ice  
And twice as clear.  
I can do it  
With a word or two.  
I want the pieces more  
Than the whole.

Everyone wants pieces,  
The whole is too big.  
You want a piece  
All for yourself.

How do you know its yours  
Unless you break it?  
That final moment,  
So precious.  
The pieces fall,  
Proof that you had something  
For a moment.

You shatter before me,  
Scatter yourself around,  
Stabs cut my feet.  
I walk on them,  
Relishing the pain.  
Here in Obsidian,  
Where people are made of  
glass,  
So delicate,  
Listen.  
A single word could end us all:  
Fire!  
Carry a hammer.  
Free yourself at all costs.  
You too are glass.  
I see the blood in your heart,  
Round and round.  
Break it up.  
Do it now, before  
Anyone else can.

## DESPAIR, THE WONDER FUEL 6

Isnt hope a wonderful thing?

People have been running their lives on it for years.

It is a very powerful fuel, and economical.

There was a time when hope was almost free.

In the early days of this century

You could have a big, comfortable life

Without worrying about the price of hope.

People drove big, fast lives, shiny and colourful.

Later, in the 60s and 70s, it started to change.

There was less hope, and as each well of hope dried up,

The government searched for more.

Lives became smaller and faster,

They tended to burn out, and many were wrecked.

There was still just enough hope to go around

But the price was higher

And there was a special problem with pollution.

When you burn hope too fast, you produce promises.

Big ugly clouds of them.

Promises are harmless in themselves, but they are

The main cause of a form of photochemical smog.

In the light of day, or under the spotlight,

A promise will often turn into a lie,

And lies are poisonous.

So the government and big business

Began the search for an alternative,

And meanwhile people choked on all the lies

And almost completely ran out of hope.

So they developed despair.

A life that runs on hope

Can be converted to despair easily.

Despair is an industrial by-product, and cheap.

Now almost everyone's lives are running on despair.

Only the rich and lucky can afford hope.

While not as good,

Despair can keep a life running almost like normal,

Although it does cause wear and tear.

And continued use tends to destroy the life.

But, considering the general good of the nation  
And the strict rationing of hope, we have no choice.

Despair is a clean fuel.

Its only by product is tears, mere salty water

No problem for the environment, as long as  
There are not too many to handle.

So that's despair, the wonder fuel of the 90's.

I wonder what they will think of next?

## 7 SECRET OF THE WORLD

Behind the reality great shapes

Move they turn in baroque

Spirals they are the

Secret of the world and

I could watch forever.

There are strings and wires

And strings bind and wires talk

And secret messages at night

When no one listens but me.

Messages written in lines of art.

Spells in the trees and wind

I write them for you.

I use an old pen to make

The lines smooth.

Where are you reveal thyself.

For you I have thumbed the secrets.

There are horrors and monsters

I know where they are and I

Will go there.

This is the green and leafy hell.

This is the nightmare of content

There is only horror here for me

When you smile.

There is pain in the lines of your mouth.

Laughter is as desperate a sound

As crying, and smiles are grimaces  
Of pain. This is the sandy beach of death.  
Let's go for a swim.

[8]

### SONNETS - death

At night I lay alone, alone, I rest  
My hand upon my chest. The beating heart  
Beats faster as I coldly think when best  
To halt its movement, stop, and never start  
Again the ceaseless endless round of beats  
That thunder in the night. I am not brave,  
But well aware that life itself must cease  
And certain that I have no soul to save.  
The spheres that turn above in endless space  
Withhold no mystery. I know their art.  
Their light shines forth apace, they show their face  
more readily than man's immortal part.  
~~Our~~ Our instruments reveal the planets face  
Yet searches for the spirit yield not trace.

With subtle instruments of diverse sorts  
Has mankind sought among the minutiae  
Of atoms, particles, but never caught  
An angel dancing on a nucleus.  
Philosophers with no mere instrument  
Than mind alone have sought the higher truth.  
Religions old and new have their ascent,  
They come and go but never offer proof.  
That man is something more than what he seems,  
A plague of creatures stalking through the world.

That love and work and war and dream small dreams  
which frantically reject the simple, cold  
Reality, the fact eternal death  
Is coming with each heartbeat and each breath.

[9]

### BOMBS KILL CHILDREN TOO

Out of the night of dust and sand,  
The wasteland T.S. told us all about,  
We rode the flying missiles in our stand  
To strike the ground and snuff the candles out.  
A whisper in the were marks the times,  
Far away it echoes in the dark,  
Where people sit and watch and drink their wine,  
A billion souls and not a single heart.

The water is gone,  
The water and the milk.  
The light, too, moving eternal  
Across the face of the planet.  
It plays in waves, but not here.  
Here we are muffled  
In the dress of the dead.  
In our skull and shrouds.  
In our robes of loss.  
Everytime I pick my child up  
I put her down wet with tears.  
Will I be here for her tomorrow?  
Far away? Nowhere at all?  
Everything I do is for the last time  
And certainty is dead.  
Dread fills me with pain  
For there is no ignorance  
The fall of hard rain  
And the cruel must coming.

The rockets in the sky,  
Lights on the clouds,  
Rumours through the city,  
Listen: we can put our masks on.  
Go to our room and wait,  
Hide in the ground again,  
But we know we will die  
And you will go before I.  
My child, life is short now  
For the small and weak.  
We inherit the earth  
That lies in the grave.  
Get up, and go to the market.  
Is the market still there?  
No people, no sounds,  
But the rising wind we know,  
And the rushing wind we know,  
And the distant drum in the ground.  
The flame that comes on wings.  
And when I came home  
You were gone.

#### 10 OIL FIRE

The soldier awoke at midnight.  
He stood upon the plain,  
Brushing back short hair beneath  
A shower of black rain.  
Which only part obscured  
His view of burning hell  
Which lit the far horizon  
Above the ruined wall  
Lighting twisted girders  
With tongues of yellow fire  
Which fade to rolling blackness  
And labour ever higher.

Black raindrops fell upon him  
As thick as human blood,  
As that which had so recently  
Flowed endless as a flood.  
No bandage for this wound, he thought,  
No cure for this ill.  
The earth will always suffer  
Beneath the human will.

#### II

##### DOWN DOWN DOWN

If you go gladly  
And gentler than before,  
You will hear the call  
As you go about the world.  
If you always listen,  
Hold you there forever,  
Lay you down below,  
Soft dark will draw you on.  
Never feel regret,  
Go, go ever over.  
The earth that draws us deep,  
That settles round the globe,  
Keeps at bay the waking day  
That <sup>rises</sup> settles from below.  
Surround the place of rest,  
In stones in ancient rounds,  
Into vaults of freshest night.  
Carry us down forever  
To sleep in empty ground  
Beneath the marble boughs  
Where purest flowering sleep  
Springs forth forever now.

## 12 EXTENT

I've never met you,  
Never learnt your name,  
Never walked down your street,  
Seen you on the train;  
Laughed to see you fall,  
Helped you up again.  
Never heard you singing,  
Crying out in pain,  
Reading from the paper,  
Lining up cocaine.  
Flying bites at midnight,  
In gusts of freezing rain.  
Bending over sinks  
Cleaning out the drain.  
Playing with sharp knives,  
Opening a vein.  
Running out forever  
Into the empty plain  
That lies between the worlds we share  
And search in vain.

## 13 THE SOUL

There was a young woman who lost her soul.  
She slept in her room beneath an open window whose  
bars caught the moon each night and held it captive. This  
night however, before the moon could come and be imprisoned  
a creature entered her room. It was a jeweled snake,  
with scales of every coloured stone, shining with an inner  
light as it coiled through the night in liquid movements.  
Its eyes cased with diamond panes and tail tipped  
with gold, it came through the window and coiled upon  
the woman's breast.

So it remained, paused above her parted mouth  
as though about to strike, until the moon's first rays  
came. As she breathed slowly in her sleep, a flutter of her  
life force, her soul, flickered in the moonlight above  
her lips like a pale tongue of fire. It was reflected by the  
snakes fascinated eyes, and grew brighter with the moons  
radiance.

There was no resisting on both parts. The snake  
opened its mouth, revealing the rows of silvery teeth  
engraved with tiny words and symbols, which caught  
in the material of her soul. It pulled back, testing the  
resistance, until it seemed the soul would break. Then,  
with a shuddering sigh, it drew from her body, out  
through her mouth and into the drifting haze. For a  
second the snake reared back, the soul like a gauzy  
scarf above the body it belonged to, waving in the air.  
Then it changed into its pure form, that of a white egg  
which the snake held in its jaws.

Stealthily the snake stepped away, leaving the now  
still body behind.

It took the woman's soul to a pawnbroker, and layed it gently on the dusty counter.

"I cannot buy this, we have nothing to do with eggs" said the pawnbroker, appraising it through his loupe.

"It is not an egg, it is the soul of a beautiful woman," bussed the snake. "It is priceless, but I will sell it to you for a reasonable amount."

"Souls, souls, souls!" he said. "I have plenty of souls." The pawnbroker turned around with a dusty ledger in his hands. The gauzy tissues of hundreds of souls were trapped between its pages. "They are worth little, here," he said.

Carefully the snake took the egg in its jaws and left, and the pawnbroker, looking at its skin, mentally calculated the worth of the jewels set there.

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Passing a surgery in the street, the snake decided to go in and see if a doctor was interested in a soul. "After all, doctors are present for the birth and death of so many of them," he reasoned.

The secretary made him wait. He coiled around the soul egg and read a magazine.

When he was let in, the doctor looked up and said "Shouldn't you be seeing a vet?"

"I have a soul and I don't know what to do with it" said the snake, laying it on the examination table.

"Hmmm" said the doctor, listening to it with a stethoscope. "It looks healthy enough, but really I know nothing about souls."

"But surely you do! How can you know so much about the body without having some knowledge of the soul?"

"We are really only concerned with bodies, mostly sick ones!" said the doctor. "Take it to a priest."

[

At the church the snake layed the soul on the front steps and waited to be noticed.

Suddenly the door slammed open and a priest ran out wielding a broom, trying to hit the snake with the broomsticks.

"I have a soul..." began the snake.

"You have no soul! You are the personification of evil and you have no place in my church!" He reversed the broom in his hands and tried to break the egg lying at his feet with the handle. When the snake darted in to rescue the soul, the priest hit it and dislodged a diamond eye.

From across the street the snake watched the priest search on hands and knees for the diamond eye. It must have rolled into a crack in the road. A mother stopped pushing her pram near the snake.

"Look at the priest" she told the child. "He must be praying in public so the serpent will see him."

Now he was dancing with rage, breaking the broom over his knee and throwing it into the street. The baby in the pram laughed, and looked down at the snake.

"Hello snake," he said.

"Would you like an egg?" asked the snake.

"That's not an egg, it's a soul. What are you going to do with it?"

"I don't know. I wish I never saw it."

"Everyone who has a soul feels that way," said the boy. "It makes you afraid of the future."

"I never had a soul before."

The mother started to push the pram away.

"Take it to a teacher, they know everything. That's what my brother said," called the boy.

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In the classroom the snake lay coiled on a desk, listening to the sound of children outside. A teacher sat at her desk turning the soul egg over in her hand.

"This is a soul all right. I have some books here that have something on the subject..." she said, and began to search the shelves behind her. She pulled out a Shakespeare compendium, some poetry, a book of horror stories.

"These ought to help a lot."

"But can't you tell me yourself? You know everything!" said the snake.

"We try to live up to that reputation, but it is hard. I have 32 souls in my class, but I really know nothing about them. There is only one thing I can tell you." She pushed the poetry forward. "See a poet and get an expert opinion."

The snake thanked her and slithered out of the classroom. The children in the playground made way silently. Normally they would have attacked it, but they saw the soul in its jaw.

[

The poet lived in the basement of an old building. The snake slid easily through a vent in the brick wall, and found a bare room lit by a naked bulb. The poet lay on a mattress on the concrete floor smoking and listening to a Walkman.

Slithering up and onto his chest the snake lay the soul egg on his breastbone. The poet switched off his music and slowly reached up to touch the snake.

"Are you death, come for me at last?" he asked.

"No, not unless you want me to be," said the snake, baring his engraved silver teeth. "I have brought this soul, and you must tell me what to do with it."

"They say a lot of things about them," said the poet.

"It is very hard to give one as a gift, and very easy to sell. You cannot get a fair price, but everyone undervalues their souls and sells them for pretty trifles."

"There is no use to me, I need to get know what to do! What would you do?" said the snake.

"This!" cried the poet, standing and casting the soul egg at the wall. The snake leapt for it as it left his hand, but its teeth fastened into the poet's fingers instead.

"I broke it" cried the poet, falling back clutching his hand. Indeed, the shell lay cracked on the floor, two halves and scattered shards. There was nothing inside.

"It's empty" said the snake, dropping the halves besides the mattress. "I didn't mean to bite you. I'm sorry. It will not take long now."

"Empty" sighed the poet. "I knew it all along, somehow. This is it, then. I wish..." and he was gone.

[

The snake left the body, the shell, the room behind and went out into the street, leaving no trace.

The teacher took her books home and read them, for the first time, (she had never looked at them before.) Later, she found it harder to teach, as the well known words would stick in her throat, as she began to question them. She was never the same since the snake visited.

The boy went to war and died.

The priest never found the diamond, but he never stopped looking. For years he was a familiar sight, crouching on hands and knees in front of his church.

The doctor and the pauper kept on doing what they did, forgetting everything else.

The girl without a soul never noticed it was missing, and lived a long time. I saw her the other day, and she looked better than ever. She walked by with a group of girlfriends and strangely enough, none of them seemed to have souls either. Curious.

[

[14] what regions can hold us,  
what time do us justice,  
what land can enfold us?  
We cannot be saved.  
Our lives without meaning  
shall fall into dust as  
Our spirits flee screaming  
out into the waste.

[15] You might ask me:  
why were you crying there in the garden?  
And I cannot explain, because  
Some things are too hard for spoken words.  
Those things I did thoughtlessly  
Will hurt forever, though  
They are burned in time.  
It is not their existence that troubles me,  
But the fact that when they are finally gone,  
I will be gone too.  
Can you hear it, the sly song of the seven?  
We know we will drown, when we answer the call,  
But never once turn back. Is it any wonder I cry,  
when today may soon be gone?  
My eyes staring out into space  
Burn their holes through the world.  
You think I am sad  
But I enjoy this more than not.  
I would that I might always suffer this way  
And never know release.  
Jason the Argonaut, tied and yearning  
Knew this pain, and surely cried.  
It is better to know than to not  
No matter what we feel.

It is better to feel, even pain, even loss,  
Even this emptiness without end.  
Once I made plans to leave this mess forever  
Fool that I was, I never did.  
Those days now gone, and all I bear is a scar  
That I burnt into my mortal hide.  
I could go and walk forever  
And never leave myself behind.  
The sadness of it overwhelms me,  
A paradox in my mind,  
For why should I give myself such pain  
And not be able to take it?  
The pen is my one release, these spells keep night at bay  
When piece by painful piece this life turns deadly grey.  
Forgive me my cliches, I cannot hold them back.  
This heart should beat forever, this spine should never crack  
Beneath the weight of words that roar within my mind.  
Life scares me so  
Please help me hide  
And never know  
What waits outside  
The world. I cannot contemplate  
The end of it all. Please let me wait  
Forever. Please don't let me die,  
Don't make me make that last goodbye.

[16] My darling please forgive me these words I wrote today.  
For had I known you better I'd have known what to say.  
Could lines so very desolate mean anything to one  
whose spirit is so beautiful it shames the golden sun?

## MYSTERIOUS SEMBLANCE AT THE STRAND OF NIGHTMARES

[7] The water in the bay at the Strand of Nightmares is dark and cold, as well it might be. Perhaps more than anywhere in the world, this water has accounted for human life. But I will tell you more of this later.

Above the bay and the Strand lies the town, of old and mainly square hulled houses which climb the steep hills like stairs. They run along their steep perches in rows, following ancient roads layed out many centuries before. Most of the houses bear their age well, mainly because the local people tend to be a conscientious and hard working lot. They repair their houses with care, and many of them are so old the date of their construction is lost, and they bear other signs of their antiquity. The doors and windows tend to be low, for people were once shorter than they are now, and many a doorway bears the double cross and crescent on its lintel, so that no one who bears malice to those within may pass. The walls are of whitewashed stone in many colours, mostly shades of red and blue. From the sea they look like stones rising from a grassy sward, and are a welcome sight to fishermen who are easily able to find their own house from the masses. Here and there glint the anvils and ears and other trappings of our own century, but not many. Some of the old people say the marks on their doors will not allow harmful televisions and computers to be carried into the house, and they may not be joking.

On the dark, cold waters of the bay a fleet of old wooden hulled fishing vessels resides. They have been the main source of income for the town from time immemorial and once again the townsfolk, discerning how dependable the old ways are, have elected not to change them for the sleeker faster boats used elsewhere. Still, where once sturdy brawny sail would have carried the boats out of the mouth of the bay, now a chorus of diesel engines thuds

and sends up black smoke in their place. The boats hulls are the same, though, made locally, and this is a source of pride to the people.

Stretching out from the base of the headland on the left of the bay is the Strand. Of loose yellow sand over shingles, it reaches out to touch a rocky spur in the ocean. The waves break over this rock, and it and the strand are what protect the harbour from the full force of the ocean. However, just outside its protection the wild sea rages, raging as it will, and those that go out in the boats do not always return.

The townsfolk say that the sea is their mother. It gives them everything, in one way or the other, and in times past it was even worshipped as a god by their ancestors. They still recognise that, even though it exacts its toll in human life, they owe everything they have to it.

Over the many years, however, a darker force emerged. Gradually they began to see the ocean as something hungry, something that wanted them. Whenever they looked out from their houses on the top of the headland and saw how dark the water was, and how violent the storms and waves, and how they would toss about the fishing boats that left each day, they began to associate the sea with death.

As this happened the loss began to increase. No one knew why. A mystic would say it was the seas fault, that it was alive and imbued with the qualities the people had given it, that it indeed did want their lives, and took them when it wished. On the other hand, a psychiatrist would blame it on the people, saying they went out in their boats with such vivid thoughts of their own death that they then fulfilled their own prophecies.

No one will know which side would be proven right. Perhaps both, perhaps neither. And yet, there was a more

general and widely felt change in the peoples relation with the sea. No one knew when it started, and even the oldest people in the village could not remember a time before it.

Every night, as they slept in their town, a tide of nightmares began to rise. It seemed to come from the sea. At least, those first affected lived nearest the shore. And didn't everything come from the sea?

Slowly it rose. People sleeping above the shops and docks of the waterfront stirred in their sleep. The lapping of the waves and the sound of the sea wind invaded their dreams. Higher up the steep town more people turned and mumbled. They began to murmur as visions of the many who had died, and who would die at sea, drifted through their mind. Many saw drownings, people struggling in rough water which beat them down and held them under. Over and over the visions came with their message, "You too will die." The fishermen who had seen these things before and the wives and children who had, at most, seen a body brought back, or the space of a missing boat as they returned in the evening, or who had lost someone to the sea, they all dreamed their nightmares. There were sounds in the night. screams answered screams as the sleepers were tortured by nightmares. The tide reached the top of the headland. People travelling through in the night would remember the crazy town, with the spooky dark and narrow streets, where people cry out in their houses at night.

As morning approached, the tide would recede and the nightmares would fade. Gradually the people of the town would fall into a more natural and restful sleep. Here and there a child or old person would still cry out, as the last horrific image faded. They might see a boat smashed on rocks, people swimming in cold water, or perhaps experience the pain of drowning, and hear the final agonized thought of the victim as he struggles: "Oh no, not this!"

It is in the nature of people to accept their troubles and live with them, and they had shared the nightmares for so long that it became part of their identity. They even knew the sandy spit running out from the headland as the Strand of Nightmares, though this name did not appear on any maps or signs. The strand, pointing out into the ocean, seemed to be the link that drew the land and sea together. In their hearts they knew that it was here the tide of nightmares would touch first as it rose, and here it would be the strongest. It seemed that the tide ran up the Strand and into the town like an invasion.

They were accepting of their lot, and nothing would have changed had it not been for one man. Kleg was a newcomer to the town. He was different, and he knew it. While his family almost immediately became townsfolk, he was always regarded as a foreigner, as though he had married a woman who was already living in the town.

It was he who broke the code of silence about the nightmares, by talking about it in his shop. Before him, the only clue that something was different here was the name they gave the Strand, and the sounds at night.

In his corner store he began asking customers about their dreams.

"What did you dream last night?" he would say, and they would remember the horrors of death at sea as they had seen them at night, and leave. Soon he realized he would lose his customers, and stopped talking, but he watched. He watched for those who seemed unhappy, troubled, haunted by their nightmares. Soon he began to spot them, and it was to these he talked.

They would gather in his shop after closing time, when he had a large enough group to hold meetings. Kleg was clever, and he knew that a small group would only discourage those who joined it, so he had waited, and now they were quite a large one. It was surprising how many people

were secretly unhappy with their lives, the town, and particularly the nightmares.

In his shop he would coax the discussion around to the nightmares and what could be done about them. To most of them the idea of doing anything about the nightmares was completely foreign, unheard of.

"You might as well halt the tide of water as halt the tide of nightmares. They come and we see them, that's all there is to it." is how one put it.

No, said Kleg. He told them about the city he came from, where no one had to suffer nightmares constantly. Gradually he convinced them they had to do something. But what?

One night, Kleg had a different dream. The nightmares faded from his mind, and he was standing on the strand, looking out to sea. He knew as he stood there, that if he walked out and drowned, but without fear or regret, let himself go whole heartedly, he would know rest.

He turned and ran towards the town, but it came no nearer. Instead he saw a crowd of people, all the townsfolk, walking towards him on the sand. As one they pointed at him, then out to sea, as though they wanted him to go.

He turned again, and walked into the ocean. Calmly and willingly he let it take him. Only, at the last moment he screamed: "Oh no, not this!" and woke shivering in bed.

It was not hard to figure what his dream meant. Sitting there next to his whimpering wife whose dreams were obviously as bad as usual, he realized someone would have to die, as he had failed to, willingly and calmly, and the sea would be appeased and stop sending the nightmares.

The group were shocked.

Who would go? they said. Who could possibly be expected to give up life like that, so easily? They agreed that anything to rid themselves of the accursed nightmares

would be a good idea, but this was beyond any one. This was impossible. Anyway, what would the person who died experience at the hands of the sea. Suppose all the horror of all the nightmares was delivered instead to one soul, never to know rest?

Just outside the store, in the alley besides it, stood Kleg's daughter Juna. She had heard everything. She knew who would be the one to die. It would be her.

It was past midnight. The town slept its uneasy sleep, screams and ghostly cries floating down off the slope into the bay. A lone white figure moved on the strand. It was Juna.

As she walked she heard the sounds of the towns pain die down and cease. In the town the dreamers felt a change. They moved in a different way through their sleep. Now, instead of struggling in cold water, they swam through it. They had a purpose and a destination.

Suddenly they were there. All of them, in their dreamers bodies, standing on the strand. Juna felt the prickling in the hair on her neck, and turned. There she saw them, the entire town of dreamers. They glowed with a cold blue light like ghosts are said to. There was the low hum of a crowd at a concert. They looked at her, watching the sacrificial offering.

No! cried Kleg. He stood amongst the crowd. As in so many dreams before he couldn't move, but he struggled. No, no, no, he cried. The softly glowing crowd around made no move. All eyes were on Juna.

In his bed Kleg sat upright and screamed. The struggle to move had woken him, and now he was back in his body. Why he did not assume it was all a dream he would never know, he only knew what he would see when he looked from his window. It was just as he had left it, the soft blue glow was visible all the way from the town, and his daughter was just entering the water.

He ran all the way, screaming her name, but he was

too late. Just as he left the town and ran out onto the strand, the waves closed over his head. The glowering ghostly crowd parted, even though it had no more substance than air, and he ran through. The last of his daughter to disappear was her hair, which swirled in the water before sinking beneath. Kleig couldn't even scream, he was so exhausted he could only whisper, no, no!

Behind him the crowd swirled and was gone. In the town lights came on, and people looked out their windows, to see him trudge slowly up the narrow streets to where his wife waited in bed, a straight-edged razor in her hand and a pool of coagling blood by her side. She had been there, of course, but unlike her husband could not cry out or awake. Like her daughter they had become part of the town, the group mind. It was only her body that could reach out in its sleep, find her husband's razor in the drawer, and use it to end the dreams.

Every night the town dreams, but no longer does it dream of a watery death. Now, a strange figure stands at the end of the Strand of Nightmares, glowering ghostly in the night, holding the tide at bay. The sea has finally received the willing sacrifice, or so it is believed...

Juna stands at the end of the strand, looking out to sea. In the night the sea is phosphorescent, the foam from the waves glows in the dark. It forms shapes and pictures. Sometimes the lonely spirit sees her father's face. It is Kleig that battles the sea and holds the tide at bay. The morning he returned to find his dead wife, he made his decision, and the next night he followed his daughter into the sea.

There was no regret in his heart, unlike his daughter. She, too, had whispered as she entered the water: "Oh no, not this!" But her father in his grief had done the impossible, incredible thing.

Now, as Juna's spirit gazes out to sea in the night, she can hear the echo of her father's voice.

"Yes!" it says, "This...!"

[18]

It was a cold day  
And we had travelled far  
When we entered the gates of Hell  
And passed down those noble streets,  
Then through the square.

The people gazed back.

As curious as we were to see them,  
They wanted to see the outsiders more.

They welcomed us with gifts,  
Things of local make:

Bread baked on the fires the sinners fear.  
Coven idols of demons in moments of leisure,  
Tracts of a thousand different religions.

They played music for us  
As grand and hideous and infernal  
As any Duke of Hell could wish,  
On honey flutes and harps of hair.

They were a happy people,  
Content with their lot.

We heard screams in the distance,  
Saw leaping flames,  
Icy blains and black fits,  
But in the town all was well.

We were sorry to leave the next day  
But swore we would return.

So we passed back into the world  
Through the old stone gate  
And read the inscription carved there,  
On its inner side,

"All hope abandon  
Ye who enter here."

[19] THRASH PUNK

No connection

Garbage lives

No reality

Can't talk to you

Alone too long

Adrift on time

Decisions unmade

Sandy beach

Dark night

Cheke life

Feedback music

In my head

Keep on playing

When we're dead

Plastic garbage everywhere

Troubles with love

Just like TV

How can you want

More than everything?

All I can give

Take your pain for you

Expecting nothing

Share the depression

Keep the lights

Told you my secrets

Should have told lies.

when the moment reach the moment

And the madness is complete

In the glowering white of lightning

Is the remedy for sleep

You will never fall again

If you exercise your will

But we cannot take the pain

So we have to take the full .

[20] THE JOGGER

... every night he would go out jogging, every night he would go out and run as far as he could, to the very limits of his own endurance.

Every night, and one night, when he had run as far as he could, he ran a bit more. Then just a tiny bit more than that. One step more, then half a step, and so on in fractions forever, such that he never stopped running.

On and on, running, leaving friends and family, home and town behind. He crossed mountains and valleys, bridges and roads, continents and seas, and finally crossing whole worlds running.

Running through new realities, he saw things no one had ever seen before. But he couldn't stop to look, because he was always completing that last tiny step. Finally he passed beyond the real worlds altogether and into the realm of heaven. God, whose attention was devoted entirely to the material worlds, didn't notice the jogger until he passed directly in front of Him.

For the first time in all time, God was surprised. Impressed, He offered the jogger anything he desired.

"I would like to stop," he said.

[21]

Song of the whales, walls of the doomed

Freezeing the air between expensive speakers

Hard sunlight thunders through my head, but stillness

Has caught me, in the glass of time stands still.

A glass of wine rises inevitably. Outside

The air swirls in invisible patterns.

Pollen and the essence of earth hang in clouds,

Drawn up the light. I cannot move.

It is the stillness of the desert, full of fear

This fragment never happening but here.

... they say she never asked for help ... she couldn't talk, couldn't speak, thoughts so slow, work was such pain, to go to the office each day and pretend it mattered ... when everything seemed to stop working, when her breath catches with fear, when time stands for every moment frozen like breath in the air, pale clouds on the soft green morning with rainy concrete paths and drops in the trees, smoke hanging in lines of sun in the last gold wooden evening ... when the suns on her table is too cold to touch, the papers falling up on the chairs, covering the carpet ... dishes in the suns, bottles in the door, dead lightbulbs, dead batteries ... the books of lies, the TV all too stupid ... she was afraid to open the door, her thoughts slowed down, the hypnosis came, distance increased, shadows moved around ... the sheets were so cold, dust settled everywhere, everywhere, hiding at all, and she wants to look anyway? ... holding in the icy white brushing her hair, trying to remember everything and losing it all, remember what to do, how to behave natural, be like a person ... walking past, there she is, in the mirror of dark glass, watching her face to make sure, keep the faults at bay, looking in the wavy shop window glass as she walks by, the cubicles about her in the bends of glass, bleeding herself out into the air, thinner and thinner, lines of colour, gone, running away like trickles of smoke, her coat, her hair, her bag, into smears of faintness, a wet watercolor ... why so many shops, so much buying, so much need? ... music for company, for something that understands and says so, for a voice ... into the breakup, chaos into that force she cast herself, down into self pity and sorrow ... imagine her, hair and dress streaming behind, falling into the depths of despair ... does not her beauty increase; is she more desirable as she passes you, as you cling to your uncertain perch in life and resist

the temptation to fall? ... Why then shouldn't she fall? She loved the cold and lost feeling, so do not mourn her loss, when she finally has all she could want ...

## [2] VALERIAN

The story, always the story, over time and space the spectre of this thing comes to haunt me, never revealing itself in full, only tiny glimpses of a life already lived in what appears to be the present, why? What is this thing, so like music on tape that has been cut up and scattered about to be collected piece by piece. Each piece so short, yet promising so much to come. Why no order? All I want is a single narrative to latch on to, that leads somewhere.

The conclusions you might draw are so sketchy, yet a skeletal logic locks it together ... each man and woman lives, and then dies. There is no soul to go on and be reincarnated or suffer heaven or hell forever, or finite. When each of us is the same person with different memories. All the same person, that never dies but loses its memory from time to time. Only our memories make us differ, and we fear their loss, which is pride as there is nothing really different about our own experience ... why should we fear the loss of our petty and limited memories of a time and place that soon, on the cosmic scale, will cease to blurb and be? Not even lost at all. Every story is a random selection of memories of people in the past and future. We see ourselves in our stories all the time. Our memories may be lost, but randomly they recur over and over in the stories of the future. There is nothing new.

Valerian's story comes to me, whoever he was, whenever he lived, whatever he did or will do, what his real name is, these are gone or will be, but the story comes still. Reach into the air, into the spaces between worlds, and flick out a pattern. To it I give a name, and as I write Valerian lives. I am he, you are, and everyone else. Light a candle, blow it out, light another. Is it the same

flame? Light both, and are they different?

whatever Valerian does, he burns like a candle, a flame so easy to extinguish, but so precious. Every life is his.

[24]

Lifes fire travelled on its line  
Along the outer edge of the real place  
And when it lost its speed  
And came into being, then it knew  
That finite was the place of best potential.  
Later when it recognised itself  
Did everything collapse. Now  
Infinity is sought, but where it lies  
Is locked by lifes decision far before.

[25]

... so we have a recording, we have a time and a record of the time, so we have Valerian existing within the universe existing within the frame of function, the form and time, the coil and spiral, the gateway and the final solution. The beginning and end, the seed and its shell, so the chant may run when Valerian is considered, who has never exhausted yet is more real than I who chronicle his existence... here they come, and there is no avoiding these words, which mean so much more than any dictionary can say, which will hang forever in a cloud of confusion and concepts which collide and combine...

[26] GREY DAY

Darkness and cold are the stuff of sleep, an empty universe waiting to be filled. But, there are times when that universe would be better left empty, than filled with nightmare worlds. This is Valerians nightmare, as he will tell:

"There was a bridge, a harbour bridge stretching over water, and a shocking day. The sky a uniform hateful steel grey, like cruelty made visible. That sky promised horrors to me like an evil portent. I stood on a narrow path besides a traffic lane which approached the bridge. Besides me stood a figure, but I couldn't tell who it was; I found it impossible to turn my eyes in its direction. There was only a dark outline to my side, a tall man in a dark coat.

There was a crowd, silent and sad. A man with a gun cursed them from his perch on the steel safety rail, firing and screaming insanely. People fell, shot, but no one went to help them. Holding up a bomb, he told the crowd he would destroy them all if he wanted to. Still no one moved, no one spoke, they were frozen in the insanity of the scene.

Without speaking, the shadow at my side and I left, turning about and walking into the grey and silent bushland that stood behind us. There was a small path between the dead trees and grass there, and at the bottom of the slope a bus shelter waited besides a deserted road.

Much later, and no bus had come. Evening darkened the filthy greyness of the sky. There was nothing to do but walk across the bridge, though why I wished to cross I never knew.

There is radioactivity in the air. Radiation sheets through us, some kind of fallout. I try to remember where it might have come from, and catch a half forgotten image of a mushroom cloud seen from a beach, rising over the distant horizon, and people staring in horror and running. There is nothing we can do about it, of course, it is everywhere. We can only walk on and feel the deadly rays inside us. This must be why the sky is so grey and horrifying. For

some reason I have been carrying a shovel, but I don't know where it came from, or why. I've been using it as a walking stick, and the grate of its blade on the concrete is the loudest sound we hear. There is no traffic, and only our footsteps, the shovel, and the stately rushing of the radioactive wind in the waves overhead.

We see a figure approaching, dressed in the ripped and torn clothing of a street person. It seems to be a friend of mine, name of Bowow, and I hail him; he replies, but it is someone else. For a moment I feel fear, this person could kill us here and not be witnessed; but his tone of voice carries greater fear than mine. Fair enough: I have a shovel, and the silent and shadowy companion who I cannot see.

Together we approach the small office which blocks the footpath ahead. It is some kind of checkpoint. We enter through a small door into a waiting room. An observation window separates us from men in uniform shirts who stare in concentration at the dials and controls before them. They ignore us, and the girl who is already here. She stands close to the window and doesn't glance around at our entrance, but pleads with the uniformed ones.

"Let me through, let me go. I'll give you this" she pleads, holding a fan of tattered grey money up to the glass. Only one of the technicians glances at her, then looks away. They have no interest in money, their eyes completely blank to anything outside the world of their instruments. A guard rushes into the room and seizes the girl, dragging her backwards by an arm to the door. Outside it is dark and grey snow is falling. The door closes behind them.

All dreams dissolve with time, for if they didn't our lives would be consumed by them. Now the shadows come into my mind and erase things, but this is what I recall. There were figures and movement, unclear in their way as the shadowy figure by my side. I still could

not turn my head towards him. There was the door, and the scene outside. There were guards there, and I remember the way the poisonous snow had eaten away at the flesh of their cheeks so that their teeth showed through even when their mouths were closed. Through the pylons the sea showed a deep grey with foamy whitecaps. The guards wanted my shovel, and argued over who would take it from me. On the shore there were buildings, tall and square, but no lights. The girl was nowhere to be seen. I knew the end was coming soon.

I thought, as I drifted away from that terrible place: that the shadowy figure I could not look at was my father. No real reason why it would be, but I knew, even if he died years before.

Another thought, just before I wake: I'm glad there is so much radiation and that I must die soon. You see, every time we wake from a dream we leave part of ourselves behind, to continue the story we leave unfinished. In this world a long life would be a curse, and death a release, so I'm glad that my dream self will not suffer long.

27

...the stoned are alone... everything written is one long suicide note... don't fall in the fit of meaning...  
shadows of Venus...

## BETA LYRAE

[28]

The star Beta Lyrae

whose name reflects her beauty,  
with hair of flaming hydrogen  
In ruddy red and gold surrounding locks  
Spread out across the counterpane black night.

In this fair space, this light,  
Her spirit goes about the sacred places  
Without telling. None know her plan,  
Put pattern in her spiral designs,  
An eye to see forever from her perch,  
These ensure her purity of intent.  
Two suns tearing her apart  
Into her natures variously known,  
Decimation of red vacuum and black,  
The one so hot and one so deadly cold.  
The scarlet spiral fire flows away  
Out into human eyes and other minds  
And spreads forever.  
The smoke of stars knows no death  
But lives and lives again on many worlds.

## MARIAN

[29] Valerian took his bike down the autumn tinted streets,  
Marian laced her fingers across his chest. They saw how the  
grass was dry and browning with the cold. Roots of trees lay  
bare on the ground without even fallen leaves to blanket them.  
People with rakes had piled them up and their smoke was in the  
air. His jacket flapped in the wind of their speed. Faces raised  
to see the strangers on this quiet street, wondering if they  
were dangerous. Marian loved to see the houses with their  
little round windows, their tiled paths, brick and sandstone  
walls. It was an older suburb. The footpaths were buckled  
and cracked. They slowed for children on pushbikes. She  
tightened her arms about her pilot as he leaned into a corner.  
The smoky smell was in their hair.

From here the city buildings could be seen. Brown haze  
lay in a band across them, stretching around the horizon.

It would irritate her nose, Marian knew, when they drove down  
into it, but here the smoke from leaves was a pleasant  
substitute. The last lawnmowers of the day were packing up and  
going inside.

In his mind Valerian was flying.

[30]

... this is my image. Do not ask questions, they will never be  
answered. In time you will come back to read this again and it  
will make more sense. Time makes sense of most things, and  
then it destroys them all. So there is no difference, in the end,  
between answers and questions. Listen to the music and do  
not try to think, it will get you nowhere. The barrier between  
us and our dreams is growing faster than it can be  
destroyed. All you will catch is a glimpse. Is it worth the effort?  
Life will go on and on forever and no one will get what they  
want. One is as certain as the other. It would be either if the  
world was different: with birth but no death, growth without  
decay. But this could never be, even the universe will end.  
Anything alive when it did would have to go with it, so why  
re-birth? Would heaven be bearable when the world  
and the universe itself where gone?

Heaven, the Eternal Party, rages on in another region of  
space. Now and then a guest tiptoes to a window to part the  
curtains and look out. There lies the Earth, now a barren  
useless ball under its dead sun. The heavenly guest quickly  
turns away and goes to find something to drink, or to talk  
to the Host, anything to forget that everything mankind treasured  
has gone and that Earth herself has died, forgotten by her  
children. Later, the universe is gone and Heaven floats  
in a limitless void. There is nothing else to see there, just  
heaven floating like some flying saucer in black-starless-space.  
The only lights are the windows of Heaven, and they are scattered.  
Would they survive being so alone?

Is it better to think about mortality and be depressed,  
Or not think at all and be happy?  
Better to live like there's no tomorrow  
Or live like an immortal, in our short lives?  
Which is the greatest waste of time,  
Sadness that one must die  
Or happiness that one must live?  
Would the former breed care and preserve us,  
And the latter depress and destroy us,  
Or would sadness in life and gladness at death  
Reverse or enhance our performance?  
Should mankind then strive to do wonders?  
If all we achieve comes to naught,  
Is achievement itself desperation?  
Would life after death be worthwhile  
If our works in the world led to nothing?  
Our cities in rubble and ashes  
And Earth just a ghost of her greatness?  
  
If learning and knowledge and faith  
And kindness and justice and love  
And hope and desire and life  
Cannot save us, then why should we live?

## ABSTRACT NIGHT I

I was lost deep in the mysteries of our city. It has many secrets, the city, perhaps more than others known for their mysteries, perhaps not. There are more than enough, though, to satisfy the hunter after the unusual and unknown.

The saddest and most romantic suburbs are the industrials where dwellings and factories collide and the mix partakes of the essences of both. I walked from a main street, that night, deep into the heart, down narrow alleys stacked with unusual refuse. From a pile of old fabric something glittered at me, and I found it to be a tiny pair of silver scissors. I still have them, a reminder of that time. The alleys and streets were lit by fluorescent lights that buzzed softly, and by the reflection of city light from low clouds. Lighted windows were generally softened by curtains. Here and there the TV flicker caught my eye, and there were other lights, strangely coloured, in second storey windows. They flickered and changed colour, no reason for them was apparent.

The rusted iron lace was outside the rows of terraces was left unpainted, every spike from the top of each bar was broken off. Flakes of paint lay in a drift at the base of the walls, and they shared a uniform grey former colour.

Here there are always a few people about. Some of the factories operate all night, and people in goggles look up from their benches and tools as you pass the open garage doors. All night a form of who watch operates. People coming and going, standing in doorways and smoking on balconies, there always happens to be someone on duty. As I walked, I noticed a boy reading by the light of a streetlight, leaning against a post padded soft by years of hand posters. The gutter was swept clean around him as though it was his regular reading seat. Streamers of old tape festooned the pole above him.

Despite the number of people awake so far into the night, there was only quietness. In this region noise means trouble and even the music from parties was muffled by soundproof walls and didn't travel far. A faint mist of smoke coloured the air from the occasional wood fire, either in an inside fireplace or a barrel on the street. In dead ends these fires were

maintained by the residents, where they did not worry about the police or local council. They had barbecues in old wheel rims, set on legs crafted locally by metalworkers, they could have won prizes for sculpture. The wood must be gathered from factory pallets, and offcuts, stored here against the cold night.

There are other signs of local culture; obscure messages written in graffiti, on small posters, in handouts on car windscreens. The trunks of the leafless autumnal trees are thick with carvings, mainly names and dates. People hang flags and posters in street level windows, and the security bars are often locally made, twisted iron sculptures. The shops have eccentric names and it is often hard to tell exactly what they sell.

Here I found and entered Nowheres, a pub on a corner in one of the most obscure streets yet I found. Outside it seemed like any other building in the area, of a little cleaner. There was intense, sad music of a type I didn't know floating through the open door. I went inside.

The seat I eventually found inside was opposite Valerian at a small table near the door, (I didn't want to sit too far inside in case retreat was called for.) I found him staring deep into the depths of a meat brazier, with a set expression. That twist of the dark eyebrows on his pale face is what I most remember about him, yet I had the impression it was not his usual expression.

Nowheres was half full, a quiet and sombre crowd dressed in the darker and older clothes I see amongst my students now, at the university where I teach. They favour long overcoats of a type I remember from my childhood, and hats too. There was a sparkle of silver jewelry and subdued colours, but they favoured blacks. Dressed in a black overcoat I was not conspicuous and they weren't bothered by my age, as others might have been.

In fact, their air of sad wise maturity marked them out from any other group of youngsters I had ever seen. It was as though those that remained of a regiment of soldiers, years after a forgotten war, had donned these young bodies and come here to talk. Their behaviour had the same elements

of remembrance as I had seen amongst ANZACs together.

The music was a mix of sonorous, discordant rock and sadly sweet ambient sounds from a turntable behind the bar. It was mostly guitar based. The more active danced languidly with stylized movements, in couples and groups. Most of the patrons drank, talked and listened reflectively to the music, as we did.

Valerian was easy to talk to, of a little abstracted, and our conversation consisted mainly of pleasantries with occasional reference to something more. He nursed his drinks, never seeming to get truly drunk, watched the dancers, smoked. I could sense the expectation in his manner, and soon found out what caused it.

A figure parted the dancing crowd and sat down at our table. He wore an ancient leather jacket, with strands of violet hair hanging from the cuffs, and his greasy hair hung in locks over his mirrored sunglasses. This, I knew instantly, was Borrow. Many of my colleagues had told me about him, a reclusive hermit user who had much knowledge of old relics and strange things.

His manner was silent, secretive, aloof. With only a few words he and Valerian conducted a transaction, a gold nugget for a box of what appeared to be some drug. I watched them both, Borrow staring back at a thin young girl at a nearby table who had been eyeing Valerian, who was now smoking the contents of the box in his pipe.

I don't know what it was, but its smell was so evocative, reminding me of India and the time I had spent there with my parents as a child. Whatever it was, the feeling at our table changed. Borrow lost in his reverie, Valerian immersed in whatever the smoke contained, I began to feel like a stranger. It was time to leave.

As I walked out into the still night I felt so lonely. Despite my tenure at the university, my wife, my colleagues, I felt like an outsider to the world. I began to wonder why I had come to this place, was I really searching for interesting cultural trends? It sounded so shallow, such an affected thing to do. And what had I found? I could never write a thesis on a trip to a pub in a bad part of the city. Was I actually searching

for a culture, or was I searching for something else?

Like the mysteries of the city, the mystery of that night will never be entirely revealed. Best to leave that enigma alone as my chance encounter Valerian sits crouched in smoke with a faraway look, while the strange Borrow hides behind his mirrors and hair, and the sad muse stirs the ghostly dancers gently. If it had any meaning, it is lost, only a tiny pair of silver scissors remain now.

## ABSTRACT NIGHT 2

[3] It was only then, when I was in that mood, that I went to the place the dead people go, the bar of lost souls, where fear of the world evaporates into a hunder and softer emotion, aloneness. Out pours the repressed sense of futility, coaxed into light by music unique in its sense of doom. The crowd there mingles with ghosts that come for the gloom and a chance to dance with living flesh.

One sat at the next table to us, we could almost see her face through the shant of dark threads of hair which hung across it. Outside a funeral truck steered the sidewalk and she shuddered at the wet sound. The smell blowing in from the street turned to that of wet earth.

Silently we stared at the sticky smears on the table, lost in our musings. Valerian was my customer, tonight, and I trusted him enough to ignore his odd companion. The ghost at the next table was catching my eye, though I couldn't tell what she wanted. Unable to make me respond, she hurried to her feet and moved into the crowd, shaking slightly with alcohol and cold.

"This is the thing," I said, and placed the box of coral on the table. Valerian opened it and gazed with faint regret at the contents.

Black coral is rare, but widespread. No one can tell where it will turn up next. Here and there, in the oceans of the world, nature places her strange little bombs for man to find. Mostly those who find it do not know its worth. Those that do know sell it or use it themselves. Many who know believe that those who use it are damned.

Strong language, but possibly true, The smell of the

coral hit me like a blow, as Valerian eyed a piece closely. I felt no craving in that smell, only remembrance. Dreams began to fit around the lights, the drinks, the ghostly people who roamed in self pity and twisted lust to the music. Through this swirling image Valerian's hand reached out to me with a hand rolled cigarette. When I took it a rough ring of gold slipped out and hit the table.

I never accept money, but things of worth. They might be rare white moths mounted in a case, or a holy relic, or a strange book. I have received many things, and passed them on for more. Now I took up the dull lump he had given me and put it away in my coat. I lit the cigarette.

Perhaps I should have said something as he packed his pipe. I watched as he lifted it, its large charred wooden bowl packed with lumps and grains of black coral, almost all that was in the box, and flamed it with a shot from a steel Dunhill. Coals glowed and collapsed in there, rose and fell in brightness like nova stars. I listened to the rush of smoke in his thin chest and saw the look of pain in his eyes. It was his funeral. I could taste the tragedy with the smoke.

I remembered when I was twelve and my cat had kittens. I knew my father wanted to drown them in the dam as we had all the others, and I hid them. For days he searched, never thinking to look in the back of our old car, where I had put them, where the mother \* could climb in and out through the window to feed them. She was clever enough not to let him track her to the hiding spot.

Finally he told me he only wanted to see them, and promised not to drown them. I showed him. We carried them inside and watched the cat feeding them. They had fuzzy hair and their eyes were still closed.

He was true to his promise, he didn't drown them. He burned them. He built a bonfire out of old railway sleepers and carried the box outside. I couldn't stop him, I didn't want to be shot. He had a handgun for shooting rats in the barn. That's why he didn't like kittens, they grew up and spoiled his spot by hunting all the rats. With the gun in one hand he picked the kittens up by their tails and tossed them into the fire, down between the sleepers where it was hottest. They were

screaming in their box, but they made no sound as they burned.

Much, much later, I saw a connection with the coral. Black coral was like the fire. Our lives are filled with silent screams of fear and horror, but the fire consumed them and leaves only silence. The fire in the pipe. It was more than death because it leaves one alive but changed. The kittens had never really been alive, so death was no different to them.

Valerian slumped in his seat, reflectively blowing smoke, the stranger had left. The box was empty. There was nothing to say. He was probably beyond any words I knew, nothing he felt or perceived could be communicated to me. The many times I had smoked meant nothing, the gulf between us was so vast, and there was no way to cross.

It was late. My eyes felt like they were swimming in coarse salt, the tables were littered with glasses and butts falling out of ashtrays. Perversions and desperations manifest themselves around us. Horrifying people talked and swore in the gloom. A scratchy record blared. The door was propped open with a chair and the night breeze came in. People were leaving.

Valerian roused himself, stood, packed his pipe away in his coat. He was smiling. The whites of his eyes were not red and very from tiredness and smoke, but clear and strange.

He left. The ghost girl who had been watching him and me all night, debated following him, but decided not to. A wise choice. Marian would never have permitted it. This was before she left and her love for him was still strong. Still, it hadn't prevented him from partaking of my bounty, my prize and glory, the smoke that makes death seem but a brief excursion into darkness. Her love hadn't prevented that.

[34]

The last train is gone, and Valerian sits in the molded plastic seat the station is supplied with. arms folded against the cold. There is light from fluorescent tubes; but no heat, and a breeze blows steady as a fan over the distant trees and marshes, fields of clumpy grass and cows. It is completely cold with not a trace of warmth in it, all heat lost to the stars with no clouds to hold it down at ground level. His is the only heat here and the wind seeks to steal it from under his big coat. He wishes for a fire, but even the bins are empty of things to burn and he would never make it safely over the hidden ditches in the fields if he tried to get some wood. And even though he hasn't seen a car in hours, as soon as he lit a fire on the station the Man would probably drive by and see. Valerian has always had these problems with the Man, in all the guises he assumes, cop, judge, teacher and boss.

In the concrete tiny stars work at his feet. They are chips of mica in the sand it was made with. So he is mocked by stars above and stars below, neither with even a trace of warmth. He thinks of Marian and wonders if she is worried, then he sadly remembers. It had only been a few without her, then. He reflects that he will probably never change, always the thought of her will come first to him when alone.

[35]

What is there for the hero  
In a world that drown in tears?

If time was like an army  
He could fight back through the years.

To find himself a youngster  
With dreams of blood and war  
And there convince himself that he  
Should dream such things no more

I'd like to be a hero  
But fear I can't maintain  
The sense of moral purpose  
And singleness of aim.

The questions heroes face are filled with  
Ambiguity,  
And action finds itself confused by  
Possibility.

Destinations come and go  
And aims are barred by doubt,  
So in the end the only way  
To go is up and out  
To leave this tangle of nothingness  
Would be a victory.  
But failure always finds us  
Drowning in reality.

### [36] THE DROGUE FIRES

Above the mall they walked in strange planes moved through the air. Behind them trailed clusters, platforms of complex and alien machinery. I gazed at one like a small oil refinery, trailing by a cable of some sort from a large bi-plane.

Those are called drogues, I told my brother. They must be testing the air.

We passed a steeply sloping grassy bank that fell away from the footpath we now walked on. Further down the slope thick trees hid the grass.

That's where that Philipino hung himself, said my brother. I nodded. I could remember his body on the evening news when they cut him down, though I thought he was a Maori.

The sun shone from a washed out hazy blue sky. It was hot and muggy, weather I hate. My brother's short hair shone in the sick lemony light. It was a terrible cut for him, far shorter than I had seen before, like a skinhead. I was too polite to comment.

On we walked. Up the long street to Marsons house. It was still hot and humid despite the dusty wind that now blew. The trees beside the road bent and shook. Here the houses were set back in their little blocks; the road was half gravel at the kerb, there were no gutters. There was the smell of smoke.

The road ended at the escarpment where the land fell

away down a long slope to the beginnings of the city. The city was large and sprawling, ugly, a mess of tall buildings and red tiled houses in no particular pattern. There was something different about it this day. From the end of the road, at the edge where we stood, the orange flames of burning buildings could be seen scattered about. From them columns of smoke grew to be carried our way by the high level wind. Over this the unpestable planes cruised slowly, dragging their complicated drogues behind.

We were only a short way from Marsons house, perched on the edge, ready to leap. A standard fibro box with small windows and even roof. The heat would be terrible inside, we knew, but we hadn't come all this way for nothing. She would be waiting with her two sons, I thought... which rang false as I knew she had no children. I was confused, couldn't tell why I thought she had children.

She did, it seemed. In her sweltering living room they sat with her watching TV. They were young, around age six. I could not remember them or their names, but greeted them as though I did. Everyone was awkward in the cramped confines of the room and I went to open a window.

As my eyes fell on the city below, on the hundreds of roaring fires that leapt from the buildings and poured smoke upwards, I knew we were in danger. At that instant a sudden roar told everyone the house we were in was burning too.

Outside we were safe. I held Maron, my brother the boys, and we watched the huge blaze that engulfed the house. Another plane and drogue passed over: somehow I knew they were the cause of the fires. Both mysterious. Both random. The fire reflected madly in her eyes as Maron struggled in my arms. She was too shocked to say anything. The boys held my brother's hands and cried quietly.

We walked them up the road to a small RSL club we had passed earlier. There were no planes now, and I figured they would be safe enough there, even if they were not connected with the fires cause. There we left them in a television lounge, sitting in stunned silence watching the news.

I told Marian we were going back to check up on her house, and she nodded, but I knew she had not heard. There was nothing else we could do.

Outside, crossing the dusty road, a gust of wind buffeted us. My brother ran his hand across his head and a cloud of hair blew away behind him. I could see what had been hidden, a growth the size of an egg that protruded from the base of his skull. The wind blew stronger and stripped away even more hair. He was almost bald now. I ask him:

Why is your head almost bald? What is that thing on the back of your neck?

He turns, crying. I'm dying, he says. Cancer.

Oh, I reply. We walk on up the road towards the smouldering remains of my girlfriend's house. There will be nothing left, but we have to check. I don't know why but that's the way it is.

### DISTRACT

[37] ... to draw out the very articles of our ecstatic faith, soar on the tenuous threnodic wings of internal sight, come to rest at the eternal outer door of endless night, where the thinky piping song of the executioner might be heard. There goes all that has gone before, the love and belonging of a time rich with products of rare force. Leaving only the monotonous thralls of the heirs to the dead, and beyond that the song only the distracted hear...

... the distracted, those whose attention has been shaken from the goals of a mundane life, they travel on paths that sweep all behind, that twist and turn recklessly beyond the perception of others. People fear and love them both. They bring to the world signs only they can understand. In this they have no joy, only a self-hatred at their perceived ugliness in comparison to the things they see. The conflicting desires, to return once again to the world they rejected and taste the joys of acceptance and friendship, or to outdo themselves and pass on through the infinite barriers that surround them, to go beyond everything. They bring us

their discoveries and urge us to follow them, for they are so lonely there, in the outer darkness and vaults of life. Why cannot they have both? Is it possible to combine the unique pleasure of their esoteric knowledge, the rare beauty and endless seas of strange experience, with the comfort and warmth the belonging kind take for granted? No, they seemingly can never meet. If they ever did, someone would experience true happiness...

... once you are distracted you can never fully forget what you have seen and heard, and go back to your friends the same persons. Always the desire to go, to reach and find will be with you, and the desire to distract others and take them with you. They will sense your strangeness and not understand. Instinctively they know that they too may be touched with the sublime madness of the distract.

Rejected, you can only wander further out into the crystal insanity of the higher worlds, and there seek what solace, what cold dangerous pleasures you can find in their shadowy reaches. Always in the heart of the distracted there is weeping. On one side barred by the perceptions of a shallow race, on the other by the natural limits of the human mind. Neither way can fully be...

### [38]

Sometimes, when Valerian was sitting on a railway platform waiting for a train, worrying about whether it was late or not, the sun burning through his shirt and screwing up his eyes till the tears almost ran, making the dreary yards and messy surroundings take on a grey appearance, he would experience one of the strongest and purest of longings in his life. He would wish to be able to fly. More succinctly, he would wish he could rise up into the sky leaving the platform, the train and all the worries of his life below. There was never any destination to fly to, in his mind, only the idea of rising up forever and leaving everything.

At other times he experienced a similar urge, to leave his job and move to another part of the country, without telling anyone. He would go to a place where no one knew him and he would be unlikely to meet anyone who did, and stay there. He wouldn't even tell Marvan, never even writing, even to his other relatives and friends. He hated none of them personally but he hated the complexity of life they caused. He wished to climb onboard the next train out with a suitcase and ride for a long time and get off far away, a small town near the sea maybe, in a warmer climate, where the people would accept him without comment, where other refugees from the world would welcome him, where he could empty his mind from day to day until it was light enough for him to stand outside, look up and feel his feet lift from the grass, and disappear into an enamel blue sky, forever rising and letting everything below grow small and disappear.

[39] It seemed that he melted and poured through the world in a shower of fragmentary drops. Spent shedding, core flying apart, heat in a million circuits, everything dispersed around him. The +v mass of the worlds broadcasts was in him, the crackle of distant lightning, raindrops pelting on plate glass, rustle of paper in streets, tinkle of broken ice from windblown eaves, all at once and everywhere, coming in and coming in. Birds swooping, trains rushing, cars racing through, waves crashed in him, the sun warmed and wind cooled. Rocks held his feet down, the clouds drew him upwards, people moved him around. Out of this, moments.

Walking past endless terrace houses, cheery with stained glass, wooden balconies, white iron lace, porches, pediments, eaves, copings, slats, engraved numbers, hanging baskets of plants. Cool green in their hallways, front doors open, smells of polish paint and dry wood pouring out and mixing in the street. Dusty sparrows fought in the shade of giant figs that grew from holes in

the road, buckling it with their roots, causing parked cars to lean at odd angles. Spots of sun beamed down through the leaves onto the pavement, picking out concrete and fallen leaves, flaring in his eyes as he passes.

Flaring in his eyes like a fire. The fire he and Marvan lit besides a road on an aimless motorcycle drift through the country side, when they spent days touring odd old runs and towns which dot back roads.

The last of the sunset glowed on the horizon, red hilded with black, as they gathered white bleached wood and built the fire. It was so dry he only had to toss a match onto the fuel to light it, and the bone white wood gave out a bright yellow light as it burned. From the darkness it glittered back at them from particles of sand, shiny leaves, the chrome of his bike, tiny eyes.

He had glanced up from a pan of soup he was stirring and watched the flames reflected in the mirrored glasses Marvan wore, two circles of steely plastic hiding her eyes. She had been silent all day and stared silently back at him - or perhaps her eyes were closed, he couldn't tell.

She had worn those glasses only once before. She usually favoured plain black ones to match her hair, but one time when they had been in Nowheres in the late afternoon, she had worn her mirrors.

Instead of fire they had reflected puffs of smoke, rising over the table. The smell of cigarettes mixed with the sour tang of gin, the spirit of the moment. Around the table sat almost a dozen people, and they each had a gin drink of some sort, by chance or some common chemistry.

For some reason Valerians eyes were drawn to their clothes. They wore sombre colours, black, brown and khaki with a little red and white, and silver jewelry shiny or carefully left tarnished and dull. Clothes were mostly old, or new ones worn before their time. There was a girl in a white lace shawl, a girl he hadn't met before. It was an old shawl full of holes, draped across her shoulders like a shroud, contrasting her lightly tanned face and arms which in turn contrasted

the paled whiteness the others cultivated. Her hair was dark brown and streaked with a dark tone, it lay in locks across her forehead. She gazed languidly with the talk, adding her own to the stories of drags and addicts which always seems to appear at such times, everyone outdoing the next with tales of desperation and madness. Her eyes were cool light blue, though it was hard to tell in the light.

He was shaken from his reverie by Marcan, who was reading from a scrap of paper he realized she had drawn from his pocket. He suffered a wave of embarrassment as the table listened to the poem he had scribbled that morning on the margin of the paper:

Entropy and decay  
Make laughing stocks of heroes  
Sabotage the best of plans  
Sour the finest wines

Even the mightiest of mans  
Works come to nothing, zero,  
Nothing but decline,  
Entropy, and decay.

They clapped, and the embarrassment faded. He smiled back at Marcan's mirror eyed green and at the people reflected there, lifting his glass to toast them.

As he drank from the cool glass of gin and Coke he heard a sound like a car's engine nearby. He lowered the glass to look around and realized he was in another dream.

There was an open Cadillac driving through a desert wide and flat, covered in small red stones like Mansay plains only there were trees and grass here. The car followed a gently curving dirt road, one lane of deep wheel ruts. It rode smoothly on the bad surface, and it had no wheels. It crawled evenly along above the ground, the wind of its passing blowing up a tail of dust in its wake. On each side the empty wheel wells gaped eerily, displaying the brown rust which coated the springs and axles. It passed close by where he stood, about 50 feet from the winding road, and he was lost in a cloud of its dust. When the dust settled it was close to the edge of the

high land he was on, where the road dipped down a slope.

Suddenly he was there, where the road descended to a plain, having moved with the powers of a dream. The car approached again, flying at constant height above the paths and congregations. He could see the driver. It was Marcan, younger than he had known her then, in the left hand drivers seat, steering with her right arm as her left dangled carelessly over the door. Her black hair was still short, as it had been when he first met her.

Faintly, from the car's radio, he could hear music. It was the song Planet Claire by the B52's.

"She came from Planet Claire  
I knew she came from there  
She drove a Plymouth Satellite  
Faster than the speed of light."

The road car followed the road down to the lower plain. Short mesas rose from the rocky ground, they marched endlessly towards the horizon. The road led to the base of the closest one, to the small town of ramshackle huts with roofs of corrugated iron which huddled there under a floating object he couldn't make out.

"Some say-she's from Mars  
Or one of the seven stars  
That shines at three thirty in the morning  
But she isn't! she came from Planet Claire  
I knew she came from there."

The music ended as she reached her destination, the town. Valerian was there with her. Part of the town was in the shadow of a huge container ship which hovered above. Its stained hull showed its age, but of course, not being in water, there were no barnacles. A thick hawsaw rope led down from its bow to the main street of the town, where it was looped around a concrete post. The rope was slack and the ship hung motionless in the still air. Marcan drove down the wide main street to the plug and pulled up. She vaulted out over the car door, wearing a favourite frock and black shoes which sank into the dust. She didn't see him, and walked briskly to the rope leading up onto the ship, flapping it

off the concrete post.

Picking up a small rock, she threw it up at the hull above. It arched up and hit, setting the entire ship ringing, a deep tone in the silent desert. A rope ladder came swinging down towards her, which she caught and held steady. She began to climb, and above her a church squeaked as it reeled in the mooring soap rope.

Valerian watched as she reached the ship's rail and climbed over onto the unseen deck. The hull was huge and dark above him, lit dimly red by sunlight reflected from the mesa. It seemed a long time before the ship finally left, rising suddenly into the cloudless sky and accelerating towards the horizon. Dust boiled up from the ground around him, drawn by the vacuum left in its wake, and thundering winds blew them it across the little town, enfolding him in darkness. There was the sound of breaking glass as the forgotten tumbler in his hand fell and hit the stony ground obscured by dust and shadow.

40

Crumble, globe,  
Humble abode.  
Little ocean.  
Brittle notion.  
Land mass  
Bland, crass  
Mighty race?  
Tiny trace.  
By and sell  
Heaven, hell,  
Weeping tears,  
Sweeping years,  
Laugh and cry  
Cough, die  
Cash? Lust?  
Ash and dust.

41

### FOREVER STAND APART

This world of material need we pretend not to notice but cannot carry out our threats of exit was cancelled at birth illegally to leave the ride with dusty keys unlock the doors around this place into the glowing dark groups and individuals confused by sight consumed by sound just letters to the news of this just calls to those we share their lives gone down before to be the first on the strand the last to stand on the peer and see the lost ghosts of the sea as they cry and laugh to live on film forever but not in water the sun is bright but brighter than the world needs and this will be our testament to come enduring at the pole till long to write as long as you can but never to say the word just short with pencil pen and ink the core of life and leave it dry of tears and feelings there is confusion to come destruction to go and here between in nothing a toast to a world love and lost our world together and each of us a personal world a secret never known by any but this one and only me they all will be forgotten never come again into

the light and patterns preserved  
won't last the distance east

into the fire

I'm all alone right now  
and maybe always will  
but if there is a hope I hope  
I find it first before the world  
comes in to break it up  
and watch it run away

Seek not to know the rules  
That turn the world around  
Or try to find the jewels  
Of knowledge lost and found  
Before your time. They only  
Bereave the seekers heart.  
The end will find you lonely,  
Forever stand apart.

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It felt like there were tears on her cheeks, cold and moist, chilled by the breeze from the open window. But they were only raindrops. They had fallen on the windowblown curtains during the night, as they trailed out over the sill, and now they were shaken off onto her face by the wind blowing gently into the room. Both curtains billowed out, filled by the cold breath of the morning which had come up the empty streets from the sea. They moved slowly and gently like seaweed in deep water.

She pushed down the doona and stood, goosebumps on her bare arms and legs. The floor was cold. She wanted a rug but had never found the time to buy one. Air puffed up between the floorboards and her toes.

At the window she kneeled and peered over the sill. The street was still empty. It was Sunday morning. There was no reason for anyone to be awake or outside. The roadway was mirror like with pools of water reflecting the morning sky, and the parked cars glistened. Even the bare branched trees were alive with drops of water. The first

rays of the pale morning sun rang rainbows from some of them.

It took her back to a time she dropped acid with a friend, in a flat at Manly. They were just above the beach. They spent most of that night having sex, firstly in a bathtub till the water became deathly cold, later in a bed. Around 4 a.m. they both went and sat on the little veranda looking down on the promenade and the beach.

They could feel time move, so slowly. Every moment became an eternity in itself. They sat above the silent street, the floodlit beach and the pitch black ocean beyond, each wrapped in thought.

Eventually the first light came on the horizon. The first people and cars of the day went past. The spell shattered. Noise grew as the area became busy with people and movement. Even the wind and the waves seemed to pick up, move faster with the sunrise.

But here and now, as she knelt looking out at the dawn, that moment of frozen time returned, and the drying droplets on her face were replaced with tears of remembrance.

She thought:

Oh gods oh life oh sweet existence, why? Why so hard? Everywhere I turn there are only decisions and uncertainty and loneliness. There is nothing here for me. Why? Why do I feel so unsuited to this world? If there was a better world I could go and find it, but time has proven one thing to me, it is all the same. Everywhere the same problems and no solutions. And death! what an abominable thing! Mends as complex, rare and beautiful as the world so often is not are extinguished daily, to no avail.

I hope mankind never finds immortality. The thought of all the deserving people who have died already without the chance of eternal life is too much. How could we indulge ourselves with that freedom from fear with the weight of all those who died before us on our conscience?

Then again, how do we keep going now, with the fear of death always with us, even on a day like today?

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In the steel  
of the toe,  
crushing feel  
from the blow  
of the club,  
rubber nose,  
broken thumb,  
broken nose.  
Bleeding free  
from the veins  
scarlet tree  
in the brains  
shattered dome,  
sudden day  
floods the home  
of the grey.  
splintered bone,  
matted hair,  
final groan,  
nothing there.  
Just the shout  
of the breath,  
raging out,  
crying death.

44

Now do not fear and do not cry,  
The world is cold but you are warm inside.  
Your dreams will last forever,  
Just keep them fresh and new,  
And don't accept the dark in trade  
For the light that shines inside you.  
Too many words are spoken  
In times of doubt or pain,

without a thought for better times  
That always come again.  
I know you love the darkness  
As I do, but this life  
Is all we have, don't leave it  
And drown my world in strife.

45

## YEAR .

what do you want? what do you expect from me? I'm  
only a writer of words, not a god. My skills are limited. I  
only have my vision of a tragedy, poor Valerian and Marian  
lost in their own worlds, linked together by only the barest  
threads of a relationship, which you, my clever reader, can  
already see to be falling apart. You cannot yet know why or  
how it will happen, but you can anticipate.

But first, a year. A year if not of happiness, then perhaps  
of freedom from pain. No, pain comes in no matter what we  
do to hold it at bay. A year of hope, then. Or hope of hope? Some  
thing. A year better than the time to come. A year fit to be  
recorded, celebrated in some way, remembered as a year  
when some people approached happiness. And I won't even tell  
you which year it is...

Valerian, I'm sorry. Please forgive me. All I can do,  
knowing what's in store, is give you this year. Some things  
will happen - they will be covered in passing. You will be able  
to forget yourself at times. What more could you ask, besides  
a life lived happily ever after?

Marian, I'm sorry for you too. You will die.

"communication.

This world is thick with truths.

I cannot make my way between them to you, they hold me back, they hinder movement and speech. Everything is difficult.

What is the true thing? Am I close to it now? Which do I choose, life or truth? Why must I chose?

Would you chose to crawl between the darkness of the world and be in mundane misery? What is the glamour of pain?

Here, the thickness of humidity creates a subtle haze for us to move through, furniture representing obstacles more than goals, our possessions mounded up in piles about us, music and tapes, videos full of lost souls of black and white, bad dreams in plastic coffins, voices in the dark hardly heard when no one hears them, they just echo."

So wrote Valerian one night in summer. He looked up from the page, his creative impulse run out despite caffeine and alcohol.

He knew the only reason he wanted to write was because of his early education. Teachers insisted that everyone in the class had a creative urge inside which had to be expressed. Of course, the one thing they didn't teach their little writers was stamina. Greater writers are still freaks, with concentration spans longer than 15 minutes. At least he was able to write a good letter, which was a novelty and something people appreciated. People keep letters. They remind you that you exist in other peoples minds.

It was hot and his hand was sweaty. It stuck to the paper as it moved across. He leaned back and considered the page, arm resting limp at his side. The forgotten pencil dropped from his slippery fingers to the bare floor. He liked writing with pencils. There is a visible loss of lead to the page. Sharpening a pencil reassures a writer that he has done something. A pen never gets shorter. The sound of a pencil is restfull, and there is real friction with the paper. You have the security of know-

-ing you can erase what is written.

The chair toppled back as he stood up, and he stepped on and broke the forgotten pencil. Leaning on the nearby window sill, he considered the pack of cigarettes someone had left there. Slight nausea stirred in him, he had smoked too many already. He turned around and locked out.

Below him lay the darkness of a mass of morning glory vine. The leaves were almost black in the night. The flowers had closed, rolled up into tubes. The vine had grown out of the back yard of a chinese takeaway. Maybe they fed it their scraps, it grew like a monster, eating up walls and buildings as it went. It was impossible to kill, rooting between paving stones, climbing up wires and strands of itself till it covered all. He had heard that its seeds were hallucinogenic but it never grew any. The sap was toxic and made his hands itch when he clapped its leaves off the wall of the block of flats. He thought sometimes about replacing it with something usefull, a spreading vine like a passiflora.

Orion was high in the night sky. It was just visible. City lights drown out the stars until the old constellations disappear. All that is left are the morning lights of planes and the very brightest stars. The air was humid, even more obscuring the sky with its haze. There was pollution too. When he awoke in the morning he could taste the smog inhaled during the night on his tongue. Thinking about sleeping made him tired. It was time to crash.

He went into the bedroom. Marion was asleep lying on top of the sheets, and he was carefull not to wake her as he lay down. They both wore only tee shirts. It was too hot for anything else.

Summer was a bad season for them both. The heat restricted their movements. Their pale skin was damaged by the cruel sun, crueler now that it had less ozone to hold it back. They hated sweat, hated the feeling of stickiness that oozes out of the skin.

The theme of the party, according to the invitations, was to come as your favourite dead person. Outside the gate they gathered, in unlikely combinations. Jeans and burgundy shirt, whisher shadow on his skin and a carefully tied hangmans noose around his neck, Valerian passed as Ian Curtis, (a man who had sung for the Joy Division before he hung himself). Marcan was a far more accurate recreation, of James Taylor. She had spent hours embroidering a shirt with beads and quills, and wore small lense round blue glasses. Now she wished she had chosen to wear less, as the steamy night air brought pimicles of sweat to her skin.

The gate, the iron fence and front garden were in poorer condition than those belonging to the neighbouring terraces. The garden was thick with undergrowth, dark shadows and mysterious sounds, the letterbox leant out into the road. Two stores of decayed white brickwork coated in ancient peeling paint hung over it all. Yellow light spilt dimly from the upper windows along with the sounds of the party inside.

They walked up the short path to the door, where the first crowds were. The people here stood and sat in a dense mass, passing bottles and talking loudly to be heard over the music. Only about half were in any kind of costume. As the couple squeezed through the door, Valerian found himself face to face with a clone of Billy Idol.

"I didn't know you were dead!" he told the singer.

"Soon, soon!" he replied.

It was crowded inside as well. They inchéd sideways down the hallway, between rows of party goers. Marcan squeezed Valerians hand, smiled, turned into a room, probably a bedroom, that was packed with people dancing frantically to 70's disco. She joined them. Valerian turned and continued down the hall to see what the rest of the crowd was like, and to get away from the blast of body

heated air that came from the small stuffy room. He knew they would meet up later on. His violin, his will seemed to leave him as he drifted into the crowd.

Valerian leaned against the wall of a room, likely the living room of the house, reading the carefully inscribed graffiti on the painted concrete walls. There were lines of poetry and song lyrics, like statements of likes and dislikes, as though cavemen had recorded their tribal love on these walls of white stone. One in particular caught his eye; "One goth and I'm gone!" it read. He couldn't help but smile.

He sipped from a plastic bottle of Coke into which he had tipped a quantity of bourbon. Friends and acquaintances passed by with a smile and a nod, or stopped to talk. A stranger, short and intense, took up a position next to him and began a one-sided conversation, mostly about the new flat he lived in. Hazy at first, Valerian gradually realized that the man was gay and was trying to chat him up. He was careful not to say anything, as the stranger introduced more and more hints into his words that he wanted to spend the night with him. Valerian hoped he would give up soon and go away, but he was too polite to tell him to just get lost.

Eventually the stranger abandoned all pretense of subtlety. He stood on his toes to reach Valerians ear and whispered: "Pole."

"What?" asked Valerian in surprise.

"Pole" he replied, giving him a deep and meaningful look that gay men use as a signal to others of their kind. Valerian thought quickly.

"Oh, are you Polish?" he replied loudly, with a stupid grin.

Desgusted, the stranger turned and left. Valerian toasted his departing back with the bottle.

Then, a familiar face. It was Borow, weaving

his perpetually black clothes, disdaining costume as he despised most things in life, unmindful of the heat in his heavy leather jacket. He absently reached out and caught the end of the rope that was noosed around Valerian's neck, towing him away from the wall and across the room.

"Well well, it's Ian Curtis I see. Very appropriate, for someone as obsessed with suicide as you", he commented loudly.

Valerian was amazed that someone could recognise who he was supposed to be. He was also annoyed that Borrow should accuse him of being obsessed with suicide. Before he could work himself up enough to strike out or escape from Borrow's grasp, they reached the door leading out to the yard of the house. He had been outside before, and found a lush courtyard full of people, and a table set with food. The food, in keeping with the party theme, was well and truly dead. It was a feast of decayed and putrid looking dishes and snacks, which were probably perfectly good to eat, but remained untouched because of their appearance. The air outside was only slightly cooler than in the house, and the stars were obscured by a hazy overcast.

The tables had been moved, the guests now stood in a dense crowd surrounding an open space. Valerian realized that Borrow had dragged him along to see a performance of some kind, and forgave him the familiarity. The crowd were quiet, the music had been switched off. They had arrived just before the entertainment was due to begin.

A few moments of waiting, and the crowd gasped. Valerian turned to see what it was. It was a procession of stiltswalkers in costumes. Four in number, they came around the corner of the house, wearing masks and carrying totem like objects in their hands. They picked a careful path through the crowd, on stilts six feet tall.

First came the effigy of Bob Hawke, his stern face painted on a cardboard mask that covered the stiltswalker

entire upper body. He wore a suit, and carried a lightning-bolt in one hand and a limp doll made to look like a dead child in the other. The crowd hissed and boozed quietly, as though it were a solemn ritual.

Behind Bob came Andrew Peacock, with a long tan mask and a fan of peacock feathers attached to his suit like a tail. He carried a hammer, and a giant hourglass filled with white sand, like a strange version of the grim reaper.

Next, side by side, came a man and a woman. Their clothing was ripped and torn, their faces simple and primitive, like children's drawings. The man wore blue overalls and carried a giant black revolver. The woman had a baby which she nursed.

They faced each other in the cleared space, standing at the corners of a square. They were so tall that the lights lit them from below, giving them an otherworldly appearance. To balance, they had to move from one stilt to the other constantly, so they swayed gently and rhythmically. The crowd around them remained silent, fascinated by the huge, gently rocking figures. It was the hour of midnight.

From a second storey window there came faint music, which gradually became louder. It floated down into the yard, a strange melody played on a dulcimer. The swaying giants matched their movements to the rhythm of the music, then began their dance. Firstly, the man and woman advanced to the middle, bowed, and returned to their places. The two politicians did the same. Each figure turned and bowed to the one besides it.

It was a square dance in slow motion. Hawke and Peacock did a stiff do-si-do, followed by the couple. Valerian was stunned by the powerful image it all made and could hardly breath. The only sounds were the delicate rhythm of the music, the breathing of the stiltswalkers inside their masks and the soft thud of their stamping stilts.

Valerian could have watched it for hours, but it soon ended, as the dancers processed twice around the circle and returned to their places. The music stopped. There was silence. Then, came the hissing of an old and worn record, and the familiar first notes of a song.

The crowd relaxed and smiled in recognition, many singing the words, if they knew them, in an orgy of nostalgia for times long past:

And what costume shall the poor girl wear,  
For all tomorrow's parties?  
A hand me down dress from who knows where,  
To all tomorrow's parties.  
And where will she go,  
And what shall she do  
When midnight comes around?  
She'll turn once more to Sundays gown,  
And cry behind the door.

As they all sang, the giant figures turned towards them. They bowed, and handed their burdens to figures in the crowd, then removed their masks and, singing, returned the way they had come.

Valavan felt a hand steal onto his own. It was Marian. She was blank faced with deeply felt emotion. He bent to kiss her and silently offered his bottle. She declined. He wished he could see her eyes behind the blue glasses but it was too dark.

"Have you got a bottle opener?"

It was a young punk. Marian loved punks, as many of her friends did, for much the same reason as people love the dodos, for they are just as ridiculous and just as extinct. This one wore a wide crest of dark hair, scalp at the side fuzzy with shorter growth, and a torn tee shirt.

He held a pair of large beer bottles, one in each hand. At the sight of them she began searching feverishly for something, anything, to open them. The grass she had scoured and smoked made her mouth as dry as a desert, and the sight of the bottles maddened her with thirst. How on earth he had saved them this long from the thirsty crowd she could not guess.

Objects were dragged from her pockets, studied vacantly and replaced. At last she found something, a keyring with a key, the tab of the key cut through with a wide slot that would most likely fit the cap of the beer

bottles and lever them off. She fumbled to remove it from the ring.

The punk sat at her feet, his back against the wall, unconcerned by the dirt. The ground had been flattened by passing feet into shiny bare earth. People had passed all night, leaning on a window to talk to the dancers inside, spilling their drinks on ground that was too dry and well shaded by trees to grow a crop of grass. Marian slumped down besides him, key at the ready. It fit, and with a little effort she popped the caps off the beer and they toasted each other.

Now the memory of the strange midnight ritual she had seen was a pleasantly distant haze in her mind, devoid of meaning. She concentrated on the odd taste of the beer, its effect as it mingled with the dope in her blood, the blessed relief as it moistened her dry throat. She listened to the meaningless babbles of voices behind her on the house, and the bass thump of the music. The punk chattered loudly at her side. Above them white clouds shredded across the starless black sky, lit by the nearby city.

A few minutes later, Valavan stepped from the front door and staggered down the steps. He stopped and examined the front of the house over his shoulder, checking for Marian and not seeing her. She stood and waved her bottle at him, and he waved back with a flask of bourbon he had found, hidden above a beam in a darkened room. He had reached up to steady himself in a crowd and discovered it balanced there by someone who had probably forgotten where it was. It was quite empty now.

Marian left the forgotten punk with his now empty beer bottles for company and glided down the concrete steps. Together she and Valavan left the party.

So they wandered down the street. At that hour the buses had long since stopped running, and if they had waited a little longer the sun would be rising. They were safer than they thought, as it was too late for the usual dangers to be present on the streets. Only they two were there,

unpeaking in the silence of a sleeping city. Sydney is a city that sleeps, unlike some others, and when it does sleep its silent strength those able to detect it.

At one point Valerian looked up as they wandered down the road and saw they were passing a cinema he knew, a place he had gone before to see rare and unusual films. It seemed to have aged and decayed since the last time he had been there. Perhaps it was the light. At least it meant they were on course and heading in the right direction down the right road. The glow of city buildings was stronger ahead as they topped the next rise.

Then, they turned down a side street. It was a stupid decision, made for them by these errant feet. Perhaps they thought they could reach the city faster that way, perhaps it seemed like a more direct route. Soon they were lost. Down near the harbour there were mainly warehouses and factories with a few small houses squeezed in between. Many of the streetlights were out, but the light from the sky was stronger. They caught glimpses of water and dark boats moored, and the wet slap of the waves on their hulls echoed off the blank walls of the buildings around them.

Neither spoke. It was a strange situation. The air was balmy and light on their faces. There was no urgency to find shelter. They were in no danger from other people or natural elements. For a moment Valerian considered sitting down in the next park they found and dozing off. But there was Marian to consider, he had to look after her.

The first other life they saw came around a corner ahead of them and approached. It was a taxi, crawling towards them at a crawl, as though the driver was looking for a particular house. Valerian put out a tentative finger. It stopped next to them and the door opened. They climbed in.

Paper and pencil collide in the dark,  
Vision and eye confront in the day  
Down your road and through your grey door  
Passes the body when the foot's not there.  
Melted passed out in the air  
Like a leaf that changes its mind.  
Now is the time the mind is right  
Many things are ripe  
Look at the dew on the lawn  
Hear the guns far away  
The chimney stack as a precious vision  
Big semi trailers stamp their feet in the road  
And rattle our rare and precious gifts  
The bottles filled in the rain  
The wine of the sky come down  
From clouds as bruised as grapes or plums  
But this wine is tainted.  
Walk me to the shops  
Buy something I will want  
Dont ask what, dont anything  
All will be one here  
Our guests express their fears  
With glasses they refresh their tears  
And keep the helping hand at bay  
To better preserve their dearest  
Through the long night into the day  
Beautiful words might emerge if we wait  
The house next door is firmly sold  
For gods to come and purchase in their dreams  
The fount of anger bubbles up inside  
A storm of reaching words seeks out between  
And heard before they come around again  
Should I draw on a white wall  
Or write my words on black?  
Much paper is burnt before being read  
And trees die that this be heard  
Wood and paper, pencil and the page  
Left in emptiness, suspended in script.

Add these lines to the story  
And make it last in memory  
Not even scared of the dark now  
You have done the most worthy thing  
And still cannot believe it was accomplished  
Could mortal humans perform such empty feats?  
I found an old prediction  
A map of cards layed out  
In a moment of decision on the velvet  
And they have been right so far.

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all writing is useless, as it supposes that someone wants  
to read it  
they read our words, and see only themselves  
better just to watch the sky and drink it in  
sharpen our wits and wait  
see the face in the fire  
streetlight gleaming through the trees  
fog binding a road.

here it comes, a bag of white  
which comes all at once  
when turned away it goes  
and trails another life  
here it comes for another try  
an offer of sweet sweet loss  
finer than love that never arrives  
more real than a life that mirrors the box  
that mirrors a life more dead than a dream  
with style provided by names before  
who reached out and took the offer up  
who left for better things; or left all things behind  
or changed and thanked experience  
it is the only feeling left  
for it drove the rest before  
like a god of wind and nothingness

fills up the side with space  
washes its wave into the silent beach  
then washes away and what is left  
there is a moment in the wave  
when bubbles and sand fill the eyes  
and a body rolls up the strand blind and unaware  
only to stand up in the shallows and cough  
smile at the salt taste of sun on dripping face  
well, here in the bag, this wave goes on  
and sweeps the sun and face and sea away  
needles each and every memory  
spreads to a universe, till  
nothingness can come in  
better to see the blue  
the grass sloping down to the waves  
traced on wrinkled paper  
the rocks with their freight of life  
and me there watching it still  
rosellas fixed in flights of three  
across the sky between the flouering trees.

50

Rain came to the city as it does once a year. They found themselves trapped inside their flat. Grey curtains drew around the world, hiding them from the sky, the buildings, the street. Falling sheets of greyness. Twisting slightly in the weak winds that sometimes struggled through. They stared out the windows at this new world. People stayed indoors and cars became rare on the flooded streets. Shops stood empty of customers and their owners quietly cursed the sky that cursed them in return. They stood at their cash registers and stared out at streets empty but for the huge toawan drumming presence of the rain.

The rain reached its damp and persistent fingers inside houses to touch what lay hidden. Walls became alive with growths and sometimes shimmering rivers ran down from a leak in the roof and turned carpets

into swamps. The smells of decay caught in the cities throat and gagged it.

Valerian idly turned the pages of a week old paper that lay on their bedroom floor. The paper felt damp. Marian lay on her front on the bed and added line after line to a personal letter she wouldn't let Valerian read. He didn't push her.

Later, as the short day faded from grey into black, he rested his head on her stomach as she told him a story. This is an old story, she said, and it is said to be true, though I've never met anyone who was there. It is a story for rainy days.

There was a boy, who went to school, and lived with his parents. They lived on the edge of the harbour.

He had many friends at school, and one day they decided to go to a certain cemetery at night for fun. So, that night they assembled at the boy's house, and at the appointed hour left to catch the train. They formed quite a large gang, which they liked as it made them feel safer. Up and down the moving train they ran, acting crazy in front of the other passengers to scare them, cutting the seats with their knives. They had felt tipped pens with which they wrote their secret names on the windows, using an unreadable script to keep their secrets.

As a gang they felt powerful. It was easy to evade the guard at the station when they arrived, and easier to enter the cemetery which had been closed and locked for the night. However, inside the gates, they felt their powers ebb. The cemetery was big, and so full of tombs and headstones, and they were so unused to the presence of death. The only sound was the freight trains whistle and the sighs of the wind. Not one of them was under six feet tall, yet they felt very small in those surroundings. The silence stretched out, and some began to shiver in the cold air.

Then the tension broke, like at the beginning of a party. Someone screamed and they smiled and laughed

when the shock wore off. Someone else got out a marker and wrote his name on a stone. Two people began to rock another headstone back and forth until it came out of the ground. Others helped to shatter it over a small tomb. They felt brave and excited.

Everyone talked and laughed, daring each other to do more. There were jokes about grave robbing, digging up the expensive looking graves to take the jewelry from the body. No one had thought to bring the shovels. They were spread out now, moving further in to the centre of the graveyard. The boy who lived on the harbour moved from stone to stone, tagging his name on each one. He wanted to write on as many stones as possible. Gradually he drifted towards a region where many big tombs and mausoleums were.

So he called his friends over and gave them a plan. He reasoned that by using a big headstone as a battering ram they could shatter the locked doors on a tomb and find out what lay inside. If they found anything valuable they would share equally, as they shared the effort to break in. If they only found bones, then they would have souvenirs of their night's adventure.

A large and solid headstone was uprooted from a nearby grave and carried to the door of the richest looking tomb. It took four swings before the door burst open and swung back, hanging by its lock because they had broken the hinges. With burning cigarette lighters held high they cautiously stepped inside.

They found a small room with a bronze plaque on the wall listing the names of those interred, and stone steps leading down. So, down they went, joking and laughing to bolster their confidence, making a lot of noise. None of them had ever seen a dead body or been inside a tomb before, and they didn't know what to expect. What they found was a short passage of two bare stone with square holes let into the sides. Most of the holes were filled with coffins of various types.

With some effort they were able to carry one of the coffins up the stairs and out of the tomb. As those with knives employed them to lever the wooden lid off, the boy

who lived on the harbour told his friends he wanted no jewelry, but would like to have the skull.

They paused as the lid came away. Inside the body had long since decayed to dust. Bones and sinew remained, clothed in the dusty remains of a dress. The bones were a light grey like furnace or ashes and the mortal flesh had become dust, which now lay on the upholstered lining of the coffin. The only jewelry was a plain silver bangle on one wrist.

So he carefully removed the skull from the neck vertebrae, leaving the bangle for his friends to argue over. There was hair, long and still golden, and it slipped from around the skull and lay on the old discoloured fellow there. Later he found out that some was taken and braided into wristbands. No one wanted any of the other bones. Some of them were getting tired and bored, so they pushed the coffin roughly back down the stairs and dropped up the door. It was covered in big dents from the battering they gave it, but they hoped it would not be noticed.

They were quiet on the train home. The evening had taken a lot of energy out of them. Each agreed not to tell other people of their doings, and if one was caught he would not inform on the others. Carrying the skull carefully wrapped in his jacket, the guy rode the train home and hid his prize in the back of his wardrobe where no one would find it.

Of course, they broke their first agreement the next day. The story spread through the school, and those who missed out on the night's action wished they had been there. Many wanted to see the stolen skull, and braids of golden hair were proudly displayed.

The news that night was full of the story, about the hoodlums who raided cemeteries for bodies and defiled the graves. Police told reporters they had some good leads and would apprehend the criminals shortly. They appealed to anyone with information to come forward, and there was a reward for clues to solve the crime. In each of their homes the boys were suddenly very scared. They remembered how they had bragged at school and knew someone was

sure to talk in the hope of being rewarded.

Knowing they would be scared, the boy with the skull rang his friends and told them what they should do. He said they could rely on their parents to provide good alibis. They would have to ditch everything they took from the cemetery and stop tagging on trains, as they would be traced by their nicknames. Otherwise they would have to sit tight for awhile, until the story left the news and was forgotten.

Later, he took the skull from the wardrobe and put it in his boat. It was a small rowing boat he took out on the harbour with friends when fishing. The skull stared blankly up at him as he rowed steadily, until he seemed equally distant from both shores. Satisfied he was in the middle of the harbour, he took the skull and hurled it out into the water. There was a small splash, and it was gone.

The next few days they were very watchful. The word had been put out, that anyone who informed on them would be dealt with. It seemed no one did. There were no police at school, and in a few days the cemetery incident was dropped by the media.

On the weekend, he woke early and walked down the lawn to where it met the water. They had a small beach with sand and rocks, a slipway for the boat, and a shed full of gardening equipment and tools. He looked out on the water and wondered where the skull might be, down there at the bottom of the harbour. At the end of the small stretch of sand he spied something new, walked over and picked it up. It was the skull.

He was stunned. He couldn't believe it had floated and washed up on the shore so close to his house. In his memory he saw again how it had sunk when he threw it out. There was no way it could have come up again. And how, out of all the miles of harbour foreshore, did it find its way to the tiny beach that was part of his backyard? There was no time to waste on idle questions, however. Quickly he launched the rowboat and rowed out, the skull held firmly between his feet. Once again he pitched it into the water and watched it waver down into the green depths.

The next day he again slipped out of the house early,

this time with the express purpose of checking the beach. It was foolish of him to expect it to be there again, but he was taking no chances. The previous morning had shaken his contempt for ghosts and supernatural beliefs.

The skull was there again.

At first he felt only horror. Horror that this inanimate thing should try to ruin him, to get him convicted of his crime. Horror that it should be able to make its way in some unspeakable fashion to the very beach from which he had rowed out to dispose of it.

Then, calmness came to him. He took a deep breath. What was he doing? Nothing! Something had gone wrong, and instead of fixing it he was scaring himself with stupid fantasies. No one with a successful future ahead of him as an accountant or businessman would stand around letting a skull fight back. He would make sure it couldn't come back and ruin his life.

So he rowed out for a third time with the skull. It was now lashed about with fishing line and weighted with lead sinkers from the fishing box in the boat. It weighed at least five kilos.

This time it didn't waver as it sank. It disappeared instantly trailing a line of bubbles. He stared back at the spot he left it as he rowed home, thinking, now it would no longer trouble him.

The next day it was back. Sitting on the wet sand, in a little depression created by the waves that swirled around it, it regarded him with empty eyes like a small grey child. The now loose binding of nylon line and lead weights made it seem pitiful and sad, as though someone had been torturing it, instead of the other way around, for it had definitely tortured him.

He picked it up and held it like the skull of Yorick. The logic of this situation was obvious to him. It had recurred three times, and he knew it would happen again. No matter how many times he tried to sink it, it would come back. Eventually someone else would find it, perhaps someone in his own family, and without knowing it would get him into trouble. Beyond fame and horror, deep in a burnt

out calmness of soul, he considered everything before him. Not once would he consider giving up, taking it to the police or confessing to what he had done. He despised such thoughts and banished them from his mind.

Perhaps casing the skull in concrete, he thought. Or burning it. He inspected the cruel bandings he had lashed around it, and the thought of torture returned.

It was a bone. Bones could be broken. Not just broken, they could...

Something possessed him. The same hard and purposefull spirit that had enabled his father to make a killing on the stock exchange and pay for the beautiful house he lived in. He took out his knife and cut the fishing line off. It fell in a tangle at his feet.

For the next hour he was busy in the garden shed with his fathers angle grinder. It screamed and the disk smoked as he used it to grind the skull into powder. The smell penetrated the dustmash he wore and made his eyes water behind the protective goggles, but he didn't stop until there was nothing left but a heap of white dust. Without resting he grabbed a broom and swept every trace up. It went into a plastic bag, along with the sanddust and dirt already on the floor. He added a handfull of mince from the small fridge in the shed, put the cleaned and clothed disk in a bag with the dust mask, and walked down to his boat. He was going fishing.

Out on the water he carefully sprinkled handfuls of the mixture of meat, bone and sanddust in the water. Soon a school of fish surrounded the boat, darting and feeding in the cloud of bait. He threw out a line and mechanically reeled in the large silver fish he hooked. He didn't smile. Again and again he threw out the remains of the skull until none was left, then tossed over the sanding disk and dustmash and returned wearily to shore, to clean the fish and put it in the freezer.

He waited, he waited for days, until the fact that the skull had finally been beaten sinking. He checked, he couldn't help himself, but the beach was always empty. The dust had all been eaten by fish and spread over a wide

area, until its powers disappeared. He had won.

He did well at school and was successful in later life. Sometimes he had bad dreams, but they were the only flaw in his perfection.

The dreams were always about tiny particles of dust. They floated about in dark green water, seemingly at random. Sometimes two particles would be seen to touch each other, in the dream, and stick together. More and more particles would join on until a recognisable whole would form. The thing that formed seemed to watch him, though it had no eyes. It moved.

When Marcan finished her story, Valerian was asleep. She gently pulled the doona up over him and went to sit at the window and watch the streetlights light up the falling raindrops.

51 To the Queen of Night I raise my voice.

No crown of fuligin glass to grace her hair,  
Between her breasts hang no black opals there  
But from this mith blue globe she makes her choice  
And takes for pleasure or necessity  
The other jewels with which she graces her form  
Those lengths and curves and globes of whitest bone  
The kernels from the fruit beared on the tree  
Of Man. Now shell, now rib, now curving spine  
She ganners in her garden, but I cry  
To her, "Your ancient practice I defy.  
You've worn these things of death too long a time.  
Accept these words and wear them in their place  
And poets praise might save the human race.

52

most depressed in this cold  
I want you to warm me up  
If you don't or won't or can't  
nothing left but to go  
there is no other way  
this is the way it is  
this is the truth that surpasses  
it is something to say  
but if you turn away  
what is the point of asking?  
cold feet speak volumes about the soul inside  
that is if it can still be found,  
a soul or an inside to keep it in  
warm against the cold light  
of my house, my life  
erase the boring time  
this will fill many books  
if we open it out into lengths

Far too scared of death to die,  
too scared of life to live  
awake at night, trapping moths  
inside this cage of bone  
their beating wings a comfort  
because I fear the day that beat is gone  
that day beyond which no other day  
will dawn.  
all the things I own,  
they seem so pointless now  
why is it all here?  
what brought it all together?  
a book or a poem cannot save.

53 ...the whole universe is racing towards oblivion and the rules of insanity are closing in they occlude these moments across the world they no more no more they might last long please no energy how the creative process running out at last please peace in the world the meaning is clear to searchers they can be down after so many millennium of endless waiting for it to be made clear to them and at last the entire concept is changed they have waited in vain the all of them in the last agonizing fall from the regions of light into infinity ad absurdum and the light is fading from those who once carried it into battle into the room of birth into the cosmos as they ascended and into the regions of hate and loathing for sure for sure as they die on their quest and rot where they fall may they be remembered in some small fashion perhaps a tomb of glass or grass I dont care as long as it was not all in vain which it is and no one can change that the name of the game didnt anyone tell you when you were young they should have they failed in their duties and you lost out ha ha you can never catch up it is the rule of the game that once you fall behind you are there forever everyone is going as fast as possible and they will never wait for you once you lose you keep on losing once you fall behind you keep on falling even if you recover you never catch up no matter how fast you run they are running just as fast at the front in fact even if you wish to reach the back of the pack even if you lower your sights that far and strove only for the company of those like you fail & fail for they cannot stand the sight of you each one lost in the fog of their own failure each one each one self obsessed to the point of abstraction and destruction is the only comfort the only thing that makes up for existence it is the bliss of self annihilation on the sharp words of some monumental book or more of great import that the world ignores except where they find it useful to further careers only the lost can appreciate the words of the poet for it is the price of their position the only thing that makes up for the endless endless only they can find enjoyment in the creations of some demented

novelist or painter while others can only pretend and posture that they believe but will never know and this is the true purpose and the reason the prize if you will here is life and the true root of the race they are its fairest flower and its most precious fruit the reason for existence is others alone to enjoy and others can only keep achieving and enjoying their stolen pride if only it were not so bitter a fate so heavy a load to carry it would be enviable but it is not it is more a punishment than a reward but so sweet a punishment it is and better than nothing that would be far worse to fall and be unable to enjoy the ecstasy of the fallen oh all beings of more than ordinary power all those who are more than mortal anything with the abilities of myth I can only ask you why must it be so for it will break many they will die by their own hands all because of this why cannot they find some solace why no warm comfort only the cold hell of forever and contemplation it is manifestly unfair and against the created rules of the race the rules so many claim to live by but dont but that shouldnt mean that you who are higher than us should not it is a duty to uphold the laws you created us to create so why this unfairness this crazy cruelty there isnt even a true alternative for them to chose they can only endure and live like trees blown by a strong wind that cannot break them but bends over time until the tree is warped into strange and ugly shapes...

54

#### The last of the fireworks.

First comes the smell of incense. Valerian, Maran and a group of their friends crossed the road from their flat, sticks of incense burning in their hands. The tiny red embers cast a faint glow over their group like magic. Whisps of the smoke trailed behind them and mixed with their clouded breath there.

For as long as Valerian could remember, firework night was always cold. It was a tradition. The sky would be clear and the heat of the land would simply shoot straight up into space to be lost, until replaced the next day by the rising sun. Stars sparkled brightly in the dark sky, which was ironic, as this was a night where they would not attract attention.

In their long coats they carefully hopped over the fence that surrounded the school and headed for the concrete playground they knew lay at the centre. It was screened on four sides by portable classrooms, large rooms made out of two or more sections and erected on brick piers at schools that ran out of room. Here they stood around and defined a square quadrangle of concrete, and prevented passers by from looking in. Misty, a school friend of Marcans, lead the way. It was her idea to use this area as their private fireworks arena, but she hadn't stopped to think about others that might be using it.

A pair of dark shadows stood suddenly on the steps of the classroom across from them as they rounded a corner, and they halted. There was a moment of confusion and fear. They were both young, dark skinned, male. They stepped down from the metal stairs they had been sitting on and walked slowly towards the group. The friends spread out slightly in an automatic reflex to make it seem like there were more in their group and to ready themselves for a possible fight, or rather to run away as none of them relished confrontations.

No problem, thought Valerian, as the two strangers passed them, vaulted the fence and walked away. After all, whatever they had been doing was probably no more illegal or dangerous than what he was there for. I wonder what they made of all this incense, he thought idly.

Recovering their composure the group walked out into the open space of smooth concrete, which was perfect for fireworks. Valerian began to hand out the contents of the bag he had purchased five years before, when it was still lawful to buy such things. He remembered the nests of people that had quied in the curatorium store he went to. They too had seen in their minds eye the passing of an old custom. The cold night, the papery sticks and devices in their bags dusted with powder, gritty to the touch, the tiny red coal on the end of the incense stick that could, when touched to a wick, blossom into amazing displays that always lasted too short a time. Valerian had saved his purchase for a suitable time, and this night had felt

right. Each person in the group took what they wanted from the bag and moved apart into their own space, ready to light. Marcans took a bundle of Lotus Blossoms, small cylinders that spun and cast up dancing designs on the ground. Borrow and Misty shared a box of swallows that twirled and levitate like tiny helicopters. Others took ball shooters, whistling fountains, golden pagodas and parachutes.

There was no signal. As soon as they were ready they began to light fuses. The black windows of the classrooms reflected the salutance of the flying sparks, hovering wheels and ascending rockets. Whistles went off in unbearable blasts of noise, and Valerian hoped fervently that the law would think it was a display organized by the school, and that no one would complain.

Burnt out cases of cardboard and clay thumped sadly to the ground around them and on the corrugated roofs of the classrooms. Labels that had been bright with alien script were now smoky and blackened. Black spirals, circles, and other nameless designs had been scrotched into the concrete by spinning fireworks, a lasting testament to their brief lives.

As the bag was exhausted they stopped and looked around. A pall of smoke hung over all in the cold stiff air and the smell of cordite was in their hair and clothes. They drew together and returned the way they had come, leaving the empty cases for the schoolchildren to pick up. It was the last of the fireworks, and they would probably like to keep the strange packages they found as a reminder of a time they never knew.

55

Winter was the season in which they felt most at ease. Sunlight and the raw heat of summer did nothing to lift their spirits, but rather drowned them in lethargy and sadness. The overly warm air bathed them in an atmosphere like the womb, and they found themselves doing and thinking less as the days grew longer and harder to take. Mosquitos came and stung them, each bite like a little curse cast by the

season itself. Around them others flourished like plants, but they felt their links to the cold northern countries their ancestors came from grow stronger, and felt homesick for a home they had never known.

In winter they wore black and grey mainly, colours they usually affected because of their personalities, but they fit in more with the general public which donned their own warm clothing, stylishly sombre too. Others felt the weight of the cold dark season and became depressed, and were able to relate to their normal mental state.

Diets changed. They grew fatter and sleeker as they ate more soups and meat. It was the only time of the year they had any interest in food, as the cold made its demands of their bodies. Valerian found the old cookbooks stored in their drawers and tried new dishes in their small and usually dirty kitchen. Whereas in summer they would content themselves with something from the fridge, or making a sandwich, now they found the time and energy to create.

Winter, in a way, personified their relationship. Neither was likely to survive in the world without the other, like people stranded in a snowstorm. But together they were able to sustain themselves. In each other (they were able to) they saw a person able to understand the strange mixture of depression and angst, existential pointlessness that passed for faith in their lives. Their love was defined by the fact that neither had loved any other, or could imagine doing so. Who else could enjoy, or even tolerate, their habits?

They sought nothing from the world except to distance themselves from it somewhat, to diminish the demands it made on them. Advertisements on TV, for instance, they found intolerable. They dwelt too heavily on the well, the conscience, and woke them up with meaningless images of yearning. The print media was more palatable and they often spent an entire Saturday going through papers and magazines which they spread around themselves on the floor like a nest or wall against the world. Through the page they were able to observe the world they found so unfriendly from a safe distance. Rain and cold encouraged them to do so and they enjoyed these conditions.

Image was an important part of their lives, even though both would deny this strongly if asked. Strolling together through falling leaves in a dry and threadbare winter park, in their overcoats, black shoes and sombre clothing, unsmiling and relishing the sharp bite of the wind that blew their coat shirts flapping behind them, mirror shades protecting their eyes in their expressionless faces, these were the fantasies they acted out when the weather allowed.

In this they were admired. They had many friends, though they tended to be distant. They were mainly artistic in trade or nature, and found themselves envious of the casual ease with which Valerian and Maran acted out their roles in the existential play that was their lives. If they could have read their minds they would have been surprised, shocked by the real depression they found there. Much as they would like to think otherwise, most of the friends were as complacent as the average person was, with only an ideal of enmity to their understanding. Valerian and Maran though possessors, knew the real thing.

56

The streets were wet with heavy rains, and they went out for a walk, because they liked the sound of the car tyres on the asphalt, the swish as they passed, the lines of light from the streetlamps that sparkled on the road ahead. The smell of new earth was still in the air, a rare smell in the city and one to be savoured. Not many people were out on this wet night; few appreciated the atmosphere of fresh rain in winter.

Maran pulled away from Valerian as they walked, and he slowed as she strode ahead. He liked to see her walk, but she looked so lonely now as she dragged her feet through the puddles, a feeling of pity welled up in him. He began to examine their recent life to see if he had been looking after her as he thought he should. Lately they had drawn slightly more apart, as though they had suddenly aged many years and found themselves to be strangers. Not that this was unlikely, but their appreciation of their mutual loneliness had faded now.

Her solitary form cast a shadow that swirled around, from behind to before, as she passed each lightpost. She

looked anonymous in her coat, like the cipher of a person walking alone at night. One shadow cast on the wall of the factory she was passing, and then, as she passed the corner, there were two.

The other shadow was cast by a light around the corner. Valerian watched in shock as the figure that cast it stepped out, followed by a group of similar ones. He could tell, by their walk and stance, despite the fact that they were all a block away, that they were muggers. The leader drew a knife from his pocket.

As Marcan backed away to be surrounded by the group, Valerian began to run. His feet were silent in the soft tubing boots he wore, and the rush of adrenalin that came gave him unknown skill, so that his strides were level and even, his body glided straight forward with only arms and legs moving up and down, in unconscious imitation of a sprinter. Still accelerating, not knowing what he could hope to achieve when he got there, he watched as the knifewielder placed his weapon against Marcan's neck.

"You shit!" he screamed with all the force he could muster, as he bore down on them.

Suddenly he was there, everything happening at once. The knife wielder turned at his scream. Marcan stepped back. Valerian brushed past another member of the group and collided with the man, who had raised his blade above his head instinctively to ward him off. As they both fell forward the hand with the knife moved down behind the man's back to brace him against the ground.

They hit the ground and rolled apart. There was a clatter of shoes as the startled gang retreated to a safe distance up the street, to turn and watch what happened. The stranger stood and faced Valerian, his knife transferred to the other hand. In his fall he had grazed his knuckles to the bone and the glints of white seared Valerian who couldn't bear to hurt anyone. With knife ready and face blank with surprise and confusion he glanced around to clarify the situation.

Valerian never fought. Almost never in his life had he raised his hand in anger to hurt another person. This stranger didn't know this. All he knew was that a man, who

he didn't connect with the goal he had been about to rob, they had been walking so far apart, had barreled up the road to crash straight into him. The uncoordinated flurry of limbs which was his impression of the fall, had seemed like a karate move or some other martial art, and he was wary. For a moment they faced off, studying each other, though later neither would remember anything but vague images.

This impasse lasted only a moment. Then, making his move, the mugger feinted with his knife, intending to cut the hand that would automatically come up to parry the fent. Instead Valerian remained frozen in his stance, seeming oblivious to the danger of the knife flashing out towards him. He was petrified by confusion and the overdose of adrenalin, and didn't even see the movement.

Marcan stepped forward, then, and kicked with full strength at the mugger's ankle, right on the bone. For a second time he went down, dropping the knife this time in order to catch himself. There he crouched on all fours, looking up into Valerian and Marcan's troubled gazes, before launching himself backwards, twisting around and leap and running up the street towards his gang. They too turned when they saw him coming and continued on ahead of him.

Valerian and Marcan looked at each other, then down at the abandoned knife. It was a butterfly knife, the handle made in two parts that could swing around to sheath the blade. He bent stiffly to pick it up, folded it and slipped the closed knife into his pocket. Suddenly they were both shaking.

They would have embraced then, for comfort in shock and gladness that they were safe, but they weren't. Fast footsteps began to rumble down a side street, coming closer. It was the gang of course, who had swung around the block to come at them from an unexpected direction. Only a trick of sound had let them hear the running feet so early before they arrived.

"Down there!" Valerian pointed towards where he knew Central station was. They both started running, this time awkwardly in the exhaustion that comes after fear, splashing heavily through the puddles. Behind them the

running sound grew louder as the gang rounded the corner and sighted them.

They made it, rounding a corner and entering the white tiled and oddly lit station well ahead of their pursuers. The ticket collector stepped out of his booth as they raced towards him. He understood immediately what was wrong and reached for his walrus tache. Valerian and Maran shuddered as they passed him and stopped, leaning against the back side of the booth, trying not to pant loudly.

The gang came fast and steady around the corner, forgetting their earlier fears. At the sight of the guards uniform they halted, allowing the mugger to catch up. He lagged because of a slight limp. The guard held up his radio.

"Clear out! The transits are coming, I called 'em."

"We want the knife, and we want the bastards that stole it!" growled the leader, shaking sweat from his hair with a menacing movement. In the bright light he was revealed as an older man, perhaps forty, who might have been a docker or a merchant marine before discovering another way to earn his quid. The guard decided to appeal to his intelligence.

"Forget it, they probably caught a train by now. You hear that?"

They listened to the rumble of a train departing above them.

"Most likely that's them. Now, stick around and the transit police will be talking to you. It's your choice."

They chose, and turned to go. The gang stood back from their leader who soothed his palm and swore under his breath in silent rage at losing his knife. They knew that to look him in the eye then would be suicidal, and walked with their heads turned away so that he seemed faintly pathetic, alone in this crowd. They turned the corner and were gone.

Valerian and Maran, eyes still wide with fear, stepped out from their hiding place behind the booth, only to be pushed back by an anxious ticket collector.

"You fools!" he bussed at them. "They're probably

just around that corner waiting for you to come out. They've probably just about to come back and double check! Just go and do like I told them you did, and catch a train. Go to the city, go home. Just stay away from here for a few months, till they forget you. They live around here."

Silently Valerian handed him the folded butterfly knife and they turned and strode quickly towards the stairs. The guard shook his head and pocketed the knife; stealing it from its owner must have required guts or stupidity, he thought. Meanwhile another train left for the city.

"Shut, no tickets! How do we get out?" Maran groaned, standing up as they reached Town Hall. In answer Valerian gently pulled her back down to the seat.

When they reached Museum, another four stops along, he lead her off the train, up the stairs of the station and past the empty ticket booth. Laughter and the sounds of a television came from the nearby office.

"No one gets off here usually. They don't care" explained Valerian.

Hyde Park loomed eerily besides them as they emerged from the pedestrian tunnel. The lights of the city lay to their right, the bustle of George Street and Pitt. Already the drama they had been through was fading, for the moment, from their memories.

Much later, after an evening at a restaurant, the shock came. It was Valerian who burst into tears as he suddenly remembered the danger they had been in. He sat on their bed, shivering in the blast from an electric heater. Maran kneeled behind him and hugged him as he curled forwards protectively over his knees.

"We nearly died!" he finally told her.

"Shh, we're still alive. Don't worry, it's all over", she cooed behind him, rubbing his arms which had suddenly turned cold.

57

Love will beat you down  
 Love will burn your heart  
 The world will break your body  
 But love will tear your soul apart.  
 Everything comes in  
 And never goes away...

For then the wind was soft and gentle  
 Favers were had ne'er been crushed  
 From grapes - The sky removed the mantle  
 Clouds, and warmed the earth with brushed  
 And reverent sunlight till the trees  
 Spread out their boughs and drank it in  
 Leaving the clouded fiery lees  
 Of sunset at the long days end  
 For us to drink in with our eyes.

58

The sea of mountains, talks  
 With slow lichen and darting rain,  
 Forever rocky waves roll on  
 And lap the salty sea in vain.  
 For permanence looks not to stone  
 But life in its softness there enthroned.  
 While waves of mountains come and go  
 They toss the forest to and fro,  
 And individual trees may die  
 But evermore the green will be  
 Across the mountains, and their roots  
 Break stone to feed the tender shoots.  
 The waves die down beneath their might  
 And always will, as long as light.

59

Let me lead you on  
 And show you everything I am  
 What is written, is  
 Anything else is shell, fake,  
 Facade to hide behind  
 The most precious thing there is  
 The line of light on the water  
 Don't ask me why  
 The worst thing there is  
 The sound of one heart at night

Moving so fast  
 Past lovers and lives  
 Leaving the dead behind  
 Takes no time at all  
 Helpless as a passenger  
 Enduring like the cold  
 Immortal as the pigeons  
 That circle in city streets  
 Who never die, but spiral  
 Up and out of the well  
 Of gravity, and into the black  
 Of nothingness  
 To come back again  
 After the rains have gone

60

So long since I last wrote here  
 Things have changed  
 emptiness waits closer and closer  
 work calls with its tired refrain  
 hate waits but fades  
 what have I ever made?  
 nothing that means what it could  
 short statements in cryptic tongue  
 impoverished but free  
 meaning was never an issue  
 just a record and release

something to do  
what can the mind find to hold it?  
just the cash search and drink  
a stupid fuck with a lonely girl  
hushing the style with shades and a coat  
waiting for the bus  
letting the crowd push me along  
watching commercials and hating them all  
long pauses on the phone  
abusing the chemical issue  
thinking about the waiting book  
waiting for the change to be made.

## 61 THE EMPTY QUARTER

There is a place in Arabia called Rhub al Kali. This means "The Empty Quarter". It is a round area of desert that protrudes out into the sea of the gulf. The only people who live there are the few nomadic tribes who continuously cross and recross the desert in camel trains, long lines of camels roped together. The people of the tribes do not ride, but walk beside their animals. The camels are loaded with the goods they trade in the markets of the few towns around the edge of the desert.

There is a small group crossing the desert. They walk through clouds of sand blown by the strong dry wind. The men, women and children are completely silent, shuffling through the sand on the crest of each dune and stepping over the rocks in the spaces between them. The only sound is made by the camels who complain in soft growls when they tread on buried stones. Endless sand stretches out before them, endless dunes recede behind them.

There is an old man leading them. He wears a long white robe and a black cloth over his head. In his hand he carries a wooden staff covered in ancient carvings. The staff is the exact brawn of his skin, so that the hand holding it appears to merge and become wood. His face is dark in the shade of the hood wood, his mouth a thin line, his nose a curving hook. His eyes are milky white from rim to rim and he is completely blind.

Camels and people follow him faithfully, for they know that although he is blind he is the only one who can lead them. Sight is worse than useless in the changing

wind-swept desert. Instead, his nose is what guides them. He can smell cooking food, camels and men ahead and he unerringly leads them towards their destination.

The tribe doesn't know, but ahead of them is another camel train almost exactly the same. This group moves slowly through the desert a few miles ahead always just out of their sight.

Unlike the group behind them, this one is lead by a young man, his skin untouched by sun or time. His eyes are green, but he is dumb and cannot speak. The people follow such a young and inexperienced man because of one of their beliefs. They believe that when a person speaks in the emptiness of the desert the wind blows the words away and they are lost. Words are the sounds of thoughts, and if a person speaks too much all thought is blown away, leaving the person mad. The only way to survive the terrible desert is to remain silent as much as possible.

(They know this is true. Many times they have been joined on their journeys by foreigners, noisy explorers who talked constantly and asked too many questions. They usually ended up dead, by their own hands, buried in shallow graves in the sand, or wherever they fell after wandering away during the night.)

So they rarely speak as they travel, containing themselves as much as possible, and they have elected as their leader the one who talks least. For, as he has never spoken a word in his life, they know he is the sanest and most trustworthy of all.

In his sand coloured burlap and uncarved staff he strides ahead over the dunes. They respect him and keep their distance, content to follow behind as is their custom. None know the real reason for his silence, the fact that within his skull there are no thoughts, only the sigh of the wind and the emptiness of the dunes. Never has there been any intelligence here, only a space where a person is supposed to be. The desert inhabits him.

Into the desert he leads them, not knowing where. Behind his tribe the old man smells them, their camels and food and numbers of people, the scents of a town, and doesn't realize he is following another camel train. Just as people are content to follow a madman, so he is content to follow the people, and have more people follow

him. The wind erases the footprints and signs left by his leaders, leaving no trace to find but their smell.

As night falls the two groups continue to move, further into the desert.

[62]

chain start  
in a place beyond futility  
there it remains  
the remains of the frozen  
spread eagle in the air  
crucified, hands nailed to emptiness  
there in the all

[63]

Marian has left.  
She left, the flat.  
She went away.  
Gone.  
It cannot fit into words.

[64]

Borrow said:

I first knew Marian had left him when she told me on the phone. I knew she was ringing from a station because of the sound of the trains coming and going in the background, and the stupid music they had then only just taken to playing over the speakers, probably to keep people passified while they waited for trains, or to keep dangerous young boids from hanging around.

She wouldnt tell me which station it was, but I wanted to find her if she needed help. That was the problem, she sounded like she was in terrible trouble. At first she only started the issue, like, she wouldnt tell me what was wrong.

How she found me I dont know, as I was staying with a new friend of mine who I was helping with a shop he was opening, and no one knew where I was, or at least thats what I thought. She must have found someone who knew. Perhaps she tracked me through the trail of previous addresses where I had been. None of them was really my address, only the place where I was

allowed to sleep, in the brief periods when I receive such a luxury.

[65]

In the endless stretching corridors of that place he marched alone. Stepping over a pile of broken bricks which had fallen from the wall, leaving a rough hole. He stops and peers through. The room is empty, the floor scattered with old blocks of yellowed and stained foam once used as mattresses. There are shredded rags and the faintest smell of rats. It is a cell, a room without windows or entrances other than the hole he looks through. The three other walls are also brick, darkened and crusted with the dirt of years. A drop of blood falls to the dusty concrete floor. Looking up he sees a girl, hung by the neck, the rough rope strung over a loop of pipe in the ceiling. It cuts deep into her neck and her face is swollen and almost black with cold blood. There is no fallen chair or stepladder beneath her, only bare floor with blood. Another red drop swells at the tip of her nose and falls.

He turns to go. Behind him, he knows, the swollen staring eyes turn to follow him, and he can feel their stupid gaze on his necks.

You know me, a voice says in his mind as he continues down the corridor.

No I dont.

You well.

There is a sound of crying here, like a young child. He tries the door it appears to be coming from behind. It is of green enameled metal with a small observation window in its face, now closed. The door is locked. The walking increases at the sound of his struggle with the handle. It sounds like a baby in a council estate that has been neglected for too long by parents that dont care, who have let it get hungry and dirty.

With great difficulty he slides open the rusty panel on the face of the door and stares through. At first he thinks the room is in total darkness. It is dark inside, but his eyes adjust to the blackness and he makes out a strange movement. Clouds roll and stream in the vast space that is behind this door, stretching infinitely in all directions.

The clouds mass darkly like a storm at sea, only there  
is no sea here, and the wind has been replaced by the  
babys crying. Somewhere out there, at a great distance,  
there appear to be lights that drift about like slow moving  
stars. They appear and dissappear behind the shreds of cloud  
and he cannot count them. For an instant the weeping  
sound changes in pitch and becomes an inhuman scream  
like an old machine grinding a rusty axle, and then  
the crying returns.

Leaving the portal open he moves on picking his  
way over the litter on the floor. Above his head a naked  
bulb hangs from a frayed and hairy cord, swaying  
for no apparent reason. It casts mad shadows over  
the scene that shift and change with each swing. One of  
the shadows moves the wrong way, and when he gets  
closer it proves to be a rat. Poisoned, it shakes and  
jerks with sickness and struggles to find a hiding place  
in a pile of wood scraps. He cannot find it in himself  
to hate even a rat in this forsaken place, and he moves  
on without hurting it. The tiny sounds of its struggling  
echo from the ceiling.

[66]

so a nothing in a dawning must chaos  
till the cat call comes  
stiltng tall and lacy in a breeze  
she summons like a robe  
and sparks of indifference fly  
angry from that brow  
cause nothing on the ground can  
change the landscape hid in there  
many try, many fail  
but the wall will thicken tall  
bare white marble over eyes  
that can glister but never live  
and my wings career off stone  
when I chase my own reflection  
till the hair comes down to hide  
what must decently be hid

is it cold, or warming chill  
ripples out across my bones?  
we can trade a glance or two,  
nothing more or stroke me down  
and the hen comes out so quiet  
drifting down to stroke the page  
rows of houses glide behind and  
lines of people file before  
so she joins the mad procession  
carried on by eager crowds  
and the doors slam home to cut  
this time away from any else.

[67]

Real life is a bad drug menace  
Numb and mixed with sweetest pain  
Cracked around the standing upright  
Moments getting more insane  
Body still demanding treatment  
Holling up for crystal cool  
into every other sense  
Bit mended out on eager food  
Dread forever hardcore copy  
Piling up in loops of front  
Cruised above the fields of meaning  
Unaware of what they meant  
Nerve ends out on beds of feathers  
Swollen hands and shrunken head  
And the message at the end is  
You will not mind being dead.

work goes on work goes on life and work goes on forever and the temptation is to do something about it to stop the ride and step outside gets strong but never strong enough at least not here where the fear is too strong I do a million useless things I do not know what time will bring but cars go fast and people march down the smoggy sunny street between cars and shiny mirrors glancing sideways at reflections more real than they are to tell what others see in them the sun sweeps overhead so fast and even the realities of it are not enough but fade at the first dreaming and are no longer just as a body can be burnt, and all its fellows, leaving only the memory in our minds which also fades burnt away by time, so these things will be also. I am tired and colours fade.

Faintly shaded eyes are moving Up the wall away from this Out to the rolling dawn horizon Catch your gold in my sight And one will die for the other No problem though, I only See this nightmare become There is no waking here To trouble our deep selves A sun struck down Glaring sideways into yellow beats Smudge the trees out of the eye But hammering home the spheres of angels dread we learn to be courageous in the normal World of random pain

If a story can be written Is forever, is forever Will survive the loss of memory And carry on without me Catchment of words I only Hear the pity full scratch And the tape waits for playing while the blood spills free Another hope has sprung From this, but nevermind The hard and crazy song has come Again, I hate my breath These words so dearly loved Speak once again my fate To move alone in lines and circles To write another line.

so I ran down the way guided by the walls, towards the edge, always towards that line that hovers before like the end of the race, the stinging bite and spirits working in my stomach, my thumb aching from gripping a futile pencil, chasing a truth that recedes across the paper covered in lines, finishing lines for all the races of the world, always racing at night around the silent streets with racing heart and quiet feet then thick foamy shoes that had down wet paths gracefull as leaping cats, suspending me above them in a space of silence, grace in pursuit of an unattainable dream of perfection, weaving away at a body that grows in patterns undesirable to me, cutting at the fat that bears me down and you as well, this is the expression of our lives, the changing and shaping of our mortal vessels, for the spirit should not be impressed in a gross form but should change its vehicle to suit its needs, and only pain stands between it and perfection

The man in the corner store stands at the counter as though he was the last outpost of a retreating army. Nothing can move him. When an old lady tatters in and demands something he mutely bows to it, and if it appears to be too high for her to reach he looks the other way, even if she stands before him and curses loudly enough to drive the other customers out of the store.

He brews Turkish coffee on a primus. This means he has to keep a weather eye out for a council inspector who checks the local shops, making sure they don't break any regulations. The inspector likes to walk around the corner and in the shop and get the shopkeeper to scald himself as he hustles the hot and steaming coffee under the counter. There is an oily brown mess in the kettle, revolting to anyone but a Turkish coffee lover. Such a person would know that the stuff makes ordinary flat white coffee look like weak chamomile tea by comparison. It's so strong that in Turkey they measure the amount they give you in miles. "How many miles would you like?" asks the girl in a Turkish cafe. There are many miles in a single cup, and the man in the store drinks about six a day. Maybe he is planning a journey of some kind.

Valerian payed for his bread and milk quickly, eager to get away from the smell of the old brown pot. The old man's forehead has borne the brunt of the sun from many years of working in the open. It is as brown and polished as teak. Valerian is taller than him and can see it from above. Any skin cancer unwise enough to try to grow upon such a hard and exposed surface would probably get scoured off by the next wind. The hair had already gone, mostly.

Outside on the clean grey footpath a small black-and-white cat looks up at him. It's been crunching the bones in a quarter of chicken someone has thrown out. The chicken's skin is wrinkled and pale from being too long in someone's fridge. The cat reaches down to pull off a strip of white meat and looks up guiltily, like a small child sucking

a stolen lolly. Its eyes set wide in its face have the same open stare as a child's.

The sun is setting, burning its way into the mountains that lie beyond the buildings of the city, which seem from here to be another city, far larger and far further on. There have been spectacular sunrises and sunsets recently. Volcanoes have erupted all over the world pouring megatons of dust and ash into the sky. The dust, propelled to incredible heights by steam and gasses, spread through the jet streams and covers great areas of the earth. Buzzing voices of doom are awakened in the back of his mind, composed of all the pundits of all the television news who had talked about this stuff. It was all in there, the figures of warming and cooling and animals gone forever, and islands drowned, radiation swimming around in the form of fish and flying in birds only to be caught and eaten by men.

Everyone said that someone should be made to do something, but the entire world suffered from a syndrome of lethargy and let the task slide to those who were jerk enough to care and waste their only life looking after people they would never meet and a future that did not exist. The cruel wisdom of this society had made a decision based on the knowledge of mortality, not only of humans but of humanity. Never before had so many believed in so little. Sex and wealth were all that was left, sold and pushed in a million different ways. The images of the glass fronted box never died as they endlessly replayed the messages of lust and power. Music videos broke all bounds in pumping thrusting grinding action, lyrics became form and style more desperate. Fuck today, they cried, there is no sex after death and the world itself dies tonight. Of course there was the outcry, the symbols and the do-gooders crying in the night with a message the crowd tried its best to ignore, saving time that would best be used in the search for the perfect orgasm, the perfect arched back to arch and tense above or beneath oneself in the throes of love, the perfect like tanned legs to wrap

themselves around your hips at the moment of truth. Love was proved a lie, forgotten in the rush that resembled that of shoppers on a sale day who forget their manners in their desire to get what they can before its all gone. Love never existed anyway, only the necessary instinct to continue the species and spread the sick across the sphere, to the glory of money and power. Anyone who opposes these things is a hifly and should be put down in cold blood as hopelessly unstylish and unnecessary and underproductive as steam power in the electric age. They were gaily coloured dinosaurs and no one regretted their passing other than crazed and hoary old sociologists. Their only purpose was to supply ready made bitch for the stylists to exploit. Darwinism was where it was at and heaven help the weak. They were only good for one thing; roadmetal to be ground under the wheels of the good, the upright and perfect people who ruled. The meek were sure to inherit the world but only after the bawful had squeezed every last drop of goodness out of it. When they finally got the charred shell that it was destined to become, they would probably be given a deadline in which to rebuild and refurbish it for the next age wave of powerful men who were sure to come. After the age of ashes the age of gold, when truth and right would tenderly repair what was broken and replace what was stolen from them, and have only a short time to enjoy it before the age of silver, when the clouds of the future would appear over the horizon and hide the gold of the sun, and the age of iron would come around again as the strong took by force what they knew in their bones was rightfully theirs, to rule over and stomp across in glory and thunderous might until once again the ashes come down to hide their great works and bring out once again the meek, the meek.

As the poet TS had said, it would end with a whimper, but a whimper is a whole war of bangs heard from a distance. From the distance of space that the poets mind inhabits it would lose the terror immediate, to become a slow fugue of loss and time, the first strains sung as the industrial revolution gained a foothold in the cities of

Britain, the introduction well underway in the flaming skies over the times that Valaruan knew. Concrete walls and jagged factory roofs had replaced the trees and openness of the country as a desirable view. Post modernism demanded ugliness with an insatiable voice that deserved the weakness of those that would hide in greenness and forgoe the heady pleasures of that greatest invention the city. There was pride in the ability to tolerate toxic air and poison water. In this contest the last to get cancer is the winner.

Sex the contest is well underway, and never mind the quality. Feel the beat. Dont stop and dont quit. Nothing is real anymore, even now clever minds are replacing the real with the imaginary and then banning imagination, for it is an old game but the rules have been changed, so that where anyone could once use their minds in any way they liked, now only those with the knowledge to share their dreams around are permitted to do so. They dream for us all. Moves the art form supreme with computer controlled musical stings and mood changes to guide the viewer through the complex emotional webwork, all the work done in advance for us and recorded on 70 mill film to stimulate the raw nerves that float based in the eyeballs of the masses, covering in their cars and waiting for more of the same. There is still art in the world but it has been relegated to its own little ghettos of the intelligentsia, an incestuous clan which steadily grows more smaller and smaller and more and more distant from the world, drifting off into an alternate state more friendly than this, all this kindly helped along by people interested in saving the common man to exclusively consume the tasty and easily digestible hap supplied at a reasonable cost fresh from the committee room.

And so on. There are thoughts that occur mostly to those which are alone or feel themselves to be outside. Like a beggar on the street who looks into a restaurant and thinks, "Look at all those weak and ugly people in there stuffing themselves, while I out here am tough and resourceful and nobler than them!" sour grapes, perhaps,

but true. The people in the restaurant know only that they have earned their meal, (even if they have not), and therefore the beggar must have been lazy and deserve to be outside. The people responsible for the state of the world, I mean those powerful few who are more responsible than you or me, they don't see things the same as we do, as Valerian does. They don't see the cheapness and lack of subtlety in their movies, the way their advertising works and degrades the lives of those who respond, their products that destroy the future by using it up today. What they see are good works and justness, for they are the breasts that suckle the world, and if the world wants chocolate milk they have no choice but to provide it. They are the parents we dreamt about as children, who never furnish and always deliver the things we ask for, the cheap and shoddy toys that break before we have time to grow tired of them, the meals that are all meat and no veges, books that are all pictures and no words. They are teachers who do not set homework, shops that give us free and grates.

Valerian turned and left the street behind, climbing the steps and narrow passage that lead to the door of his flat, the way lit by the last ruddy glow of sunset. There was a brochure of some kind on the steps, he picked it up and folded it for the bin, moving in an absentminded dream. The key was getting worn and had to be jiggled around in the lock before the door would open. He made a mental note to get a new key made, and promptly forgot it as he went inside.

[72] Lower deck of the train, watching the freaks, only a few about, watching the girl still wearing her Safeway's checkout badge, a bit too far away for me to read her name, I envy the boredom of her life, the mindless smalltalk of a Friday afternoon waiting and wondering what's going to be on the television after work, checking out what's new in the cake section, thinking about that new assistant and the change in hours, and will the boss keep me if they have a layoff, and turning the idle head towards the right,

towards me, I turn too and glance out the window at the racing blur of grey gravel, the twisting silver snakes that catch the eye and pull it forward, and out there a strange tableau that passes in a flash but its all recorded in the mind, police, at least five, sitting in a row on the metal conduit that runs along the tracks, the SRA employees with their green flags waving the train on, saying its alright, the action is over and all is calm, and there was a little bundle, only about five foot long, covered and wrapped in white with red splashes at the end, waiting there like the girl with the badge who is shocked with her mouth open, waiting to get taken away, removed so the other people passing by, like the people on the other train that matched our speed for a short while heading in the same direction, so that those people with still shocked faces would not have to feel such things, nor look at such suspicious little scenes that hint at the violence that was there only trains before.

[73]

sometimes I can hardly focus on the question and sometimes I am blinded by the clouds that obscure the world around and long to cry the name that comes then Marian but I know how corny it sounds and anyway can't feel pain and not allowed to suffer in this world such things are frowned upon and should be hidden in a concrete room walled around the pectoral virgin wherein lies that thing which it is embarrassing to mention but I will anyway it is a heart yes I said it out loud a heart soft red and rounded beating away here like something from a gooey old fashioned hallmark card something vulnerable to danger such as a knife or gun and I know how wrong it is to expose this thing to the eyes of decent folk like yourselves but unlike you I haven't yet red myself of this ugly embarrassment please if you don't wish to see it just turn away and let me contemplate the wound it bears o Marian my mortal side has collapsed under the blows of memory and today I plunged my hands into the clutter of the coffee table and came up with these things which I will relate first

the packet of coloured pencils which are still all the same length as they have never been sharpened or even used and they still stood out to me use me use me we yearn to touch paper guided by your hand and we have heard so much about your artistic abilities but i could only reply it was all bullshit the family made me do it my parents wanted to see an artistic child so the legend started and grew and now it is firmly established with no substance to back it up only those sad by products which all children throw off these drawings and things which are the waste products of youth and which seen through the rosy coloured glasses of our parents are most positive of the delicate birdlike souls of art which wish only to escape our breasts and die colourfully across the paper or canvas like messy suicides i swear they might almost have been asking me to nail myself on a cross for their entertainment the way they thrust the materials of art into my unformed hands and demanded show us what we can do as their product i had to produce for them to show my gratitude and i did so but always in the knowledge that it was a lie and you picked up on this straight away and never demanded so when i was guided by habit and tried to perform the art trick and draw for you you demurred and so sweetly pointed out the truth with this gift a small pack and only six colours and no paper i understood and felt such relief as i had not before that my girlfriend knew i was no artist there was also a pen a beautiful pen such as a man of wealth would once have coveted a pen that would last the long journey the endless squiggle line which is life unlike the endless stream of plastic rods that pass through our fingers and are always lost well before their ends as exhausted this tool that filled the hand better than the sword and imbued the words i wrote with power and fitness far beyond their meanings and gave them what those words tapped out onto little glass screens and noisily chiseled into fanfold paper always seem to lack a sense of permanence for who would hesitate to heave a ream of computer paper into the bin and who could bear to do the same with something inscribed by the hand of man taking time and effort to do so with a pen worthy of respect gods

bless you for that and next to it another memory a candle stub in the bottom of a small red glass with rounded facets i remember you smoking and staring into its glowing red eyes and you told me the history of candles and how there was often a candle lit in your house your mother who was once a catholic liked to light a candle for the dead or family and friends but whatever reason there would be a fine small and friendly mans best friend represented here tonight by the small white ambassador flame like the monks of Tibet who spin their prayer wheels we light a candle to pray for us an endless prayer of peace warmth security and light and you said that the cigarette had replaced the candle now that it had acquired a bad name as a symbol of love it was also weakness where a cigarette was a friendly red glow yet symbolized strength and was therefore acceptable except for its bad effects your words had the ring of truth for me and they sounded new to the world a novelty there was also a reel of cotton and needle and a used battery and paperclip which went into the bin and reminded me of only nothing and more nothing which is fine as there is a lot of room for nothing now but when i found that cassette tape it was filled and the names where all tolls of the bell that tolls for us and measures out the brief seconds of our lives i read the names in your hand written on the card Joy Division Novelty and the strange delight we had when we realized punks had ended and it was alright to care again and we felt the things we did i am c until he left and they changed their name but never like before the echo of our secrets when he said "when people listen to you dont you know it means a lot" and Some Youth the somes pain and death right there and the loneliness of madness they knew that more than most as their generation suffered the after affects of war and crazy lies and only they could manifest the glamour of madness as it was once the sign of a god come down to live with the tribe now they saw that schizophrenia is taking us home and Nick Cave the wrathful and stormy frown who could growl and cry a Box for Black Paul and the pitiful story would come out right and true and all the rest that were there they too

were embarrassing to admit to and somehow too romantic for this hard and competent and unforgiving world but we will admit they were the voices we listened to we know no shame Morrissey and This Mortal Coil oh you sad people the dance clubs tell us the fashion mob mocks us to listen to music with no beat and little sex you must be wimpy but we turned our backs on them and their frantic moves we shed our tears and now we took our sadness neat with the Cocteau Twins dancing a stately pavane midst words that meant whatever we made them and last on the tape I read Ride exploding smoothly like a speaker slowly burning and the smoke of sound pouring into the room I played that cassette and for only a while it was the old days and you were almost there until I fell asleep and didn't dream my mind switched off as dead as the long sleep the cassette reached the end all those voices wasted in the dark and the box switched itself off knowing I had gone and so had you somewhere there in the dark it stopped and there was silence and nothing but

[24] There is a hardness in the world. Who knows where it comes from? Perhaps its Charles Darwin again, the cruel master of the age who calls the weak and rewards the strong. Perhaps its a reaction to the troubles of a world that changes fast and allows no safety. Perhaps in its own way its a drug that is more insidious and hidden than the rest.

Hard hard hard. No other word will do justice to the concept. A man runs down a road. He is hard. Sweat runs from the short stubble of his head and soaks the sweatband stretched across his flaming brow. It coarses down between the waves in his neck and darkens circles in his singlet. The feet are hard. They have worn through the weak and yielding material of his shoes. Soon he will throw them away and buy a new pair. There is a look of animal emptiness on his face. This is what he wants. He wants to have this face all his life, all the time, for it is the expression of winning, beating the rest and dominate-ing the self. He does not stop when he is tired and weak,

for that would be losing. There is more distance to travel and the body must be made to do what the mind wills.

The body is a god, in its own way. He summons it like a magician might summon a demon. This powerful and independant thing which can grant our wishes. Its needs must be met, but it must also be disciplined lest it drag us down to the hell of losers and find a place amongst the weak to stow us. We are not of our bodies. The jogger passes a tattooed man. They exchange glances of knowing for they are equals. Under the needle the tattooed man's skin becomes something made rather than found. I awake in the morning and find my skin as it was given to me, but he finds instead proof of his own powers. His decision to endure the pain and make the choice of pattern. He is hard. He has conquered his skin.

Why should we wonder at the prevalence of war when we are at war with our bodies? Minds in perpetual struggle with the prisons of meat they find themselves in. Trying a thousand tricks to cheat the body and bring it under control, weightwatching groups offering subtle traps, foods designed to fool the bodies craving for more mass, to free the mind from encumbering drag and allow it to express itself in any way without worrying about fat or people laughing or any thing, being light as a feather, light as we imagine here mind to be. Subtle chemicals are passed from hand to hand, with binky chains and thrashing tails designed to expand the mind beyond earthly bonds and free it from its chains, and techniques odd by savants that report to put the mind back in touch with its organs and leave the body behind to rot or disappear and no one cares much.

The proof mounts up and enters the mass consciousness under its own pressure. The words fall like hammers on the eyes that read them. Death is forever. There is proof. As computers approach intelligence, so man approaches machine. This is scary, because a machine can be destroyed and never exist again. Words can be wiped from the processor and a whole novel lost just by pulling out the plug. There is proof. The cold equations say again and again, there is no god, no safetynet to catch us when we fall and our body is broken. The only answer to these terrifying revelations is

to become hard.

I don't care. So what? At least I was everything I could be. At least I took this worthless pile of shit the genetic lottery gave me and turned it into a hopped up machine capable of fitting in more raw sex and consumable goods than anyone in history before me. And forget history after me, there isn't any, or I'm not doing my job! The past is good for easy to use style, to be plundered from the recorded patterns passed down, but the future is only fuel for my engine, and if any is left after I'm done I wasn't going hard enough.

Heaven help those who might dare to disagree, because they will encounter only one reaction. Derssen mixed with hatred. Derssen for acting in such a contrary and illegal way. Hatred for threatening the stability of the system. The only threat to the buzzards tearing at the flesh of the world is the calm voice of reason. Their only threat. I am their only threat. Are you? we will be calm.

25

Force of habit drew him to Nouheres, where he could be sure of a quiet drink with few interruptions. The crowd was thin, hardly deserving to be called a crowd. The economic troubles of the world were having a definite effect on these people. Drunks and even companionship where now luxuries many of them could not afford, and it seemed that everyone had in some way drifted apart from everyone else. Old links were weakened and broken as people realized that the people they had to fight to survive were their mates. Life in general, and those that lived it, were getting tougher.

The beer was slightly more expensive. The music on the jukebox in the corner had changed, now it was standard songs by current popular artists, instead of the old mix of more interesting titles. There were many people around he didn't know. Groups of three or four men were male bonding at the bar, in identical blue jeans and faded shirts open to the waist to display a wee of tee shirt underneath. They laughed loudly and moved around a lot, driving the usual bar flies of this establishment into a corner. From there they glared at the usurpers who had taken their rightful position. They were the serious drinkers here, those who had made

it their life's goal to be of alcohol poisoning, brain damage and sclerosis. They lived nearly in flats shared by small groups, only coming out in the afternoon. Their clothes, in common with their cousins the junkies, were off shop rejects chosen for cheapness rather than style. Style was for other people. They had more important things to do.

The characters at the bar now were a different breed. Whatever they did for a living, they had few worries and plenty of money. The strangest thing about them, Valerian had noticed, was that an eavesdropper like him could never work out what it was they were saying. They never seemed to talk about anything, yet they were always talking, and laughing at jokes that weren't there. In the past he had tried to puzzle it out, trying to crack whatever code they were using, looking for sense in whatever they said. But there was none. Just mateship, repetitive voices, old jokes.

Now he just sat and refused to listen, letting the beer get warmer. There were many other people to watch here, people he could understand. Art students and graphic designers in their Docs without socks, complaining about life and their grants or A study, waving their hands around theatrically. Diabolical looking people who shuffled around in pairs and hunched over their tables discussing arcane matters. And other harder to classify people, who did not seem to be affiliated with any group.

One of these walked in and looked around as though searching for a familiar face. Valerian recognised her suddenly. From a casual party in this same place, on a Sunday afternoon. He had been with Maran then, and she had been part of a large group sitting in a circle around a nest of tables pushed together. He remembered her face for the tan it had, which marked it out from the rest. The ring of pale white faces, and only one which looked like it had been outside during the day. She had worn a short, beautiful and lacy and venerable for its age and the brave way it was unravelling; but now she had on a leather jacket strangely like Bonows, seemingly older than she was and very badly scuffed. He remembered her sipping tall gins, as they all had, and grinning slightly at the sweet sourness of it.

Obviously not finding anyone in the crowd, she went to get a beer and sat at a table directly behind him. As soon as she left his field of vision he forgot her and started to read the music paper someone had left on the seat next to him. This was hard in the dim light and smoke but it kept him occupied.

He didn't notice the couple that soon walked in and swung around to walk past his table. They stopped when they noticed the girl behind him, greeted her loudly and began to discuss something. Valerian looked up puzzled. Something they said had distracted him from his reading. A name.

"Hi, how are you? Darling, this is Bloom Again" is what he had heard, and he turned half around. The couple had sat down and were talking tête à tête with the girl. Her name, Bloom Again, was what had distracted him, as he had heard it before.

It was not from the Sunday party that he knew her name. Then she had only been a friend of a friend to whom he had not been introduced. No, he had heard her name years before that, on the radio.

One night, after twelve. He had a tape in the deck to record the show. Later he would transfer anything worth saving to another tape, to listen to when the radio was boring. The DJ was taking requests and announcing the names of those who made them, something that rarely happened during the day. He would hear it over and over later; it was a good tape and the radio was often boring in the years ahead.

"This is for Bloom Again" the announcer said, and it was the first time he heard Nick Cave's Mercy Seat. It was a noble song, one which almost everyone he knew agreed about and liked. And he now he knew who Bloom Again was, that name he heard whenever he played the tape and heard that song.

During his reverie he noticed the couple leave. A corny impulse moved him suddenly. He would check the jukebox.

The song was there, surprising enough. It had been

there before, but the songs had been changed and he assumed it had gone with the other old favourites. Still inspired, he punched it up and it began to play. Walking back to his table, he noticed the sneers of the good old boys at the bar. It was hardly surprising they didn't like it. The rest of the patrons were more approving, perhaps as amazed as he was that this song had survived the changes.

As he had hoped, she was listening. She had turned around at the first chords and had the intense expression of concentration people always have when a favourite song is played. He could read the words on her face as she sang them within, following the crazy beat of the massed guitars and violins with a gentle nod.

And the mercy seat is waiting  
And I think my head is burning  
And I think I'm yearning to be done with all this  
weighing up of truth  
An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth  
And anyway there was no proof  
And I never told a lie.

She glanced up as he sat down and turned his chair around.

"Did you play that one?" she asked.

"Yes, sure. You don't mind?"

"No, not really. I'm a little tired of it, but I haven't heard it for awhile."

They listened till the end, when some joker from the bar went over and started punching up some popular dance music. Then, idly, they began to talk. Each was mostly self absorbed, remembering the times when the song had been fresher. They talked about mutual friends, and got around to the time they had sat across from one another in the bar. Suddenly she stopped talking and dug her wallet out of the pocket of her jacket. To his surprise, Valerian recognised the crumpled paper she pulled out. It was the poem he had written and which Marian had taken along and read aloud, to his embarras-

-ment.

"I thought it was OK. She left it there in the ash tray and I kept it. I hope you don't mind." she said.

He wanted to say how much he minded, but he didn't. He regarded poetry as something best done in private, and the results safely locked away or destroyed. Still, there was something flattering about someone saving his work, no matter how bad it was.

"No, of course not. As long as you don't show it to anyone else."

She agreed not to, and they talked some more. Shifting anything serious, they discussed music and television till closing time, when the last patrons were herded out onto the pavement by the manager. Some sat on the concrete, still talking and passing bottles they had bought. Most headed away in various directions. Valerian and Bloom Again agreed to see each other around and walked away, each to their own place.

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I can only keep reminding myself that everything I write here is forgotten even before the ink falls and hits the page and that no one really cares do I need to have that proved any more I think not the point has been driven well and truly home but the pain remains she could be she could be but not to think that way instead go out into the night and the soft wind that old friend that comes from the ocean and cares not but condemns not and soothes for all my sins that is always there waiting to be noticed and appreciated coming around not too often and not before time only when needed go out into the night maybe to a certain pub I emerged from the tunnel of the rail station today and realized that there were good pubs every few minutes walk away and even though I didn't go to any it made me feel so much better knowing they were there no wonder the Irish insist on having one on any street corner they know the truth of the cruel world that so rarely caters for our needs she could be finally the one no keep

that thought under control instead consider something else like work or then again dont it was never of any importance only a source of cash and it looks like I won't be fired thank god though that might be a blessing in disguise and saving grace from final madness its funny that when times are toughest and one is supposed to be thankfull for having a job of any sort one really hates work the most perhaps in unconscious envy of the jobless who if they have any Evans might take the opportunity to get some important things done I wonder if she is working now what would I do if I lost it tomorrow if they told me my position was filled by a sixteen year old school leaver who lives at and home and who is grateful for the chance to work like a dog for half the wages they pay me I reckon I might spend some time at the beach at that perfect secluded spot in the royal national park with a tent and a hammock and a pile of books from the end of the shelf where I put the ones I've been meaning to read no Steven Kings or other popular crap but the real thing some Shakespeare or something heavy and meaningful where the true nature of the life I lead might be found and I would live on water and one slice of bread a day and swing while reading in the hammock in the cool shade only coming out to get a light tan in the morning and afternoon when the sun isn't so dangerous and cancerous and I will give up smoking too just for the hell of it and increase my chances of living beyond thirty even if I don't know if I really want to at least I'll try it I could get her to come surely I could she looks like the type to appreciate these things no not a chance she probably plays the field & like a front rower and only has time for dumbbushes but then again we talked didn't we just like the old days with M just like but I must think not these things I must go back to the beach with the cool night wind gusting in carrying the sound of the dumpers like semi trailers rumbling on a highway and the smell that cannot be defined but never gets tiring mixed with the smoke from my small fire only a little one so the park rangers won't come around and ask to see my permit

but it wouldn't be right without that fire and nothing better  
to sit high on fatigue and hunger and oxygen blast and  
perhaps just a little doctor if I can afford it staring into the  
dark purple yellow and white heart of the fire not thinking just  
ticking over like a machine finally at peace perhaps this  
christmas when I get my time off for good behaviour I'll  
do it by then I find out if she wants to know me or not  
if by then I know what she likes and can get her to go and  
have it too if by then no these wishes must cease they never  
come true if they are thought of in words when has anything  
wished for in a sentence ever come about when has anyone  
ever specified what they wanted and said I want this to occur  
and then it has never ever ever the world itself will fight  
to prevent it the laws of chance will tend to make it more  
unlikely this I know with the sense of childhood if I don't hit  
the beach it might be up north with the hippy crowd taking my  
few surviving dollars and try to wrangle a place in a commune  
with some tiny dirty hut full of lice and leeches on the edge of  
the jungle perfecting my permacultural technique planting and  
growing and sitting back to watch it all work and smoking  
every day the lush grey green crop and waiting for the  
system to come crashing down back in the outside world  
so we can start our mission and spread the word of peace  
and love and incredibly tasty vegetables coming back to the  
smoking remains of the cities finding the survivors starving  
in the blackened suburbs leading them out to the wounded land  
and setting them to healing it that would be a fine life the  
last great adventure the last avenue for the budding hero  
with an urge to save the earth from the coming fall and a  
corny belief in hope unshared by the masses of greed that swarm  
in the cities and buy them lives readymade at top dollar from  
K Mart at least it would be OK if I could keep a straight face  
long enough but too much brainwashing from the media  
and I can't help but laugh at them the way they look and act  
so hopefull and gullible and unlike the highly evolved sheeching

dealing machine we are all supposed to have become to have  
survived this long without hope without love so long without  
love even when we were together I never noticed thought it was  
style but no maybe this could be it maybe hope will prove itself  
maybe this is ridiculous but maybe not why must reality be so  
full of questions why must the truth be so hidden why must I  
do what I do over and over and ride the doubt train to defeat  
and sorrow there must be resolve and no turning back work  
will continue until we break and our hearts will function like  
dumb machines hardly pausing for all we wish they would  
and our glands will pour forth into our blood the drugs we  
depend on to feel anything and the ground will continue  
to come up at every step to smash the soles of our feet like  
the hand of the surgeon at birth and the trains will run like  
rivers of people and buildings will stripe the city they to hide our  
sins from god and I will never go camping or go hippy and I  
will never talk to Bloom Again these things are ordained by  
the highest and stamped by the department they are approved  
and guaranteed not to be all flesh no grass and no correspondance  
will be entered into the infinitely quiet and gentle winds will  
be the only balm for our sorrow but even with this realization  
there remains the tiniest voice so far within that insists  
maybe maybe she could be she could be I try to crush it  
saying no possibility it is written there is no real thing I just  
moved it the voice appears to die but it leaves an echo just so  
faint hardly heard crying maybe maybe

[7]

Why are there glowing eyes outside my window?  
Why are there cracks in the sky?  
Why do I think these things?  
If only we could all stop together  
To sum it all in an insight flash  
And nail it down for good.  
Why did you give me that look,

Or did you really mean to say  
Listen to this and please don't laugh  
I'm serious, in a way you know.

We could go out of these places in search of peace  
Good to find but hard to know  
When to stop searching and say "At last!"  
You wanted sun, but then the storm  
And lightning and bullet rain  
Came down. You cursed  
But when you smelt the earth in its driving wings  
That beat free in secret music times  
And black clouds with their triumphant drums  
That cracked out the old changes  
There was at least a small smile.

- [78]
- This is the end  
And we know it,  
The music drags the moments by  
In logic inescapable as age  
And lines so old and tired falling dry  
To have stone floors in a dry country  
Leaves chased by the broom  
While dust catches on the cobwebs  
And evensun glitters on and through and all.  
The steam pours forth in clouds  
Carrying the savors from the pot  
Sweet coffee here, and a view from the how  
Of the hill. The stone house things so tight  
But nothing to fear from the sun,  
They've known each other at least a thousand years.  
Passing by and by.  
Neither moving, never still,  
Each eternal as the other.  
This is the end, the tail breeze  
Of the day passes  
To touch the tall weeds to moving  
Nodding all in time

Almost smiling but not quite  
Almost laughing, but far away  
Crossing the sky in lines  
Clouds fainted with dust  
On the horizon, smoke and ashes  
Cast beams across this space  
Being, all in all, very good  
Each in its part to place to play  
Being fine in and of itself  
Waiting itself down because  
It wants to survive this moment  
And go on the same way  
There are storms  
Drought, fast flood and the pass of time  
But hear, and we only know it,  
The end is our one delight and pleasure  
For we love the sad reprise.

- [79]
- Sad but waiting, walking slowly in the small parks  
that hold the streets apart, long grass too anonymous to  
mow, too many trees and concrete curbs and the neighbours  
never complain. Bare flat patches testify. Dangerous  
little shives in the sun, until the thoughtful take it away.  
Grey clothing from the supermarket hangs in folds or  
pushes out. Not too dirty or wild eyed or matted hair.  
Only enough to identify, and scare the passer by. Checking  
the suitboxes of the houses for a forgotten carton.  
Giving the lens an idle glance while passing. Poetry goes  
by the fall of a sneakered foot, carefully placed. No arm  
swing, or so I've seen. Perhaps cultured speech might  
fall from those lips whose shives ragged with nervous  
threwing, and a little cracked and raw from different  
blood. Still, they might say things worth writing down and  
recording, a few words before the departure. Memories

still come up and recall a familiar past. Always a family, always sunny, never any reason, or maybe once a cruelty or difference that remained unsettled. Actions that echo in the mind. They can be bad but rarely that bad. Rarely the endless list that dogs others all their lives and lights up dreams with hated sights. What dreams get through are subdued and shallow, filled only with cartoon characters.

Everything goes sooner or later. Gifts go sooner, they are not wanted, never asked for and never liked. Possessions can last and last, but they might face the bakers book a dozen times and finally be caught. All the baggage that gets caught up in our move through time slowly drops away. We can laugh at what's left, it so often disappoints. What is its worth? This value that kept it in our hands, this slowly but surely goes down until it passes a line of some sort and it disappears. A roselid like memory is left, and amazingly it fades within three days. After all, the heart beats on without it, and the spine rods waiting for more.

More rising bliss, numbness of glowing ice and slowly drifting rain hitting each nerveend with a pleasant buzz. Sun sleeting down through a cobwebby window for eons on end, turning every floating dust into planets with inhabitants and wildlife and histories and all of it meaningless. Bricks and stones which smile. A joke inherent in the design of the foot, and endless study will not reveal the punchline. A warm jelly syrup encloses and bathes the limbs. It enters the spine at its base and flows up, outlining the limbs in quiet displays of rainbow fire, reaching the brain slowly and drifting through its cracks.

It is for certain an animal, as it knows where to go. It searches its goal with a forked tongue that only flickers when no one is looking, and only in the dark. Poetry or soul is useless to this being, it

progresses smoothly on a flat belly and its limbs hang slack at its side. Head first it winds away through the canyons, not thinking or breathing but only moving. The sound of it upon the ground, a delicate hiss like sand, thin as the air and keen as heat. The leaves of thought curl around it, and it is through. None may come close for fear of poison which takes the head first. Only the truth here, only the story strained through from the other side with my sweat and wild eyed yearning for it.

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This is so delicate to handle, too fine for my clumsy hands. It is a legend and a religion. How can I do it justice? This tale whose existence is so precarious. Already the crudity of my words has degraded so much. Conversations that shatter into banal phrases without worth if I only breath upon them. Times and places in our history that deserve the attention of masters of words, who could capture their atmosphere gently and lead the reader through them without stumbling. Would that I myself fit into these scenes and knew my way around. I move here like an alien, unable to interpret what I see. Still, what if I was a master of this art? It would only enable me to simplify the complexity of it all to a form readable for others. Valerian and Bloom Again, they have no one observer, no novelist following them around, no angel with quill and book hovers over their heads. It saddens me to have to ruin their story in telling it, I'm sure the angels would do a better job, but no matter. I am a human, and I will ruin it as I know best.

The crowd on the dance floor jumps and jostles, the floor thunders, they are lost in the fog, internal and external, spilling drinks on the already sticky boards, here and there people stand together in their own little space, jumping and colliding chest to chest in mid air. The music deafens, an unearthly throb and wail from the line of guitars played by an anonymous band on the small stage.

The real music comes from the drums behind them, they only modify the noise. Lost in the middle of the crowded floor, Bloom Again dances in a subdued mode. She connects with Valerian with her eyes. There are people between them, but they dance together. Signalling each other through the crowd with subtle movements.

Later, after gaining her trust and her address, Valerian wrote a letter. Calm and polite, perfectly true. She didn't want to appear overly impressed, so she dropped it carelessly amid a pile of clutter on her kitchen table. When a friend caught sight of it and tried to read, she would casually take it, calling it "private correspondence" with a concealed smile. Later she wrote a reply. It was hard work, and she was surprised at the cost of stamps which had gone up again. Valerian read it through 10 times while standing at his letterbox, and carefully saved it.

They started to hang around each others house, as their casual facade grew thinner. Bloom Again had a collection of CDs while Valerian collected records. He spent a lot of time in her collection, noting which albums he had and which not. They shared tastes about one third of the time. The others surprised him. It was amazing how so much good music had escaped his notice. It promised many afternoons to come of exploration, back through time in each others collections, finding lost treasures they each had missed.

During the week they met at lunch to talk over coffee and rolls. Weekends they had moves and music. Time passed and they were ready.

The moment of truth is always sex. It is always the date from which the true age of the relationship is judged. Sometimes it seems that life would be easier if this was not the case, if there were an easier ritual of regeneration, and sex to follow almost by accident. No matter. Nothing was really said about sex, before it happened, but there was a lot of thought. The customs and

rituals were rigidly set. They knew how to follow them.

They met at the pub as arranged. Northern, where they met the first time. They talked easily now. Most of their questions had been answered. They knew each other. The other patrons flowed around them like water around a stone. The barmen smiled at Bloom Again when she bought the beers.

When they had lined up four glasses between them (being very restrained, knowing the real value of the drugs they used) they left. Bloom rode pillion on Valerian's bike, her hands now sure on his stomach instead of reaching back to hold the pillion bar. She had no helmet, and he kept to the back streets hoping to avoid the police. Her hair was in a ponytail, tucked into her collar so the wind wouldn't pull it loose.

They moved in the overly casual space of tension. Appearing calm, while inside both eager and timid. Trying to avoid the pitfalls of cliché that gaped at their feet. Trying to avoid being obvious, avoiding the embarrassment of emotion. Valerian parked the bike and locked it up, Bloom Again opened the door. He had shown her the spare key, hidden under the morning glory that covered the wall. The flowers were faded and rolled up now. Inside, she lit some of his candles. They sat on his bed, a futon folded up into a couch shape, and kissed. Their mouths tasted like beer and smoke, familiar each to the other.

They showed no fear as they slowly and ceremoniously undressed the other. Outwardly they were both half serious, half joking, enjoying the ritual but laughing at it. Inside they were both afraid, and neither understood why. What was to fear? They revealed more of themselves to each other. It was fear of the unknown, Valerian realized. Carefully, gently, he undid her halter top and slid it down her arms, stroking his hands down the warm white skin. She turned around. Her breasts were smooth white mounds, nipples very small. She pulled his tee-shirt

over his head and threw it aside. His chest was thin and bony, only a small tuft of hair on the breastbone. She ran her fingers down through it, making him twist and laugh at the tickle. They went further, helping and undressing each other now, more eager. Skirt and jeans joined each other on the floor and they stood naked.

Valerian removed a packet from under his pillow and handed it to her. For a second, both hands holding it, their smiles dropped and they both looked down. They were ultrasure condoms, the kind that are stronger and less likely to break. Once, Bloom Again would have taken the full, automatically getting the prescription around the time she left home, and she would have nothing more to fear but a temporary case of VD, unpleasant but not deadly. Now, and the great dark forces of the world had reached into the room and touched them both, changing the form of their lives. Now, they could no longer trust each other entirely. They must prepare for this encounter as astronauts prepare for another world; with protective clothing.

It lasted only a second, one second of introspection before they returned to the here and now of their own senses. Valerian removed the band from Bloom's hair as she bent to roll the rubber on. Her breath was warm in his curled hair as she closely admired her prize, standing stiff already in her hands. She was pleased with his cock, glad at its normality, its interesting shape and size. It was a good cock, a polite one, to coin a phrase! It promised interesting, tender sex for her, and she carefully remembered to never reveal her thoughts about it. She knew it would only embarrass him that she thought his cock was "polite".

Valerian watched the candle glow slide around her shapes and forms, as she turned and walked over to the dresser. Her skin was lightly tanned on arms and face, but it was pure white on the torso. Her bottom

was revealed in its fullness as she turned, faintly touched with cellulite dimples that made him weak with their beauty. It was the perfection of imperfection, the slightly vulnerable attraction of something delicate, that seems to need protection. Her long hair was feathery sprays of darkness across her shoulders, curling down to lightly touch her breasts. Her navel was a shadowy jewel. Her pubic mound was hidden beneath a delightfully wild and curving black puff of hair. He smiled, thinking that she wouldn't care for blemish blemishes, and glad that she let her hair grow as it would, and vowing never to refer to her dimples as beautiful, never to refer to them at all, only enjoy them silently.

So they drank in the sight of each other, until Bloom Again snuffed the candle and they both unfolded the bed, jumping on before it had straightened out and scratching the floor with its legs. At last the last barriers were down, and they went where they would. All that remains, in their memory of that night, are moments. Valerian, looking up in the dark at the pale form hovering over him moving with slow sure delight, her face hidden in a cascade of hair, that came down as she bent towards his face, pushing back rhythmically, obscuring his sight in hair and tracing hot lines on his chest with her breasts. Bloom Again, also looking up, into his close face, feeling the glory build with his slow sure thrusts, the strength of his legs with her own wrapped around them, and the gentleness of his hands, fingers in her hair, one reaching down across her stomach between them to touch her there and bring her home like a breaking wave.

Hyperactive, or welded  
Hard as ice, the tiny  
Nervous twitches ended  
Times that were formandy

Good. A rare quantity  
That changes with the smell  
Of ice or blood, and only  
Rarely leaves us well.

And so ye searched for drugs  
Without a book to guide you,  
Reading urges shot through  
The strange nerves and blood.

To take another user  
To your bed, this cuts adduct  
So surely as a loser  
To be last so quick,

But numb fingers slip, so  
Easily to be fellthrough.  
So sure upon the weapon, though.  
They hit each time so true.

If God was a teddy bear,  
Mary was a nurse  
And Jesus was your doctor,  
Would things be any worse?

## I fear

The white fingers of death that grow a knuckled fist  
around my heart,

The clot of blood that waits like Achilles heel in the  
arch of the foot, for freedom to wander and feed my mind,  
Flood it with the friendly red or blot it out,  
The car with my name inscribed invisible on the  
silver bumper,

The gun in the drawer of the man who waits  
Whos pain drives the trigger home  
Lightning not yet born in skies now blue.

I fear being alone so long that people move away  
And speech becomes a trial and love locked and gone.

I fear women who I cannot understand  
And anyone who understands me.

What happens far away in sealed rooms  
Where they with power gripped between their teeth  
Might casually reach across the world to end it.

Without knowing they scratch a flea - me.

My every thing but dust between their gears  
And messages travel down my Moody ways

Small messages coiled tight in knots

Unwrap, unwind, they strangle living cells.

Everywhere its cold and lonely

Waiting to rush in when the effort stops  
Waiting for a chunk in this wall.

You know its coming closer,  
You smell it on the wind.

You see it in your parents eyes  
That cloud and turn within.

Each morning it gets harder  
To go and face the pain,

Each evening much quicker  
To seek the arms of sleep again.

[83]

... screaming so quiet, as the dreamer falls, clutching, but translates her breath into a sigh, almost restful in terror, to turn and ask, but not to guess, it not being right to break this silvery knot, that hangs like trust into the chasm at the centre, night breaks, morning falls and between the sleeping girl trembles, tiny, lost amid imaginings she never knew she had, things which must have come inside, not created there, not there, I hold her hand, fingers grasp in instinct, seeing visions inside, climbing through the bars, or pouring out of the ground in unstoppable numbers flapping wings that blow a stink so uncanny, so bizarre it could not possibly be real, but nonetheless the sleeper faces things as true as light, changes, visions of blood black suns and scalding darknesses, eyes in bad places that talk, chasing waves of foamy grey brilliance of cockroach wings of paper shreds of bile of rich old earth, these come close to drawing out the grey lines of sanity, if only for the hour it lasts, and if only here, in this bed, my arms enclose this head and gently stroke her cool damp hair, I follow her lips moving and try to read them, guess the meanings, words of people who only live once a fortnight or so, once in a while that head becomes their world and they live again, generated by miles of wires and clicking cells in there, working up a model for tonights virtual show...

[84]

And so we find so self aware we count the changes there within

We've all so human tragic stupid running headlong into sin

And nothing said or ever thought asleep and drifting in our time

Our gods ourselves and worship me and you to make it seem so fine.

[85]

Bloom Again turned as a secondhand rose,  
Faded as beautiful print blossoms shed  
Flaming red in concrete roads and alleys  
Chosen sadly for their empty to walk through  
Against the closed sky and white clawed sea  
The gap where a meaning less dream or two  
Crashed into wreckage strewn stone below  
She caught the wind in her skirt, seining out  
The salt foam wash as lace  
Turning, ragged, in a moment mine forever  
Later there were trees she knew  
And a lemon cloudy sunset stare  
A big sky, she said in awe  
And flatmates who cried when she left  
I am guilty for breaking the family  
But glad, for the sound of the change  
And the future given back  
Re written for our hope, new thing  
We couldnt control the time or place  
Draining bottle of spirit, boring people  
At party as slow as pitch  
Giving fears for your health but  
Proved wrong, never kept up with  
Brightly burning through the pale skin  
On arms and legs freckled as sun  
Brave to the sky  
Shopping home up the long road  
Bags cutting through to the bone  
Down to the water under night lit clouds

Drunks and see the crowd  
A beer like everyone does  
How easily we move from a decade of school  
Burrowing deep in a decade of grief  
watching ourselves in disbelief  
Hating the changes days made  
Cutting lines in a defenceless face  
Deal out the glossy colours  
A drawerful of time in slippery stacks  
Photos of thee and me , we  
Saved from habit .

We say , This cannot be true  
Me and you , here and now  
It is not what you wished for  
And our wishes were meant to come true  
I am all you get now  
This is the best you can do  
For a second in your arms I catch a glimpse  
Of the truth - now gone  
Reach that screaming height  
And she in the others hands  
Take that terrifying jump  
Not now , not here  
There where the light through the blinds  
Finds the shine of thy eyes  
Turned over and saw the look  
Of empty inside to reflect the city  
City seen from afar , from a hill  
A grassy place but touched by smoke  
City of glass in an age of glass  
Ever reached out for the shining sun  
Blinding off the angles at you  
And shivered in the double light  
Two shadows can only mean danger  
Lightbulbs so hot  
They burn through the wall

Shine in the rot  
And give you the call  
To act in frame of misery  
Loose your sense of decency  
Spare a thought for me  
Slow till I fall

[86]

In the basement down the down  
And the sugar sweet smell rises  
Into spiral smoke and feedback  
From the amp stack that comes  
Faces clenched or apathetic  
At the bleeding fingered wires  
Down the neck of battered axe  
Wait to segue to the cover

Raised black muddies toasting death  
In their stamped and clamping hands  
Sheaved in the tattered black adorned  
With trumpets picked up at the market  
Tallung bullshit over bullshit  
Till the 'dine but rushes squarely  
Or we hit the pavement barely  
Missing going home alone .

[87]

Sad Sun  
On Autumn Sunday  
Drifting off  
To other climes  
The tilt will turn  
Your face away  
From mine until  
Two seasons time

For now the clouds will bloom again  
Where I can't reach to burn away  
In black and grey  
Like clouds, fair people  
Leave their houses,  
Seem to say;  
"This time is right  
For me, the air  
Is fine, this season  
More all mine!"

[88]

Green window leaves are yellow from the sun  
Motionless hanging in the moments of time  
Waiting to brush the head that turns  
To follow the shy blue black cat phone line  
Birds flocking on the move now,  
Leaving without a backward glance  
Clutching up the clouds in rapid strokes  
Perching here on suns gold dusty lance  
Hits down into the eye  
A last attempt to warm the worn out cloth  
Black coat down to the knees  
Wards off inside to cut the cloth  
Of Autumn afternoons waiting indoors  
Watching the pale square of sunlight on the floor  
Watching each mote shine out and swirl  
Resist the silent bicker open door  
Thought frozen in the early deer smell  
That gathers now in shady lawns under trees  
Whose blossoms flew before and more  
Than leaves curled and died beneath  
Their limbs stretched out to score  
Cold air like rocks in running water  
Each step falling in love  
With tumbling rocky footpath underneath

Every breath of the fenced carefull ~~footpath~~ gardens  
Another gift of earth  
Soft smoke moves across the road  
Raked into a pile of smouldering  
Choking gravel gutters with ash  
The strangers around here stare  
They think you are a danger  
Black and tall in sombre mood  
Tinny trillie whispers out of  
The phones in your ear  
And inside looking out on others  
From veiled windows peers the soul  
Confronted by another passing by in fear  
Here in the dangerous fence  
White fences and plastic vase protection  
Suburbs in troubled paravara sleep  
You can see it, looking out the train  
Passing yellow windows past early sunset now  
Families crouch in the light and snarl  
And grimace at TV news.  
"Walking is danger, outside is danger,  
Do you not live here, are you danger?  
Do we hate you, suffocating the air?  
This is a cul-de-sac you know."  
Mindless wings leave the lines over  
Crying unheard in the light blue shadow  
Between black trees on the fear of sky  
Projected by my tracking eyes  
Stirred now by the violent riff  
From a worn but precious tape  
Whirs away one more time on low battery  
Somewhere far begone they felt pain  
In the fingers so sure on the neck  
Of a sharp feet polished strat.

Taken up and pressed and sold  
Here now singing in my pocket  
Into the dark of damp gardens, parked cars  
Stand aside to let a jogger pass  
Who staves out on parked miles to go  
Not as here as the soft light  
And air, this is a rare cool  
Air that is a vintage bottled  
And only allowed to flow slowly in rays  
On the worlds true celebrations  
Not those worked up to calendar  
But any time it comes  
The cool draught flows from the sky  
Past everyone to you alone  
Later the colours go slowly out  
Waiting harsh flicker on council lights  
In strings down these quiet streets  
Sticking lines from hair carved  
Back over stooped weary shoulders  
By the wind of swift stride passage  
Out of the trap of old luck  
Bared and locked and lighted white  
In windows figures back and forth  
And the tiredness carries me home

[89]

Cold grey all the way  
Every day I watch the combers rise  
watch them plough the sand  
So much much effort there  
watch the air fill with its spray  
Floats away cast up the wave  
Carried past my stinging eyes  
Salt the earth and burn the roots  
Of trees, furnish the green shoots

That dare to test the salty air  
it carries gulls in screaming clouds  
Grey delta aerofols that crowd  
With mindless hunger on the line  
Between the living and the dead  
To pick their morsels from the bone  
They fight, the weak are never fed

[90]

### LIGHTNING

I ride it up  
This second long white star  
Leaving ears  
That bear their shred  
A tear in the air  
Being stressed, then  
Relaxing in rain  
Morning rose red, steaming,  
Adorn  
Footprint of Jupiters  
Horns grey white blinks, now  
At half the speed of light  
This jagged mover takes  
The need to think.  
Stolen, stare at the clouds  
I ride it up, to clearness  
Appalled by rain  
Leaving my friends below to pass  
Another night without stars

[91]

### ACID CASUALTY

Ho ho ho!  
What a very vicious joy it is  
To be free at last  
From the dark.

I sucked your letters  
Dry, and that strange ink  
Has written much that is  
And will remain secret  
In the cold dark lightless vaults  
Of my skull.  
Now I step from stone to stone  
Slowly yet easily  
And no longer need to see  
The eye of the passer by  
Watching me.  
Now I hunt for grace  
More than sustenance.  
Now my hair and face  
Are labels of my tenancy  
When I suffered on the rock  
And came out clean  
In dirty grey and shadowless  
Being in a good possession  
Of the message that you gave  
In a square. I say;  
This is not Madness,  
This is Freedom.

[92] LEECH

Doomed black comma,  
Salted for table,  
You need what wasn't yours.

Leeching me  
Broke treaties  
For chemical war

Caustic white squares  
checker your back,  
Of wetsoft black  
Falling pain  
You dance on the path.  
Dance for rain.  
  
[93]  
This is a voice,  
And this is what it is crying,  
And this is an eye,  
And these are the tears it is crying,  
All the time, all the time,  
And this is the rain falling  
Somewhere in the world, all the time,  
And every where, sometime,  
And these are the tears we are crying,  
And this is the man  
And this is what he is crying:  
"Why? Why?"  
And this is the rain falling  
All the time, all the time.

There was a knock at the door, a timid knock, barely able to be heard. They were deep under the doona in their bed, exploring each other in an ongoing process of discovery which was their hobby and job. In his mind, Valerian the explorer, constantly redrew his maps of Bloom Again. She changed as a planet changes, with her seasons and revolutions and tides. She was never the same person twice and always a mystery to him. Bloom knew that she was a conqueror not an explorer, and she marked each new territory of Valerian she discovered with a flag and claimed it as her own.

After half an hour there came another knock. Just slightly louder. They dreamed in their bed, warmed by each others skin and not wanting to wake up and open the door.

The third knock was heard, by Valerian as he dressed. It was still early morning and no one was expected. He could hear Bloom Again in the shower, and the coffee maker working in the kitchen, and that faint knock, like that of a young child who didn't want to disturb anyone but had an important message. It was ominous. Hurriedly he pulled on shorts and went to the door.

She was barely recognisable, the girl that stood outside. So thin, the greyed and badly worn material of her tracksuit blown by the soft breeze to outline the cruel angles of the joints beneath. Shoulders thin and curved like defeat, neck deeply wedged with tendons and the short horizontal bars of her throat showing through the pale, almost grey skin. He winced at the sight of the great cold sore on the left side of her mouth, and the scratch on her hand. One arm was folded across the thin chest holding the other, a badly infected cut on its back, partly healed with a crystalline scar which looked like it had white sugar rubbed into it. She was half turned away as if about to go, but frozen in place.

On her face a cheap pair of mirrored sunglasses hid her eyes, their lenses scratched and rainbow patterned with the patina of wear. The hair was pulled back cruelly into a ponytail, that and her emaciated thinness rendering her of a hollerina, wearing old velcro fasten sneakers instead of pony shoes. If she was a hollerina then she'd been costumed to play the part of a junky.

Valerian could only stand and take in the sight of her in silent self punishment. A feeling of responsibility knawed at him inside, amplified by raw shock at this terrible event. She remained frozen, staring half away, aware the door had opened but not willing to turn and look someone in the eyes.

"Marion, why?" whispered Valerian. "You can't come here. I've got someone with me, she won't let you stay."

The silent figure turned to face him and tried to speak, but he silenced her.

"Look, I know what you're going to say, you haven't got anywhere else to go, right? I just can't help you, I wish I could, but you have to understand."

With every brutal word he whispered to her the terrible feeling of responsibility and guilt grew stronger, weakening his resolve. But he knew things, knew a story that repeated itself over and over, and had heard rumours about her. Her addiction. Long sleeves covered arms which had held him, but he could see through to the damaged skin with his mind's eye. Her name had been mentioned by people who had the truth.

He closed the door gently on the silent figure and turned away, but Bloom Again had finished her shower and heard the click of the lock. She came out of the bedroom where she had been dressing.

"Who was it?"

"No one," replied Valerian flatly, but there was still a dark shape visible through the rippled glass window in the centre of the door. Bloom stepped around

him and pressed her face up against the glass to see more clearly. She stiffened with shock, and opened the door.

"Maran."

"You have to let me in, I have to talk to you," she replied.

"You're my only hope" whispered Valerian bitterly to himself. Of course Bloom would let her in, how could she resist. There was a kindness in her that ignored danger and threat, and there was also curiosity. An opportunity to find out so much about Valerian's past was being thrust into her hands, and she gave no thought to the possible risks.

so they led the dirty elfin figure down their hall and into the kitchen, where she instinctively sat in the chair that used to be hers. They made her a sandwich, and Bloom was already planning to let her sleep on the couch.

95

An artist had been her friend, from a chance meeting she could not recall. Love, or infatuation, had gradually built itself up in her mind. In him she had seen a way out of her private world, which had contained her emotions and movements before, shutting her away from others behind a glass wall nothing could break. He took time to explain to her, art and the thoughts that went with it. It sounded good, like a way of talking without using words. She had never been good at talking. Best of all, he lived with a tribe of friends who, it seemed, scorned the quiet despair of life and created their own lives to replace it. They lived in happy groups and moved fast, and were exactly opposite to her and her old ways. Now she wanted to change.

The decision came to her, suddenly and desperately. She packed a suitcase with clothes, and left

in an almost symbolic way, and became an artist girl. Absorbed in a new medium, rarely remembering her past. His medium was painting, and he found in her a surprisingly apt pupil. Maybe it was so fresh and new to her, and she lacked the cynicism which comes with having too much to do with art.

They shared everything, except drugs. The artist used a small amount of smack, occasionally, more as a joke than a habit. It was the ritual he enjoyed, all the preparations done in their right order, and the frame of mind one needs to achieve (when not addicted) to plunge a steel spike into the flesh and pump something foreign inside. When Maran said she wanted to try he always gently steered her away, saying it would damage the development of her natural art. And she agreed at other times, when the thought of using a needle was frightening, and remembering wanting to was frightening.

Still, just as she had decided to leave, another decision came, and when he saw how sorrowful, he relented. He helped her and supplied her at first, purely out of kindness, hoping she would touch it once and leave it alone.

The familiar ritual was repeated, she had her first taste. The artist sat across from her, ready to assist her to the toilet if she needed to vomit. Gradually she felt the change come through, the ineffable undescribable change which was the closest thing this generation had to a religious experience.

Sometime afterwards she painted a picture of a plant, a seaweed in the ocean. It grew in the bottom of a deep trench. Gentle dark water waved its arms for it, and slow fish nosed their way through it in search of food. All its needs were simple, uncomplicated and taken care of continuously by the salt water. It was in its place, its home, and the sea made it welcome. Slowly it grew, and it could feel that growth

like a singing out that continues forever. It lived in a perpetual time where night and day were one and the seasons didn't matter and even the years stood still. It grew in a space between time, for it time was all one moment and every moment.

"That's what I felt" she told the painter when he asked about this work. Maybe he felt, then, the first foreboding of what was to come. Whenever he wrought out his fit she would share, sitting in the softly pouring sun cross-legged on the floor, watching motes of dust dance in the beams, thinking her plantlike thoughts.

96

On a Saturday evening in the city the paths are full of people. Laden trains make their way in from the suburbs laden with youth in flashy clothes, imitating the styles imported from America. They run up and down the carriages like children going on a picnic. Others are quieter, they avoid the noisy mobs and travel in small select groups. They appear sad in their sombre clothes and ragged hair, but they have found their own truth.

All move in large groups through the city looking for entertainment. Each group is a single animal, an organism composed of separate parts but with one mind. Decisions about what they will see or do that night are made automatically, in some strange kind of group telepathy. You can see this. They walk in step, and look at the same things, their heads moving together and their mouths talking, each saying the same thing in different words. Shopkeepers and owners of clubs and to cinemas fight to attract the groups attention.

Sometimes they split and shatter, leaving separate entities to go on and search for other groups, or stay alone. Other people never get caught up and move habitually alone or in pairs. But groups

dominate the streets.

Marcus trailed an ordinary group, trying to avoid the knowing eye of the police. They wouldn't have recognised her anyway tonight, but she had a habit of trying to fit in. She had changed. With a serious wash the pink skin had been revealed beneath the dirt, and food had brought the blood flush to the surface. Now she wore old clothes from a bottom drawer, left behind and saved by Valerian. In her pocket was money, his money. She had asked for it, and he had brought it out already folded and ready.

She had asked him. Some sense, a survival trait within her had bypassed embarrassment, her shame at leaving so long ago and now intruding where she had little right. She was not even hanging out, not even in need, but the thought of the need the future would bring had driven her to ask.

Earlier on Valerian had folded 150 in 50 dollar bills and tucked them into his shirt pocket. Marcans eyes were hungry. It was a sure need that no good intentions could avert. So, he took money from his wallet, enough for a serious fix, and left it ready.

The group she trailed, close behind like a girlfriend of one of the boys who was out of sorts and didn't want to talk to anyone, passed a well known park. She turned and took up her place on one of the benches, opening a paperback she took from a coat pocket. She didn't read, her eyes remained fixed on a single word and her shoulders were tense. For ten minutes she sat without turning a page.

A young boy came to sit at the other end of the bench. His hands stuck out oddly from the sleeves of a too large coat.

"You after works?" he asked. The S on the word "works" was barely noticeable, it almost sounded like he said "you after work?" The innocent world thought he was only a tout for a brothel, sizing up this girl as a refugee from a boring country town after

money and adventure in the city, or maybe he knew of some other work, perhaps a place for a waitress in his father's cafe. Marian, however, knew what waits were.

"That's right" she replied, "works". This time the song was drawn out into a hiss of desire.

"Mackers, half an hour" replied the boy, and left. She didn't even bother with trawling a group this time, walking straight up the street and around the corner to where the golden arches of McDonalds beckoned. There she ordered a coffee and took a seat at a double table in the smoking section, all according to custom.

The coffee was long gone an hour later and knowing attendants with smirks and cool eyes had swept up around her table a dozen times. She knew they wouldn't call the police no matter what they suspected. The management took their cut and everything was OK.

The same young boy as before sat down opposite her with a tray; a cheeseburger fries and coke. The sight of the food made her simultaneously hungry and sick. With a deliberate gesture he tipped the packet of fries towards her in invitation and unwrapped his burger.

She checked the street scene through the window behind him, where people out on the street passed out of the darkness and into the spell of light. There were no eyes watching them. The tightly folded bills were taken out, held in her palm, and slipped into the box as she took a chip. The boy approved of this with a smile, negligently taking back the box of fries and glancing in. He generously pushed his burger towards her. In the bite he had just taken she could see the blue of a plastic capsule tucked into the filling with his tongue. This she bit off, careful not to break it or swallow, pushing it back into her cheek as she chewed.

The boy bent earnestly over his meal now, probably quite hungry, and she left without a word, her purchase

now safely under her tongue. There was no time to lose, and she hurried to get home and see just what it was that she had bought.

[7]

Come out from where you are hiding  
You secrets  
Come out and show  
I would know you  
I want to see what you are  
There is fear  
But only enough to spare the hunger  
Are you ugly? I love ugly  
Ugly is the strength that resists beauty.  
Are you dangerous?  
Life is danger, and yet I like.  
Would it please you if I said please?  
Begging is not too hard for me,  
I have done it before.

[8]

Endless lines, running through the streets of this place, this city. Along the lines of the streets run the lines of the stories. Traced out on the ground by feet. Written on rail and bus tickets. Stepping in shops and restaurants to change direction and run on again. There isn't enough to follow them all. They tangle and weave in strange knots which no one can unpick. Hunched over this book in the dead of night, weaving away, I can only approach the truth, and not too closely. I iron things out, make them smooth and easier to see, for you.

Bloom Again reached out and turned the needle around. It had pointed towards her like an accusing finger. The tip glittered silver and clean, but there was a touch, a trace of red inside the barrel to show it had been used. sitting on the coffee table before her and Valerian, gloating, full of power. Surrounded by other things, the cooking utensils and the blue plastic cartridge which had ridden home in Marian's mouth.

"If we wanted to, we could save her. I know the risks, but we can't let her do this. Did you see the look on her face? I've never seen anyone so sad and down. She knew what it meant, bringing all her troubles here to you. Look at this stuff, on the table here. Like a painting? And that was a one fifty fit, all at once, no hesitation and nothing saved for tomorrow."

Meanwhile Marian phased in and out of being, like a flying fish she slipped below the cool green surface of her mind into its depths, and then rose to swim just into consciousness. Bloom Again was right, she was troubled deeper than even her huge fix could cure. She sat in the corner to where she had stumbled, away from the table and the fair setting on the couch, who had silently watched while she used, and she gently nodded. Even the soft fingers of heaven could not soothe away her distress, she frowned and disjointed thought rose into her mind.

Valerian said:

"Bloom, we can't do it. You don't seem to realize what an effort this is. We would have to give so much, all the time. Even the relatives of junkies don't do it. Don't you get it? She's already gone! She wouldn't be using unless, deep down, she wanted to die, and what would we have to do to save her but completely change her mind. She made her mind up; she wants to die, and I don't want her to die here, I don't want any guilt."

Bloom Again said:

"No one really wants to die! If she wanted that she could jump off a bridge, or something else deadly fast and final. This is different. Don't you see? We have to do it, she came here asking for help and what else can we do? Dump her? Kick her out, let her rot? It can't be that hard or no one would do it. I'll do things, I'll get time off work, or even quit! There's the program, methadone, we could take her there. We can afford to look after her, and once she's on the program she can look after herself. We can do this!"

She looked at Marian, whose head rested on her knees in the corner, turning slightly side to side. Poor thing, she thought. What a bird to fall into, servant of some flower growing thousands of miles away, some stupid red poppy. It was always on the cards though, from what we hear. So weird and alone, even with Valerian. She's still there and she wants to get out.

Valerian watched Marian nod with a bitter heart. It was an accusation to bring this problem, these things on the table, back to the place she came from. Bloom Again, he thought, is innocent. She doesn't know how it really stands. This is like a judge passing sentence, and I'm expected to have her die in my house with junk bought with my money. What else can I do? She has to go, I won't put up with it. Never be cured, or free, impossible to free a slave, a real slave who is used to that condition. Slave to her emotions, now slave to the habit, no escape til death. We can convince her and support her and drag her down to the dive for a cup of doped up juice every morning, and one wrong move, one slip or tiff or argument and she's away looking for her angry fix again just to show us all. Harder than breaking up a child and even on the program she won't be any better off. Still a slave. Even if she finds a way out, works

her dosage down to zero and gets clean, still the memory lingers and she doesn't have the strength to resist. I know.

[160]

So Sunday was cloudy but beautiful, as they all liked it, and even Marian in her troubles was moved by the weather. They left the flat after an uneasy night of truce and walked through the dark morning streets, deep in thought.

They agreed, earlier that morning, on something which they could not avoid. Bloom Again was right, Marian had no choice but to go on the wagon and enrole in the program. She walked in a daze, still feeling the effects of her last hit and missing her usual morning dose, but resolved. Valerian walked beside her kicking stones and talking about various things, silently supporting.

He was the only one who felt any danger. There were problems ahead and trials ahead. Even now he could feel Marian slowly growing tenser with her need. Bloom seemed unaware of the battle ahead, he noticed. She didn't realize the battle that would be waged that day, as Marian's present strength waned, and the temptations around her grew too much.

It was a remarkable experience. He glanced at Marian. Her hollow cheeks and dark glasses, framed by now clean but still wild locks of black hair, made her into an exotic wraith from another time, wandering out of the land of Faery perhaps. She should be dressed in a black gown, he thought, with an obsidian crown, a princess lost and starving. So then she could ride on the wind.

Contrasting so much, her well fed health and optimism jarring with this frailty, Bloom Again. Wearing an old army jacket bleached and tattered with age, bulky folded around her more solid figure, she stomped along in her sneakers and looked around at everything. I must be dreaming, thought Valerian. I could never

have conceived such a crazy scene while awake.

Night, and Marian raced around the other room while they held each other in bed. The radio was on, tuned to a commercial station. The footfalls seemed to grow faster with time.

"I wish she would turn it down", hissed Bloom.

"No, forget it" replied Valerian. It would be all that distracted her from her troubles that night, and if she never slept, she would present a better picture when they took her to the clinic the next day. Still, he could feel her pain as she stomped away. Most probably scratching he thought. Most likely muttering and thinking about where she could go, if she changed her mind and decided to run away from him a second time.

[161]

Early in the morning he woke in confusion, trying to remember what was so special about the day to wake him so early. For a time he drifted in a fog of unknowing, lost and helpless as his mind scrolled back through memories that had been thrown away. They gave no comfort and later he was troubled to think of his mind hanging on to old pain. Times when his family fought over petty points. Long drives to some destination, late at night lost in pine trees on some back road. Hospitals and doctors waiting rooms, cracking a broken arm and watching the fish in their neon lit tank through a veil of agony. Running away from the violence of a school playground, a slow cricket ball glancing off a shoulder and jeers of hate behind.

Marian was gone, he knew even before checking the room. The sheets were a tangled sweat stained mess on the couch, there had been no sleep that night. Even when she had turned off the radio and all was quiet, she had turned slowly on the spit of her chemical desire, roasting in hell. It had been too much.

Nothing was missing. He checked the rooms quickly, looking for gaps in their patterns of shelves, and

they were whole. He felt some shame in expecting her to rob the house, but not much.

Somewhere out there on the early morning streets she would be in trouble. Like a nocturnal animal turned out in the light of day. Blinking her eyes and scratching, doing the jerky shuffle, sniffing back the watery snot and trying not to let tears run from her inflamed eyes out from under her dark glasses which might attract attention. Valerian could only send her his sympathy, unless she decided to come back, which he knew she would.

She would come back for money. Right now, he thought, as she searches for her usual contacts and tries to remember any favours she has owing, right now she is swearing never to see me again. Right now she has shame for her actions and doesn't want to be seen so hungry and desperate. Plunging headlong down her path, vowing that she will get by and never stoop to asking forgiveness.

But soon the time when possibility runs out, and there is another timid knock. She would be there, looking away, crying and begging with no pride, and the knowledge that she could be reduced so far made him sick.

102

Fly thy coat like a kite in the road,  
wings spread out in the smoke.  
The card with the wheel is not to be feared,  
On the wheel you are only a spoke.

There's a charge for these dangerous days, my friend,  
And we pay it alive or dead.  
There's no reckoning, only oblivion,  
In the vox when the flames are fed.

Well the smoke smells just like smoke does  
And it never ascends very high,  
But gets blown out to sea or caught in the trees  
If it's still and the weather is dry.

The cold wind chills if you have no coat  
And its blowing will drive you insane,  
But the chill will never last as long  
As the silence we come to again.

103

To be faced with your own gullibility, that always hurts. No matter how pessimistic life makes me I always forget the worst.

That afternoon as I parked the cycle and chained it against theft, and my mind was on theft, I glanced up and saw the broken window. That was a sign easy to understand, and I cursed myself.

Even as I was unlocking the front door I was missing my records and stereo. For those records were a diary of my life and the way time had changed my tastes. For each one I could remember what was happening when I bought it, where I was living and working at the time, everything.

So I was glad when they all appeared to be there, lined up in their nylons crates, the end ones slightly warped by the curved plastic sides. The stereo was gone, the turntable and amplifier, the speakers and other parts were still there stacked to one side waiting to vanish out the window.

On the couch were she had tried to sleep I found Maran, nodding blankly as she struggled against sleep under the influence of her score. The paraphernalia was spread out in front of her like magic instruments layed out by a wizard in a pattern to cast a spell. The candle was still burning so I snuffed it out before it set the table alight. The wax didn't matter, the table was covered in wax marks already, and coffee cup rings. There were marks were people had rammed knives in and split em.

It was a grubby realistic coffeetable.

When I sat down, next to her, I could smell the dryness of her skin, dirty and unpleasant like dryrot. Her slow breaths whispered emptily through her dry nose, now that the smacks had stopped it running. That is its best use, to cure dysentery and blocked noses. Once cough mixture had been full of the stuff, in the '50s in this country they had been advertised as containing heroin the wonder ingredient.

How long since she had used I could not tell. Perhaps two hours, not much more, what with the time to rock the stereo and score with the money taken into account. The anger I would have expected to feel, at being such a fool as going to work after we had planned to take the day off with Maran, didn't come. It all was so pointlessly tragic, it made the despair I usually felt on watching the news seem trivial by comparison.

She stirred against me. She had felt me sit down and the message that someone else was there was just getting through. One eye slowly opened and she turned to me. The afternoon light was too strong for her to open both. She turned around and so did I, to catch Bloom Again standing in the doorway with a look of such hatred I was scared there would be fighting. Peaceful Bloom Again had a savage heart which would show sometimes, leaving me helpless to stop her from doing something terrible. Now she controlled herself, coming in and sitting across from us.

"The stereo is gone, the window is broken. Maybe we can find the place she knocked it and get it back. Does she have a receipt?"

I told her how it was probably sold to a fence who then knocked it, and there was no receipt. No pawn-broker would accept something as expensive and obviously stolen from someone as ragged and strong cut on need as she had been. It was amazing that she had mustered the coordination to get inside and steal the thing without dropping it.

I felt something on my shoulder. It was her hand, Maran was waking up. Suddenly she rolled quickly across the couch and lay across my lap. She was light, I could push her back upright with only one hand.

"Don't do that," she muttered with a shy half smile, and her hand crept over my leg into my crotch. I was frozen as she felt me there, blown away by the rush of memories of the times she had done this before. Bloom's face was blank, frozen as she watched Maran caress me and it was only when a rare tear bled from her eye that I knew this was hurting her to see. I stood up, tumbling Maran away into a wretched pile on the couch, and followed Bloom as she stormed into the bedroom. She sat on the bed, crouching over her knees in the attitude of one punched in the stomach.

"I will not I will not I will not. This is wrong, this is so wrong. Just sitting there like an auto child, just breathing. She must be so stupid. Your stereos gone, and you smiled when she felt your dick, I'm just a temp and now you can both be joshes together if you like, if you let her stay. You smiled when she touched you, just like old times for you isn't it?"

This was the truth and I couldn't deny it.

"You said we had to help her," I reminded her. She curled over tighter, making me feel as guilty as if I had fucked her.

"Not like this! Doing that to us after we had walked yesterday as though we were a family, it's so ugly to steal from your friends. We can't just sit and take it. I know I said we should try, and we did, but now this is different. We should put her out like an old couch for the council truck to take away."

Nodding, she would stumble away from our place looking for a quiet place to furnish, wait for the drug to wear off and new need and desire to motivate her to find more. The chances were, being stoned and slow and stupid with smack, she would be spotted by the cops and

picked up before getting very far. Then jail, and a forced cold turkey that would likely leave her dead. The police loved to do that to addicts, they thought they were doing a good deed and curing them. The ones that died in the cell were none of their fault.

"That we can't do. Now that she's here we have to take responsibility. That is what I meant, when she came to our door, that we might have to go through these relapses for months or years before cure, and then support her to keep her cured."

Bloom Agans stood suddenly, uncurling with an audible pop from a joint somewhere, and pushed past me out into the hall, walking past the loungeroom door and stopping at the end of the hall.

"I'm going, not forever, but I have to get this all straight. Listen;" she looked straight at me for the first time;

"I know, right now, that Maran will never get off this habit. This is going to kill her and very soon. If she stays here she might kill both you and me. And that will be our fault for letting her in. Remember, Heroin and AIDS are both viruses."

She left, leaving me more stunned than before and unable to follow her. I fought with the hardness of what she had said. I hated her for being right. I decided she was wrong, all in that moment.

Back in the living room Maran was awake. She smiled when I came in and sat down opposite her.

"Good stuff?" I asked her acidic.

"It's always good, every time. That was the best like every fix is the best."

I wondered what it was called now. Usually I said "Heroin" to be precise, and because the slang always seemed childish to me. Smack, horse and scraggy were the names I knew best, but there was also hammer wood which seemed more elegant. There was an effect called the hammer, when it was mashed into

the wrong vein or artery, and caused the heart to hammer like a waterpipe. Velvet hammer, someone had once said, and I thought of the Velvet Underground.

Maran looked like Nico now and sounded like her due to the smoking which was heavy, never heard of a junkie who didn't smoke, it was part of the addictive mentality and the lack of concern for life. Now that I think of it, Nico could be short for Nicotine. Separately suited Maran, gave her hollow cheeks that didn't need any makeup to get angular shadows. Sunken eyes with no need for liner.

Later I reflected that I too had the death wish, that made me stand and lift her up so she could kiss me, I could taste the chemical dryness of her mouth and her breath was bad, but she was so thin and willowy and the combination of frail weakness and deprived strength was irresistible. And the danger.

There are no excuses. We walked that kiss into the bedroom and had sex. I assumed or hoped she was taking the pill, (not knowing they can never take the pill for various reasons, not least being the lack of money). I didn't even care about her passivity, how she lay under me and only moved in a mechanical ritual of sex. It was craziness and ~~no~~ excuses.

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all my thoughts you had them all down so fat they burnt as the coal that fuels what I laughingly call a soul heating the steam in arms and legs and lungs as I run and follow myself minds eye tracking diligently lifting feet over buckled concrete dodging under heavy branches the trees unpruned leaning out a danger challenge no reason pointless action asked but the answer was always no I never changed that you can check the records are all still there it is scripted by the god of time and memory setting unpestered upon tall steel waving quilt scratches across the mighty tone of events he keeps it all safe and then releases guided things events planned in the hope

that they will hurt and they come down the flow of the river we sail upon trying to make the speed loading on the coal racing the rapids and the estuary ahead trying so and urging each other on happy to the outside and strange within there was no avoiding the belief of the stupid populace waiting bland faced in the family album giving us our gene orders we must obey they are always ready to interpret wrong they should be balled up crumpled like paper that is worthless and thrown full it as the necessary part of our time the knowledge that the change will come good or bad purely automatic this writing is controlling me the pain as it comes out is beyond belief but the alternative is only to lay down and stop at last as so many have done before they left bones and empty shells only the white testament inside blank and mute words on the stone only last so long and there is no one to remember and protect what once stood the only way to beat time preserve the houses torn down the trees dead their leaves dried on limbs that will never again bloom the rate of change will fall until frozen and this will take forever carry her perfect through the forces of the outside which hate that state of grace the rust on the wheel burning in slow motion in the oxygen dance reversing the letters the paper so long it seems like an endless road that rolls through this time it is hell and forever the toll of the dead voice come over the horizon they say this is paradise but be a flickering image on the glass of the eye they say this is heaven with smiles and frowns and falsities created to comfort the weak and the ones believing they have no souls and the others eating their share amid the poetry of destiny that reverses all and I will never again seek to face even a copy of the thing I seek but avoid that goal and satisfy myself as many do with cheapness and imitation as long as the book is there and the feel of the skin on the limbs of the he we be together it lasts only so long and no more remorse a sweet longing to be deprived deep in the heart like a cup to be filled with a draught of an illegal drug or henlock there next to the heart prohibition of the emotions that is the crime that has been accomplished without fuss only a slight trembling on the foundations of the mind

and the sun painting its eternal line on the changing water falling into the empty stony eyes of the fishermen who wait patiently as I was before she came and cast and cast out into the echoing harbour where the water is empty of movement without hope but with such ancient dusty patience I can only stand in awe who have tried and failed the sound ringing in the corridors of the forgotten by-product of television burning in the red tired eye that sinks and waits to be filled with the idea and my horror when I discover infidelity in my friends when I thought it was a plot for a move and recognised the not there in their affairs playing musical chairs with one another and somehow dodging the guilt I imagined went with the territory they invaded together in strange bands exploring the ugliness of their sheer want pushed to the back of my mind but not idle tunneling its way into the frontal lobes and the action resultant from my ignorance and nearly trapping again over my unlaced jogger down the dark streets with the lights burnt out in their plastic shells dark and foreboding like the face of a dead girl slack and starved with the stars

105

In many of the city buildings they leave the lights on all night. This is usually when the workers stay late, and the building is empty for a shorter time at night, and the supervisor works out some costs and finds that the fluorescent tubes need more electricity to start up in the morning than they consume all night.

So towers of ranked light stand amid the dark bulk of their brethren, and many other buildings have lines of light that peer out from their faces where someone has left an entire floor lit. Atop each building the signs glow in primary colours, simple childish shapes that lose the threatening qualities of the companies that own them and exist for their own sake, as though drawn there by a child with luminous paint. The pollution gives each of them a special glow, a faint halo of diffusion. There are other lines of light, such as

the overpasses that run along the face of the cities mass, built on pylons there near the water, dess. used dock lands, with no roads to obstruct. The lights come white or red, approaching or receding, or both flickering in and out as they pass. Each overpass has its synchronised double in the water, crossed by occasional ferries and noisy party cruises that thump the bass beat of their music across the water for miles.

When the eyes have taken all this in, they find more. The few stars, or more likely planets, that outshine the haze of the cities waste light radiating upwards and being reflected back by dust and smoke. Nobody thinks about the loss of the other stars; after all, their light is no use. The clouds, when low, are lit pink from the halogen streetlights. Higher and they tend to shine a dull beard. Like the pigeons, who often fly at night now, hunting the late night food scraps. Their wings are reflective enough to catch the eye as they pass overhead down city streets, and from a distance clouds of them sparkle as each one turns in sequence, wings catching the city glow and throwing it out again.

In the parks the late breeze moves the leaves on figs and eucalyptus, they sparkle like shards of dark glass. Sometimes there is dew on the lawns, but not often. The buildings and paved ground act as a heat island, trapping the day's warmth and letting it out at night, preventing the grass from cooling enough for dew. When it does form, whole lawns can catch the light like a mirror. The grass blades follow the sun, each turning enough to expose its face fully. When the sun sets they remain in position, each with a little angle for the dew to form in. Each aligned to throw out dim sheets of light in unison.

Concrete, grey and plain in full light, is transformed. When they add water to dry concrete, the calcium hydroxide absorbs the moisture and forms water of crystallization, tiny angular prisms. The sand has polished faces, and sometimes tiny blades of mica are included. Close up they shine like stars, though only the mad, or those whose senses are enhanced by drugs, are apt to notice. Distantly the brilliant flecks of light run together into a

pale sheen like a glowing fog.

Even from a distance where the city is hidden below the horizon, the pale glowing cloud of its light is visible in the dark night sky. From the suburbs the intense light of the city itself can be seen on the horizon like the glow of a distant holocaust, orange and hateful. Further away the grid of streetlight of the suburbs and city together combine to line the horizon with paleness, outlining trees and mountains. Sometimes the orbit of a space shuttle happens to pass overhead, and the astronauts can see the densely glowing mass of the city centre, and the paler arms radiating outwards from it to touch other smaller cities and further to fade out in points where a highway or rail line leaves it.

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white shoulders glimmed through ebony hair,  
The perfect shadows of her thin  
The sweep of pale arm, turning grace  
Moving with subtle meaning as in dance  
To turn and face the watcher with a smile  
Step forward confident with happy pace  
Through fern heads bobbing in a breeze  
comes from white blue waves  
Glimmering blinding rays across the beach  
That swelters in honey whiteness, dancing haze  
Upon its burning shimmer sand.  
Air and light enters the gloom  
Carry the essence of the day to us  
Wrap warm around our limbs here in cool shade  
Of trees that sing a sighing feather song  
Of summer wind through dark needles  
Nodding in bunches above.  
The dark clouds move about and across her face.

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She promised she would stay awhile  
 But smiled; she knew her hope was vain,  
 That desperation was her style  
 And she would only fail again.

So then the world turned around  
 And then her mind turned in her brain.  
 They broke her bedroom door and found  
 Her body, twisted in its pain -

Her reasons no one could profound.  
 They marvelled at the mystery  
 Of hidden feelings so profound  
 And blamed each other endlessly.

108

This life is a long wait between the last life and the next.  
 No wonder that you were confused and terribly perplexed,  
 But every body knows it, and now you realize  
 They hide their sadness well, and cry with desert eyes.

Remember all the poetry you thought you'd understand?  
 Its meaning is as empty as the fall of waves on sand.  
 The television flickers like a long forgotten dream,  
 Our souls turn into candle flames and ocean spray  
 and steam

109

Ferals sit down anywhere they want nowadays, they have gone beyond the constraints of society which is only fair as society doesn't give a damn. They sit with their backs to a convenient wall to enjoy the view, their television, eating out of paper bags. They wear whatever they want and their style is the non-style of all the clothes from shops that no one else will buy. As a concession to vanity and total conscience are the crystals and jewelry around their necks and wrists and the hair styles they adopt. Already rejected, they adopt confrontational styles to reinforce in their own minds that they have chosen to be rejected. Purple and green hair, in dreads or strange clumps. Braids of all or part, beads and clumps and ties of coloured cotton, all give the finger to the outside world and turn their isolation into an exclusive club that other people envy and want to join. I envy them and want to be noble and lonely and strong willed enough to invite the hate they do, but know I'm not strong enough to handle it. Once out you're never in, is the rule, both for the masses and the subgroups. Their walk is loose and deliberately clumsy, threatening to the old, insolent to the disciplined like cops, easy to identify by other ferals. They also tend to wear large and clumsy shoes, army boots or steel caps. They dislike keebobs or anything too commercial or flashy. Strange rumours and fragments of information pass through their ranks as they compare notes on the latest conspiracy theories. There are certain root legends from which these contrived and bizarre theories grow. One is that the government has incredibly complete files on everyone which are constantly updated by their agents. They believe that cameras on streetlights record their movements, and that they have permanent black marks against their names because of their audacity in being feral. Maybe they are right. Also they believe there are alternate systems of energy and science that contradict the presently known and accepted laws of science, that have been suppressed as

unprofitable to the vested interests. Tesla the scientist a contemporary of Edison, is a god to them. His theories could have resulted in free energy transmitted through the air like radio waves, could have made anti gravity possible. They believe his lab was burned down by Edisons henchmen and that his ideas were suppressed by powerful people as being too dangerous to their profits. Ferals live in squats or messy shanty houses which are not much better. They generally live in filth like the hippies did, for the same reasons. They reject their parents ideas about cleanliness and societies compulsion to hide dirt. Their food is contradictory. Some is healthy, free range eggs and raw vegetables, as are cooking styles and small portions. Then, they might binge on junk food and often such up cake and chips as they eat on the street. My theory is that they want to condition their bodies to accept and live with a certain level of carcinogens. There is no way to escape anymore, they pervade the ecosystem as forms like DDT and lead. If we try to avoid entirely we lose the edge of evolution. The weak must always die, that is the harsh but true law. The strong will reproduce.

[110]

Nothing to believe in  
False as a long lost gem  
On a Polaroid found, worn and thin,  
Ground into the bottom drawer  
Under the junk stashed long ago  
Against the death of hope  
Lost in memory, brought back with a shock  
And the echo of old words from an old mouth  
In a young face with eyes that turned up in despair  
And turned up to the whites often and again  
And the useless hands that curled to hide  
Fingers clenched as tight as our  
And folded dry as bats wings  
Nothing to believe in.

[111]

Desperate armies,  
Eyes blank with need,  
Past my door nightly  
Eager to feed.

The faces change but look the same,  
A look we know well.  
They close the door but can't contain  
That sweet sad smell.

[112]

Entropy and decay  
make laughing stocks of heroes,  
sabotage the best of plans,  
sours the finest wines.

Even the very best of mans  
Intention comes to zero,  
Nothing but decline  
Entropy and decay.

