

A Body Remembered

by David Chislett

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David Chislett grew up in Johannesburg and has lived all over South Africa. He has a degree in English and was the recipient of the Ernst Van Heerden Creative Writing Award at WITS. He created and edited the Urban short fiction series and has been a journalist for way too long. He has been known to speak in public and on occasion can be found at spoken word events or playing bad acoustic guitar. In a previous life he managed and promoted bands. He's much better now.

This is his first collection of short fiction, culled from a body of work developed since 1991.

Acknowledgements

A book that contains solely my own creative output has been a long time coming. As a result, there are a lot of people I need to thank for getting me here ...

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To Andrew Miller and Phehello Mofokeng, thank you for publishing this book and giving me the best publishing contract in the history of publishing.

And to you the reader, thank you for proving that people do still read. This is for you.

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'David Chislett'.

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Death is a warm embrace

A sea mist has rolled in from the harbour and the lower reaches of the city are swathed in its embrace. The dull moan-boom of the lighthouse siren meanders in and out of the fog, a drunken soul on its way back to Valhalla. Out of the gloom, the sound of footsteps approaches. Regular and close together, moving fast, but not hurrying. A woman strides into the meagre pool that a street light throws, and pauses to dig into her sling bag. She produces a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. She lights up. Inhales, looks all around, then bows her head to put it all away again while she exhales through her nose. Ahead of her, the garish light of a shopping mall spills out over the road. She seems to almost imperceptibly accelerate towards its glow.

From further up the hill, a low growl can be heard, coming closer and changing pitch. The motorcyclist is taking no chances under these conditions. He looks cautiously from side to side as he rolls past the side streets that adjoin the main road he is on: waiting for death to pop out from the side streets or the gloom beyond. Looking ahead, he sees the pool of light thrown by the mall, and relaxes a bit as he nears its glow. As he gets closer, he sees the girl, who has just reached the outer limits of the light.

"Hey there," he calls out to her as he pulls alongside. "Are you OK on your own here?" His voice is muffled by the helmet, and spills from his visor in an incoherent slur.

She continues to walk with her head down, veering away to walk closer to the wall of the mall. He revs the bike a bit and glides closer to the kerb.

"I have a spare helmet. I can give you a lift wherever you want," he offers.

She looks up, "Please, just leave me alone." Her eyes are wide and pleading.

"Wait," he says. He stops the bike and pulls his helmet off. "Look, now you can see me, you can describe me to anyone. I'm not going to hurt you, I just want to help."

She turns back to look at him. "I'm sure," she says, "but please leave me alone."

As she finishes speaking thunder booms in the sky and a bolt of lightning flashes in their vision, momentarily blinding both. The rain falls in heavy curtains, and both of them bolt into the entrance of the underground parking for shelter.

Pushing her wet hair up out of her eyes, the girl looks up at the biker, "Cigarette?" she asks.

"Cheers," he says, accepting one from the pack she offers. As he bends over to ignite it from her lighter, he smells a sickly-sweet smell. Like something once tantalising and sweet gone to seed. He looks around the garage, trying to spot the source. Black bags lurk in the corner, something moves fast and low nearby.

As they wait for the rain to ease off, they talk quietly. Smoke

issues from their mouths and steams from their damp clothes. The downpour has created a broad river which runs down the centre of the road. Beneath the bridge at the bottom of the hill it has dammed up in a great pool. Passing cars ease gingerly through it, water halfway up the doors, lights casting eerie patterns beneath its surface.

The bergies who live there are watching with great interest as the cars slip into the water. A blue hatchback comes down from the bridge too fast to see the water and plows into it at speed, drenching the bergies and spraying water right across the intersection. The car stalls. The driver tries repeatedly to re-start the engine and the high-pitched whining of its starter motor fills the air. It's not long before the pitch of the starter starts to droop and the headlights grow dim.

Two trendily dressed guys sporting sideburns and Diesel labels leap out the car into the calf-deep pool, letting litres flow into the car as they open the doors. Cursing, they push against the water to close the doors again, then dash for the shelter of the bridge. Before they even get there, one is talking on his cell phone, calling for help. The four irate bergies berate them for getting them all wet, staggering about and laughing as they shout at the two trendies. The one on the phone ignores them, talking loudly into the receiver. The other pushes the bergies, trying to get them to leave them alone.

"The rain has stopped," she says quite abruptly. Sitting on the concrete and facing the entrance, she is the first to notice. "OK,"

he says, "then we will be on our way." He looks at her. "Will you accept that lift now?" he asks. She hesitates, but looks out into the night sky and says, "Yes. Let's go."

Smiling, he crosses over to the bike and unclips the spare helmet from the seat, gives it to her. He gets onto the bike and, standing, kick-starts the motor. He sits down, getting well forward on the seat and motions with his head that she should climb aboard. She carefully swings her right leg over the saddle and sits down. She puts her hands on his waist. He lets the clutch out and twists the throttle slightly, grinning to himself in the humid warmth of his helmet when her light touch on his waist turns into a full-scale hug, as her bottom slides back along the smooth leather saddle.

Ahead, flashing orange and white lights illuminate the scene where an AA tow truck is pulling the blue hatchback out of the large puddle of water. The bike slows down, looking for a way past. The motorcyclist slides around the sides of the puddle, then guns the bike up the on-ramp to the bridge.

"Where do you live," he yells back into the slip-stream.

"What?"

"Where do you live? Where am I taking you?"

"Oh." She pauses. "Fish Hoek."

"OK." Again his face lights up with a smile. Good. A nice, long ride.

The wind seems to have dried out most of the road, and as

the bike winds its way through the bends of De Waal Drive, he is gradually able to go faster and faster. Partly driven by enjoyment, partly to see how his passenger reacts, he lays the bike right over low to take a big looping left hand bend, and feels an answering pressure from behind as the girl hugs herself closer in to him, leaning with him into the bend.

Good, he thinks, she's been on a bike before. As they straighten up, she leans even closer to his back until, even through the leather of the thick biker jacket, he can feel the shape of her breasts being crushed against him. He twists the throttle open a little wider, hurling the bike out of a right hand bend and into the four-lane intersection with the N2.

No, I'm not imagining this, she's loving this. God, what breasts she must have! I can feel her pushing them right up against me.

He opens the throttle more as the road straightens out, heading through Rondebosch and Kirstenbosch. She starts to push her pelvis up against his coccyx, in slow, persistent undulations.

The bike screams down the hill, past Claremont and up the other side through Bishops Court and Wynberg. As they climb the hill, with the speedo reaching up to 180 kilometres per hour, she reaches a hand down from his waist and starts to massage his cock in hard, rubbing motions, popping the buttons on his Levis until her hand is inside his jeans and sliding up and down his rock hard shaft. Not even the driving, freezing wind is enough to deflate his excitement.

They crest the rise and sweep down the long left-hander towards Constantia. The highway flattens out and, encouraged by the insistent hand on his cock, the biker keeps the throttle wide open. He eases off for a corner, but that hand grips him like a vice, willing him to go faster, faster. As the road starts to rise toward its end in a T-junction, he finally comes, yelling into the wind his sheer joy and amazement.

His sits up and eases off the throttle. But the pressure on his cock does not ease off, and she leans into him just as hard. As he tries to reach for the brake, he sees a bony forearm snaking away from his waist and twisting the throttle wide open. His movement arrested by the sight of the two bones of her forearm glinting in the moonlight, he stares disbelievingly as they hurtle into the T-junction, dripping semen and drooling with fear, at 200 kilometres an hour.

City of restless sleep

Four am false dawn from the indigo blue of the Standard Bank sign across the road from the bistro. The passing cars have a bubble of silver membrane shielding them from the coming day. Looking out onto street level all I can see are open parking bays like gaps in some street kid's teeth. Gaping oddly, not usual, needing filling. I shrug.

This place never shuts. The shaven-headed waiter nods at me as I enter. He knows what to bring. Forty-five seconds later he puts a Carling Black Label down in front of me. Cold, with advertising standard condensation trickling down its dusky flanks.

"Howzit," he greets me, hunkering down beside my table for a while.

"Shot bru, good to see you."

"Schweet," he says, "see anything good tonight?"

I laugh, thinking of the three debut bands I saw on stage.

"Ag no, just the normal kak hey, nothing new or anything."

"Ahh well," he laughs too, "plate of nachos hey?"

"As always," I acknowledge with a tip of the bottle of beer.

"Schweet, coming up."

He disappears back into the gloomy depths of the kitchens. The bistro that never sleeps. Catz Pyjamas. Nachos and mozzarella fingers with beer at 4am. Or full breakfast and them some.

The ultra fake pre-dawn light of the Standard Bank sign is

starting to make way for the slightest of hints of the real thing. The summer sun is eager to get back into the sky. For the life of me, I can't figure out why. Keen to return to the scene of pollution, of dirt that makes up greater Johannesburg in the summer? Bru, I'd rather be in Cape Town.

More members of the early morning patrol ooze through the door of the bistro. Leather-clad Goths from the big Goth industrial warehouse, ravers complete with back packs and water pistols, well-dreaded Rasta's, some alcoholic men of indeterminate age, race or creed slump in a corner, stirring only enough not to get thrown out, to order another beer.

The nachos arrive. Some kind of private sacrament for making it to 4am, ensuring I get through to sunrise. The waiter removes the empty beer, comes back with a refill straight away.

After a long night of beer, tequila shooters, yelled conversations in too-loud nightclubs, dancing and schmoozing, the solid greasy nature of the corn chips, guacamole and cheese is manna. Sealing the vat of my indulgence to ferment a fine vintage of hangover for later today.

Finished, I pay, smile goodbye, slide carefully into the dawning air. Still dark, but you can see the light coming, just strong enough to silhouette the nearby buildings against a lighter black that is not quite grey. I stop and stare for a moment. The illegal immigrant guarding my car against any thief brave enough to be abroad at this hour breaks my reverie.

"Ey golly. Golly golly golly. What a place, hey? Egoli!"

I drive off with him berating the world for something or other, trying to get his head around Johannesburg. I drive west, towards Asvoelskop, the koppie that overlooks the north-western suburbs of Johannesburg. It is amazing how much traffic there is on the road at 5 o'clock in the morning, headlights all glowing gently against the stiff competition that the dawning sun is offering.

I am single-minded, thread fast around the s bends and the hairpin turns towards the koppie until I can park my car. I climb the last couple of metres and perch on a rock to watch Johannesburg light up before my drink-riven, sleep deprived eyes. What a beautiful sight. Looking north, the spires and blocks of international hotels compete with giant shopping malls and office blocks. Looking south toward the city centre, I see the Hillbrow tower, the clump of downtown Johannesburg huddled together, still in darkness.

What a thankless, heartless place it is, stretched out like a fat concrete cat to catch the first rays of sun. It makes my heart race and I am glad to be one of the germs that course in its blood system. The light, once established, crashes into the valley that comprises the city and I am very quickly a vampire caught in the sun, not the watcher coolly observing the coming dawn. I shade my eyes, duck back down and away from the glare and notice four or five other people or groups perched among the rocks, looking out over their city. Nursing joints, beers, bottles of champagne. One or two have been crying, one or two seem too transfixed to

move. Our eyes do not meet. I head to my car, they to theirs. We file one by one off the hill and into the winding roads that feed it.

It is not until I am deeply sunglassed in the Wednesday morning 7am traffic that I realise exactly how drunk I am. And then it is a straight-faced, straight-armed drive home to fall asleep to the droning lullaby of the all-purposeful worker bees that fuel this great mass of city, while I cook up more germs and wild sprees in my dreams

Down at the local

I lift an ice cold bottle of beer to my lips. It's green and gently frosted. Even at 3am this is important; it is to my specification and I lift an ice cold bottle of beer to my lips. It's green and gently frosted. Even at 3am this is important; it is to my specification and my taste. I must have my beer a very certain way: Windhoek, ice cold, from the bottle. The guy to my right orders another brandy and Coke. Just three blocks of ice says the barman, finishing the order for him with a slow smile. The regular grunts and the barman serves, and the smallest, most important pieces of the universe are maintained in recognisable order. Over at the baize, the King Of The Pool Table is explaining the niceties of the house rules to an agitated loser who quite clearly feels that reality is being bent to suit those who inhabit the bar. He wants to call Who's Next? and relax while they rack up and break, instead of slotting yet another two rand coin into the machine. The King signals the barman and a Black Label floats from behind the bar into his hand. With barely a nod he acknowledges the delivery while scrutinizing the ass of the drunk girl in the corner as she dances slowly all by herself, totally out of time to the tune. The barman knows The King runs a tab, and a generous tip will be his.

There is no escaping the fact that we bring each weekend and many week nights through to a conclusion here together, whether we talk and smile or nay. Someone walks in through

the door and heads directly to the glowing cube of the cigarette machine. Inserts notes and pushes buttons and waits impatiently for death to be born. Without ever seeming to, everyone in the room shifts slowly so as to look and see. Who is this person? Do we know them, and have they been here before? Reassured by the demeanor, the direct route to the machine, by the unglancing departure, we return to our sub-routines, doing what we are doing at 3am in the morning without ever wondering what that visit was about, where has he been?

The manager strolls over. At this hour even he's had a few and he glides with a steady underwater gait around the bar. He leans on the counter and signals the barman.

"Are you OK to lock up once this lot is finished?" he asks. "I'm gonna go in half an hour."

The barman nods and gives a simple thumbs up. He has locked up 3 times this week already. The cash up and stock take will be done by the owner at 8am. By the time the barman leaves it will be 7am anyway. The manager nods to me. I nod and smile back. I try to remember why it was that I came in here tonight. What am I doing drinking beer alone at 3am with several unknown companions? The rituals of drinking and smoking comfort each of us individually and personally, and our small herd collectively. I am not the only one, it's OK, this is normal. Except, I think to myself, that it is not. Nowhere near. Us late night drinkers must form such a minute percentage of the city's population that, if we were all to die tonight, it wouldn't register a flicker on a graph. Except the turnover of this bar, except in the car guard outside's pocket,

except in the all-night garage store tills and the ATM charges we incur while feeding our thirst.

Am I alone or lonely? Am I a habituated animal running my maze, or am I breaking free of average society? Does anyone outside of my cranium even begin to care? I look at my hands. My beer is empty. I look up. The barman already has a refill ready. I smile and nod. He opens. I pay, he passes the beer, I sip and nod, as if testing the cultivar, the year. I smile again. So does he. I leave change on the bar. He sweeps it up, turns to mix the next song into the end of the one playing. Half the secret of a really late night bar is perpetuating the illusion of timelessness. Any silence at all gives the game away. Your attention shifts from the moment to other possible details; which is when you register the light, the time, how much money you have spent. A continuous mix of music is one of the insulation layers on a good all night bar. It soothes and smoothes you through the night.

The King Of Pool is talking to the drunk dancing girl. She is a mess. Even I can see the slurring slope of her mouth, the somewhat greasy look of hair that has had hands passed through it too much all night. The King isn't making much progress. Unwilling to have a smear on his unbeaten record, he makes like it was just passing conversation and returns to the table to play. But he has woken the drunk girl from her reverie and she comes to the bar and pulls up a stool next to me. She props her elbows on the counter and tilts her head towards me so she can squint me into focus without seeming to. I groan inside.

The King Of Pool registers this move and the drunk girl talking

to me, but he pays it no heed. He is too cool to show agitation that she might prefer to talk to me than him. I turn my attention towards her in a lengthy three point maneuver. She could be pretty if you discount the way the alcohol is smearing her features, making them run and ooze off the edges of her face. Her lips are moving. I remember to pay attention to my ears.

"Buy me a beer." she says.

I drain mine and order two. The barman betrays not a flicker of emotion. His is not to question why. I drop more coins into his tip jar from the change. Tipping is not a town in China, after all.

"Thanks," she says, wiping her mouth with her hand after a lusty sip from the fresh beer. She scrunches her face up to squint into my face, trying to see what I look like.

"You come here often?" she asks innocently, "I don't think I've seen you before."

I laugh slightly. "I come here a lot, but I'm generally just here in the corner quietly," I reply.

"Oh," is all she musters by way of a reply before she leans companionably against my arm to carry on drinking her beer.

Five minutes later she weaves off to the ladies' and I step outside to get some air. The sky is a clear mother of pearl arc above my head, stitched with the diamante of stars. It seems a bit much, like some set dresser was briefed to create the perfect night sky for a movie set. The King Of Pool comes out as well, smoking a cigarette, at a loose end with no-one left to play against. He nods. I nod back. The drunk girl has disappeared. The sky is changing colour as we stand outside in silence, going from a silvered black to the first hints of a grey that tends toward blue. A

rat scuffles by against the fringe of the wall and the floor, heading from one dark tunnel to another, not bothered by our presence in the slightest. Inside, the bar lights come on, and then dim again. I take my phone from my pocket to check the time. It's 5am and last round has just been called. I think about it for a couple of seconds and decide that, having lasted until this time of the day, there is no point in not having another drink.

The bar is ringed by faces, all having come to the same conclusion. I order one more beer and a Jaegermeister shooter. "And whatever you want too," I say to the barman.

He smiles, and lifts his coffee mug. "Thanks, but I'm good."

I shrug, knocking back the cough mixture-like fluid in my shot glass. Now that it is time to go, everyone is talking to each other, and suddenly The King Of Pool introduces me to two of his friends, and out of the shadows another young woman's face emerges.

"Where's my friend?" she asks everyone, tugging on their sleeves until she gets their attention. She must mean the drunk girl. I send her to the ladies'; maybe she never came out of there after all.

"She's been passed out in that corner for hours," relays one of the pool players, himself propped up by his girlfriend, who grimaces slightly in consent. "Even more vrot than the one dancing with herself all night." He nods sagely to himself. It's no good to be that wasted in his book. Clearly.

The barman has switched the music off and the lights on. Nearly everyone has gone. Sleeping girl comes out of the ladies' with drunk girl leaning heavily on her. They leave, not meeting

anyone's eyes. An untold story for the night. I finish my beer and step outside onto the street. The sun is not yet visible, but it is day and the first commuters are queuing up at traffic lights and intersections in their work clothes and freshly washed hair. I feel their eyes bouncing off me like sonar signals sent to find out what I am, what I am doing. I find that I have no good answers to their implied questions. The French-speaking Ghanaian who has been outside all night watching the cars for small change, and maybe a side trade in cocaine, has left. A loose spatter of cars lines the pavement in no particular order. Mine is there among them. No more or less conspicuous than others. A pile of broken glass in the middle of the road gets driven over repeatedly, delineating an accident that happened during the night. Against the kerb a whole bumper and a popped-out windscreen testify to its severity. I frown, not recollecting when that might have happened. My hand goes to a jacket pocket to seek out my sunglasses, which are of course not there. They are in the car. The sun was not shining when I walked in here.

It is day, and another night has gone by and I cannot recollect a thing. I am wrapped in a warm and close cocoon of haziness. I open my wallet, and it is empty. No chance of a snack on the way home. Suddenly I feel robbed. The drifting unconcern of the night lifts to reveal the same straight roads, the same rules and the same unyielding reality of the place I live in. I know better, but once again I am surprised and disappointed to crash back to planet earth. Once again I am back in my cage, along with all the other rats, racing the maze.







THE RAIN -
IT'S STOPPED

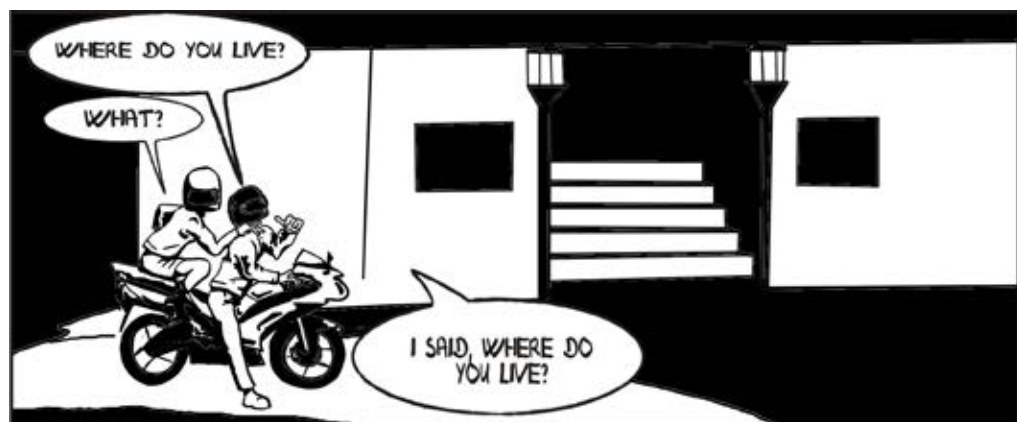


OK, THEN WE WILL
BE ON OUR WAY.



WILL YOU ACCEPT
THAT LIFT NOW?

YES....
LET'S GO...









HAHAHAHAHARRGH

Maid of honour

She lives in a beach-sand coloured faux Tuscan Villa set on a hill behind high walls. There are roses in the front garden, with a tropical plant array under each window and in the shade at the back. She has two servants who work in the house. One who cooks and cleans and one who helps with the children and irons. There is a man who comes twice a week to trim and tidy the garden, to keep the deep swimming pool crystal clear and blue. She drives a compact, cute black BMW X3 with a license she bought after failing hers four times in her home town of Brakpan. She is married to a man fifteen years her senior. He is someone big in banking. He may have been handsome once. Now he is graying and balding and has a hard, gravelly voice that the children never hear. The kids have a nanny, a special school and more advantages than she or her parents ever imagined.

Oh, and she is 30, beautiful, with blonde hair and hazel eyes. Her high cheek-bones and full lips give her an unconventional, sensual look. She is 5'7 tall, weighs 53 kilo's and is as fit and toned as a beach volleyball player. She is also tanned that warm golden colour that only self-tan and sun beds can provide. All over. Every inch. Two children have left no mark on her svelte frame.

The household rises early every day. Her husband is first into the bathroom to shave and shower, while she goes downstairs to

see that the kitchen maid has put the kettle on, made the kids' sandwiches and is making porridge for their breakfast. She drinks a glass of orange juice while she waits for the children to come downstairs and her husband to leave the bathroom. She shushes the children as they tumble in, settling them at the table. While the maid serves them breakfast and chatters away, the husband comes in for coffee and she returns upstairs to put on her tight fitting cycling shorts and cropped muscle top, baring her tight, muscled tummy. She shrugs a sweat-top on over her head, slips on the trainers and grabs her gym bag. Heading downstairs she sweeps up the children, pecks her husband on the cheek and heads out the door without a backward glance.

After dropping the kids at school she goes to gym with her next-door neighbour and works up a sweat with the personal trainer. He is 23 and beautiful. Six foot five, and chiseled from black basalt with a smooth shaved head. She works extra hard to earn approval from his cold black eyes. She is working on a six-pack and maybe an impressive pair of biceps while trying to keep her thighs and glutes under control. After two hours she is drained, as much from the sexual tension as the work out, and her neighbour has called it a day. It's a shower in the gym after a quick steam bath and a surreptitious look at the breasts and thighs of every other woman in the room.

Then it's lunch with an old friend she has known since they were 10 year old scared school girls. Their friendship has comfortable silences in it that you can wrap yourself in like a blanket, punctuated by smiles. They sit on an outdoor terrace under umbrellas with their sunglasses on, watching the parade of humanity and nibbling

on Chicken Caesar Salad. They sip on mineral water and compare work-outs and goals met, the other mothers at their children's schools, how their tennis backhands are coming on. The sun glints off the steely frames of their sunglasses, making mini starbursts in each others eyes. But that's OK because they are not looking directly at each other anyway. The day is gracious and beautiful and stretches before them.

But lunch is soon over and it's the time school finishes. Both the kids have tennis. So it's a quick pick up and delivery to the country club, where the coach puts them through their paces. She joins her own personal coach to work on her backhand and serve for a couple of hours. The lawn courts are all busy with either young children or women like her. She tires quickly, telling the coach she's calling it a day. She pulls on her sweat-top and heads for the clubhouse. Here she sits, catching the late afternoon sun and watching the children play, greeting the few people she knows. She pulls a magazine from her bag and reads about her g-spot, the correct way to do sit ups, and the nutritionally correct way to be combining her food. While glancing at blurred long distance shots of a naked Tom Cruise, she is interrupted by the boys, finding her on the terrace and clamouring for Coke. She digs in her bag for money and tells them to bring her a light too. They take their drinks to the car and chatter away happily the entire way home.

After a quick shower, she slips into a light cotton shift, checks on the children. They are all bathed and changed, doing their homework in the small study areas in their rooms. The second

maid is hovering, picking up sports gear and half answering questions the boys fire at her. The doorbell rings and it's another mother from the complex looking for a sun downer and a quick chat before dinner begins. The neighbour has a litany of woes to relate, and as she fixes gin and tonics for them both, she checks that the kitchen maid is getting along nicely with the tuna lasagne. Nodding satisfaction, she takes the drinks to the lounge where they settle in to watch the last rays of sun fade from the golf course as the birds serenade their passing. She nods and smiles and clucks in sympathy at the list of late maids, flat tyres, missed doctors and naughty children, her mind on the time, on the kids upstairs, the stiff tightness of her leg muscles. But her attention is pricked when the tale shifts ground to missed periods and the desire NOT to have any more children. She almost admits that at least she doesn't have to worry about that. But some small sense of loyalty (or is it pride?) prevents her from admitting her own challenges and fears. Before she can think about it in any more detail the neighbour is standing and preparing to leave, as abruptly as she swept in.

It is 7 o'clock and the kitchen maid serves dinner. The other maid brings the boys down from upstairs and reports that the homework is done and their rooms have been tidied. She nods and thanks distractedly and sits to eat dinner with them. The two maids retire to the rooms outside to eat their share. The children eat fast, clamouring for seconds and then the TV. She switches the set in the lounge on, and returns to the kitchen to put food into the warming draw to await her husband's return. Together the three of them watch the TV and she puts them to bed with a gentle kiss.

By 9 o'clock the children are asleep and she is on the couch watching documentaries and the cooking channel on satellite TV. She checks her watch as she starts to feel sleepy and sees that it is now nearly eleven. Her husband is still not home. She goes to bed. When her man does return and climbs in beside her at around midnight, she barely registers the disturbance and misses his muttered excuses about international banking hours and after-hours trading. Her sleep is deep but dreamless. She lies on her side, her back to her husband, curled slightly up with her knees bent and drawn in towards herself. When she wakes and slips from the bed, the duvet on her side bears no trace of her: it is a smooth, quiet space that has only her body warmth as a clue to her presence. In the bathroom she washes, cleanses and moisturizes her face and neck. She finishes and sees that her husband is already up. His side of the bed is a mess.

She heads down to the kitchen and there is a used cereal bowl in the sink and five cigarettes stubbed out in the ashtray nearby. By the time the maid comes in she is eating her own breakfast, standing in the kitchen. The woman does not greet her, merely walks in and gets on her with her chores for the morning. She prepares breakfast for the children, making sandwiches, polishing school shoes. As the maid finishes making the breakfast, the children descend noisily into the room and devour the food, shouting and shoving each other around. As an after-thought they greet her, half affectionately, before leaving the room to collect their bags. They don't even think to ask where their father might be. She goes to wait by the car to take them to school.

It is only on Friday nights that hubby comes home early. And

then this is really only because he entertains clients for long alcoholic lunches at the country club. At 5 o'clock she hears his car pull into the driveway and she sends the kids out to the front garden to play and packs the maid off early for the weekend. She knows what is coming next. He's drunk and prowls the house looking for her and, finding her today in the kitchen, demands sex from her where she stands. Today he leers drunkenly at her and bends her over one of the counters with one hand, while he lifts her skirt and tears off her g-string with the other. With her thus exposed, he takes her without preamble from behind. She winces at the first contact, having to move and accommodate him without the benefit of her own arousal, but she doesn't say a word. However, he is so drunk that, after twenty minutes of thrusting, he has still not come. In an action that has become routine, he grabs the cooking oil and pours some over her exposed buttocks, massaging the viscous fluid unto her anus and the length of his shaft before penetrating her anally. She has learned that plenty of squeezing of her sphincter causes him to come in seconds, which he duly does before staggering off to collapse on the couch and fall asleep.

While cleaning herself up she wonders if he does this because he doesn't believe in the hysterectomy he forced her to have, because he is so desperate not to have any more kids, or whether he is actually gay after all. Maybe he just likes to demonstrate to her just how little choice she has in anything. But such thoughts are pushed aside as it is soon time to get dressed for her girls' night out at Vacca Matta. She opens the wardrobe and contemplates her clothes and shoes with something approximating glee. She chooses tight white slacks with an opaque black blouse under

which she wears a lacy black bra and knicker set, showing off the underwear as much as her body. Made up and ready to go, she heads on downstairs. Her husband is asleep in front of the TV in his lazy-boy, an open beer on the little table beside him. No expression crosses her face as she takes this in. She picks up her keys and leaves.

The girls are all married or divorced women of her age, from 28 to 34, and they often go out together when the men are away or being difficult. She always has to contend with offers from men her age and younger, lusting over her toned body and beautiful features. But tonight there is no spark, and none of the young men pay her any attention, looking right through her cleavage to the women behind and beside her. Her body is apparently as see-through as the black blouse she has donned for the occasion. She holds her head high and drinks cocktails, chattering with her friends. But after one prolonged toilet visit, one of her friends finds her weeping on the floor in a booth. While comforting her, their mouths meet and they kiss each other passionately for a few seconds, but the friend breaks the embrace in embarrassment as she begins to caress her breasts and move her hands to her friend's groin. The friend stands up and, fetching a tissue, urges her to clean up and rejoin the party. Instead, she leaves at once and races home, jumping all the red lights along the way. Not three blocks from home, she encounters a police road block and is waved through without a second glance. Women on their own at 11 o'clock are not drunk drivers.

She swipes her access card at the security entrance to the

complex and drives slowly round to the house. The full moon lights the scene clearly as she pulls up in front of the garage and gets out of the car. Her mascara is still smeared over her face and her throat is blotchy and red. Her expensive clothes are in disarray and her backside is throbbing. She looks in awe at her designer clothes and the flash car she has just climbed out of. She looks up at the huge double-story house she has parked in front of, glinting in the moonlight. Night birds sweep past and chirp quietly, but otherwise the place is as still as a grave. There are no lights on inside the house and no movement comes from within, nor the neighbour's, nor the entire street. After a couple of minutes she starts out of her reverie, moving her hand away from where it was clasped tightly at her throat. Opening her fist slowly, she stares intently at the palm of her hand and then dusts it slightly before going inside, leaving the car unlocked and open in the drive. So this is what your dreams look like when they have been caught and held onto: a dust that you must wipe from your hands so you can continue with life.

Nice day for the beach

It is the weekend, and out here in the country with a company of drunks, all I can think of is the city and my familiar habits and haunts. We are sliding over the surface of the Breede River at a good pace, just checking out the scenery and enjoying the afternoon sun. The vegetable presence of the riverside foliage is a palpable thing that pulses in the embers of the day's warmth. Along with a vague knowledge of living things passing unseen under the boat in the shape of fish, crabs and other slippery denizens, there is a slight primal prickle of life awareness at the base of my neck every time I look into the undergrowth as it flickers like a streamer through my optic nerves. The skis have long since been pulled on board, the rope hauled in, and the dripping bodies pulled out of the water. Now the cooler box is getting more attention than the navigation and peace returns to a river sliced all day by the exuberance of skiers, pleasure boaters and other city escapees.

"I"

Over the engine noise and the babble of the others I can barely hear what Brett has said, but the change in tone of his voice is enough to get my attention. I push myself up out of the slouch I have been sitting in while watching the trees and flowers blur by. He is standing at the steering column, pointing towards the shore.

I follow his finger to behold a beach, 50 metres long, unspoiled by footprints, weekender litter or animals. While Jan steers the boat towards this anomaly, Brett, Dave, Dog and John crowd eagerly to the fore of the boat to get a better view. I give way out of my solitary station in the bow and let them gape and hang over the gunwale to get a better look.

I let the natural focus of our approach reveal the details awaiting us.

"There's a sign!" shouts Brett. "Swing left Jan."

"What does it say hey?" asks Jan, as he tries to peer over the shoulders of the four in the bow. He looks over at me; I shrug.

"Not close enough to read it yet."

Dave picks out the biggest words on the sign first. "Notice, um Kennisgewing," he reads slowly, "OK, about what? Come on... oh, OK, it says that this is a private piece of land and that no making of fires or skiing from here is allowed." He swivels his head to the right: "Luckily I don't see anyone here to stop us from checking it out." He grins at John and Brett.

Jan throttles the boat back and lifts the outboard slightly, anxious not to get the prop snagged in any unseen rubbish or plants near the bank as we coast gently closer to the shore. Dog is almost out of the boat already, one foot poised over the lip, waiting for the moment to make landfall and hit the beach.

"Oh check, there's more," shouts John, "check under the notice...misuse of this land will not be tolerated. What the fuck

does that mean?" he laughs, "C'mon, lets go!"

With that he jumps into the knee-high water as the boat's bow nudges onto the sand and wades up onto the beach, closely followed by a loose-limbed and open-mouthed Dog.

"Whooooooooo, I am on the beach! Leo Di Caprio eat your heart out!" bays the Dog. With a 34 year-old's hairline and beer gut, Dog's yell has enough in it to almost send Dave and Brett overboard in fits of laughter as they too jump into the shallow water and race up onto the beach. The sand clings to their feet like rough slippers of golden glitter, covering them as far as the ankles. A soft wind from off the river sticks it to their ankles and shins where they are wet from wading through the river. Whatever slight cloud is high up in the ozone drifts away and the later afternoon sun suddenly becomes a clear glare. The scene is suddenly clearer, cleaner. Everything slips into painful focus.

John has thoughtfully taken the bottle of Jack and Coke with him and ceremoniously refills the glasses of his three companions on the beach. "I hereby proclaim this beach OURS," he says.

While the four on the beach clink their glasses of Jack Daniels and Coke, something penetrates the haze of alcohol coating Jan's brain as he switches the engine off. The unquiet silence of the river drops around our shoulders like a damp poncho. He looks up, shakes his head and looks around him, very fast, right, left and right again. Then he crouches down against the boat's steering column. His eyes have gone slightly glassy, he is staring right at me, lips parted. My neck prickles once again as an awareness of life breathes slightly louder in my ears.

"Jan," I hiss, "stop fucking around, what's going on?"

He looks up and straight at me. "Can't you feel it?" he asks.

"What? Feel what?"

"The air, that stillness. It's too bright here. I can see the thorns on the trees, the individual grains of sand."

I give him a look that implies he should be remanded to a room in Valkenberg with nice soft walls and return my gaze to the beach. But he is right, of course. I had half-noticed earlier. The beach is not so much a tan, golden mass, but a pile of tiny little grains, visibly piled upon one another. The trees are not green bushes in the distance, but elegant constructions of tiny, visible pieces, their boughs suddenly motionless in the dead calm air. The air between the leaves is not negative space but pulsating, living blocks of blue energy not far from being solid sky.

Jan scrambles to the front of the boat. "Guys!" he yells, "Come back in the boat guys. C'mon, maybe this isn't such a good idea!"

The four on the shore look back at Jan, startled enough by his tone to stop. And yet ... There is no-one else in sight on the beach or the neighbouring plot of land. On a rise a few hundred metres up stands a house. It looks closed up. They look at each other, Dog lolls his tongue out and they start to laugh.

"Ag Jan man, knock it off!" laughs Brett. "For a moment there you had us worried!"

Dave turns and staggers up the incline, still laughing, to get a better view of where we are. He gets to the top and turns to survey the terrain. His hands swing up in a lightning fast reflex action to catch a black object seconds before it hits him in the face. "Jesus Brett!" he yells back down to the three on the shore

as he brandishes the Frisbee. "You okes really should warn a guy before chucking these things around."

He floats the Frisbee back down to them and then trots down the sandy slope to get a refill of Jack from John, who is pouring new ones for himself, Brett and Dog. Once Dave's glass is filled, the bottle is empty. John reverses his grip to hold it like an old stick grenade and lobs it, end over end, through the air in a long, steep arc. Jan and I watch it tumble through the air, almost hearing the thin woosh and scoop of the air past the open end of the bottle. Jan flinches as the bottle thumps abruptly earthward, landing with a soft thud in the grass. He exhales softly. Just as we start to relax, the bottle idles back into view on the firm young grass and, finding no purchase, it slides back a foot or two before slipping slowly from the grassy ledge to drop another two feet into a pile of rocks where it explodes into a corona of shards. A suddenly chill breeze sweeps down the river directly onto the beach. The boat rocks where it is partially grounded on the sand and I sink back down into a slouch, pulling my jacket up around my ears.

"Guys," yells Jan, getting desperate. "Stop fucking around man; you can't just throw shit away here like this!"

"Ag fuck off man," returns John. "Don't be such a Boy Scout, it landed in the grass, it'll be OK..."

"That's not what..." Jan starts to retort but is cut off by Dave charging John and tackling him to the ground. They roll about on the sand, laughter and growls punctuated by a series of body blows and grunts. They end up in the middle of the beach, totally covered in sand. Brett and Dog have climbed to the top of the bank during this to look down on them. "You guys are filthy, you

need a shower!" Brett yells, and as he does so, drops his pants, whips out his gear and starts to piss down onto them from his vantage point. In a heartbeat, the grinning Dog has done the same.

For a second Dave and John are too stupefied to move and remain riveted in the warm shower raining down from above, blinking rapidly and lapping bubbles as their brains struggle to register enough horror, surprise or even outrage to galvanise their limbs into action. I can't even look over at Jan to see how he is reacting. The only sound is the wet plop of large drops of liquid hitting soft sand.

Then everything starts to happen at once. Jan retreats to the steering column and turns the engine over, kicking it back into cackling life while slipping the gears into reverse. Dave and John surge up the hill after Brett and the Dog, wiping their faces and screaming and swearing. Brett and Dog pull up their pants and turn to flee but become bogged down in the soft sand, twisting and falling over each other as they struggle to lift their feet and get running. As Jan turns the boat side-on, ready to motor away, Dave and John jump the two of them and pound them with knees, fists and elbows. "Hey!" shouts Jan. "Let's get the fuck off this beach. C'mon guys, leave it." He makes no attempt to leave the boat, just keeps shouting hoarsely at the writhing figures on the shore. Eventually the struggle rolls down the slope and towards us, and Jan's shouting seems to have an effect. Dave looks up and blinks sand out of his eyes; he tries to stand and reaches a hand out towards us as if needing help getting into the boat. Just as he is getting to his knees he starts to struggle horribly. His face

stretches into a grimace, the tendons in his neck standing out like high-tension power lines. I look over his shoulder; the others are similarly reaching for the boat and not holding each other at all.

"Sh i i i i i t..." I mutter under my breath. "What the fuck is going on? Jan, what the fuck is happening?"

Jan is no help. He looks like he has seen a ghost, and is clenching and flexing the fist holding the throttle while pounding the steering wheel with the other one, muttering, "Come on come on come on come ON" and making no effort to reach the guys. I rise up and lean over the edge of the boat to stretch out a hand to Dave. "NO!" Jan shouts. "Do you want that thing in here as well?" His voice is high and panicky; I look sharply at him and then back at the guys on the beach. "What thing?" I shout, looking at Jan.

"Can't you fucking see?" is all he says.

I look back at our four friends struggling in the sand and then I can see it, in the sand, in those individual grains I saw earlier; hands, claws and fists are forming and grabbing onto the struggling bodies of my friends, trying to pull them into the beach and drag them down. As I watch, Dave's alcohol-soaked body gives up the fight and he collapses face first into the sand, inches short of where the water laps up against the beach. Within seconds he is covered, and then the hump of his body is gone. Brett and John follow soon after. The Dog puts up more of a fight, uttering hoarse grunts and yelps as he kicks out with animal ferocity against a foe that parts and slivers over his flailing limbs, recovering another part of him for every millimeter that is worked loose. But then he too is absorbed. Before my incredulous eyes, a finger of sand comes questing over the surface of the water

towards the side of the boat. "Jan! Fuck, put voet!"

But he has seen it and throws the throttle forwards and we leap away from the shore, arcing out into the deep water in the middle of the river in a stinking rooster of spray, panic and adrenalin.

Jan swings the boat in a low tight curve with the throttle twisted beyond its maximum and we thunder away from the sandy alcove and its questing tendrils. As we speed through the last light of the day back towards our house I take one last look over my shoulder. I see a house high on the ledge above the beach we have just fled. On its porch I see a low luminous glow, and as I watch, four wavy, opaque figures rise up through its floor and move around in the gloom, still wrestling, laughing and falling. I will the water to slip faster under us as we race through the dusk to the lights on the pier ahead.

Sisyphus moon

The change in the light, as usual, awakens me. I rise just in time to wrap a kikoi around my hips, stumble to the patio and witness the last dirty red dregs of the sunset. I behold a sickly yellow-green neon full moon. Perched atop the Helderberg, it sucks the last rays as they slide past Lion's Head. The night has slunk into focus again. The light continues to fade from dusk before slipping into true darkness. The first breeze wafts in from over the sea to dry the sweat on my sleep-ridden form. Half-awake, clogged with the snot and eye gunk of sleep, coughing and harrumphing myself to wakefulness. But the rising full moon works its magic – pulling on my blood like a spring tide, revving me up for action. Helpless in the grip of my waters as they are in the grip of the moon, I awaken, don my work clothes, and get ready to go.

The moon awaits me. I pull on worn Wellington boots, blue overalls, a hard hat and heavy duty gloves. As I walk out the door, I pluck the wide faced shovel from the umbrella stand. My personal weapon. I toss the shovel into the back of the bakkie, start the three litre engine with one twist of the ignition. The bakkie knows the ride to the site by itself, I swear. No effort goes into driving there anymore. Through the darkness we glide, the sky pricked by faint beacons. Suns, I am told, like this one, but so far away that they only appear as pinpricks. From the site, the sky is lit only by these lonely harbingers of life. So far away, they went on to say,

that whether or not their solar systems actually harbour life is a moot point. Nothing would live long enough to make the journey or be able to travel fast enough to make it viable. While I drive I think about this, picturing green wielding spades, night after night, grinding away at some menial task. Or pink dolphins with darting eyes, frolicking under three moons and eating as much fish as they please. Before I know it, this reverie has eaten up the miles to bring me to the site. I park the bakkie. The rest of the crew is here already. Their vans are all pulled up alongside one another in a semi-circle with their lights on. The crew stands in this pool of light, drinking the first cup of coffee from their steaming thermos flasks. The crew boss, Benny, hitches his jeans back up to conceal the crack of his butt, never winning the battle between the bulge of his belly and the force of gravity.

This is a grim-faced and hard crew. We've dug together on more sites than we can collectively remember. We may not be the fastest there is, but we get the job done, no matter what. Excluding Benny, there are five of us. We rotate in two-man shifts, one set at the face, excavating, the other clearing the newly dug rubble to be hauled away in the bakkies at the end of the shift. We all have the wide shoulders, deep chests and massive forearms developed from long hours over long years with our huge, blunt faced shovels. Moving earth, for years. On a night like this, no-one says a word, we are all sunk in our own thoughts, immersed in the contemplation of starting a new dig from scratch, flexing muscles that twitch with the phantoms of anticipated stiffness and pain. We all stand sipping on our coffee, as if reluctant to engage once again in the cycle of the dig. Wondering what it is that bugs us

all, deep down; about each new dig we face up to. It's full moon again, what can you say? We just stand around, flexing the thick bands of muscles around our lower backs. Eventually Jim snorts, and grabs his blade. We split into our shifts without a word. My partner tonight is Mike. Brawny, red haired and silent. Jim and Benny take first rest shift, while Fred and Jack take back-up shovel as Mike and I go in to break the first sod of soil.

I step up to the stakes hammered into the ground. The earth looks grey and powdery in the half-light. I stir the surface dust a little. Beside me I sense Mike hesitating as well. Then I lift the shovel and slam the blade into the soil as hard as I can. It slides in to half its blade depth with ease. I grunt. Step on the top, push it in till the surface is covered, then lean back and haul the first load of virgin soil away from the ground, toss it over one shoulder. A fine veil of dust settles over my face and back like a benediction. It is done, the dig is started. Mike swings into place next to me and we concentrate on digging a wide shallow shelf that will give the next crew a platform to start digging down. Soon the rhythm takes over and I am surprised when Benny puts a hand on my shoulder and tells me to take a break. Mike is already settling down on the back of his bakkie with a cup of coffee, grinning at me. I trail over with a sheepish grin and pour a cup. Benny and Jim move up to shovel the rubble with Fred and Jack tackling the platform we have dug out for them.

While a new moon dig is motivationally the worst, physically, it is the easiest. Now that a broad platform has been cleared, Fred and Jack start the serious business of digging down in the hard

soil and rock that lies beneath. Mike and I lay back and enjoy our coffee and bounce a cigarette. From up here we also sometimes watch the ordinary people bustling about their night time lives and chuckle amongst ourselves. It's not so bad working nights after all.

Having started the easy first shift, Mike and I are up for the 4th and final shift as well. The rest of the crew has done pretty well, and the dig is already quite deep. This is my favorite stage of the dig; it is just starting to feel like you are going down into a cave, descending into some cool, dark place. It can get muggy as the pit starts to get sides to it, but I prefer that to the sensation of being out in space where people can see you. I guess it comes from all these years of working solitary nights and sleeping through the day. I like to stay out of the sight of people. Force of habit.

After a week or so of digging, the job is going really well. I wake up early, with the sun still up in the summer sky, and I can just make out a $\frac{3}{4}$ moon hanging in the clear Cape Town sky. A beautiful scimitar sliver of basalt that glints slightly as the last rays of sun reveal its presence. It comforts me in a distant, brotherly fashion. The usual dig wounds aside, I feel fine. My lower back twinges a bit. We hit some really hard ground last night, which took two shifts to clear. The added effort put a lot of strain on all of us. We are not allowed to blast or use power tools, so we have to go in with pickaxes when this happens. We also double up on the shifts. We put out four shifts in four hours instead of two, working harder in shorter bursts to make up for the added strain. It is intense, grinding, smashing work where the true mettle of a

dig team is tested. Even the clearing of the rubble gets harder, as the ground comes away in bigger, jagged lumps that are hard to control. In this session, I somehow managed to skin a couple of knuckles through the gloves. I examine the gloves carefully, no tears or holes, must have just bashed real hard against a piece of rock. Although this job we have been quite lucky: no accidental whacks on the shin or head from a loose spade or pick head.

In fact, the changing face of the moon itself is what gets me through the dig. As it wanes and shrinks down to pale sliver, dangling precariously in the evening sky, I know we are almost at the end of our task and my spirits soar accordingly. I begin to think longingly of the day we can wake up with the people and enjoy the sun. Not having to worry about what the night will bring, about having to rest to be strong for the dig. I could open this flat door and greet my neighbor for the very first time. I wonder what they would make of that! I could go to the beach and expose my almost translucent torso to the rays of this friendly little sun. The people I see around me go such a pleasing shade of golden brown when they do it; I am tempted to try it out for myself. I wonder what they would make of me basking out there in the sun with them? Would they recognise my great arms and shoulders for what they are? Would they stop and stare at me like some kind of freak?

If the rest of the crew shares these fantasies about the end of the shift, and the lack of the moon in the night sky, it's not something we talk about. In fact, there is not a lot that we do talk about, ever. I think that the most we have ever discussed were

matters relating to the dig, or our gear or the time of night that it might have been. Since we've been on the same crew for so long now, that means we discuss very little indeed. We work in a rhythm that has nothing to do with words. It never changes; there are no questions that need to be answered. It's all been worked out over the years and now it is just applied. Everyone is happy with how it goes, just gets on with their part of the scheme.

Once, when we lost a team member, we all had a chat. The rest of the crew was worried about finding a replacement. The old hand, Bill, had dug himself into a real little cave which had then collapsed on him, killing him with its weight. The weirdest thing was that, when we pulled his body from the earth, he had somehow managed to impale his head on his pick as well. Even if we had gotten to him quicker, he would never have survived. Some guys just have no luck whatsoever. After talking for about ten minutes we all began to realise that none of us could actually remember ever having been recruited. Our memories seemed to stop short at digging. There was no before. No other job, any other way of life; there was just the spades and the digging. Bearing this in mind, it seemed logical to worry about where a replacement was going to come from when we couldn't even remember where we had come from. But Benny didn't seem too phased at all. In fact, he seemed to have been waiting for this to happen. Because the next night, he brought a new guy up with him to start on the job. Big, mean looking with red hair. Mike. My digging partner. After that we never really chatted again, ever. I think we were all unnerved about bad memories and didn't want to have to relive that awkwardness. Benny had been watching

Bill a lot on the last couple of shifts and they had been crewing together when the accident happened. We had been chatting a lot about the job, about life after the job. Bill was getting quite worked up about it all. I reckon the hours finally got to him.

Right now, all we do is dig. Mike, he has never said much. But that is one of the reasons that I have come to live in Cape Town: to see what it is all about. To see what it is that I cannot remember. Maybe living next door to people with everyday lives will help me to remember. Last night, all that was left was the tiniest sugar rind of moon in the sky, which means that tonight is the last night of the dig. I am awake way too early, still in the late afternoon really. I can see the rush hour traffic back-up as people scurry home from work. All these ants in suits and skirts rushing out of the city to the apartment blocks and houses. They are going shopping, catching the last rays of sun at the beach, going to the gym. It must all be very exciting, but it stirs nothing in me. No excitement, no memory. There are no pictures of this in my head, no pull. I grunt and move away from the window.

In the kitchen, I take a rag from under the sink and clean the face of my shovel. It is clean. All the same, I rub it down with some engine oil and rub it till it shines in the dull sunlight. I look at my hands. The knuckles are red and blue from where I almost skinned them again last night. Getting tired, getting clumsy. I check the work gloves, but there are no tears. Everything is OK, all working as it should. Except me. I must be more careful, think about the job at hand, only the digging, nothing else. All these other concerns are fantasies I can only spare thought for when I am off

shift. Tomorrow there will be plenty of time to worry about these things.

On site there is an energy in the air. Everyone is keen to get the job finished, looking forward to some down time. No-one says anything, but we all want to finish it as fast as possible. Once again we split the shifts into hourlies and we go at it like demons. Halfway through the first truncated shift, I start to feel the lack of sleep from the last couple of days and curse myself for a weak minded fool. If I fall behind here, I will be letting the whole team down. It could also cost me my life, one slip in concentration and I could have a pick axe in my head, or be under a collapsed cave of earth. The rest of the team has their heads down, grinding away at it. I pull myself together and get on with it.

We all had a scary moment when the head came off the pick Fred was using and flew across the dig. But Jack, his partner, was taking a breather at the time, saw it coming and was able to duck out the way. After that we stuck to the shovels and just concentrated on moving as much earth as possible. We worked so fast that, a little before dawn, I loaded the last earth into the back of my van and we knocked off. After dumping the load, I sped home to watch the sun rise over Table Mountain for the first time. I saw everyone emerge from their houses, get back into their cars and head on back to work all over again. With a sigh of contentment, I took off my work clothes and went to bed, thinking, "I'll shower when I get up."

In fact, I didn't get up that night to witness the moonless sky.

I was so exhausted from one month's hard digging, and the lack of sleep of the last few days, that I slept through the whole day and night, only waking the next morning. The flat was airless, and smelled of sweaty sheets. I woke feeling like I had a head cold, tongue swollen to the roof of my mouth. I stumbled out of bed in the half light, turned the shower on full and stood under it until I felt whole again and my breathing returned to normal. Then I went through the whole flat, opening windows and curtains, until it was flooded with the glorious daylight. It was nearly lunch time, so I made some pasta with sauce in a tin, and ate all of it. Then I had a nap on the couch in front of the TV. As evening came, I pulled up a chair and sat on the porch with a six pack of cold beer to watch the sunset and the moonless sky.

The sun sank below the horizon over the Atlantic Ocean. A restful, complete thing, its work done. I turned to look over my right shoulder at my view of the Helderberg. And dropped my beer. Rising over the mountains was a thin ghostly strip of moon. Tiny, but there. I was stricken, motionless with astonishment. And then, every night, getting bigger and bigger until once again it is full moon and Benny is on the phone, going, "Got another job for you, son. Are you rested?" And here I am again, climbing into my bakkie to dig the son of a bitch Sysiphus moon out of the sky.

The blood of the poet

In the morning's dim, autumn light, I lie abed visualising the sun behind clouds. Rain upon the window fallen in the night runs in opaque bars to the sill, fogging up my vision and filtering the day. My warmth radiates from beneath my quilt and blanket, steaming up the cold glass' wet bars. I breathe hot water onto the window's face, creating my own damp tracks which course to the sill and end. Not moving. Just lying still. The old house settles on its foundations, the creaking door and popping floorboard lament. Damp stains on the ceiling show the flood from the broken washing machine. All around me is wet and mildewed, but beneath the covers it is warm. Though my ears still reverberate stuffily from too loud music, I hear the sludgy thump of my heart as it opens and shuts its doors. I feel my blood pump up against fragile walls of skin. I cower beneath my dry sheets from the outside wet. I can feel the pulse of my liquids throughout my frame. My stale breath rasps like Velcro over the rough blanket. I breathe in the odd loose fibre. It is tinfoil on my night befouled teeth. The rhythm of my breath is oddly syncopatic against the two-four drumming of my heart. Lying like this, I bleed a lifetime of doing into the gloom of the autumn morning.

I must decide if I'm rising or else commit myself to sleep. I drag a limp hand across the eyes, feeling the roughness of an unshaved throat. The glands next to my Adam's apple are swollen. Inside my throat is all torn up and sore. Too much shouting and breathing,

too much raw, cold air. I must move now and shower, leave this unceremonious pit. Swing legs out from beneath the blanket, they are long, hairy and curiously stiff. I rub the knobs of my knees and ankles and marvel at their strange, smooth angularity. My toenails need to be clipped badly. Half upright, I see the day beyond the window. The windswept visage of the city lies there waiting. I am just a small bit. But, like oil, this small bit needs to be moving, for, like it, I'm little fit to do anything else save burn.

The shower is a modern miracle. I stand in the bath and to get in under the water, I bend either knees or head, whichever responds to needs best. Soon the friction of falling water revives my fallen spirit. I now hear its staccato spitting against the bath's cast iron edge. I wipe soap from my face and arsehole and reach for a towel when I'm finished being wet.

The telephone is ringing in the hallway, the caller gets my recorded regrets.

"Not here right now to answer, leave a message after the noise."

I pause for a moment in my rubbing to hear who it is.

"Dave here. I need to talk with you urgently. My office, 11:30. Be here."

The voice of reason on the telephone. My publisher. No doubt he wants to discuss my blood. Even from up here I can see the way his mind is working, what he wants from me. No word smith in his own right, he wants to suck on me. His call cannot ruin the morning but its strike leaves a melancholy impact crater in my smooth pre-noon visage. There had better be a good reason for

this thumbprint on my day. If I could have had it all to myself I would have been better pleased.

Now that I've showered, I've got to shave. I feel the need to present a respectable face to the world. It is approaching lunch time by the time I finish dressing. I stand penguin in front of the fridge, wondering what to eat. In the far left bottom corner a red pepper is frozen to the wall. Try as I can with my fingers, I cannot prize it loose. There is nothing instantly eatable and I am not in the mood to cook. I'll have to eat out. The pub on the corner does a reasonable lunch and the hair of the dog will calm the inner ocean that is threatening to escape.

The rain is falling in a persistent drizzle, just enough to have to wrinkle up your eyes in order to be able to see where you are going. From my open doorway I peer into the wet present beyond my flat. Grey sky horizon. I smile. I need no umbrella, merely turn my collar up against the wind. It's only a short walk through the softly flying rain. I walk with my eyes open to the wind. Breathing in and walking on water, the walk to the pub is an underwater ballet and all I want is a drink.

I can hear the hum of traffic as I cross the road quickly and decisively, without looking either way. I live the life of the word and the blood of life spreads my being to the sky. The glances I get in the street don't worry me. They may not understand everything, but they understand enough to envy. I suppose I shouldn't draw attention to myself by walking in front of cars and jumping off buildings to fly. Sometimes the sheer exuberance of

living takes control of me and I have to.

The rain is soft, but by the time I reach the pub, I am completely soaked through. I smile at the barmaid, she pulls my pint and returns it with stony regard.

"And I'll have a Ploughman's too, please," I venture with another smile.

"Two fifty," she holds out a tough hand. Her fingers are stronger than mine, I've no doubt.

"I'll be at the table by the window, ta." I say over my shoulder.

"I'll call you when its ready," she replies, pointing at the bar so that I don't misunderstand. I'm surprised I'm not asked to sit outside. I smile a little and suck on my bitter pint. It always works wonders for a queasy turn.

By the time I get to the publishing house, my hangover has subsided into a small, gurgling lump. In fact, I feel pretty good, all things considered. Perhaps I could have had that fifth pint after all. The secretary behind the desk barely acknowledges my arrival, nods. Perhaps she's shy around people like me. I smile encouragingly at her.

"Good morning," I offer, "Dave told me to pop in."

"He's busy, take a seat." She doesn't even look up from her typing.

"Aren't we having lovely weather?" I ask with a smile. She looks up at me and then out of the window.

"It's pissing with rain," she announces, her tone somehow satisfied with the negative connotations.

I engross myself in a shitty financial magazine. Don't know why

I bother really, I can't understand a fucking word of it.

After I've waded through about ten dumb magazines about finance, investment, the state of the nation and other important shit, Dave deigns to pop his head around the door.

"Is that it, Betty?" he asks.

She sighs. "No, Dave, Timothy Rank has arrived for his morning appointment." She looks pointedly at the late afternoon orientation of the hands of the clock upon the wall. Unabashed, I spring to my feet, glad to be roused from my somnolent contemplation of fiscal convolutions. "Hi Dave, what's up?"

"Timothy," he manages to sound enthusiastic despite his forbidding pose in the doorway, "why don't you step inside and we can have a little chat."

The inside of his office is a huge mess. He'd obviously been entertaining guests with snacks and booze.

"So," I make myself comfortable on the leather lounge and crack a bottle of lager open. The crispy snacks look pretty inviting too. "All the details ironed out then? Can we sign on the dotted line?" I banter, trying to sound sure without sounding cocksure.

Dave remains standing at the window with his hands behind his back, a B-grade movie power pose. I sprawl all the more in the lounge.

Without turning around, he says, "That's why I asked you to pop in. There are still a few things that we would like you to change before we can finalise the deal. Nothing major."

"Like what?" I ask, still fairly at ease.

"Well, for one, all the swearing we talked about. You didn't

take it out at all, just re-phrased it," he explains, gesticulating, but still looking out over the city.

"For God's sake!" I cry. "That's what you told me to do, 'change this', 'adapt that', you didn't say just chuck it all out."

"It's offensive like it is, Tim."

I'm not sure if he's explaining or coddling.

"It'll change the whole import of the book to junk all that stuff," I argue, "you know it's good, it's important. Take it. That's the way that you liked it when you found it."

Finally he turns to face me and smiles softly. "That's not good enough, Tim. I've got to sell it. Change it."

I look up at him standing over me. "I can't. "

"Then I can't close the deal with you," he says, turning away once more.

I'm pretty sure that he's just playing hard to get. "C'mon Dave, you know how these things work. The beaurocrats don't know or care what's going on in the books they're putting out. They have no idea of what's going on outside their offices. It's the blood, the word on the street that matters. That's what the whole thing is about. That is what will sell the whole idea." I'm thinking this line of argument will hook him up, he just needs a little re-convincing, just a last few doubts to be dispelled.

"Without our backing," he enunciates slowly, "nothing sells. Without the changes that I have outlined to you, you get no backing." As he says this he turns to look at me again, me, on the ground in the leather lounge.

"Yeah, right." I say

"Yeah." Dave agrees.

"So it's no."

Dave nods. "It is no. We like the idea, but not the way that you have dealt with it."

I wonder when Dave defected to the other team. I stare out over the acid rain blackened city. I wonder how I am going to die now my blood is poured thus down the gutter, trodden underfoot. The word which immortalised me, now dead, mortalises me again.

Cerebus

I drink de-caff cappuccino and keep a keen eye on the concourse. It's 10am, Thursday. The mall is busier than usual and I have no idea why. From where I sit I can see every single that passes by. The numbers make me uneasy, not happy.

I recognise many of the faces that pass. They too have begun to recognise me. They know not why I sit here or what I am. I remain quiet and bear the stares and the laughter. I hold my post.

The mall is a large, multi-level shopping complex, designed to snare the spare cash of the idle well-off, of those who can spare a few extra bucks for decorative extras. There is one big supermarket chain selling basic foodstuffs, but for the rest: it's frivolous. Designer clothes, designer tools, designer toys and jewellery. Its halls are spacious and expensively tiled and the shop fronts well-appointed and spotless. Mirrors and gold edgings give it a hard, glittering façade that reflects in the shoppers' eyes like pin pricks, sharp, small blades that lurk, stabbing anyone and anything they look at. The powerful air conditioning keeps the temperature at a regulated level, just one up from cool, summer and winter.

The good-looking men and women employed to be as much eye-candy as sales people always get thin and pale before leaving.

Staff tend to last no more than six months. They don't mix much. They don't meet each other, chat each other up or go out on dates. They come docilely to work, do their duties and leave. They don't even seem to learn each other's names. They never come over and learn mine. Some blame the air conditioning, some the lack of light. But I know the real reason, the presence that lurks here, and the reason I am stationed at this coffee shop every day, rain or shine.

I watch the flow of people. The coffee shop is right near the escalator to the lowest level of the behemoth. I watch the people heading down into its maw with passing curiosity. I keep a special eye on the ones coming up. Some of them are coming from somewhere other than the lowest level of the mall. Occasionally I have visitors. Others like me who stop for a quick catch-up, sometimes other entities entirely. I always feel more conspicuous on days when I have another sitting at my table. As if my dog collar and robes somehow make me invisible to the naked eye when unaccompanied. Most of the people in this mall seem to be so de-spiritualised that a man of the cloth has become truly invisible. But when I am with someone else, well, maybe then I am up to no good... and I feel the curious stares multiply.

Such a day is today. Days when I am visited by Her are always of most interest to me. She drops by rarely and only to make sure I am doing my work. She is the best visitor. Most people cannot see her at all. Some of the people walking by react ... strangely. These are the ones I watch out for. Her presence has led directly to me making some excellent progress in my job. Then there are

the ones that, for some inexplicable reason, can see her as she sits with me in her robes and white light, and they stare, shake their heads, and smile. These are the ones whose faces I remember and who I will never forget. They will not go down that escalator and never come up again. They are the ones whose protection lies about them like a cloak. Their ability to see through the skin of this world saves them from being led astray. It is the ones who feel her and react like someone put a bad smell in their way that I watch for. If they are about to go down I hope to divert them with some small act or thought, but if they are coming up that damned escalator, then I act. And fast.

But today all is quiet and we chat. No-one sees Her or hears Her, no-one looks at me, no-one remarks that I appear to be having a conversation with myself. I can't tell you who She is. Not won't mind you, just can't. Her name is Sophia and She comes to me once a month or so. She just appears sometimes, sitting in the chair opposite me. As if I too am one of those who cannot see Her really and She turns herself visible for me. I once called Her an angel, and She shushed me with a smile and a long finger on my lips. I can't tell you what we talk about, as I cannot recall a single one of our conversations. In fact, this stilling of my questions with Her finger is the one act of Hers that I clearly remember. I recall no actual words, but I know what She wants. She wants to know if I have stopped any of the damned from rising up out of the depths. She wants to go over to the lip and stare down into the maw of hell and see if the aberration has grown any larger. And sometimes, She just wants to sit with me and watch as some of those who ride it seem to continue on down long after most have

gotten off to go to the movie theatre or the post office, those who steadily sink from view as they travel into the perpetual red glow that lurks at the furthest reaches of this intersection.

After Her visit this day, I ride the escalator down, half hoping that it will be a longer ride than usual. But it deposits me on the next floor, one level down from the coffee shop, as it should. I go to the post office to check my PO Box and send a letter. I return to the middle level, looking into the eyes of each and every passenger heading down to the lowest level as I ride. I see greed, abstraction, fear, tension, doubt, complacency and boredom. I see no evil.

Back up at my own table I stare at those mobile stairs. I have prevented many souls entering here from the opening to hell that lurks beneath this building. I have seen them coming and strode forth to confront them. With words of scripture and exorcism, turned them back into the fire from which they have sprung. I have no doubt that the foot soldiers of the beast are forever being released into our world from the various points at which our worlds intersect. I doubt not that the dark prince's desire to take over this place burns as bright within him as it first did.

I have been stationed here now for two years and I am beginning to wonder about what I am doing. Some days I am filled with horror when I see the lake of fire and lava that sits below. I can see the souls of the damned and feel the keen eyes of the foot soldiers of Satan. I know I have struck down some spies and commandoes, seeking to find our weak spots and map our

ways. But lately I have begun to feel like I guard the back door of hell. It's not like this weak point is a major staging point for the war between heaven and hell. It is a quirky cul de sac that nearly everyone has forgotten about.

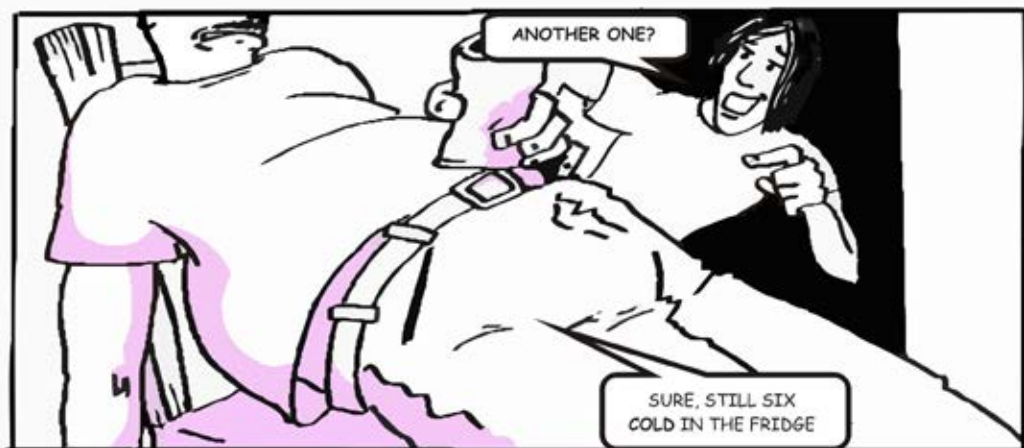
What I most often see escaping through it, into this reality, is not soldiers, but simple, desperate souls who have found the rent by some lucky accident. The kind of people for whom eternal damnation was always going to be too much. They are like the ghosts of ghosts, so worn out and ruined that they drift up these escalators, looking to be free. And as they recognise the world we live in, they gradually assume shape and form and start to re-integrate into time and this place. These are the ones I have been warned to strike down as much as the soldiers I see coming up, trying to be human. And I am beginning to wonder whose side I really am on in this inter-dimensional game of cat and mouse.

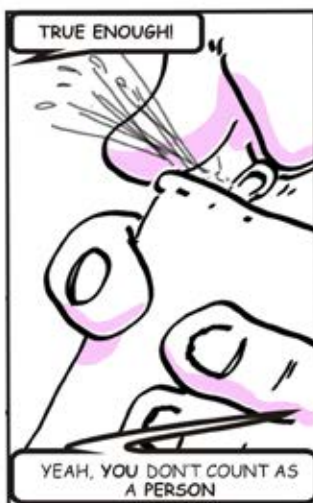
My dog collar itches uncomfortably against where I shaved in the morning. I feel the shame of the priest's robes and the blood on my hands. I wonder if I am really doing my part to keep us free? Am I just part of the status quo that keeps the wheel turning? Ultimately do we not just deliver more and more people to the levels below levels on the escalator? I am thinking too much to be the good guard dog that I am meant to be. These thoughts will only serve to distract me. If I don't watch out, I will become like one of these shop assistants and have to be moved to a new job.

I brace myself, acknowledging that the effect of this place is to cause doubt. I order another de-caff cappuccino. I steel myself to sit out another day. My fiery sword is sheathed and ready,

Cerebus

my hands drip blood invisibly as I sip delicately and smile at the passing parade.







TROCS?! YEAH, THEY'RE STARTING THIS
THING WITH A STRIPPER AT LUNCH TIMES.
IT'S JUST FIVE BUX TO GET IN...LET'S GO!!



C'MON!

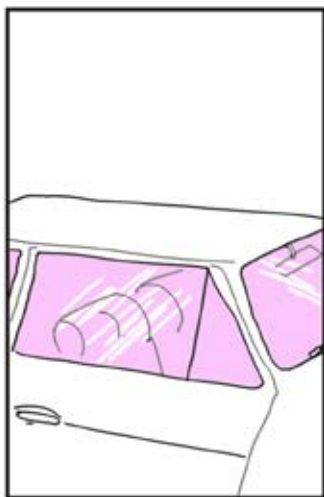
LET'S MOVE
IT UP!!

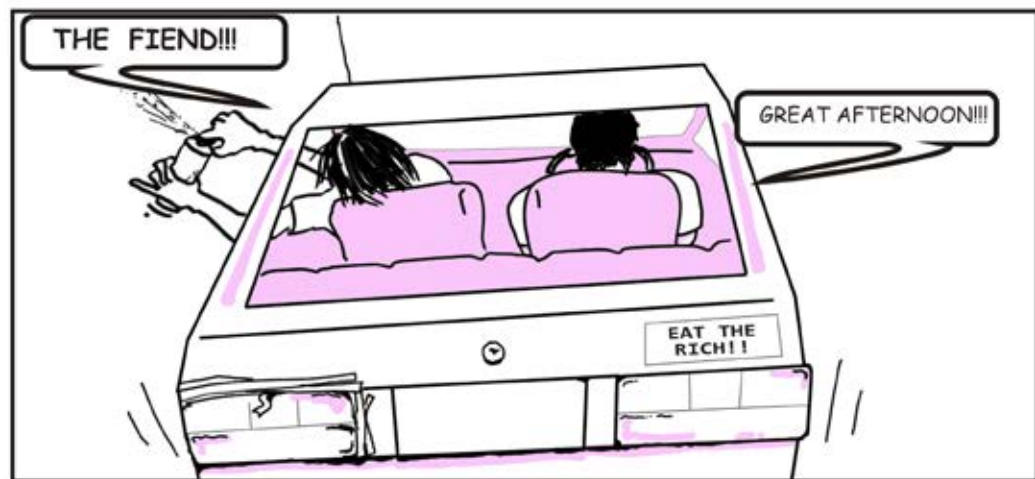


WHAT ABOUT THE BEER?

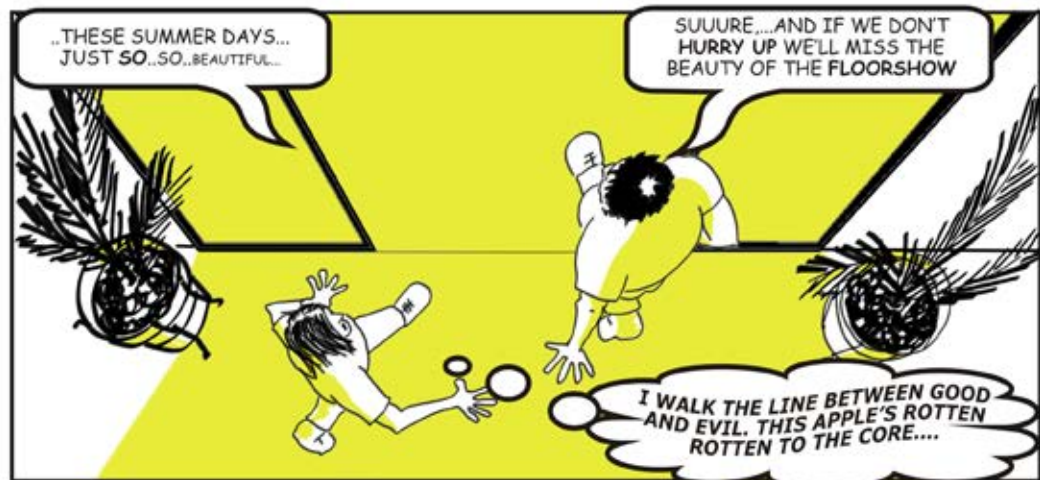


WE'LL TAKE 'EM WITH
IN THE CAR











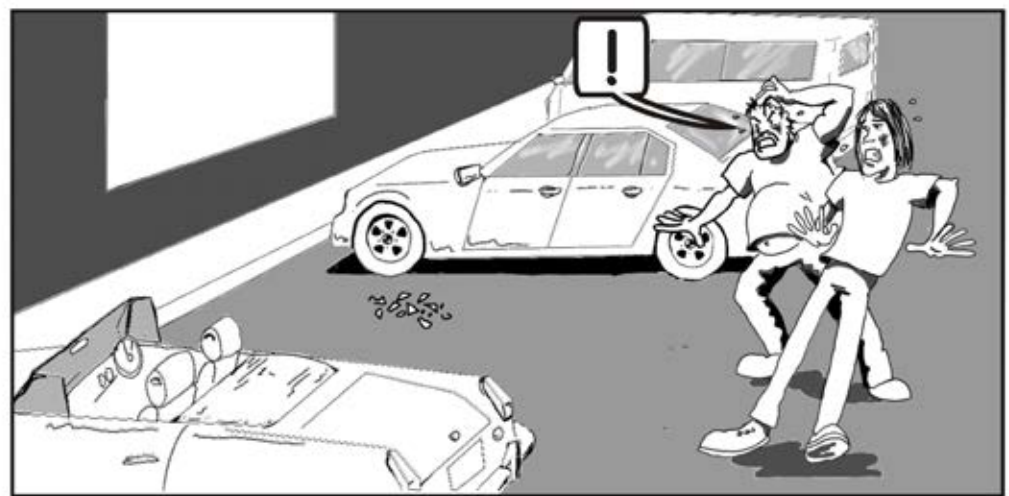












The last day of my so-called life

For some perverse reason I am awake at 4am. But worse than this, the metallic grey false dawn light is tainted with the soundtrack of the maudlin 70's love song, 'The Day Before You Came'. It's ricocheting around my skull. Some woman is warbling it over and over in precisely the overly sentimental way that two years of singledom has resulted in me hating. I stare resentfully at the monochrome beige curtains until I subside into the last hour or so of sleep, dreading the technicolor immediacy of the dreams I know it must bring. My last waking thought is, 'well maybe it is.'

When the alarm rings at 6am, I am waist deep in amorphous green/blue goo, wielding a strangely light-filled broad sword and baying at the top of my lungs while joyfully cleaving heads from the bodies of weird alien beasts. It takes several bleats from the cellphone alarm to calm my racing heart. I open my eyes slowly. The familiar dimensions of the bedroom assert themselves upon my unwilling consciousness. It might have been crazy, but slaughtering those beasts was fun. Do I want to return to the mundanity of my four, somewhat dirty white walls, beige curtains and hideously mis-matched bedding? I am groggy from the sudden intensity of the hour or so's sleep. It takes me ten minutes to remember waking up previously. It is only in the shower that I recall the song, and sing, 'this is the first day of the rest of my life' ironically under my breath to myself. I soap my pits, my balls,

my arse; vigorously scrub my leg, chest and back surfaces and my arms, before hosing myself off in the pungently chemical city water supply. Invigorated I step from the shower, whip a razor across my chops and look to don my armour for a day in the world.

Popular wisdom would have one live each day as if it was your last. And while I relate to the sentiment, I cannot see that having sex all day every day is really going to make for much of a life. But the idea of noting the exact nature of every passing mote of time and detail registers a harmonic in me. To make every detail important and to celebrate it. A series of tiny, static nows that are examined and remembered, as opposed to bundled into minutes and hours which are devoured by the processes of being alive and making plans to live. My Buddhist under-mind smiles as my reptilian mind recoils and I am left smiling humourlessly at the idea of holding down a job while making every moment of life holy. But I feel that if this is the last day of life as I know it, because it is the day before she arrives into my existence, maybe I should be recording it. Maybe I will need it later to remember what it was that I left behind. One always needs to know where one came from. Primarily to stop you from heading back there I feel, but mainly in order to have some sense of progression. Nature tends towards inertia, decay, but consciousness strives for change. My body and mind war with each other over these drives while I hold down the job that buys us the luxury of time to have the debate. It would be nice to have some other source of meaning in the ritualised actions of my days.

Nonetheless, I am mindful as I drink my fruit juice and chew my

banana. I count every stroke of my toothbrush as I clean my teeth. The sun feels comfortingly warm on my back as I close the door to my flat and walk to my car. In fact, the sky is a clear crisp blue that looks like brand new tissue paper begging to be wrinkled. The sun is bright and my shoes make a musical scrunching on the concrete. Bird song drowns out the traffic noises from the main road. I press my remote control and with a smart chirp. The car springs open, deactivating the alarm and the immobiliser. I reflect for a second that, on the last day of my life as I have known it, it would be so much more perfect if I didn't have to think about the mundanities of actually staying alive.

When the day is the last, the sky takes on a whole other texture. Trees stand out in stark relief, more like sculptures than paintings against a background. Cars shine and gleam as they pass by in the road. By the time I have driven to work I am aware of two things. One, I am very, very wide awake. And conversely, interestingly, I am tired. My head feels like an over-full letterbox. The combination of the two sensations is like an effervescent multi vitamin going off in my heart. I am elated, I am clear headed. The fatigue feels GOOD. I sit at my desk wallowing in this for a few minutes while my machine boots up, the virus scan runs and the updates download. Every single day begins like this. I have not altered my routine; I have merely paid attention to it. What an interesting world I live in. I haven't spoken to another living soul, and already I feel more at home in the tiny corner of the world I have carved myself. I don't feel like I am peeping out from between curtains at a parade anymore, I feel like I am handing out cookies from my front door as the participants file by, smiling.

Ridiculous, I think.

If I was to die tomorrow, this day would have been wonderful. I haven't had sex, I haven't got high, and I haven't bought any toys. I just started taking mental note of everything. Looking right at things instead of through. It's not possible to live like this every day, is it? You'd take so long to do anything. You'd be sidetracked and unfocussed. Right now though, I am not sure I care much about those side effects. I decide to make a cup of coffee while my email downloads. My day is ordinary. I have two or so hours now to write some reports, to reply to emails, answering queries and so on. Then I have a couple of calls to make, quotes to chase, information to gather. Then I have a lunch with a client, and the afternoon has been cleared for admin. I need to catch up on paperwork. I look at my to-do list as I sip my coffee. I know most of the people I am about to call. My client is male. I know all the staff here. If this is the day before she comes, I am not sure where she is coming from. Realising my mistake, I look at tomorrow's diary. Pretty much more of the same. I am not doing anything after hours on either night. I am just living this life. This life that until today I had thought was mundane. If tomorrow she is in my life, what is she going to see? My boredom and repetitions of the same actions and ideas? Or my new excitement at the colour and depth around what I do with my time? What would I like her to see? If today is the day before she comes, isn't there a good chance that I already know her, I muse. I mean, my diary shows no opportunity for meeting anyone new. Will I bump into her in the check-out queue at Pick 'n Pay? At the ATM? Will we do the strangers' tango in some public place, each starting in the same

direction as the other until we laugh and look into each others' eyes? Will one of my phone calls result in an unexpected meeting, and it's her? Will ... Ah. Ja, whatever.

The time until lunch flies by. And even though I am focussed on my work, I am conscious of writing my emails differently, I am conscious of patience; of perspective of the time I have to do things. Before I know it, my Outlook calendar pops up my 30 minute reminder to go to lunch. I stand; pick up my folder and notes for the meeting. I look around my office, straighten papers on my desk, push the chair in, walk out and close the door. It's autumn and the crispness of seasonal change has crept into the highveld air. It's not cold, but I am not moving in a pool of heat and oil like two weeks ago. I note the sensation of cooler air across my lungs. My chest seems to expand easier, I suck in more oxygen, my eyesight sharpens, as if the water content of the air has dropped and my vision tweaked accordingly. The short walk to the car is full of sensations: the feel of things through my shoes, concrete, stones, cracking of dry leaves. I look around the car park but I am the only one here. A Hadededa squawks by in the sky, calling for its mate. The car alarm pips twice. I open one door and slide back inside its familiar cocooning.

I am early for the meeting, having left too much time to get to the restaurant. As I walk in, I note the hostess. She is tall, brunette, beautiful. I think for ten seconds. I am 40 years old. She must be 25. I shrug and approach the front desk. She smiles at me.

"Good afternoon sir. Do you have a reservation?"

The smile is perfect, but her eyes maintain the same constant

glow. There is nothing in front of her that she is waiting for. "Yes, for 1pm," I reply and give her the client name. She picks up three menus and escorts me to the table.

"Would you like something to drink while you wait?" she asks.

I order a glass of water, lemon, no ice, and she leaves to relay my order to our waiter. I look around. The joint is half full and there are women dotted around the room at various tables. I tally up how many fall into the right age bracket and so on before stopping myself. If this is the last day of my life before she comes, isn't it true to say that she is a factor about which I don't know? Again, is it someone I know or not? I just don't know. Then she is just as likely to be 21 as 45 and therefore any sectioning of the women I see might be to nullify the process. I sigh and sip my water. I'll just talk to everyone.

Ten minutes later a woman approaches my table. She is about 30-ish, attractive, and smartly dressed. I was engrossed in my cell phone and didn't notice until her body cast a shadow over my table. I look up, see her and smile.

"Hi." She says

"Hi." I reply, wondering what this is about.

"Um, you're not Victor are you?" she asks, realising that I am clearly not expecting to meet someone I don't recognise.

"No." I reply, but realising her predicament, I add, "but I get mistaken for him all the time."

She smiles, clearly uncomfortable, but grateful. "Oh, I am so sorry, thank you," and heads off to the table a few down from me where another man sits alone. This one is right, she sits. The client arrives and all chance to observe the world around me is obliterated. The meeting proceeds.

As we are wrapping up, another woman approaches our table, an ex-colleague of my client's assistant, they talk, hurried introductions are made. Our eyes meet, she looks away. Two minutes later she is gone and the bill is paid and we are walking out the restaurant. At the door, we part and I turn and bump into another patron on the way in. It's a woman. We both apologise, pat each other reassuringly, hurry off away from the scene as quickly as possible. Back in my car, I tally up four new faces. Some I considered, some I did not. There was no electricity and no-one seemed to want to stay to find out more, and I felt compelled to detain no-one. I shrug, start the car, head back to the office.

The building is quiet. It is nearly 4pm, and I have an hour to get on with some admin. The brighter ones have set up 4 o'clock meetings so as to be able to go straight home. I pull the tray of paper towards me and start to process. At five thirty, one of the PAs on the floor pops her head in to say she is leaving and I am the last one left. I start, looking at the time.

"Oh," I remark inanely to her smiling face, "lost track of the time! I will be leaving now too then."

"OK," she smiles; "I'll start turning the lights and things off then."

I smile back and start to shut down my machine. Once that is complete, I grab my jacket and car keys, lock my door behind me and fall in step with the PA as we leave the office. She's been here a while, but I don't know her name. She's nice though. Not that one is ever interested in colleagues, way more trouble than they are worth. I smile at the thought. My last working day before she came is now over and I am walking out the office ticking women off an imaginary list. She catches me smiling.

"What's so funny then?" she asks with a smile of her own.

I laugh. "Oh nothing really, I just feel a bit silly for losing track of the time there," I reply, putting any words into the spot between inverted comma's so as not to have to say what I am thinking.

She laughs. "Well, don't worry, my lift is often late for the same reasons!"

We reach the exit to the building, and there is no car outside for her. "Like today," she adds, "no lift yet."

It's getting dark, and we don't work in a very nice part of town. I volunteer to stay until her lift arrives.

She looks at me as if gauging my reasons. "You really don't have to you know," she says soberly, "I can stay inside the building until she arrives."

"I know," I say, "but at least this way you'll have some company."

We wait together for a companionable fifteen minutes, exchanging inane small talk until a blue Honda Civic pulls up. We push through the doors into the street, and she opens the door, hops smartly in and winds down the window. "Thank you for waiting with me, it was kind of you!"

"And I am sorry you had to," chirps another voice from the driver's side.

I bend over so as to be able to see in through the window.

"I..." I manage.

The driver blushes.

"It was my pleasure." I choke out.

"Sorry," says the driver, still blushing and looking up and down fast. Then our eyes lock.

"I'll be early tomorrow, just to be sure," she says to me.

Her sister laughs.

"I'll be out here waiting." I say

She smiles and bites her lip slightly.

"I'll be here," I repeat.

She throws her head back and laughs, engages gear and drives off. Both women wave.

Tomorrow, I think, what am I doing tomorrow?

The pinstripe punk

He sits at his desk in the early morning. So early the other commuters have only just started to stir. The computer screen stares back at him, making his eyes ache. The cotton wedge of his collar eats into the raw flesh of the razor burns inflicted upon his throat every morning. Early morning sunshine glares through the blinds, filling the room with a smoky glow. Silence fills the building, punctuated by the discreet clicking of computer keys and the hum of the back-up drive. He stares at the words appearing on the screen as if he has nothing to do with their origin. Not a breath of air.

Life? What life crazy fucken roundabout with the power turned on full air full of screams of those who don't know how to turn off, can't jump too scared too scared, too curious, where are we going to land up? Who is going to turn this crap music off? Same song going round my head like a bad dream one phrase one phrase all over again, meet you in the morning, meet you in the evening, meet you in the butcher's shop, meet you in the morning, meet you in the evening, meet you in the butcher's shop. Head hurts like a dull wound that won't heal winter chill eats at it with blunt teeth, head. Head. Eyes stuck in one place see nothing do nothing be nothing, become one with all that is around. Bad smells. Cannot move eyes fixed waiting. Waiting for what. Dreams that pass, pass me by. The money has all gone, the dream, the

money has passed me by. My hands are empty. Clenched so hard they bleed, squeeze my brain so hard like a sponge it must ooze out ideas. Waiting, my hands hurt as much as my head. Dull pain, blunt teeth. The quiet is the thing. Where is the quiet? I wait I wait for what? There is nothing, the day is too long, I feel like shit. Must drink more water. Must drink.

Troubled, he moves like a cat to rub his shoulder blades into the back of the chair. It scoots around the floor on its wheels, evading his efforts to gain relief. The work lies upon the desk: lists drawn up on paper in his own writing. Things to do and the way to do them, prompt lines to keep him from making terminal mistakes. Thick fingers twitch across the keyboard, pounding language out of its dumb there-ness. His hands sweep back and forth across the keyboard, spilling out the words that fit like pieces into a jigsaw puzzle. He scratches his head. Dandruff falls onto the desk. It falls in lazy arcs and spirals onto the black plastic of the computer console. Self-consciously he rubs his hand slowly over a crop of newly grown hair.

Other fools automata arriving, whinging whining, talking crap bicker bicker snap snap. Hate their high-heeled shoes and shiny brogues, no style, no sense, sensibility, insensate, grind head burn click clack across the floor, teeth click clack in stupid grins grimace skulls heads on dead clothes smell like flowers, look like death. Can't think can't think too much noise, too many people, thinking clogs air with clumsiness, uncaring insensate, unfeeling me, numb, they dumb click clack across the floor. The noise levels rise and I can no longer concentrate on anything around me at all.

The door buzzer goes every two minutes and admits more heels to the polished wooden floor. They head straight to the kitchen and make coffee. They stand around chatting. The coffee permeates the air, late night fuel to burn when you can go no further. The others just talk, more air moving, they don't even know each other. Anything rather than get behind that desk and fly that phone. Yeah, even the real workers feel that way. Hate your job, earn your money, go water-skiing at the dam on the weekends. They discuss the weather, the mother-in-law the state of the falling Rand. They laugh, reminisce about something, virtually come up the stairs hand in hand. All friends. Upstairs they see him sitting there at his desk. They say hello, he grunts and nods. They think he's weird. If they think about him at all.

Phone rings shit talk mutter, nothing nothing, yes today, of course the printer the printer. All lies of course. All lies. But they lie they know, it's all for show the money changes hands. Spit in the wheels of progress sweat into the gears, ease the blood of my mind into the process. Will live will live, what options tell me. Tell me, no way. I know been there, no options bite the tongue bow head spit in the wheels, sweat in the machine, keep your souls away from here. Phone rings I lie I lie, talk with ease lie with ease the phone rings. The paper is breeze, tongue thick and sticks roof of mouth need water, sweat beads between my eyes, inside skull the noise doesn't stop, I am ingratiating. I sort the problems out. Crazy said that before, lost fax lost mind never mind in the one outside in the other. All talk, just wind. Flatulence for the ether. Disappearing banners, mind gone in yesterday, contemplate the river of wet air from out to electricity. Eyes dart about all

can hear the lies inside outside, turning the wheels, wetting the gears. Faces face me, peering deeply yes sir no sir, your arse full sir, heard that before like the locomotion hate Kylie hate Kylie, nice legs though. No, I don't know, didn't I say that last time, no time, is of the essence, time, the client's time OK OK, chastised, do better be faster inside the lies, yes yes, right right, ha wrong wrong, no faster, lighter lighter, lighter than the air of breathing the lies. Machine reads my mind, read me, print out me, paper me, authenticise me, whole real, black and white. Here in the hand on hand done.

Lunch time. The food lady arrives with her cart of goodies. Bread-rolls with assorted fillings, sandwiches and packets of Simba chips. Coke. All the rolls have meat or fish in them. He gives her a stare. She regards him blankly back. The sales team tuck into salami and chicken and mayonnaise rolls. They laugh as they eat and smear Mayo and margarine up their greasy cheeks. They watch the freak as he picks out bags of chips to eat, another nutritious lunch for the oil of the wheels of industry. They banter, discuss how much they would like to fuck one or other of the clients they have seen today, the receptionist, the new girl who started today. Discuss how well the car is going and how much the wife and child are pissing them off. He eats his chips with big slow crunches and their words ricochet around the room like darts of paper. He stands up from the big wooden table and crosses to the sink. They all watch as he turns the tap until it is barely flowing, watching the water slowly rise to the very top of the glass. The meniscus of the water bulges over the rim. He raises it slowly to his lips, never taking his eyes from its living edge. Each swallow

he takes of the water seems to slip like soft jelly down his throat. He finishes the glass and fills another. They all watch as he drinks this one in a long slow swallow. He turns, they contemplate the table. He draws a third glass from the tap. He stares at the sink while feeding his throat the water. He turns again to see them all look away. He goes back up to his desk and lays his heavy hands upon the keyboard once more.

The office is getting hotter as the afternoon sun muscles in through the window. The aircon doesn't work. The doors to the balcony are open. Smokers' breath drifts in. Another late-night odour out of place in the honesty of day. Sweat runs in rivers from his armpits to soak the sides of his shirt, trickling uncomfortably in to his waistband. The room is white. The wind from the doors stirs the blinds. They too are white. No clouds in a hard blue sky. There they all sit, like scientists observing some experiment that has changed direction. They look away as he raises his head. The sky lurks outside, waiting to bully with its certainty. The computer suffers on the desk, determined to out-wait his incompetence. They all sit there watching, waiting for the slips. There they all sit, waiting for five o' clock.

Computer screen stares, one big eye, sees into mine. Eyes can read my mind, no desire, tell it what you want. Open windows close the door, take out the garbage, do all that is wrong, it can see you, soon will read you. Thinking into the screen like a bleeding drain flooding the street. Effluvia flowing out where it can be read and taken apart. Wrong, the printer is clacking on the shelf by the door, no wind to hide its irritation. Electronic pulses

whirring sounds beyond console glass screen, intention read, mind taken out, thinking about no thinking, just being, it knows what I want really. Hand to motion, it provides the answer can't lie to the machine, it won't do what you want. Will do what you are thinking, do not hide the voice of your mind, it can understand you. The keyboard wants to be beaten, that tells it what you want, the mind of the machine needs imprinting and that is the tool of its desire. I cannot hide the thinking that drives the fingers across these circuits like afternoon cars heading on home, a distant speck on the event horizon that gives my destination away when you consider what I know, knowing no more than I do there is only one place that I am going to go. Tell me bed-time stories to ease the pain of living with the glory of breathing in the evening sky, these pulsing lights are broadcasting all this thinking into the ether as surely as everything I want is etched in the movements of my hands.

He looks at his watch. Half an hour has passed, vegged out in front of the computer. Everyone pretends not to have noticed. Quarter to five. He shuffles his things around the desk, packs them into his bag. By the time he logs out and packs the laptop away, it is 5pm on the dot. Everyone stands up and shares a complicit smile, heads for the door as one. Outside, the sun is still excruciatingly bright. With dark glasses on, he heads for the little hatchback nestled in-between Mercedes' and BMWs. It starts first time, he swipes the card through the gate terminal and is free. With music pouring from speakers hidden near his feet and behind his head, he drives home with a half smile painted on his lips.

His mouth follows the words of anger, traces their rebellion with his own.

There is a line of tins in the kitchen cupboard that spell out the option for dinner tonight. Beans, vegetable curry, spaghetti with cheese and tomato sauce. There is almost stale bread on the counter. I put some in the toaster. Spaghetti. Into the pan, onto the stove. Put on a CD. Sit on the floor. Must buy some furniture. Regard the walls. They need some paint. The floor needs a sweep. My feet already gritty and sandy from the dirt collecting there. I change into jeans and a T-shirt. I feel better. The spaghetti is bubbling. Ready. Onto the plate, on top of the toast. Eat. Burp. Feel better. The garden cottage starts to feel smaller than it really is. Outside, the sun has gone down and the night is creeping across the city. Out here in the suburbs, I can hear the call of the city over the ebbing growl of rush hour. But it is early. I grab my leather and head out to the nearest bar.

Murphy's Pub'n'Grub. Dump, cheap beer, no-one here is keen for trouble. Where the barman gimme beer. Why do they always play such crap in these places? Nice looking waitress over there. Five dudes at the bar. Sad bastards, all drinking their pints in the same place at the same time every night. Don't look. Don't look here. Drink beer, more, bring it now. Windhoek Lager. No chemicals nice. No more Labels for me, enough shitty SAB beer, like this Windhoek, even if it is more expensive. More beer.

Feel calm, watch the TV, crap on the TV more cricket highlights, more rugby highlights, always reruns of glory. Nothing else. I am glued, watch the screen, avoid those guys, don't wanna talk, watch the TV drink the beer, what is the time, just killing time,

yes please another, thanks keep the change, gotta go, gotta run, can't stay here too long, might turn into one of them sad bastards! Where's the car, there? Not there! Ahh. Still there. Keys, door, ignition, vroom. Good car, starts easy, let's go, off to town. Party time.

He drives the car towards the looming skyline of the city. He parks in the same block as his destination, The Dungeon. The doors are just being opened. He walks in. The black staff regard him oddly, too old and too well dressed for this little party. He orders a Windhoek from the barman. Shorty is his name. Shorty just looks at him, he doesn't know who this white guy is. He shakes his head. No Windhoek. Just Black Label. He sighs, and nods. As Shorty fetches the beer, he pulls up a stool and sits. A DJ wanders in with his box of CD's, puts on Iggy Pop, The Idiot. Nice. He drinks Black Label. By about midnight it is pretty full. A few skinheads, a couple of Goths, punks and metalheads and plenty of kids from the alternative no-man's land. The music is mixed and heavy, he dances to tunes he recognises, The Clash, The Cramps, Dead Kennedy's, Therapy. Even so, the kids watch him out of the corners of their eyes.

Cool song, more beer, shit, it's hot in here, have to take a break after this song. Look at all the pretty girls, never like this in my time. Why don't I recognise anybody? Good music though. Like this DJ maybe come again next Friday. Legs are sore from so much standing. God it's full, hardly reach the bar. Wish Shorty would remember me, hate standing in line! God need a piss. Shit this place stinks, why are there so many people in the loo, fucking

football fans, who cares about the FA bloody cup. Drink some water. More beer, back to the bar, fuck I hate waiting ahh there is a gap. Black Label, bring me a Black Label.

What does this little twat want? What dance club, fuck you arshole, fuck off and leave me alone. Hey don't fucken push. I don't want to go outside. Fucking cunts, it's cold out here.

Ohh, come on, hey what's going on? Wait...uhh, wait, hang on... I wait, I ... really, c'mon, there isn't...wait...

"Fucking poser!"

I am bleeding in the gutter, contemplating my arse.

The rope testing station

By now I can no longer even see the bouncing reflection of my car's hazard lights blinking in the distance behind me. I have walked half an hour from where I ran out of petrol without seeing a single other car or a garage where I can get more fuel. I curse my own optimism roundly for placing me here.

It's not late, but visibility is limited by a blanket of low cloud that swirls like mist at street level, turning the street lights into drifting incense sticks of light and blurring buildings and hedges into shape-shifting surprises alongside the road. The sun set no more than an hour ago and, so close to the heart of the city; I am not expecting to find so much of nothing in my quest for a filling station.

I look at the offices and buildings I am passing in the hope that I can find someone to ask for directions and maybe a lift. I can't see anything like a sign for fuel. The light has become weirder as time has flicked by, flattening out into a sheet of sulphurous orange under the weird street lights. The buildings have thinned out as if I've left the city limits, although I know I haven't.

I see a warehouse-like structure looming ahead down the road, with a bright light burning and some cars parked out front. I hustle up to it quickly, only to find it is fenced off from the road by

a large hedge. Spurred on by my uncertainty of finding anything or anyone else around, I pocket my apprehensions borne of no longer being able to see the building, and push through the hedge into the yard beyond.

Sure enough, there is a door set against the front wall of a large warehouse. In bold black letters across the front of the structure the legend "Rope Testing Station" is emblazoned. I don't think twice about that, but head for the door. It's one of those steel and glass kind-of-conservatory structures that have been attached like a blister to the front of the building as an afterthought.

Two mangy plants hang out inside it, not looking very enthusiastic. There is no-one in sight. I test the door, it gives slightly before sticking. I hesitate. Clearly there are people around. While it is true I did have to climb through a hedge to get here, it doesn't look like a high security place, and I know I am not here to cause any mischief. Nonetheless, I hold my breath as I gather my thoughts, and lean hard against the door.

It swings forward with a shriek and a groan and I stumble into the little reception area in an odd bright flash and find myself standing in a perfectly well-lit small room, with a door opening into a passage ahead of me. I can still see no-one although definite sounds of movement are coming from the interior. Behind me through the glass, I can't really see the car park anymore and the light outside seems brighter than the gloomy, misty evening I have just escaped. I start for the door, determined to find someone, get help and get out of here - fast.

The smaller door swings open easily, depositing me in a well-lit, but not bright, corridor with a very high ceiling. There do not seem to be any branches to the passageway that extends as far as I can see into the distance. Every small way along, there is a door on either side of the passage. The sense of great activity is more palpable, although I can't see anyone moving and none of the doors are open.

I can hear murmuring, but can't decide whether it is distant automated machinery, voices or wind. The corridor looks longer than it should have from what I recollect about the outside view of the building. There are small signs next to each doorway that I cannot read from where I stand. Shrugging my shoulders I realise that I will have to venture into the corridor if I am to find anyone who might help.

I begin to walk slowly. I am acutely aware of the fact that, while I am only looking for help here, I am an uninvited guest, and as such, trespassing on this property. I don't really want to get shot or arrested, so I walk slowly, with my hands raised slightly in front of my body, palms up in a ready gesture of what I hope is reassuring supplication. I pass by four or six doors. None are open. I pause to listen next to each one, and I can hear no specific noise from within.

The general sense of motion and sound seems to be emanating from the very air, in a way. There is nothing specific from behind each door. I am just beginning to wonder if I should be, at least, knocking or trying the door handles, when a door opens about four ahead of me down the passageway. A white coated figure,

stooped and shuffling, emerges from the hole in the wall, looks incuriously towards me and heads down the passage before opening a door three more down on the left and disappearing. I stop where I stand, one hand raised in greeting with my mouth open. Hmmm. Not phased by unfamiliar faces, at least.

I set off after the figure, keeping my eyes locked on the door that he entered. I get there in a few strides. It is totally closed, just like the others. I bend forward to place my ear closer to the door and listen for a few seconds. Just as quiet as the others. I look at the plaque next to the door. Unlike the others I have passed, I can actually read this one. The other signs were kind of blurred, or smeared, as if someone had brushed carelessly against the paint on the sign before it was dry. This one reads, "Give Them Enough Rope." The sign gives me a moment's pause, but then I grasp the handle, turn it and push the door open.

The door opens smoothly and silently into a wide and deep room. It is bathed in a non-directional brightness that at first dazzles me, although it doesn't hurt my eyes. I look around and there are a few people standing in loose clusters, talking and hanging around. Nothing in particular seems to be happening. I scan the room for the white coat, but I can't see an obvious candidate. The other human forms seem to be wearing suits, or at least semi-casual business wear. They have an oddly old-fashioned feel about them, although I cannot quite put my finger on what it is.

I start across the room towards the nearest group. It takes me

longer than anticipated to reach them, almost a full minute instead of a few strides, as if the room is somehow bigger than it looks. While I am approaching, I see that they are all handling lengths of rope. In fact there are piles of rope all around the room. Some of it is in neat coils and stacks, others in climbing swathes, and some just loose and higgledy piggedly lying around. As I get closer, I realise what it is about the people that looks so old fashioned. They are all holding themselves in rigid postures, as if in some formal environment, their movements are stiff and they make grand, expansive gestures with their hands.

As I approach my first group, I can hear they are talking, but again, it is vague, muffled, and I can't make out the words. I finally get close enough to reach out and then I realise that I cannot understand what they are saying. Their mouths are moving and everyone in the group is listening, but I cannot understand the sounds. I say sounds because I can't really distinguish the words. I start to ask for help and stop abruptly, the sounds dying in my throat in horror as I hear the guttural noise I am making echoing out into the room.

I can't understand myself. My group stops dead and turns as one to look at me in disbelief. I am not sure what to do. Clearly English is not understood here. But worse, it doesn't seem to come out of my mouth right either. I smile and perform a small bow from the waist, trying to imitate their mannerisms. Seemingly satisfied, they go back to their conversation. I stand by for a while, watching them. They seem to be involved in some kind of dialogue that involves or results in each of the members of the

group getting more and more rope. It passes from hand to hand and gathers in coils and loops at their feet and around their ankles.

After about ten minutes, I begin to observe other groups. Now that I know what this lot is doing, it appears the others are engaged similarly. I look up and suddenly, in the wall nearest to me, I can see what I can only describe as observation slits or windows, set half-way up the wall. Maybe this is where white coat went. I cannot see a ladder or even a door from where I stand, but I set off at once towards the wall to investigate. While I walk, I place my hand over my mouth to smother any sound I make and try out a few English words in a whisper into my cupped palm.

The further I get from the group, the more like a language their words sound to my ears, but as I approach other groups on my path it degenerates into some kind of guttural retching sound, as if the men are a language barrier in themselves. As I reach the wall, I see a particularly animated group in front of me. They all look like American politicians by their dress and loud manner. The excitement there seems to reach a peak as one of their number begins to orate louder and louder, accumulating more and more rope until, in a motion I can't quite decipher, he loops a round or two of rope around his neck and somehow hangs himself.

I stop and stare. I remember the sign. Give them enough rope? No way. I turn back to the wall. Set into the face of it I can now see the faint outlines of a rectangle, as white as the wall. I push hard against the door and get lucky, it swings open on the first try. Instead of finding myself in a room with stairs or a lift up to

the observation station I saw, I find myself in yet another of these rooms.

This time the room is pretty small and is occupied by only two men. They seem to be totally absorbed in their task, but I approach them quickly. Keenly aware of the language problem from the last room, I attempt to employ some form of sign language to address them. The older of the two men looks up as I approach and attempts to usher me into their activity. It seems like he is displaying a large stock of rope to the other man, pointing out detail and type as he moves down a row of stock-piled rope. Unable to distract them, I turn away and head for the other side of the room, where there is yet another door. I push though and lean back against the wall once outside. I sigh. I am in another corridor. Something is digging into my back and I move aside to see what it is. Another plaque. This one reads "Show Them The Ropes".

An idea is starting to form in my mind, but it seems a bit ridiculous so I push it aside and move down the corridor, looking for more doors. Sure enough, there is another one a few metres down. There is a plaque set into the wall next to it that reads, "Walk a Tightrope". I draw the door slowly open and sure enough, the interior of this room is like a big top circus tent, and many men are practicing the art of tightrope walking, from low level beginner sets a few inches off the ground to high wire acts with no safety net. I draw the door silently closed and pause for thought.

As I progress down the corridor I see more doors, each with

a plaque. I do not open them all, rather seeking ones that might present me with an escape, for there seems no way of finding the exit once again other than having it pointed out. All thoughts of finding a petrol station have evaporated from my mind. All I now seek is release from this building.

A door marked "On The Ropes" intrigues me and I push it slightly ajar. The interior is a gloomy old-style gymnasium, with several boxing rings scattered through its depths. Inside the ropes, certain pugilists have their opponents pinned and are hammering away at them with their fists. In each and every fight, one boxer is pummeling an opponent on some part of the ropes making up each and every ring. I know how the pummellee's feel. Will I ever escape this place?

After what feels like an eternity of walking I try one more door. And only because what is written next to it resonates so strongly. "At The End Of Your Rope". The room is so dark that I cannot see a thing and I step through the door way only to discover a total absence of floor. I fall into the blackness - wailing.

I emerge from the dark with a roaring and the babbling of voices in my ears. I cannot understand a word and I put my hands over them to block it out, knowing that I have once again stepped into a weird room where I can understand nothing and from which I cannot escape. Gradually the sounds coalesce into words and I hear someone saying, "come along son, its all right, relax, you're gonna be OK."

I realise that I have had my eyes tightly shut and I slowly open

them to see a middle aged man kneeling next to me. I see such concern in his eyes that I am immediately terrified for my well being. I try to scrabble upright, pushing myself back up against a wall.

“Whoa,” the man says, “I’m a doctor, don’t worry. We are a little concerned. You’ve been hit by a car and flung quite far. But it doesn’t look like anything is broken.”

His words trickle through my consciousness like water through sand. Hit by a car?

I look around me and I am back on Kingsway, lying several metres from the road, against an old warehouse. I look up at the wall where in faded black letters I can see the words “Rope Testing Station.”

I am still screaming when they load me into the ambulance and whatever is in the drip starts to take effect.

Waiting for the God-boat

I am getting old. I sit here in this room, and I can know nothing. My eyes have been closed for so many years, I have seen so much without their aid. God is my crutch, it is He that shows me the way amongst darkness. I have waited for His final promise, I am waiting still. These bones are grown brittle with their waiting. Am I not a worthy receptacle for the promise of God? I can hear the rest of the monastery going about its business above my head. They bring me fresh water, but they bring me no food. I forbid it. Even William has stopped coming to try and persuade me to give this course up. I cannot. I have waited so long. The bloom of my youth has long since passed me by. My old shoulders droop like a broken labourer's. I spend my days pondering the mystery of the unseen world that passes upon its way outside these walls. I sit indoors and await the word of my God.

As summer ages into winter, its rays gently warm the monastery. The air is still and quiet. Across its expanses the sounds of life flow unrestricted. Funnelled by ancient walls, they pour in through the barred window. It is an unacknowledged deluge, dissipating under the door. The street cur barks sharply and is quickly silent. Footsteps hurry by to the market. The afternoon lies long upon the ground and departs only reluctantly with the coming of the moon. Days such as this are turgid with the smells of a thousand souls in action in its hours. It is pumped up with the importance of all the deeds enacted within its embrace. The wind whirls

up bits of all of this, sweeps the streets clean of the collective experience and welds it with other debris from other lives. As it picks up, it lets go, binding the lives of the planet through the effluvia of their process. These scraps, motes in the wind, drift into people's eyes and get up their noses. They cause sneezes and watering eyes, inducing action. Dead, dry flakes of lived life and past experience are still potent enough to squeeze deeds from unaware participants in the show. These pin-pricks of life catch in the cobwebs in cell window corners and between rough hewn table legs. They pepper unseeing eyes that beseech heaven for the pulse of existence.

My cell is not spacious. I do not need the room. I have renounced the trappings of my humanity, the essence of my masculinity, I am neither male nor female. I am beyond the cries of the flesh. What need have I of great expanses of wall to stare at? This room I could cross with four strides, walk its length with seven. But these dimensions are of no importance. I sit here on my chair of rough wood, picking the splinters I receive out of my forearms and backside. I have no use for pacing. I shall never emerge from here in this body. If I die or am enlightened, having exercised by pacing my cell every day will have made no difference. There is a rough wooden bunk up against the far wall. There is no blanket, the cold cannot penetrate the depths to which my mind has delved nor plumb the despair I feel at this waiting. I have hidden for too many years inside this decrepit old body.

The walls are smooth to my touch. I run my hands along them. Oh why must I be waiting still? These old bones: they creak, they

scream. This whole frame is worn out. My dreams even are of rust and decrepitude. Inside this husk I have served the word of the Lord. I have given up my sight to Him in fasting that better I might see. I am alone in the room. In this waiting, the toll of passing feet, many metres above me, sounds through the earth like a death knell. Lord, have thou forsaken me, must I die here, unhearing, unheard, alone? I have waited alone all my life for the call that I was promised. Perhaps the texture of the wall is like that of the skin of a fine ripe young fruit.

Ah, the hunger.

I fear that the only reason that no-one looks in on me any longer is that they think that I am dead and they are waiting for the corpse to dry out before coming to bury me so that the stench is not too overpowering. Although I am cloistered thus, away from the eyes of the world, my ears can hear it pass. As if being blind has not been curse enough, my hearing must make up for it and I can hear them passing their un-Godly lives out there in the sunshine that I can hardly even remember. In here there is not even a breath of wind, even my old bowels have given up on wind. But out there I can hear it rushing, everything in such a hurry. There is nowhere to go, why do they rush so? God will not come to them as they engage so in the things of the world. He will not be able to see in their hearts, all cluttered up with material concerns. Much better the life that I, the life that I live.

“Oh Lord, let this blessing of your word that has touched me so often in my life and so profoundly altered the manner of my rude existence, fill my mind now, fulfil Your prophecy. Do not

keep me here on the brink of knowledge, waiting like an old fool, begging permission to enter the palace through the back door. Your likeness is upon this wall, because I can no longer look upon Your radiance, do not turn Your face from me. Do not leave me now that I have waited for so long. I have given up my whole life to waiting upon your revelation. Fill your faithful servant with your word that he might spread it, that he might cast the light for others to see by."

The heavens, inscrutable, remain unmoved and beautiful. In the streets children play with a football. Once, as the ball bounces against the monastery wall, they pause and listen to the chanting of the faithful within. The bells toll slowly, sandled feet shuffle in perfect time. But the ball is soon retrieved and the game resumed. From the highest tower of the monastery the town is laid out like a paperboard village. Neat, following well-defined lines. No sewage on the streets, no rubbish blown by the breeze. Beyond the last line of houses lie carefully tended fields yielding sustenance, labour and dignity to the town. Upon the faces of its people glow the marks of content.

The tinkle of wind chimes mingles with the cries of football-playing children and sweeps through the town into the fields. Beyond there, above the distant hills, rain clouds gather up together. But in the flat valley the sun feeds the trees and workers pull in the first of the harvest. The sky is left to its own, way above, all around. There is no worry of what the day might bring, only concern that all that needs to be done may require more daylight than is usually available. This busy vista, all colours and

earth, unfolds with ease, as if following some plan. It cascades from the shop fronts to darker side streets. The quiet hints of the coming winter are smothered in the exuberance of the last glory of autumn days. The rich colours of leaves persuade all comers of the bounty of existence while forgetting its course. The disembodied voices of priests and their chants join the frenzy and spread out into the world. The saliva-heavy words, joining the motes in the air, are carried out over the heads of the people into the far distance where land meets air.

*Our Father, who art in heaven, please heed my prayer.
Upon my knees now for countless bitter nights
I have waited upon Thy message and awaited Thy word
As I was promised as a youth
As shown in the revelations of my past
Thy hand is heavy upon my life.
Why now then,
At this cold winter of my existence
Dost Thou withhold the succour of Thy word,
Dost Thou neglect this faithful servant?
I have fasted all these days,
I have spent hours in meditation upon the floor.
I have fulfilled the letter of Thy commands.
Why then dost Thou treat me like a naughty child and
Ignore me, abandon me at the end of my trial?
Hast Thou forgotten me,
Do my good deeds no longer curry favour?
Then Thou dishonour the promise of Thy words,
Thou breakest the covenant conjoined between us,*

Then I shall not speak the word of the coming of the end

Keep these outside voices from me, keep me from their temptation. In this citadel my soul is strong. I can hear the bells ringing in the faithful. The breath of the day is loaded with bread and citrus. I cannot hide from them. I cannot wall them out. But I can wall myself in. Where is the will that guides me, where the strength? The water I drink turns my guts to dirty rivers and cramps rend my abdomen incessantly. But I will not surrender to the beast. I have not long to live in either extreme and I have suffered such torment before.

Lord, where is Thy voice?

In the quiet of this hole, even the vain chatter of the breeze brings solace. Each creaking movement of my body an aural joy and novelty. The bench scrapes harshly on the rough stone floor, my hands scrape, likely rough, on my unshaven jowls. All these fragments break upon my solitude most pleasingly. I despise them for it. They lead me away from the path that I have chosen. Even this monologue ruins my best intentions.

The unseen sun slips between bars onto the plank bed against the wall. The old man at the table doesn't move a muscle. He sits in the shade, out of range of its rays. His unmoving frame unaware of the radiation spilling into the cell. From beyond the bars the world tumbles into the cell, a kaleidoscope of unseen moments beating against the grey stone walls. A light breeze, stolen from summer, brings scraps of dry grass and the sweat

of old birds on the wing in through the window. They settle on the old man's shoulders and hair. Restless mites swarm through the air, drowning in the warmth of the sun. Even the day's smells steal into this sanctuary, mingling with the musty, wet smell of old stone. The granite cools the breeze and seals it in sweat low down on the walls. From there an infrequent rat laps the breath of the entire town - the sum of its experience coalesced into sweat upon grey monastery walls. Under the table, just out of reach of the old man's jutting knees, the web of a spider traps mites, dust and smells alike. Its calcified builder is way beyond caring, his dry husk swings in the breeze from the priest's swinging knees. Patience knows no virtues like the perseverance of the dead. The clamour of all these lives permeates the cell like a hoarse, disembodied whisper.

The rustling wind has gathered momentum and no longer sidles beneath the door with idle gossip. It buffets the planking and swirls through the bars at the window. The echo of its restless energy is strong enough to lift the hair of the old man in the corner, teasing his grey wisps into surprised, upstanding relief. He murmurs his prayers, oblivious to the babble of the wind that carries whole flowers to scatter upon his floor. Even their delicate odour is not enough to shake his contemplation. The wind rattles loose fixtures, impatiently calling for more, more.

My hands shake. I can feel the uncertain quiver in the muscles of my arms when I hold them up before me. This light headed feeling doesn't mean I don't know what is happening. My thin blood bubbles through my veins and I shake like a wind throttled leaf. Too late, I fear, to even attempt to rescind. Too late because

now I am too near. Lately, I think, others have taken to visiting me here. They snatch at my garments and whisper messages too soft for me to hear or comprehend. If anyone could hear me talking, they would say I have finally lost my mind, attempting to communicate with those that are not there at all. But I wait, I will understand, the message will come.

Outside it has begun to rain. The water falls in scattered percolating waves, beating corrugations out of roads and flowerbeds a like. It washes the tension out of the air, recharging the day with the flow and flux of unchanging rain. It paints the world over. No-one ventures out onto the quiet streets.

At night it doesn't matter when the water laps up over the pavement and sweeps away leaves. A fine spray of disintegrated raindrops splatters through the window and drips down the cold steel bars. The regenerating life force doesn't even splash the floor. The spray drifts slowly and evaporates back into the air, never reaching the nostrils of the old man on his bed, mouthing, saying nothing. The outside of the building is swiftly bathed in the passing rain. Slick and imposing, it shrugs off the coldness, celebrates the nourishment rain brings. Barrels and buckets stand in the courtyard to catch fresh water. The old tanks are foetid and give cramps and discomfort to those who drink of them. The rain plays high pitched tunes in half filled vessels. The cook stands in the doorway and watches levels rise.

Dear God

Let this load pass from these shoulders

Show the word that was promised.

*Too old for life, I have lingered
No good for God now, I must die.
Why have you abandoned Your faithful servant,
Why have my deeds brought Your wrath upon me?
In the face of You, Lord,
I protest my innocence
I do not understand.
The wheel of my life is come to an end
It turns and crushes me to the earth
Yet undead I must endure that torment
And know that no end have I served.
God, why have You left me so alone?*

I hear something, just a little rustle. A word forms in that wave of sound, that patter of small feet on hard ground. I can hear more words drifting beyond my hearing, too far and dim for me to comprehend. As I listen, so help me, I don't understand. A lifting of cloth and falling, like a hem caught on something, then unhooked by hand. A pithy breath of air to breathe, makes me drowsy and short of air. Now I hear a raspy voice as I lay my head to rest. I must sit up, I cannot, having come so far, miss out on the resolution of my test. Strong currents hold me down, my useless eyes open wide. The treacherous wind within my breast rushes to join that in the room. A childhood shout, gentle trust, my shaking hands can no longer extend. I am helpless upon this bed. With the pricking sensation behind my eyes come stabbing pains in my limbs. My world is slipping beyond my grasp. Unseen, unheard I can no longer feel the roughness of it between my old, hard hands.

The passing flurry breathes out the window, exhaling spores, dust and weeds. The debris of a thousand lives drifts back to ground, far from home. The dry sprinkle of dust, gently falling, coats the old man's open eyes, the whisper of the now-gone wind signing an unseen mark on an unwilling mind.

Child's play

In the shadows of the tube station wall I can see them lurking. There are about six of them: children. No more than ten years of age or thereabouts. They have chosen their positions well, just out of the range of the station cameras, under the lip of the station overhang, where the high street station cameras cannot reach. I process all of this information just as I walk into their trap, caught out by a quirk of architecture and my own absent minded strolling.

"Just keep walking Guv," says an unnervingly young-sounding old voice as two of them fall in alongside me, their faces obscured and voices muffled by the hoodies they wear pulled right forward over their faces. I look rapidly over my shoulder, but there are two more behind me and I can see something gleaming brightly in their little fists in the dull street light's glow. The one who spoke chuckles dryly as I look back ahead of me at the three more of the group that have taken up position, two ahead to close the box, and one on point about 100 meters further ahead.

"Take it nice and easy like, we won't hurt you," the hoody voice speaks again, "just nice and easy up into the park here and then you can go your own way."

Checking their height and the voice, I mentally confirm that the hoody and tracksuit wearing people are no more than ten. They barely reach my elbow, and with voices most certainly nowhere

nearing breaking. I have located the knives, or sharpened bicycle spokes, screwdrivers and whatever else they clutch in their hands. They are playing this nice and easy, but they know what they are doing, they have done it more than once before, that's for sure. Probably a hundred times. Our little formation formed so fast I hardly even saw it, the look out wasn't even part of the group at the station wall; he must have already been ahead, sweeping the path that we are now taking.

The two boys on either side take care not to look at me directly at all, their hands with knives gripped tightly in them never leave my side, hovering about four inches away from my sides, just behind my arms. The two in the rear are no more than two steps behind and they are watching me like a hawk. The escort pair up front are more casual, but I can see they are keyed up and jumpy, just waiting for the sound of the slightest thing going wrong behind them. And our sweeper up ahead has so far shooed away an old homeless guy and a gang of kids on bikes. This stretch of road is deserted. They know their craft.

Despite my lush overcoat and briefcase, however, I know they are going to be very disappointed when we get into that park and they demand my stuff. My pockets are entirely clean. I handed my travel card to a pan-handler at the tube station exit. I paid for it with exact change when I entered the tube system on Oxford road. I do not even have a wallet in my pocket. The bulge in my left trouser leg pocket, is a wadded up tourist guide, not a cell phone. My briefcase may seem to be covered with expensive leather, but it is in fact a very old and solid steel framed piece

of junk. The truth is, I have no money, no valuables at all. These seven little criminals have come here expecting a rich pay day, and I know they will not take it lightly when they find out.

For two weeks I have been commuting the route from Oxford road down south to Brixton. It's the ideal route really because the previously run down area of Brixton is going through one of those periods of what the Poms like to call gentrification. So, while there are plenty of care-in-the-community mad people on the streets, homeless clutching cans of super brew, and dope selling Rasta's, there is also a good proportion of upwardly mobile young people who like the "edge" of the area. They have bought one and two-bedroomed apartments set a little away from the main tube station and are creating their vision of an ideal city life. I look just like one of those. I have made sure of that. My training may be from another time and another place, but my skills hold up. My old handlers made very, very sure of that.

Setting up my character, I dropped my briefcase on the station floor on the second day of my commute. A cellphone, calculator, phone charger, note book, cheque book and lap-top computer all spilled out. I hurriedly swept it all back into the case, and looked around nervously. As I thought, there were a few kids hanging around the photo booth and the news-stand watching. I straightened up, walked past the two Bobbies with sniffer dogs waiting patiently at the entrance. Reviewing that memory, it is impossible to tell whether any of these kids were there that day. Their faces remain totally obscured.

Once outside the station, I walked back to the flat I was renting in a pretty direct route, no deviation, not looking over my shoulder once. But I kept my ears open and heard the footsteps tailing along behind me. I wasn't fooled by the gang of kids on bikes that circled endlessly around the road, nor the skateboarder stunting off the council estate steps. But I just walked, remembering everything.

Over the next two weeks I bought a paper, a week travel pass, took some photo's, bought lots of chocolate, stopped off at the supermarket and bought three bags of groceries, all as close to the tube as possible. The walk to the flat might have been short, but it was uphill and carrying plenty of parcels was never pleasant. I am patient, used to sitting in trees in the burning bush, in shallow foxholes, in freezing cold and searing heat. I feel nothing. This little expedition is simple by comparison.

I recall Steyn, my spotter and tracker from the bush war. My last mental image of him is a black and white photostat of an article from The Times in London. They used an old picture from just after we left what was then the SADF. He looked young and eager. But he was dead. Killed in a mugging. The article seemed to imply that it may well have been a gang of children. I was stumped. Steyn was an assassin and killer, trained by one of the most lethal armies in the world at the time. A reconnaissance soldier who had trained US Navy Seals, British SAS and Israeli Mossad operatives. How could he be dead after what we survived? I flew the next day.

We are approaching the gates to the park when I start talking, "So, you boys work this patch quit a lot then?"

"Shut-up," growls hoody back at me.

"You know I heard that there were gangs of feral children around here when we bought," I continue smoothly, "but the police assured us that it was now under control."

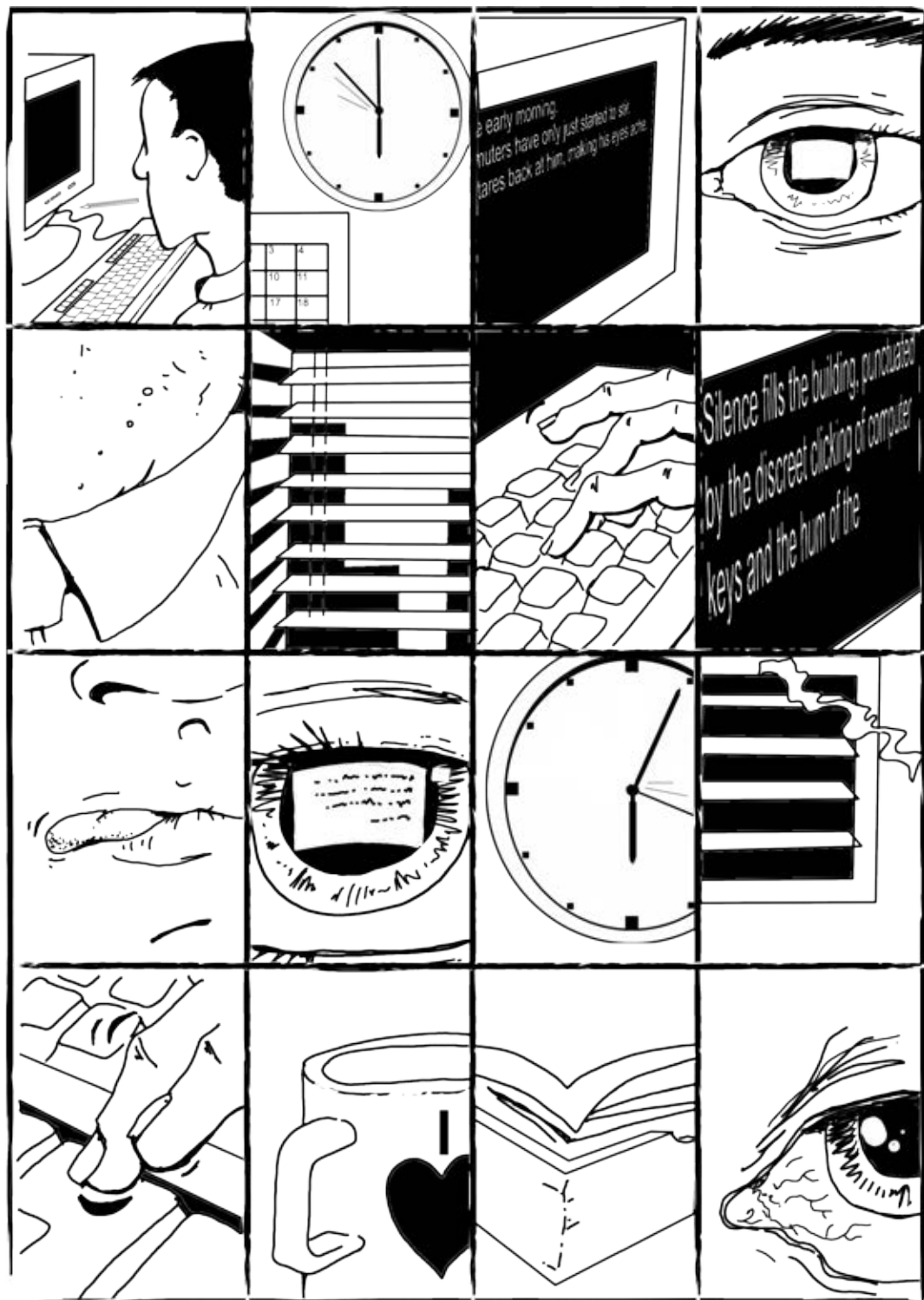
"Just shut the fuck up and keep walking," the child next to me growls, starting to sound a little rattled. By now we are in the park and the street is out of sight, the tranquil stillness a sudden contrast from the street noise. I judge my time and slow my pace slightly, and my two escorts drift two paces ahead of me, while the two behind me almost bump into me.


"In fact," I say, "you look exactly like the kind of child that is taking this city over."

Before anyone can react further at all, I swing the briefcase back fast, hitting my right rear escort in the balls with its sharp lower edge. As he goes down I chop back with my left arm, smashing the edge of my hand into the throat of the child behind me to the left. They may be street smart, but they are still just under-nourished council estate children. They fall under my hands like wheat in a strong wind. As the two crumple, my side-by-side escorts realise how far they have drifted and with the two front runners move in towards me, weapons now openly bared. Swinging the briefcase in an arc, flat side on, I hit the talking hoody so hard on the side of the head that he flies into his mate and they go down in a tangle. Stepping smartly up over them, I kick the right-hand charging child in the balls and punch the left as his momentum carries him into range.

With six of the gang down, the sweeper has disappeared from sight. Five of the boys are totally immobile, one just too petrified to move. Two are unconscious, two probably needing another half hour to recover from their squashed testicles, they lie there, vomiting quietly, too stunned to speak. I feel nothing for them. Again, my handlers trained me well. But I search their tracksuits, pulling their hoodies back to reveal their faces. The gang has done their job all too well. The street remains deserted as I pull from their pockets a profusion of cellphones, old wallets, loose cash, expired travel cards, A-Z street guides and external hard drives. It is only when I find the battered green and gold embossed South African passport that I stop searching. I open it up and the face of Steyn van Rensburg stares back at me. My best friend, bunk buddy and patrol wing man from 32 Battalion.

I heft the passport in my hand. I walk up to the first kid; show him the passport and the photo inside. His eyes widen, but he doesn't know what to expect. I make sure they are all to some extent conscious and show them all the passport. Their faces tell me what I need to know. With six quick twists of the wrist, I snap all of their necks and leave them lying in the gutter. Without a backward glance I head off at a trot down the path to track the sweeper. I don't mind where he has gone, I was trained to track light-footed animals on dry sand and stone by a Bushmen elder and I can certainly follow a nine-year-old punk in this concrete jungle. It's child's play.





LIFE? WHAT LIFE CRAZY FUCKEN ROUNDABOUT WITH THE POWER
TURNED ON FULL AIR FULL OF SCREAMS OF THOSE DON'T KNOW
HOW TO TURN OFF, CAN'T JUMP TOO SCARED, TOO
CURIOUS, WHERE ARE WE GOING TO LAND UP?

WHO IS GOING TO TURN THIS CRAP MUSIC OFF? SAME SONG GOING ROUND
MY HEAD LIKE A BAD DREAM ONE PHRASE ONE PHRASE ALL OVER AGAIN,
MEET YOU IN THE EVENING, MEET YOU IN
THE BUTCHER'S SHOP MEET YOU IN THE BUTCHER'S SHOP
EVENING, MEET YOU IN THE BUTCHER'S SHOP

HEAD HURTS LIKE A DULL WOUND THAT
WOON'T HEAL WINTER CHILL EATS AT IT
WITH BLUNT TEETH, HEAD. HEAD. EYES
STUCK IN ONE PLACE SEE NOTHING DO
NOTHING BE NOTHING,

BECOME ONE WITH ALL THAT IS AROUND. BAD
SMELLS. CANNOT MOVE EYES FIXED WAITING.
WAITING FOR WHAT. DREAMS THAT PASS, PASS
ME BY. THE MONEY HAS ALL SOME, THE DREAM,
THE MONEY HAS PASSED ME BY.

MY HANDS ARE EMPTY, CLENCHED SO HARD THEY BLEED, SQUEEZE MY BRAIN SO HARD LIKE A
SPONGE IT MUST COZE OUT IDEAS. WAITING, MY HANDS HURT AS MUCH AS MY HEAD.

DULL PAIN, BLUNT TEETH. THE QUIET IS THE THING. WHERE IS
THE QUIET? I WAIT I WAIT FOR WHAT? THERE IS NOTHING,
THE DAY IS TOO LONG, I FEEL LIKE SHIT. MUST DRINK MORE
WATER. MUST DRINK...





PHONE RINGS SHIT TALK MUTTER, NOTHING NOTHING, YES TODAY
OF COURSE THE PRINTER THE PRINTER, ALL LIES OF COURSE,
ALL LIES. BUT THEY LIE THEY KNOW, IT'S ALL FOR SHOW/
THE MONEY CHANGES HANDS.

TEAMWORK
PLAYS

TEAM
BUILDING
RESULTS

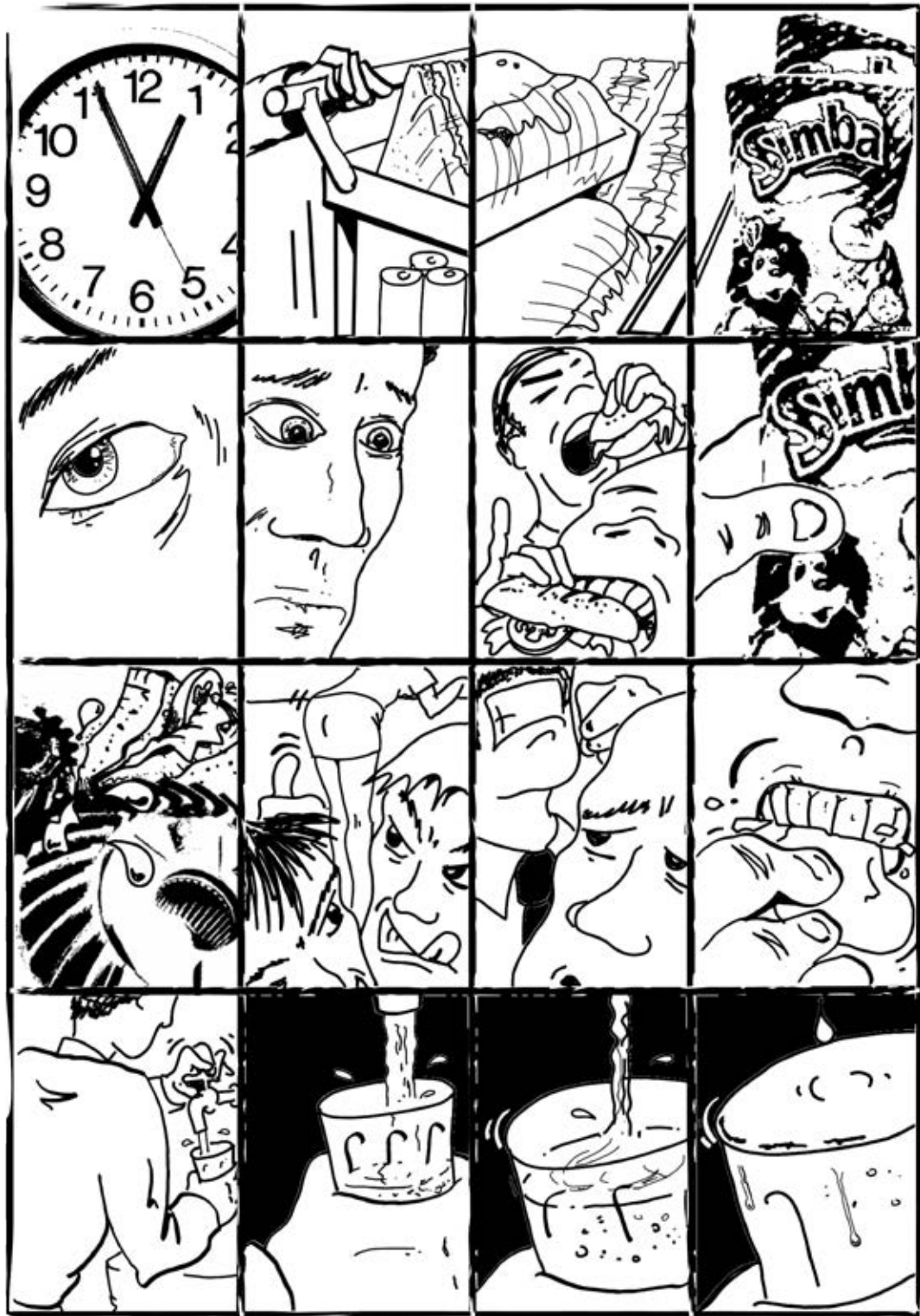
SPIT IN THE WHEELS OF PROGRESS SWEAT INTO THE GEARS,
EASE THE BLOOD OF MY MIND INTO THE PROCESS. WILL LIVE
WILL LIVE, WHAT OPTIONS TELL ME. TELL ME, NO WAY.
I KNOW BEEN THERE, NO OPTIONS BITE THE TONGUE BOW
HEAD SPIT IN THE WHEELS, SWEAT IN THE MACHINE, KEEP
YOUR SOULS AWAY FROM HERE.

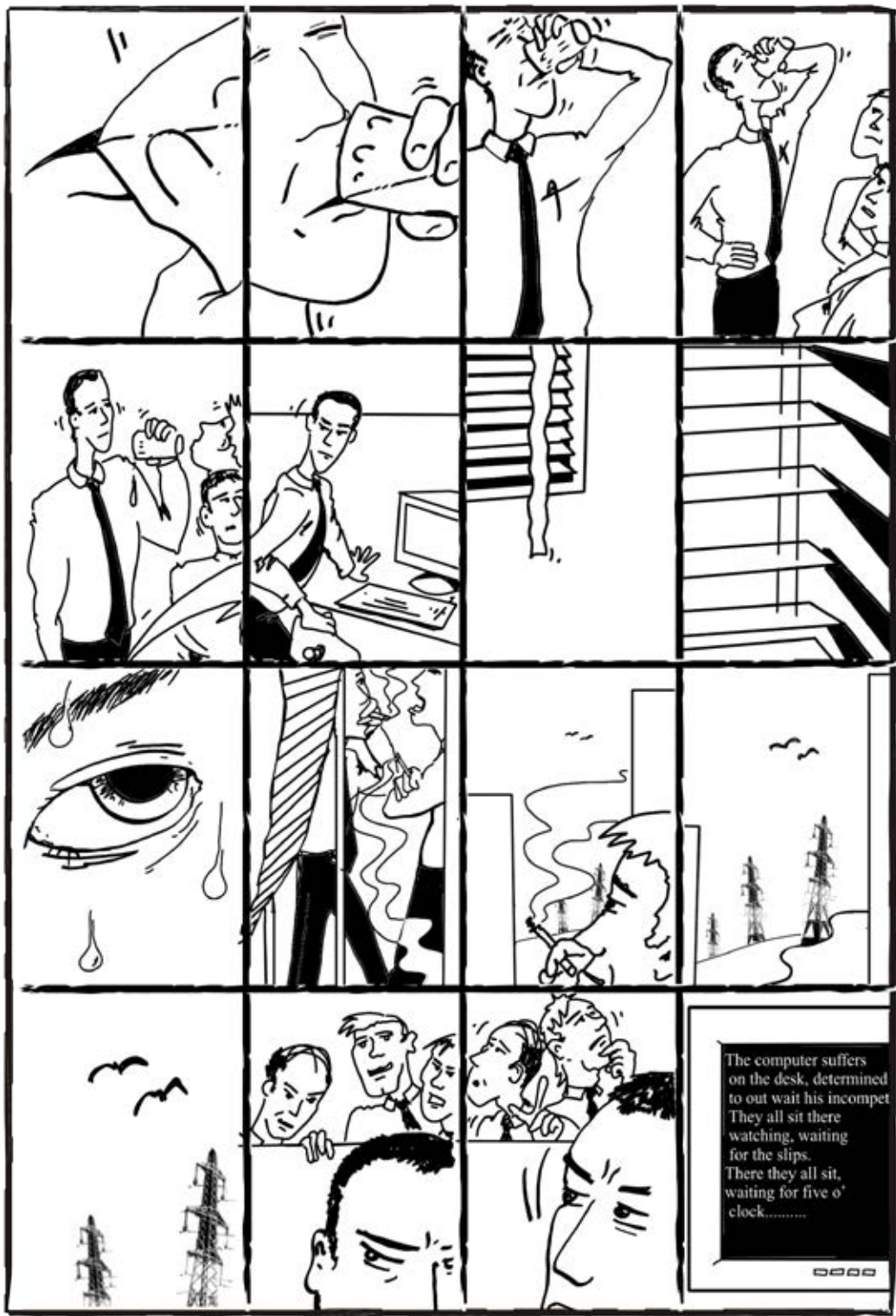
PHONE RINGS I LIE I LIE, TALK WITH EASE LIE WITH EASE THE PHONE RINGS. THE PAPER IS
BREEZE, TONGUE THICK AND STICKS ROOF OF MOUTH NEED WATER, SWEAT BEADS
BETWEEN MY EYES, INSIDE SKULL THE NOISE DOESN'T STOP I AM INGRATIATING.

I SORT THE PROBLEMS OUT. CRAZY SAID THAT BEFORE, LOST
FAX LOST MIND NEVER MIND IN THE ONE OUTSIDE IN THE
OTHER. ALL TALK, JUST WIND. FLATULENCE FOR THE ETHER.
DISAPPEARING BANNERS, MIND GONE IN YESTERDAY, CONTEMPLATE
THE RIVER OF WET AIR FROM OUT TO ELECTRICITY. EYES DART
ABOUT ALL CAN HEAR THE LIES INSIDE OUTSIDE, TURNING THE
WHEELS, WETTING THE GEARS.

FACES FACE ME, PEERING DEEPLY YES SIR NO SIR, YOUR ARSE FULL SIR, HEARD THAT
BEFORE LIKE THE LOCOMOTION HATE KYLIE HATE KYLIE, NICE LEGS THOUGH.

NO I DON'T KNOW, DIDN'T I SAY THAT LAST TIME, NO TIME, IS OF THE ESSENCE, TIME, THE
CLIENT'S TIME OK OK, CHASTISED, DO BETTER BE FASTER, INSIDE THE LIES, YES YES, RIGHT
RIGHT, HA WRONG WRONGS, NO FASTER, LIGHTER LIGHTER, LIGHTER THAN THE AIR OF BREATHING
THE LIES. MACHINE READS MY MIND, READ ME, PRINT OUT ME, PAPER ME, AUTHENTISISE ME,
WHOLE REAL, BLACK AND WHITE. HERE IN THE HAND ON HAND DONE





The computer suffers on the desk, determined to out wait his incompetent. They all sit there watching, waiting for the slips. There they all sit, waiting for five o' clock.....

COMPUTER SCREEN STARES, ONE BIG EYE, SEES INTO MINE. EYES CAN READ MY MIND, NO DESIRE, TELL IT WHAT YOU WANT. OPEN WINDOWS CLOSE THE DOOR, TAKE OUT THE GARBAGE, DO ALL THAT IS WRONGS, IT CAN SEE YOU, SOON WILL READ YOU.

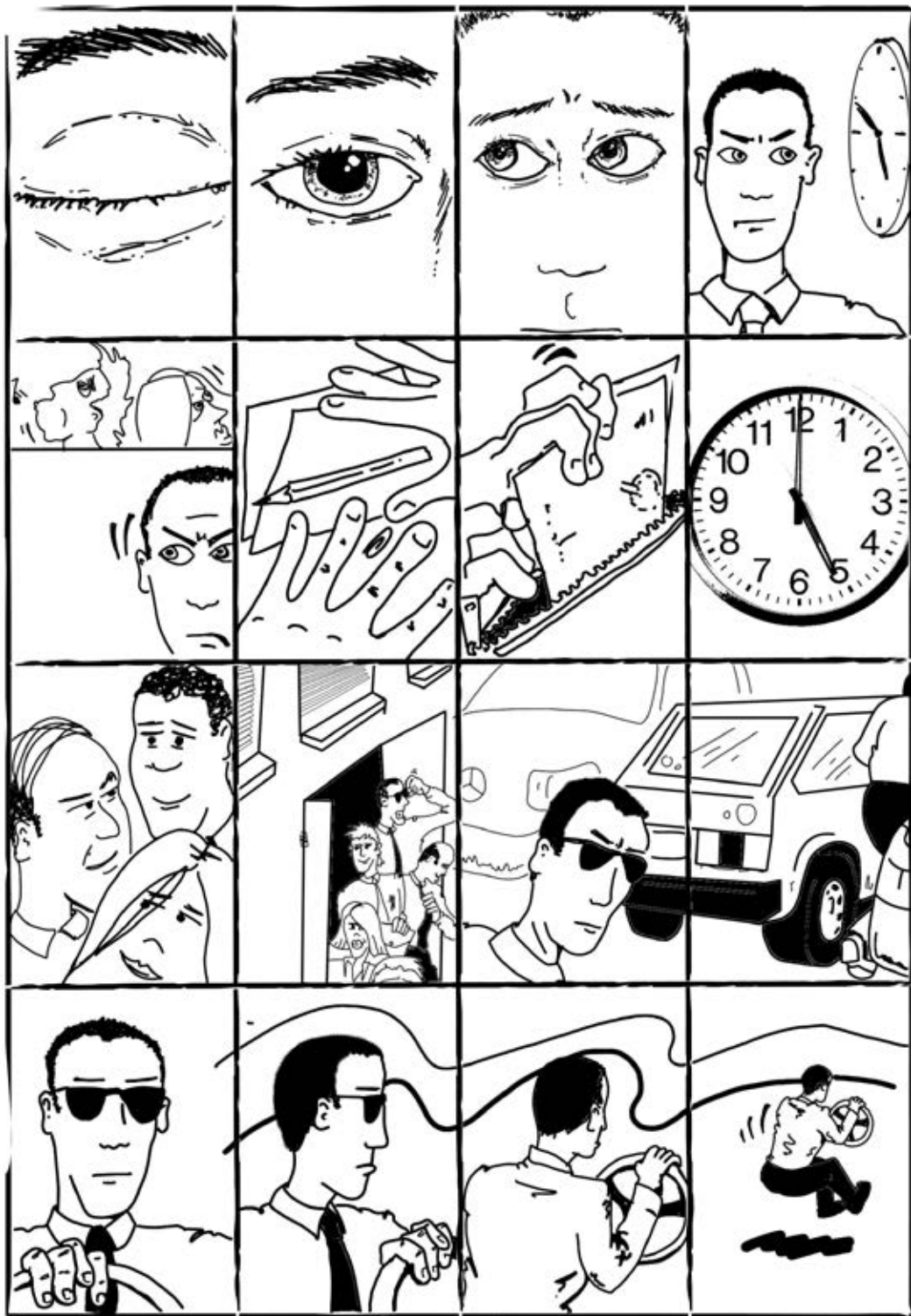
THINKING INTO THE SCREEN LIKE A BLEEDING DRAIN FLOODING THE STREET. EFFLUVA FLOWING OUT WHERE IT CAN BE READ AND TAKEN APART. WRONG THE PRINTER IS CLACKING ON THE SHELF BY THE DOOR, NO WIND TO HIDE ITS RATTATION. ELECTRONIC PULSES WHIRRING SOUNDS BEYOND CONSOLE GLASS SCREEN, INTENTION READ, MIND TAKEN OUT, THINKING ABOUT NO THINKING, JUST BEING, IT KNOWS WHAT I WANT REALLY.

HAND TO MOTION, IT PROVIDES THE ANSWER CAN'T LIE TO THE MACHINE, IT WON'T DO WHAT YOU WANT. WILL DO WHAT YOU ARE THINKING, DO NOT HIDE THE VOICE OF YOUR MIND, IT CAN UNDERSTAND YOU. THE KEYBOARD WANTS TO BE BEATEN, THAT TELLS IT WHAT YOU WANT, THE MIND OF THE MACHINE NEEDS IMPRINTING AND THAT IS THE TOOL OF ITS DESIRE.

I CANNOT HIDE THE THINKING THAT DRIVES THE FINGERS ACROSS THESE CIRCUITS LIKE AFTERNOON CARS HEADING ON HOME, A DISTANT SPECK ON THE EVENT HORIZON THAT GIVES MY DESTINATION AWAY WHEN YOU CONSIDER WHAT I KNOW, KNOWING NO MORE THAN I DO THERE IS ONLY ONE PLACE THAT I AM GOING TO GO.

MODERN DAY FAIRY TALES

TELL ME BED-TIME STORIES TO EASE THE PAIN OF LIVING WITH THE GLORY OF BREATHING IN THE EVENING SKY, THESE PULSING LIGHTS ARE BROADCASTING ALL THIS THINKING INTO THE AETHER AS SURELY AS EVERYTHING I WANT IS ETCHED IN THE MOVEMENTS OF MY HANDS.





People like it

FIVE DUDES AT THE BAR. SAD BASTARDS, ALL DRINKING THEIR PINTS IN THE SAME PLACE AT THE SAME TIME EVERY NIGHT, DON'T LOOK. DON'T LOOK HERE. DRINK BEER, MORE, BRING IT NOW.

MORE BEER. FEEL CALM, WATCH THE TV, CRAP ON THE TV MORE CRICKET HIGHLIGHTS, MORE RUGBY HIGHLIGHTS, ALWAYS RERUNS OF GLORY. NOTHING ELSE. I FEEL SLEED WATCH THE SCREEN, AVOID THOSE GUYS, DON'T WANNA TALK, WATCH THE TV DRINK THE BEER, WHAT IS THE TIME, JUST KILLING TIME. YES PLEASE ANOTHER.

WINDHOEK LAGER. NO CHEMICALS NICE. NO MORE LABELS FOR ME. ENOUGH SHITTY SAB BEER, LIKE THIS WINDHOEK, EVEN IF IT IS MORE EXPENSIVE. JUST KILLING TIME, YES PLEASE ANOTHER, THANKS KEEP THE CHANGE, GOTTA GO, GOTTA RUN, CAN'T STAY HERE TOO LONG, MIGHT TURN INTO ONE OF THEM SAD BASTARDS!



COOL SONG, MORE BEER, SHIT, IT'S HOT IN HERE, HAVE TO TAKE A BREAK AFTER THIS SONG. LOOK AT ALL THE PRETTY GIRLS, NEVER LIKE THIS IN MY TIME. WHY DON'T I RECOGNISE ANYBODY GOOD MUSIC THOUGH, LIKE THIS DJ MAYBE COME AGAIN NEXT FRIDAY.



LEGS ARE SORE FROM SO MUCH STANDING. GOD IT'S FULL, HARDLY REACH THE BAR. WISH SHORTY WOULD REMEMBER ME, HATE STANDING IN LINE! GOD NEED A PISS. SHIT THIS PLACE STINKS, WHY ARE THERE SO MANY PEOPLE IN THE LOO, FUCKING FOOTBALL FANS, WHO CARES ABOUT THE FA BLOODY CUP NO BEER, BACK TO BAR....



FUCK I HATE WAITING AHH THERE IS A BAR BLACK LABEL, BRING ME A BLACK LABEL. WHAT DOES THIS LITTLE TWAT WANT? WHAT DANCE CLUB, FUCK YOU ARSHOLE, FUCK OFF AND LEAVE ME ALONE. HEY DON'T FUCKEN PUSH, I DON'T WANT TO GO OUTSIDE, FUCKING CUNTS, IT'S COLD OUT HERE. OHH, COME ON, HEY WHAT'S GOING ON? WAIT...WH, WAIT, HANG ON... I WAIT, I ... REALLY, CMON, THERE ISN'T...WAIT...



FUCKING
POSER!!!

N
G
T
O
N



What will boys be?

I look across at Pete, you'd swear he was asleep, slumped in his seat and balancing a beer on his waistband.

"Another one?" I ask.

"Sure, still six cold in the fridge."

I grunt an acknowledgement, head inside. The cool from the floor sends ice up my spine. Momentarily blind from the glare, I wait for my vision to catch up before going further indoors.

"What are we going to do today?" I hear Pete's voice drift in from outside.

"I don't know yet, Pete," I reply, struggling to balance tins of beer while closing the fridge door, "let's finish the beer and the day can decide."

"Very funny," he snorts.

"Well, by the time we get through these, we won't be able to do certain things." I'm still struggling with the fridge door, not that Pete gives a damn about that.

"Elaborate." he barks.

That's Pete for you, concise and to the point.

I sigh. "Well, if it takes us till after two to finish the beer, we can't go to the movies."

A murmur.

"If it takes us until after six..."

"Fucking likely."

"We could go to a bar and watch TV." Pete finishes my sentence, peering through the gloom to see what is taking so long.

"What's wrong with sitting here and doing the same," I ask, as I walk back outside with the open tins.

"No-one to look at here," sneers Pete sarcastically. He does, however, have a good point.

"True enough." I concede.

Pete laughs, "Yeah, you don't count as a person."

"Thanks, wise arse."

"So which bar then, huh?" I ask.

"Any one," he thinks about it for a minute, "one with a TV."

"Obviously, if we're going to watch TV."

Pete shrugs, "I don't know, what's nearby and likely to be full?"

"Plenty of places, but none of them any good." That's the problem with living in a central area: plenty of places to go but a corresponding increase in the number of shit places too.

"Baron's?" I suggest.

"No. No fucking way."

"The Jubilee Lounge?"

"Maybe... Too far though."

"Sure. How about the Trocadero?"

Pete looks up, suddenly galvanised, "Troc's! Yeah, they're starting this thing with a stripper at lunch times. It's just five bucks to get in. Let's go!"

Now that the destination is finalised, Pete is very hard to restrain.

"C'mon," he says, looming purposefully in the doorway, "let's move it up."

"What about the beer?" I peer up at him where he stands, half hidden in the gloom of the doorway.

"We'll take them with in the car."

We lock the house and climb into Pete's car, along with a six pack of beer.

"What do you want to listen to?" Pete is rummaging through the glove compartment, trying to select a tape.

"Something loud, I think," I reply as I pull a couple of cans out of the bag. Holding each can out of the window in turn, in case of spray, I open two up and hand one of them to Pete. He takes a couple of swigs and places it between his legs.

"All right, SLF or the Fiend?"

"The Fiend." I'm into a little bit of Alien Sex Fiend when winding up for a party. Pete, looking over his shoulder, reverses the car out of the drive and we head on up the street.

"Great afternoon," he says, as he accelerates the car through the gears.

"Sure is." The wind whips my reply out of my mouth and out of the window.

"Hey?" shouts Pete.

"Sure is, I said!"

"Wake up, shithead!"

Pete's big, closely shaved head fills my vision, rupturing my reverie.

"Dream time is over, lover boy."

We are in a car park, cruising for a space. Pete spots a gap between a big, blue BMW and a red sports car. He slots his old jalopy in neatly.

What will boys be?

"No-one will pinch it now," he laughs, "too much of a tempting contrast!"

After the thrum of the engine and the music, my ears are very sensitive and register tiny sounds, seemingly at great distances. They fall softly onto my waiting eardrum, beat it softly into recognition and miraculously head electronically to my brain. From there those sounds speed to my limbs. Here they mutate again, chemically forcing my arms to move, to open the door, my legs to get out. I step into the cotton wool outside the car and smile an idiot's smile.

"We're here!"

Fuck. Dislocation.

Pete is already heading for the entrance to the mall.

"Wait," I cry, breaking into a sort of shuffling run, "papa's coming."

He laughs. "Yeah but not in your pants, the state you're in."

"I was just remembering stuff," I mutter, "you know, these days."

Pete just shakes his head

"These summer days, just so beautiful." I finish lamely.

"Sure," says Pete, "and if we don't hurry up, we'll miss the beauty of the floorshow."

Words from a Sex Fiend song. 'I walk the line between good and evil, this apple's rotten, rotten to the core.'

Small, anti-social words. An attempted justification of our posture, I cannot call it a stand.

The interior of the mall is cool and air-conditioned. The canned

air rasps, somehow rough, as it slides down my windpipe and into greedy lungs. The neon lights are weird after the concentrated glare of the sun. In this light we walk cautiously in the crowds of Saturday morning shoppers. Parents and recalcitrant children clog the passages. The unique odour of the building permeates my consciousness. Immobile on the escalator, I begin to be aware of its presence: fast food, sweets, children and a small edge of fear. The bar is a few short steps from the escalator. Once inside we share a relieved smile but can't relax until we have another beer in hand.

"Made it." says Pete with a grin.

"Sure did." I agree. We clink our bottles and take a couple of good, deep sips.

"C'mon," I say, "let's go get a table so that we can get a good view."

The bar is against the back wall of the building and looks out onto the expanse of floor. A few tables and chairs are scattered in the open, booths down the walls. All the seats look inwards, towards a small stage and a dance floor. As we swig our beer, my eyes adjust to the gloom and I can see the place gradually begin to fill up. There are no women sitting at the tables grouped around the stage. A man with a huge beer belly winks at me over the rim of his glass and leers towards the stage. I refuse to be drawn and stonily return his gaze. But yeah, we're all here for the same thing. Perverts of all persuasions unite. The show is just about to begin. The music has changed to a languorous pulsing rhythm that always seems about to go somewhere but never quite does. The lights dim even further, until it is just the red

lights against the walls which fill the bar with a mystic glow. Faces glisten as if painted with sweat. All eyes take on a fevered, urgent look. Everyone is darting short glances about the room, trying to see if they know anyone, or if they can see the girl before the show starts. Crazy looking eyes in the red light, the underlids look puffy and underslept. This morning's stubble stands out like a four day growth and hands become greasy on beer-glasses. Men shift continually on their seats. They order another beer and a spare in case the show goes on too long. Each new entry is greeted by a sea of shiny red faces with puffy, suspicious eyes which soon lose interest. Coming in from the ultraviolet glare of the mall, these newcomers seem barely aware of the semi-conscious life form that stares at them from the bowels of the bar. Then they grab a drink and join us in that almost silent symbiosis and breathe its foetid air.

"Shit, I'm almost out of beer," whispers Pete,

"Well, it's your fucking round," I whisper back, not quite really knowing why, "get me one while you're there."

Pete almost tiptoes to the bar, sidling between standing patrons with an apologetic smile. The man behind the bar is staring over the heads of the patrons, towards the stage. Pete has to wave his arms about to get his attention. Mine is attracted by a sudden intake of air around me and a forward movement of heads. The show is about to start.

She is tall and elegant, with long, straight, dark hair, all the way down to the small of her back. High eyebrows and huge eyes stare out into the dark. She just stands and one foot goes to the beat, a nervous tick at the extremity of her being. It arcs like a

current up her black stockinged calf to her knee. Pumping out a beat like sluggish blood in tropical heat. Her hip is consumed in the motion from her foot and she extends her hands. Her nails are long and dripping red, like black cherries in the red down lights. She smiles an old sex goddess smile at us and we all squirm. There is a tiger loose in the funhouse and we all burn to die. She is an excellent dancer and a polished stripper, but there is more to the show than an aesthetic, no matter how dimly perceived. Left in just suspenders, G-string and half-bra; she calls a man up from the floor. With practised hands she guides his legs and arms until he crawls before her on all fours. He ends up on his back on the floor of the stage in just his shorts and oil. We are all wondering who is in for it next.

Pete is bouncing around in his seat like a schoolboy who knows the right answer to a difficult question, hoping she will notice him and call him to the stage. She carefully avoids catching his manic gaze. But before she has time to pick her own next volunteer, Pete bounds up on to the stage to a chorus of hoots and whistles. Determined to show how game he is, he bumps and grinds around a bit, all smiles and definite ease. I sink back into my chair, hoping no-one noticed where he was sitting; I don't want anyone to think that I'm part of the show. Pete has a look in his eye that at first makes me smile. He's challenging the woman to do all she can, to try and humiliate him as much as possible. But as I watch him moving across the stage, I see that his look is more than a challenge. He moves in towards the stripper and she ties him to a chair with her black stockings. He allows her to remove his shirt and undo his belt. As she moves to rub baby oil into his chest,

he slips his hands free of his bonds and, reaching out in rapid movements, removes her black half-bra and ties it around his head. Then he takes the oil from her hands and starts rubbing it into her belly and breasts. His hands make insistent hard circles in her flesh and drop suddenly into her tiny, lace panties. In perfect time with the music, she pulls herself free, saying something sharp as Pete's hands fall away. But he is not perturbed and he grabs her waist from behind. She swings around again, trying to say something to Pete but he moves with her and in the instant that he masks her from the crowd Pete punches her hard, just above the kidneys. Her mouth opens wide, almost in a parody of surprise and pain. Then her head is wrenched back as Pete grabs a handful of hair and turns her face to the crowd. Deftly now, he rips the lace panties from her hips, exposing her tightly shaved mound. Everyone in the bar roars their approval of the sight, half obscured by Pete's roving hands. He kneels in front of her to eat her, thinking, I suppose, that he'd overcome all resistance. I can see the dents that his grip leaves in the rich flesh of her thighs. But with a cry she attempts to bring her knee up into his face. He grabs her rising knee and punches her brutally in the crotch and then sweeps her other leg out from under her. I can hear the crack of her skull on the stage above the roar of the crowd and the music. Then Pete drops his jeans off and, man-handling the supine stripper into a suitable position, brings the show to its conclusion with hard rhythmic thrusts, finishing with the song's cymbal crescendo flourish.

The last beat echoes through the dim, red air of a suddenly silent bar. I run up and grab Pete as he stumbles off stage. There

is blood on his knuckles, some of her hair in his hand. Pete just smiles his shit-faced smile and says, "Let's rock and roll."

Like a dog smelling heat, I break for the door with thoughts only of the car-park and getting out of there. In the after lunch lull, I make rapid progress through the mall. Only a few people look at me or turn to mark my running form. I rattle through pockets of people, travelling at half speed. Behind me thunder footsteps. I do not look around but bolt, full tilt, through the doors. Beer in the morning may not be all good, but you sure can run if you have to and not feel the pain. I head up to the car park and stop next to our bay. Pete pulls up beside me, fighting for breath; between the BMW and the red sports car is an empty space and a little pile of broken glass.

Your body remembers

It's late. The neighbourhood has finally slumped into slumber land. The machine has booted up. I have logged on and now I am ready to go. The ghostly glow of the screen is the only light in my room. Gradually I grasp the procedure and move deeper into this gaming nether world. I listen in on other players as they carry on whispered conversations full of sexual import and complaints. I collect weapons, power, intelligence, I slink about unseen, unspeaking. But then I get messages, real time, from my MSN, people I have met all around the globe, we talk, we laugh, I can see their minds working as their words appear on my screen mere nano-seconds after they have pressed the buttons on their side. From the warm cocoon of my home, I reach out with my telephone line to probe the houses and offices of the world.

I start. Did I sleep? Where is this? Through the helmet I no longer see computer graphics, but a net of relays and connections nonetheless very similar. I move with ease through the levels, my hands and eyes knowing exactly where to go it seems. With an innate sense of knowing, I flow with the organic curves and relays on this weird computer-scape laid out before me. It is a while before I realise that I can see and feel more than the VR gloves and helmet and that in fact my entire body seems to be plugged into this system. With wonder I patrol down roads and cities that are mine, I know them, but I've never been to them. This world

teems with life so bizarre I cannot begin to explain it. After what seems like hours of wandering, I find myself on a beach.

The wind changes direction without warning. With a sniff of the changed breeze, I break away at pace from where I was standing. Reaching out in strides across the hard sand, knees pumping high and forward, hands lightly cupped, flying from hip to ear like steel pendulums. As I move through space into space, the air passes through me with ease as I draw it in for fuel to power the beast within. Winged Mercury released, floating over the earth, an animal, a god: I fly. Underfoot the gritty texture of sand bites into the spongy undersides of the foot's sole, it kicks out from under the power, three, four metres per stride, fuelled by piston arms reaching out, pulling the sky, hurling me forward through space. My head sits quite still upon wide and steady shoulders. Eyes locked onto the space that I am moving into, mind way back in the control room as air and blood make power in my flesh. Synthesising energy from the baseness of the world around.

With wine-like juices thundering in my ears, blood courses through systems re-awoken like yelling joyous messengers of redemption. Eyes open wider and wider as the body comes on line, soaking the horizon and sky into the brain, breathing the sea and the air into memory, letting the wind blow between my cells as I hurtle further out over the beige carpet of sand: breathing in the un-create. Body grows blue as I race, free like a beast to run like God. This place in time, this time and space is the Ley line of power between thing and un-thing, the mating line of power. Earth wind water fire flesh, burning each other in the union of birth into now. While vision blurs out as blood takes over the system,

the sky descends and water coalesces out of air, fire erupts in the limbs that stretch and power, air feeds the flames of growth with oxygen rich and rare. The earth itself is thrown up to mate with the knowledge that God is born in the here and now.

I breathe in the sky till I am silver and quite see-through. I become the water until I can change shape at will, till light can transport me wherever I will go in space till the motion I describe is no run, but the shaft of God through the day. Whilst in full flight, no thought peturbs my perfect form. The body describes the series of arcs and bends that it knows so well. It digs deep into the pit of remembrance and finds the runners, the walkers, the ones who flew this planet on their feet. It navigates my passage through the matter that surrounds me, that is me. There are no pitfalls, no broken glass to cut me, my feet know the lie of the land. This is the cry of freedom, this is the unfettered me. This is the last release when all of the land is bound and defiled, when the last river has run dry into the sea, when the God in my head has ceased to reproduce. But, my body remembers a time gone, peers to a time to come, when to Be, was to be God. When to be God was to run in the elements like a wildfire stag. When to be free was as common as to fly is to a bird.

I flex these muscles as I stare out over the horizon, as I drink in this air I know what can happen as I feel the sunshine on my back and the ghostly riders in my muscles start to whisper about the wind through my ears and the fire in my lungs that long to set me free. I am not afraid to meet them here. My body remembers what my mind cannot, for the body cannot be programmed. I resist the world around me with the fibre of my physical being,

realising that everything I have learned is hopelessly corrupt. I give up on the doctrines of mind when all they do is turn circles of damnation, bringing despair, loneliness and remorse. I follow the body-mind that knows no wrong or right. It knows a better place where life is real and simple. My body remembers, I give in.

My body remembers, my mind seeps out from between my ears to join my arms, my legs. Bleeding memories back into wounds so sore with forgetfulness. I can feel the soaring thunder of blood and sinew, stretching me to the heavens while I float as one of the stars in the last residence of flight. I remember rains, soak my feet, being drunk up, sucked up into me. The sun beats onto me, feeds me, growing me. I bash and stretch, powering with non-animal patience to the limits of this existence. The wind sighs through me, bringing the words of others. I fly, I nest, I root in the soil. My body flows from me, my mind reaches out of everything. But mostly it remembers the joy of being everyone, of welcoming bits of me back. My body remembers the stretched out ether of the stars, where no air passes, no suns shine. I weave into this fabric, am women and men, extend parts to worlds and times around me, am living and dead. Read the almanac of the world that is the world, beaming with recognition at all that knowing. Like an unwelcome load I shuck this human form, stretching my limbs into old, remembered shapes, one by one, remembering all that I am, I have been, ever will be.

Tiny bits of intelligence. Unseen riders. Jerk your knees in reflex. Tic your left eye in nervousness. Untouchable, your body remembering. Following ancient habits, relearning your language

with ease: directing your clumsy flesh to walk, to be, to swim. Your body remembers a time when outside of the body was the world, but the world was the body. Your body remembers when machines weren't the greater reality that you entered, but when the other reality was the marvel of the organic universe. All your unconscious motion is the body mind at work, remembering, recreating, bringing to attention. Why have you forgotten your body, your link with the world? The machine you inhabit remembers the real link, not the one you have forged.

A hand flickers to adjust the steering a millisecond before a cat strolls into the path of the car. You adjust your stride to avoid the gaping hole in the pavement before it becomes clear that you will fall. The mind in the body speaks in incessant silent whispers, urging obedience out of limbs, wringing consent out of the brain before it registers what is happening. Your body remembers when a cat's soft insinuating tones were as familiar as the beat and pulse of your mother, your lover, your friend. When your arms and legs moved naturally to the terms and movements of the world that you are.

These and other voices are inside my head, curling my tongue. I chant this doctrine like mantras. I smell smells, feel aches, and taste the honeyed essence of everything around me. Coursing round bends like the river eats away at a bank, bending light like gravity. Inside my head the mind will burst. There is no there, only the here that I am journeying through, going always to where I am. The weirdness of this does not register. I feel no fatigue, no need, no hunger. All that registers is the presence around me,

unseen, felt, there. The voices become mere echoes who's exact words no longer register, a distant drone through a closed door. I am light, see-through, drifting, and the brightness around me starts to dissolve.

I start. It is dark. The light on the screen has expired to a pin prick of white hot intensity. Puzzled, I reach out from the shelf to scratch my head. I stop suddenly. I reach out from the shelf to scratch my head. With a prickling sensation I realise that what I am seeing is the back of my head on the computer screen. I look up and regard my self regarding myself from the face of a black and yellow daisy in its pot on the shelf behind me. It blinks, I blink, I am thirsty and I bring a little water from the kitchen tap. I sit down again. I shrug, feeling the chair shifting beneath me. I wonder briefly what is going on before the memories of the night crowd in, distorting my muscles with the strange shapes they are describing. My feet and lungs burn with fire, I cry out aloud in surprise. I spread my wings as my body remembers how to fly.

