

## **WORLD OF DUST**



# World of Dust

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THE CORONZON PRESS  
LONDON

Published by The Coronzon Press  
[www.coronzon.com](http://www.coronzon.com)

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Front cover photograph, back cover painting,  
and translation of Ryokan by the author

Printed and bound in Great Britain  
by Imprint Digital, Upton Pyne

Too lazy to be ambitious,  
I gradually left it all up to fate.  
In the sack, three handfuls of rice.  
By the stove, one bundle of firewood.  
Who cares about delusion and enlightenment?  
What use is fame and wealth in the world of dust?  
Inside my hut, the evening rain on the thatch,  
Both legs stretched out in idleness.

– Ryokan



WHEN I went to London to go to university I took myself away from my first eighteen years in Wolverhampton like a small mammal gnawing its leg off in a steel trap. I could not wait to leave, to get away from this town in which I'd walked the same streets for what was then my entire life, where nothing happened but a Pope in a Pope-mobile. I walked away from the largely bemused crowd yet another one of my childhood ambitions fulfilled. At last I had seen bullet-proof glass. Just looked like ordinary glass, yet it seemed worth the bus fare. By this time I had grown out of quarries and canal banks and mostly conformed to my parent's lack of adventure, save for the salvation that would come at the end of A-levels, when I would be away. Half-friends became quarter-friends and most days in the summer I rode my bike out to sit under a tree in what passed for countryside. The countryside

was an area of nature preserved against the encroach of houses by small farms selling sacks of King Edwards and horse manure by the side of the road, and old railway lines fallen into disuse, and abandoned quarries and mine workings, while people were thinking about what to do with this land it fell into ruin and nature took over, an industrial countryside where on roadside verges you would come across torn-up pornography and young boys would eagerly stuff cocks and cunts and tits into the pockets of their short trousers. And they'd dig out and reassemble the pieces in their bedrooms at night by torchlight, turning over an arse to find a great big slug sucking on pocket fluff and they'd go uuurh and they couldn't prise the slug off the arse it clung to with all their might levering with a biro and they'd chuck it out the window still sucking the cellulose of the paper and next morning they'd look out the window and there would be an arse on a piece of paper lying on top of the stormporch the slug long gone and the arse would get pasted down onto the roofing felt like a brown maple leaf that will not let go of the pavement stretches its arms out and says I'll sink into this pavement and it's still there when the hoarfrost comes it's like a trilobite become part of the granite and the arse clings to the top of the stormporch through rain and shower and you try to drop a piece of damp newspaper on it but



it just flops down at the side and another and before you know it the flopped-over bits of damp newspaper are drawing attention to the arse sticking up from the stormporch roof and you pray for an almighty wind to come and tear it away but out the window there's a tattered plastic bag that's been tugging and tugging to get away from the telegraph pole for months now and you think it's only a matter of time before the arse on the stormporch is noticed right under your window and will they think it just blew there from down the street.

There was a time when I sat on the edge of my bed and thought of the future, what it would bring, how my drive in the present would unfold into a fulfilment of desires. Now, grey-haired, I sit on the edge of my bed and cannot think of anything I desire, of a desire I can sustain. I am on the brink of departure, everything that was has to be left behind, everything that is, and the destination is uncertain, a void, a blank, but so too is everything that was and everything that is a blank, just a persistence of vision . . . a boy banging a metal plate sitting in the rubble of a demolished house, the banging of the metal plate calls to me from some lost ledge of memory. It was a house on the corner, it was a

small shop I bought sweets in where Mrs Smith smiled at me, it was her shop and her house, and I played in the rubble of it and found a large oval plate for putting a turkey on and it only had a little chip in it, I found it in the rubble and I dragged it out and took it back to mum look what I found mum is it any good to you and she was delighted I can put the turkey on that at Christmas. The infant school on the corner across the road was demolished too and I played in the rubble there as well. It was a childhood of sitting in demolished houses, thinking of what had been there and how it was now all pulled down and broken to bits and the dry dust rose in the long summer months as I shuffled my little feet about on cracked concrete foundations and peered down into holes in the ground and I sat in the ruins all afternoon day after day this was where I went to school this was where I bought liquorice sherbet fountains and jubbies this was where I won a glider for having the cleanest fingernails in school and I was embarrassed in assembly when mum told the school I had thrown a fork at nan and I sat there listening to the headmistress talk about one little boy sitting here today, who she did not mention by name but I knew and she knew it was me, who threw a fork at his grandma and no-one ever said anything to me directly and it was on this shiny wooden floor sitting cross-legged with all the other little boys

and girls that I heard myself singled out and shamed this shiny wooden floor where I now sit on collapsed walls in the dust and stray mongrel dogs trot in and out all day long sniffing around and dashing off as if they had other business to attend to but in and out all day they would come but they would never come near me they would look at me in a mixture of a suppressed snarl and a look of meekness as if kicked and told to go and lie in their own piss as if they remembered days when they were not as free to come and go as they were now these mangy mongrels trotting fast everywhere they went as if they needed to avoid dogcatchers or expected a brick to be thrown at them at any moment and everywhere I liked to go these stray dogs would be trotting in and out of all day keeping their distance, across what used to be the playground and for me still was and all the better for there being no other boys and girls around I had it all to myself and I would sit there in the dust on sunny afternoons in the holidays watching big black beetles and staring up at the sun shielding my eyes I was a survivor in the desert the sun beating down. Though I could see the infant school from my bedroom window I have no recollection of seeing them tear it down, I don't remember the bulldozers going in, just one day the school was pulled down it probably happened while I was at the junior school they did most of it in a single day

just smashed it all down and I ventured into the rubble through a hole in the wall and smelt the brick dust thick in the air still it was the height of summer there had been no rain to wash it into the earth and already the stray dogs were in and out but I think I was the first boy to explore the ruins I was surprised there were no things just bricks and dust there were no schoolbooks or toys no paperclips no spinning tops just rubble rubble was good enough rubble and damp dog-piss patches and sprayed-on remnants of walls. I thought only of finding places to sit and be alone and not be observed by my house. All around the edges of the demolition not on the corner to the street nettles grew and you could with luck find thin careful paths through them pulling up your long socks until they almost reached the bottoms of your short trousers and with your arms raised high in the air you could make it through with only risk to your knees and the backs of your knees, which you could tie your handkerchiefs round if you had two handkerchiefs, and the nettles smelt nettly that old not-nettled-someone-for-ages smell that nettles get when they grow gnarly and vicious and their leaves are coated with dust and dirt in the high sun and their tongues are hanging out for water their tips curling over like catkins but their stingers like steel bastards and convolvulus vines hard and brittle and forgotten

tripwire across the path and want to make you fall and rub your face into a good palmful of stings like a flannel and you can hear pigeons cooing in an old broken-down coop at the bottom of a garden where the dock leaves grow if you need them to rub on a sting and there's the garden where the old man dumps his Corona pop bottles not taking them back to the shop to get the money back on the empties and you can sneak down and drag them under the wire-net fencing and take them to the shop and get the pennies back on them. It was a childhood agenda for the day, wander in the demolished school brave the sea of nettles and go and get the Corona bottles. How full it was, a day created from scratch from what was there. Now these places are crammed with new houses every scrap of land that had something abandoned or forgotten or grown over or pulled down has been built up with brand new houses that always have flashing lights draped over them at Christmas that always have two or three cars parked in the drive. I hardly ever went in a car as a child, my experience of cars was lying in the dark watching their headlights at night following the same route up my bedroom wall and sweeping the ceiling up the wall and sweeping the ceiling up the wall and sweeping the ceiling and when it was raining you could hear the splashing of puddles in the gutter in time with the sweeping of the headlamps

up the wall and across the ceiling a rhythmic lullaby of an entire childhood they're coming round the bend by the demolished school they're passing the telegraph pole they're going past the house now you could tell where they were by the lights going up the wall and across the ceiling.

I spent a lot of time as a boy standing at the top of the stairs listening to dad slagging me off to mum in the living room. Sometimes I would creep down trying not to tread on the creaky step and listen outside the door. When I listened at the top of the stairs I knew what he was saying even though I couldn't hear all the words, although perhaps he wasn't always talking about me when I thought he was. There was a noise to it I hated, a rhythm in the words, a violence held back, an elastic band that snaps and whips cracks your hand, a grumbling tone like a swarm of angry wasps trapped under a bucket, resonating. I'd listen to it from the top step and fill in the words, sounds ingrained in me . . .

'I'll swing for him yow see if I doe, he'd try the patience of a saint he would. He'll get the back of my hand before the day's out. Screamin the house down, chargin up an down the stairs, he knows I'm on nights. He knows I

cor get back to slape if he weks me up. Bouncin his ball against the wall. Day yow tell him I was aslape Marge? Course yow did, yow'm always tellin him, he doe listen that's his trouble, he wants it all his own way, he ay appy if he ay meckin someone's life a misery, raisin merry hell all over the shop. Cor tek him anywhere, he's a liability. One of these days I'll knock him into the middle of next week and they'll come for me and cart me off. If I've said it once I've said it hundred times. I'll swing for him yow see if I doe.'

If a ball came over the fence from next door and broke one of dad's chrysanths he'd come into the house fuming and say, 'They ay gettin that ball back, they can fuckin wait till hell freezes over before they get that ball back. Bost my best blummin chrysanth! They can kiss that ball goodbye.' Then next day he'd be out in the garden and Mrs Singh would come out with little Sanjay and ask everso nicely if she could have the ball back and sorry about the plant and dad'd smile the sweetest smile and hand them the ball back over the fence and then later on he'd cut them a big bunch of sweet peas for their front window and take it round and Mrs Singh would be overjoyed and next day she'd bring some fresh curry and rice round in Tupperware and mum would take it at the front door all smiles and then the curry would sit on the table till dad got

back from work and saw it and mum'd say, 'I ay eatin that muck, it can go in the bin, yow doe want any of it do ya?' and dad'd say 'Yow berra put it in two plastic bags Marge else it'll stink the bin out.' And the next day mum would collect two pounds of blackcurrants from the garden and take them round to Mrs Singh and Mrs Singh would be overjoyed and say, 'I'll make some jam, I'll bring a jar round for you' and mum'd say 'That's very kind of you but don't go to any bother on our account, you have it yourself we ay struck on jam, Ken comes out in blotches.'

Whenever them next door cooked spicy food and the cooking smells wafted into the house, mum'd say, 'Ay fishunchips good enough for em?'

Dad didn't mind anyone borrowing his ladder but afterwards he'd say, 'Why cor he buy his own bloody ladder?' and he'd count the days before it was back in place behind the house. It took me years before I realised my parents were robots using stock phrases and reacting to every event in predictable and programmed ways. There was an odd man who lived a few houses down the road named Mr Witherington who let his grass grow long in the front garden and dad'd say every summer, 'Ay he gunna cut that grass?' and he'd stew about it like it was something that mattered, and mum'd chip in, 'He always speaks to you, never speaks to me' and dad'd



say ‘Doe worry about it Marge, he doe have anything to say’ and mum’d add, ‘Well yow spend long enough talkin to him, this feller who doe have nuthin to say.’

‘Oh it’s only football.’

Then there would be a passage of time in which all you could hear was the many clocks all telling different times on the mantelpiece tick-tock tock-tick then dad’d look out the window and say, ‘Ay he gunna cut that grass?’

There was a man with slicked-back brilliantined hair who wore a drapecoat with drainpipe trousers and green fluorescent socks who could always be seen walking his clodhopper walk in black-and-white brothel creepers up to the betting shop just before the first race of the afternoon all the kids from the infant school out throwing stones at him and calling him names and dad’d call mum over to the window and say, ‘There he goes Marge, that ruddy nutcase, yow can set your watch by him. Day he ever learn how to walk? I’ve sid him in town, like a little kid on the escalators cor get his first step on and jumps up and down in a tizzy. He must think he’s a Teddy Boy dressed like that but Teddy Boys day wear stripy jumpers in my day. Day he have a fit in Woolies?’

And then there would be a long time in which nothing happened but a dog yapped in the street and wouldn’t

shut up and the sun would quickly decide it was time to quit on this day that had been so long and sunny and I'd be up in my bedroom looking out the window and see the man with the green fluorescent socks walking back down the road from the betting shop lifting his knees up to his belly walking down the road with his wonky walk and I'd feel a little guilty suppressing a laugh and then I'd hear downstairs mum calling dad, 'Ken, clodhopper's back' and dad'd roar with laughter and say, 'Doe yer just pity the afflicted?'

Childhood is one long hallucination. People are known to each other by bloodline, but apart from that there appears to be little discernible reason they are together. The beauty is that one does not question it, at the time. Thoughts return to me of childhood, as if I am far enough away now to appreciate it. It was then I forged a sense of purpose, but even that seems something from the womb and before in one long unbroken line extending back into some mist that repels all investigation like oil water. There is a luminous clarity *somewhere*, like eating something for the first time, or disturbing a pile of old clothes and a moth flutters out of them. The fading light of the first day . . . will I ever remember that? The

stretched-out eternity of that first day, tucked up in blankets and woollens, buzzed by a bluebottle for half an hour.

That first sky pretending to die.

Tense, the long haul suddenly over, what had I been dreaming about? For the first five years or more I would return to the womb in the cot at night, pulling the covers over me. When I had a torch I would take it under the bedclothes and turn it on and move it until the light was dulled and indirect and reminded me of a familiar comfort. Looking back, it seems I wanted to preserve some memory of the womb for as long as possible, only too aware it was slipping away and I would have to find a home in this new world that required things of me. But I don't know whether I have ever truly felt *here*. Perhaps with girlfriends entwined in their arms in bodily embrace, perhaps then I have been fully here, yet often it is just for moments, not long before I am thinking is this one *the* one, or is *the one* all women in a moment I sink into the warmth of and forget comparison.

The past can hit you sometimes like the sun glinting on a suddenly opened window and you fall down into shapes of pleasures rediscovered, thought lost for ever, found again, forced upon you like a familiar face passing in a crowded street. All we have ever accomplished,

looked at and thought about, come back to us dead slow but poised to speed off and separate from its shadow, leaving us with a few seconds of understanding clotted and coagulated out of the meaninglessness, something rubbed off like moth dust. Some bloom come off to the touch. The damp grass tramped down. A family photograph album, no-one left to identify the people in faded scenes. I was forty-six before I thought to ask my mother, 'Who is this man?'

'My father's father,' she said.

My great-grandfather. He looked a dignified man. High collar, waistcoat, watch fob and chain. A signals inspector on the railway. There is a mystery in the past that the present doesn't know, its shadow races away from us like the path of totality of a solar eclipse, you could not catch it even in a train thundering along with a full head of steam. Yet other times it's as simple as something buried in a back garden, undisturbed for decades, dug up by chance one day. A dropped locket. Smudge away the dirt with a thumb to reveal a photograph of a lady in Victorian lace hair in a bun. The past calls out to us like a muted echo. It begins to recede as soon as noticed, the noises of people in a bygone street fade to a present bewilderment, a hospital ward in every story, flying soaring floating, neat little breasts covered by her elbows, drifting in and out of memories on the

top deck of a bus or marooned in a dream, a stranger on the other side of these doors, unseen creator of sleep. Braced against waking, there is a glow on the horizon, but he wants to remain under closed eyelids, a place to think. There is something draped over the evening, the shops are shutting, the street lights are flickering on. A night-light lit to provide comfort in the dark casts looming ominous shadows on the walls. Waking up thinking you are somewhere else and the accustomed wall is not there, as long as it takes to open a purse and take out a couple of coins the familiar as-it-is settles fast and people that were moments ago alive are now dead but it's okay they've been dead for years.

Slow and then fast memories reappear not so much of things and people and places but of one leg after the other out of bed into slippers. Net curtains hung from nails a crucified ghost.

Some days I hardly trouble to remember my name or language, as if they were a card with an address and telephone number pinned to a child's lapel by a mother anxious in case her boy wanders off down an alleyway in the far-flung port. And my dreams are the dreams of anyone. I dreamt I was pursued by a komodo dragon in a lecture hall. Its eyes were fixed upon me, it had singled me out, and I knew this, and the calls of its keeper that it had already been fed today and presented

no danger were the words of a fool who knew nothing of the unbreakable bond formed between the eyes of the attacker and the attacked.

So I wake up and the komodo dragon is gone, as I was gone in sleep. How can I mourn my loss when I am just a construction of thoughts reassembled each day on waking from a wardrobe store of familiars? Take away these few rooms in a blast of cobalt blue and leave me standing in the bare landscape, the houses whisked away like a magician's tablecloth from under wineglasses, and then what will I construct my identity from?

As it becomes less important to me to identify my time, my place, my name from a bundle handed to me anonymously the moment I awake, I drift for longer and longer periods just eyes open on the world standing behind my presence in it.

Faraway days lost in the blueness of the sky, a buzz saw from the gardens. And then, on top of everything, another day cast adrift in this life that is similar every day and every night, and you take hold of the reins while people in the street are stepping out of white vans and trimming hedges and geese fly over, their world even more the same every day and so this is the yardstick by which to judge it as okay, as natural, multitudinous dimensional travel a thing of dreams and daydreams. And in this day, alone, and staring into space without

looking at anything in particular, come feelings of being excluded exchanged for mad wanderings in the imagination, suppressed only to attend to a knock at the door or a pang of hunger or to pick up and bin the dead leaves on noticing the first crocuses peeking through. This is how it had to be, and before long the people walking up the road in the morning are walking down the road in the late afternoon and the sun is setting on another wild day tapering to a close.

Behind him, a growing unease, he began to alight upon exact sounds, an old nursery rhyme, splashing about in water, the sound of feet on gravel became faster, a piece of grit gets in his shoe he has to take it off and empty it out. Sitting now under the spreading arms of a big tree. Then walking, noticing his shadow and trying to walk away from it – fleeting impressions of a wall, a high barricade, can see the upper windows of a forgotten old house, such a contrast to the modern prefabs and uniform red brick semi-detached houses. A house that was here before, so few of them around here, a house that has watched horse-drawn carriages from its high windows and blinkered Dobbin milk floats dairy fresh, family huddled around a radio still

marvelling at the wonder of it. A tragedy clings to the house, a young girl hanged herself from the crab-apple tree, and though no-one round here knows of it any more still the children peer in through the big iron gates with foreboding, not knowing why, some fragment of folklore blown from generation to generation like an autumn leaf. The tree is evil, there is a ghost that dances around it in the night picking up the fallen crab apples. And still the children peer in through the gates, three or four at a time, drawn there as surely as the old lamplight by the gravel path attracts the moths. Broken glass has been set jagged-edged in concrete on top of the tall wall, there are spikes on the top of the gate. Does every childhood have such a house? Events cling to places but are forgotten, only sinister nursery rhymes remain . . .

Tread on a crack  
Break your back  
Tread on a line  
Break your spine

. . . and gingerly the children tiptoe in the playground, trying to avoid becoming paralysed cripples by putting a foot wrong. Childhood is so wonderful. I carved my name on a tree and it was still there thirty years later. A



walk in the countryside, everyone dead now. I probably won't walk here again. Down by the brook boys are catching tadpoles. The wood is full of bluebell light in the musty gloom, rotten wood crumbles softly.

Distant lighted rooms across a field of thistles. Big-head, the big cat in a cardboard box on the doorstep, hisses at the postman who says to mum: 'I thought you had a goose in there.'

I don't know whether I remember it from the pram I lay in out there with the cat or because I was told and asked, 'Do you remember that?' No-one mentioned the field of thistles. No-one mentioned the sound of rice hitting the windows. Hailstones in my swaddling clothes. One must be careful with memories, so easy to remember things vividly – that never happened.

There is a plain-coloured madness that gnaws away at the edge, that I want to know. Like a young fish in a tank some days it seems I have explored *everywhere*, but how soon our lives can change, it is well to watch the birds when they behave strangely, to ask yourself what is this odd feeling I have? Obligation to something forgotten. A pressure to remember perhaps only a single event on a single day in the past, when something was

set irrevocably in motion. Was it when I said I would pay my parents back for what they have done to me? That I shall withdraw my love from my father? That I shall leave and never come back? That that thrashing will not be without consequence in my relationship with my father, and my mother who must suffer too, because this withdrawal will become so ingrained in me it will touch everything. How much I have forgotten of my plotting to go away and never return. It never happened completely, save perhaps in my heart. But when he died it brought me to my senses and how I mourned the loss of what might have been, that could never be, because of that thrashing, that day alone, when he held me up and ground his stubbly unshaven chin into my soft fleshy face and shook me and I thumped him hard and he reeled from that punch, those punches, he knew and I knew everything had changed. I steamed and simmered in my bedroom not for the first time and held my hatred as an unstoppable force, found my power in it. In a pang of remorse right now I held my head in my hands and felt my stubbly unshaven cheeks two days old and abrasive and thought how much sorrow is bound up in a forgotten past, sadness about which we can do nothing, yet sadness that must define us in good ways too. How can we say we have lived if we have no regrets and have never been ill-treated? Just a

pity that the ill-treatment blots out so many happy times. Unwrapping presents on Christmas day, now a strange put-off ritual when I see my mother when I visit her for the only time in the year. I live in dread of a phonecall telling me she is dead, absolute dread, as if it will be the final moment of my long-drawn-out failure to be a son. Nothing can overcome a moment of pure will that has protected itself by being forgotten. The die is cast, the memory thrown away. It must play itself out, though it take years. It doesn't matter it is only a child who decided. The Devil is not fussy.

The answers will come, the pages of a life will flick together into a whole providing an illusion of movement. But it is good to feel, feel deeply, even if it is sadness that opens the door. It casts many things away, freeing you, as if the womb is the end of life not the beginning.

I'm wandering, digressing, maybe I've stopped making sense.

Cook, eat, shave.

Crawling up and down flies hidden inside the lampshade.

Outside on the pavement is where real life goes on, still so much to be learnt on those flagstones stretching away into the distance. You can start with a clean slate,

put it all behind you every step of the way, even the impressions left by memory, just walk away from it all, no-one can stop you, that pouting girl least of all. The bobbing heads and shoulders, the street lights pulling you on.

But who is calling you back? Skim the surface froth and find no-one calls you back, no-one at all. They've turned their heads away, they're lost in their distractions. Last night, I sat opposite an attractive girl on the Tube, then I noticed she had dirt under her fingernails. Even I dig out the dirt from under my fingernails.

The newspaper stand has dead mice to choose from and broken heels found on the pavement, no more newspapers for today. And away beyond the little line of shops are impediments we cannot even think of, and there, the frosted-glass public house reminiscent of dour beery-smelling stale places of childhood. Things to discover, one by one, often prove disappointing and not worth standing on tippy-toe for, years on. Beanpoles... always wanted a row of beanpoles in the garden like dad... took till I was forty-two.

A soaring betrayal must also mark an adolescence and an adulthood. Best to get it out your hair, have it as something in the past, because later you'll either trust less or care less so it won't seem like a betrayal any longer, you'll be more bothered about five-year-olds

reaching over your garden wall to pick your first and proudest daffodil. 'Little bastard!' you shout out of the hastily opened window still in your dressing gown, a fright quite out of proportion to the crime. Soon you only garden out the back and let the front go to seed.

Things happen by chance. Hasn't practically everything happened by chance? Someone else wired these things together, they only looked like they lay as separate objects, pick up one and the rest come trailing after.

Catch our needs while they are napping, take a swallow of fresh air and dive, catch an expression on our face that isn't simply the old familiar mask . . . the first of no other pages speaking straight away, urgently, because nothing follows nothing develops out of this this is it.

Civilisation petered out in our schooldays, what we're left with now is an amorphous mass, we don't know where to place the emphasis. It has most of us as its slaves, carrying out meaningless activities every day.

It's all a language. Our skin is a language. That whisky bottle. All a language. Too many of everything. One gets bored of being astounded. I had more questions in school, before I'd yet parted a pair of thighs. Long rambles in the country telling shaggy-dog stories about sex I'd never had to my fellow virgins, memories of not being able to reach right over to the back of the sweet

counter still fresh in my mind. What are you supposed to do when someone knows what the word *cunt* means and you don't? You don't want to come across like you've been concentrating on the wrong things getting As in history and geography, you have to have a rounded personality and not only know the capital of Ecuador but also the basic rudiments of copping a feel. Even the smallest dim-witted slowcoaches felt this need yet never suspected they were actually getting an education in inhibition that would see them through much of their adult life. So sex naturally became something to laugh about, and even the most shy expected to have got somewhere in the field by the time they were, say, twenty, though there was one guy with buck teeth greasy hair and scurf on his shoulders who always wore half-mast trousers who couldn't ever get a girlfriend and this guy was nearly thirty and still lived with his parents. He became an object of revulsion to me and I resolved that I would have to leave Wolverhampton by the age of eighteen or I might get stuck in my bedroom staring at the same wallpaper for years and years and years.

Spitting with snow. Cold and windy. Sunday afternoon, feeling in nowhere land, looking out the window with

longing for nothing. Taking time out of my day to sit and think hard about nothing. What might I do otherwise? Perhaps sit on a cushion and let my eyes close and drift off into still more sleep. My mind is a porous lump, it has all drained away and what remains is just soak. You can sit here so long waiting, waiting for some sign of recognisable motion.

Other people's lives . . . washing cars, fetching newspapers, visiting relatives. My life . . . sitting here trying hard to wonder something, staving off as best I can the desire to abandon what I have hardly yet begun. Drifted off to an in-between, stepping out very cautiously a little boy who was once himself in shoes that hurt and he doesn't like, which of the many recollections will take him by the hand today?

Plants that have tendrils, I remember that fascination. The despairing afternoons – does a child know despair, *can* a child know despair, know it for what it is? I don't remember whether my despair as a child was different from my despair as an adult. The ordinary despair of 'What am I supposed to do?' How did I ever have the strength to sit there enduring it? I spent a long time just staring at the wallpaper in the electric light sitting on top of my bed. As an adult I have more rooms. A patch of mauve coming up under the shelter of large leaves attracts my attention, gives me something of interest.

So much time spent staring out the window, not feeling like doing much else. Something has changed . . . I care a lot less now. In childhood I looked to adulthood to provide the answer, in adulthood I look to a simple end, failing that a simple change, such as getting up to eat, wash up, a walk in the garden, making a pot of tea. Drift on old fellow. Yet still, a small sense something will change, could change quite easily. Meet someone new, see a new angle, for the umpteenth time see through it all again and know it is not what it appears this life. The hands of a clock move so slowly, yet they rush us.

Probably we never love as deeply as when we know or sense it is all over. If only we could persuade ourselves to take a chance. You were everything. And then you were gone. How short-lived is the feeling of a dream come true, but the feeling lives on nonetheless as tender memory, before what might have been got twisted out of shape and became what was never going to be. Still I ask myself, was I the one who did that? Was that my doing? Because if I can answer that then haven't I answered everything?

What is it I want to know, what fairy do I want to capture in my jar?



All of it a tenderness bruised, never healed, come back for more prodding.

And now look. The sun is shining on the houses, already near to setting. But words, they should come without thinking about them, and all urgency simply there, a thing of the moment. Not knowing what I am looking for, I persist in looking. I want to know something and this seems to be a way to find out, so I look, hoping to see, to turn a corner and happen upon a scene.

Finish your current life, the one that ends in the garden.

Just an ordinary life. My father was a postman, at the sorting office, my mother a housewife, though she had earlier worked as a secretary in a company that made lion traps. My father as a young man before the war was training to be a tailor. The war changed all that. He volunteered and joined the navy and saw many horrifying things.

That was his story, but this is my story.

Fleeting world you last too long. Now just a puzzled shabby man wandering down the road nowhere to go, his life like a small coin stubby fingers cannot pick up.

A snake in a sack. A pile of soot. Disorientated by laughing behind his back not knowing whether it is aimed at him. Eating cheaply. Economising. Breaking loose of all constraints but poverty. Reducing all desires to what his life now consists of, as if it was something he wanted all along. Another way of living cheaply. 'Nothing matters' he would say to himself, only to find himself standing on tiptoe to watch a beautiful woman walk up the road, peeking over the net curtain. He was aware he was slowly losing his memory, but it did not concern him, so long as he remembered in time why he was walking up the High Street it would not be a fruitless journey.

Slowly and meticulously a deep green vine climbs up and covers over the walls of his house, digging into the dust-like old cement like the fork hanging from his grandmother's forehead. One of just a few remaining pictures of his nan in a mind so blotted out of everything it is not worth wondering why anything remains at all. What else is there of her? In a trench of time she is buried, a picture of her standing outside the gates of the infant school asking little children to go and fetch me and then they shall all have humbugs with brown

stripes and Turkish delight, thrusting sixpence into my tiny hand and closing tight my fingers around it so no-one else shall see. Bath towels pegged around the fringe of the tablecloth I shall not come out from under the table it is my private hut. Now I too am losing my mind and am running out of time. A thrupny bit, it was the colour of an entire childhood. And I find my teenage handprint made when I was interested in palmistry at the bottom of an old cardboard box full of Dinky cars wheels worn on hard slabs where slugs were sizzled with a magnifying glass focusing the sun's rays to a tiny point.

The smell of seaweed, black and brittle, popping the bladderwracks, walking to meet the sea a long way out with my father, him telling me how his body was once covered with leeches after wading up to his shoulders through a swamp and how you have to dab them with a lit cigarette to make them let go. What is the meaning of all this flotsam and jetsam washed up on memory's shore?

Am I proving to myself I can remember things?

When she greeted him in his thoughts she usually managed to penetrate his gloom and slowly opened him

like a tiny bud warmed by the sun, as if he was meant to be opened that way. Once he prised open a rose from its flower bud, the crinkled pink satin screamed, 'Not yet! Not yet! Too early! Too soon!' As the rumpled suit of a flower lay in his palm he felt he heard the rose bush sigh and the little tiny spirit of the flower passed away in his hand. He knew then some things need to be opened slowly and to their own tune. At that moment he became a healthy little boy whose sulks would go away in their own good time and he learnt to wait, no longer damaging furniture and throwing a tantrum on being unable to solve an equation.

No longer did he run to the window on hearing feet crunching on the gravel driveway, the window and the potential of what he might see out of it being the only answer to his interminable boredom. He waited throughout childhood for rescue that never came, all the more yellowing and fading and digging in deeper inside ingrowing into a forlornness that could be easily lifted by a few hours at a pondside catching water skaters and great diving beetles. He filled an old washing-up bowl with interestingly shaped rocks and pondwater with duckweed and emptied the contents of his jamjar into it on return each time. It was not lost on him, this freedom from pain in pleasurable diversion and even into his forties he had not lost the knack of stopping

to watch a squirrel, though he had watched them many times and knew by heart their kitbag of tricks, nor did he fail to stop in the park and bend down to smell a daffodil, though he already knew what they smelt like. He still saw faces in clouds and counted magpies. He still picked up rather good conkers if they had a mahogany sheen and if a pinecone would fit in his pocket it would go in his pocket.

In this way he succeeded in discarding whole chunks of misery, dumped like worn tyres into a disused quarry. In the summer he would talk to strangers occasionally. 'Is that a balloon?' He would point up into the sky and they would look. He had a special fondness of little wild flowers that grew in graveyards, such as the ivy-leaved toadflax. As a child he never tired of saying it, 'Ivy-leaved toadflax. Ivy-leaved toadflax. I believe toadflax. I believe toadflax . . .' until the words became all mangled and he forgot what he was saying at the start. 'I believe toad axe. I believe toad facts . . .'

In the titanic shade of demolished houses were little flowers with their own light and arms pulling stunts under rubble. He never did learn to skim a flat pebble across an expanse of water. When the sun was bright he would often walk around the world feeling excluded from the games other children were playing, and begin to doubt his interest in igneous rocks would be sufficient

to sustain him. And when, out of his bedroom window after school, he saw with his binoculars an older boy and an older girl, still in school uniform, fondling and kissing each other hidden away in the bushes where they thought no-one could see them, he shut his bedroom door and placed his chair behind it after shouting down to his mother that he was doing his homework now and did not want to be disturbed.

His mother, when he asked if there was anything she desired, said, 'Oblivion.' His father, when he asked if he had any philosophy of life to pass on to him, said, 'You make your bed and you lie in it. I learnt that in the navy.' When he urged his father to expand, asking him what he thought his fate was, his father said, 'I'll die in this house – in terrible pain.'

I have no reason to believe that this was anything other than a normal upbringing. Though Coxy, whose father had a pigeon-loft, whose mother was dead, and whose house was dirty all the time, might have been more normal. It is hard to judge these things when looking into a glaring light in a darkened sky and the lives have all drawn themselves under stones, the same stones we looked under and saw centipedes scurrying away and worms pulling into holes. For an earwig it is normal to live in a split in a fencepost and not realise it is merely waiting until a child comes along and drives

it and its relatives out by drawing a lollystick up the split. It is normal for windows in schools to be dirty and for chickens to be plucked on the laps of old ladies sitting on stools in sculleries and for water to be drawn up with a pump cast-iron with Clarendon lettering. Normal for marijuana plants to have reached up to the skylight. Normal to have a hearse going past your house at least once a week. 'What is normal?' said the wind blowing down the chimney in the cold old house. 'What is normal?' said the wooden toilet seat in the outside lavatory in the yard the freezing chill gusting under the door.

I never made a sled.

The song of loss, not 'our song' but *my* song after you had left.

Hundreds of wild flowers sat listening, wishing he did not feel so sad, wishing he could shake himself out of it. They offered him little smiles of encouragement.

On the other side of the road, tight ass cheeks, looked like she was wearing a thong. Her hair was silky and halting, he'd like to thread flowers in it, jet black and shining. Was he the only one to turn his head? Was he always turning his head to look at a pretty girl?

Chasing dreams from a distance, answering vibrations in the air with longing that had given up on holding, of crossing over into a hot variation of the theme where he made eye contact, she smiled, he felt encouraged, she dawdled, he approached, she spoke first, he answered with charisma, they fell into each other's arms in their minds mutually, together, and the rest was a slalom of excitement, pretending, drawing back, being shy, biting lips, but knowing, ultimately, they were destined for each other and the universe had intended it to be that way for ever and all the rest was a sham, not so bitter in this realisation, not bitter at all, just moments, moments passed, and now this was the rest of their lives. He would place his hand on her belly-button piercing, she would feed him a slice of carrot cake, he would bury his head in her chest . . . but he walked on, crossing the road his head still turned, as she walked away her black hair glossy and delightful in the noonday sun. He had a heart full of treachery today and was in a foul mood, banging into people he passed deliberately with none of the hesitancy that might assess size and aggressiveness of his victims. 'Out of my way!' was his mood in the sea of lunchtime office workers, Christmas decorations still up in February in many of the streets he wormed his way into looking for a little space. He cursed these streets for their laziness in not unhooking



their gaudy baubles. Cleavage after cleavage passed, and dark obelisks of suited men loomed and marched on oozing self-importance and money. In a boutique a crab-assed girl her panties scrunched up in shit-brown corduroys looked new and out of place, they should change the fucking water in that vase there's spirogyra and hydra microscopically lounging around in there and those daffodils look so tired. Sunlight floods the street and the sash windows open on the upper floors. The rainbows of petrol-stained puddles surface-tension scabs sinking into the pavement. Set the place ablaze, O Sun, destroy all living things, cast down your hailstones and heat hazes together enter this sheepfold and slaughter them all.

Usual trail of pickled peppers and sliced onions from the kebab house. A girl in dungarees throwing up, the vomit rolling down the pavement like a toppled bucket of bilge on a ship's deck mounting a steep wave. As I walk by manfully holding my nose I notice she has a leg brace and a library book.

Back home late after traipsing around town all day, sitting quiet behind closed curtains, window wide open to the sound of the crystal-clear night washed clean by

earlier rain. The quickening of a blind man's cane tip-tapping its way along the pavement waving from side to side like a grotesque lobster feeler, sluggish corpse eyelids throwing off sixpences, gives way to the clic-cloc of swinging-hip high heels walking home in the sloshing car-puddle night.

Dad always used to say 'oss piddle' instead of 'hospital'. Keep out the oss road, he used to tell me. He still called the main road the oss road, though the only horse and cart that came down it any more was the rag and bone man shouting 'Any old iron? Any old iron?' and tolling his bell clip-clopping slowly along. Always made me think of the man going round with a bell during the Black Death calling 'Bring out your dead. Bring out your dead.' And they would bring down old sinks and rusty lawnmowers, bring them down their drives to him.

Cats tabby cats licking their fur sitting on windowsills and cracks in the paving stones have stories to tell about when little Johnny fell and scrazed his knee and he cried and cried and no-one cared and his mother dressed it with Iglodine ointment and a bandage and his dad came home from work and said been in the wars have you son let's take a look and he unwraps the bandage and

the bruise is yellow and purple and it suppurates and matters and smells of iodine and clean drains and there is nothing on TV and dinner is cold and the sky has gone a funny colour and everyone is waiting for something to happen and nothing happens because nothing ever happens it just carries on being the same the same the same there is no change in this terrain it is just more of the same and he remembers Bazooka Joe bubblegum and the little cartoon strips you unwrapped out of the bubbly packet and sunny days with bees and sitting in holes in the wasteland in short trousers talking to other boys who liked sitting in holes and that was an entire day an entire good day all gone all used up and he was late for dinner and running home he tripped and fell and fell on an old door out of which was sticking a big nail and it penetrated his flesh and he cried and cried and limped home crying to his mother.

The houses sit in the road as they have for decades if not a hundred years just adding little bits like TV aerials and satellite dishes and out went the horse and cart and in came the petrol vehicles and the street carried on much the same except now it was cluttered and dishevelled and it was a new time when people cared less about

their neighbours and many old jobs no longer existed like chimney sweep and even I started to feel I am getting older I who have never grown up but have been in childhood all the time carrying on with childhood things that no-one cared about but me and so what, people would say, that you are interested in insects I kill insects I tread on them I use powder and fluid to kill them I don't care one bit about the lives of insects what are insects to me they're just creepy crawlies so son you like insects do you well I like fireworks letting fireworks off in my back garden when old people have gone to bed fireworks that have big bangs and sometimes I let them off in the afternoon too and I like to sit in my big fucking car in the street with my radio playing loudly and just sit there with the windows open late at night just blaring it out like a moveable next-door nuisance neighbour that's what I like doing so you like insects do you son well let me tell you a thing or two about insects I fucking hate insects they get in my lav and I spray ant powder all over em I do and don't care about thousands of them dying and if I see an anthill on my lawn I pour boiling water over it I do I don't fuckin care about the lives of ants if ants want to have a life they'd better have a life well away from me.

The wide and busy road. Butterflies fluttering down.  
Solace in small things. The sky a battering ram on the  
day, dark and moody, cushions the blow of roses. Vast  
reserves of melancholy. Idling day.

Flyaway bird of childhood, you do make me watch  
you from afar.

My soul has taken root in these pages, it will grow  
of its own accord.

All my life I've felt very alone. I've found contentment  
in nature. A dragonfly in the garden, a serenade of  
grasshoppers. Simple things that would always be there,  
were a part of the world, but things that arose only every  
so often. I am an only child, I had no brothers and sisters  
to play with. I developed a fascination for things. Things  
stick in my mind from childhood, such as watching two  
raindrops slowly edge their way down the windowpane  
then when they met and became one larger raindrop it  
would slide down the glass with greater speed. I loved  
watching that. I watched the rain on the windowpane  
for hours and hours, sometimes with my forehead  
pressed against it in the cold condensation. The long  
rainy days inside the house seemed to me a boredom  
most difficult to endure. Colouring books, drawing

with ink, the smell of apple stewing on the gas stove, alone and finding in smells and colours and blowing runs of ink with a drinking straw whole moments of complete satisfaction. When I had a shed to myself I put up shelves and lined it with bottles of chemicals and did experiments for hours, loving the sound of the rain on the canvas roof. Crackles, fumes, gases, crystals, fantastic unexpected changes in colour, beautiful yellow cadmium sulphide, acrid sulphur fumes that choked me, ammonia, ether, concentrated acids that burnt my skin. So many things to fascinate my mind. Only after I had left the family home and done a degree in chemistry did the interest begin to wane.

In childhood I had a natural understanding of omens and an affinity with mysticism, but it left me as I became more enamoured of science. At the age of eleven I fell out of bed with a bump after an extraordinarily vivid dream, as I abruptly awoke I was convinced that I had discovered the meaning of life. It was something to do with the entire universe being a kaleidoscope of continuous change. Like a speeded-up film of a rosebud unfurling its petals into bloom, but it doesn't wither and die it only keeps on becoming a more and more glorious bloom for ever and ever. And there was never a starting point, it just was always doing that. Even at eleven, as I fell seemingly down a great chasm from

my mattress to the floor, I knew this was the meaning of life, but I had no words with which to describe it and it faded in intensity quite quickly, though I never forgot that it was not a normal dream.

My mother always told me in the winter months that Jack Frost would draw what I had dreamt in the night in the frost on my windowpane, but I had to be out of bed quickly to see it before it melted. It was of course a ruse to get me out of bed on freezing cold mornings, but I believed it and loved to survey the scene frozen across the window as I drew the curtains back. Always it looked like white ferns. I developed the habit of pressing my finger against the frozen pane until I melted a small hole, which I would then enlarge by breathing warm breath on it, gradually breaking up the ice with my finger until I had a little spyhole onto the outside world. Once I did this and experienced an omen. The world was white outside. In the snow on the drive I could see a single pair of footsteps leading away from the house and a bicycle tyretrack, but no footsteps or tyretrack coming back. It was too early yet for the postman or the milkman. I knew this meant my grandfather had died. All the long morning I waited with mum until dad returned on his bike. He had gone to check, to see if the old man was all right in the bitterly cold snap. My father's face as he came through the back door told

me everything. 'Come in the front, Marge,' he said, he didn't want to speak with me in the room. But I had known since I had looked through the hole in the frost on my windowpane.

My other grandfather was blind in one eye. An industrial accident, a piece of red-hot metal flew into it. He always struck me as very wise. I remember once myself and my mother, when I was waist-high, came to visit him. There was a long and narrow entry between the old houses. The flagstones were wet and glossy like the black underbelly of a plaice on a fishmonger's slab and I enjoyed walking in the small puddles. Our footsteps echoed up the entry; my grandfather was out in the yard chopping fiddlesticks for the fire on a tree-trunk chopping block grey with coal dust like an elephant's foot. He could hear us coming up the entry but the high walls meant he couldn't see us. Suddenly my mother and I stopped dead. In front of us was a tiny pimpled chick slopped in a puddle, its mould-blue eyespots looking straight up to a twittering chimney pot high above. We reverentially stepped over it in silence and carried on walking, our footsteps once again clattering up the entry. We turned the corner, my mother pressed



down the paddlekey on the latch of the tall gate to enter the yard. My grandfather, tap-tapping his axe down the split with the grain of knotty pine, lifted his head, rubbing his blind eye with a yellow-stained finger, and said: 'Has another young'un fallen out Marge?'

My interests range widely, they always have. I spent my childhood consuming knowledge on everything from aardvarks to ventriloquism to entomology to planets to newts to trees to anatomy to shells to wasps to nuclear fission to metalwork to forensic science to toxicology to grave-robbing to demons to Daleks to melting lead to lacewings to caddis-fly larvae to rabbit skulls to microscopes to chemistry to . . . Swahili.

I started learning Swahili because I thought it was the language animals spoke. Mum took me to the Midland Educational Bookshop in town, where I got the Swahili dictionary and *Teach Yourself Swahili*. We went up to the counter, mum got her purse out. She looked at the girl on the till, and said proudly:

'He's teaching himself Swahili.'

'He must be very clever,' said the shop girl.

This scene is emblazoned on my memory as a choice moment from what seems like a childhood entirely

absorbed in a single-minded search for knowledge. My hero at the age of ten was Charles Darwin, I liked him because he was known as 'Stink' at school on account of his chemistry experiments. I enjoyed drawing pictures of him in pencil. Forget the theory of evolution, I just loved looking at paintings of finch heads and photographs of iguanas. I wanted to know everything there was to know about everything.

'What's that?'

'What's what?'

'That white thing sticking out of the bars of Joey's cage.'

'Cuttlefish young'un,' said gramp.

'What's cuttlefish?'

'It's a bony fish.'

'Why's it white?'

'It's bone.'

'Fish don't have bones like that. Salmon tin bones are thin.'

'It's a funny fish.'

'Funny how?'

'Come down the shed, you can drill some holes in a piece of wood.'

'Why's it stuck between the bars?'

'Joey sharpens his beak on it. Do you want to drill some wood or not?'

I loved gramp taking me down the shed. He knew stuff. Drilling holes in a block of wood was a special treat.

He'd take his time, unhooking the big key off a hook in the scullery, and down the shed we'd go, passing the outside lav, passing the pile of chopped fiddlesticks for the fire out in the yard, and down to that great shed. I formed an insatiable desire for mysterious things in that shed, which was actually an old signal box his father had bought off the railway. It was full of things that he'd made that were, in retrospect, completely useless, but had a satisfying action to them, as if they were part of something that might exist in some other world. He had tools for doing things no-one will ever want to do, some of which he'd invented himself and made just for the hell of it.

'What's this gramp?'

'That's for getting a thingummybob out of an oozit.'

'It's great. Show me how it works.'

He ferked around in a little rusty tobacco tin.

'See this? That's an oozit.'

A small metal object.

'What's an oozit?'

'It's what has the thingummybob in it.'

Then he showed me how to use this weird tool he'd made to take the thingummybob out of the oozit. It

came out like a little segmented mechanical worm from its metal shell.

‘That’s great! What’s it for?’

‘It’s part of one of these.’

He took down some sort of piston affair.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘I’ll leave you here with a piece of wood and you can use the big drill to drill some holes, and when I come back I’ll show you.’

Off he went.

He sat most of the time in a big leather armchair next to a rosewood bureau his father’s father had made, beautifully inlaid with a design of a conch shell. He had an automatic punch that looked like a pen in there with his letters, I loved indenting a piece of wood with it, its pogo-stick recoil in the palm of my hand never lost its fascination. There was a domino set and wooden scoreboard with pegs he’d carved himself out of ivory. There was a slide rule and a brass protractor. On brittle brown tracing paper there were geometrical designs he’d drawn sitting at the bureau, the hinged work surface resting on the arm of his chair with him turned sideways. He especially liked drawing cogwheels in 3D. He wore a weskit, high trousers on braces, his thin white hair yellowing, he sat there smoking his pipe by a blazing fire, sometimes rubbing his rheumy white eye or bringing things to read up close to his good eye.

As he sat there one day, watching me sitting on the threadbare rug over lino in front of the fire playing with the punch, I asked him what life was all about, to which he replied:

‘It’s just vivid memories of something that happened a long long time ago. It ay wuth workin yerself up into a lather over.’

Sparks flying up at him from the grate, he goes at it with a poker and stacks the coals tidily with the fire-tongs.

‘What do you mean?’ I said.

He replied: ‘It’s nothing but a whim-wham and a wowser wound up with the sun.’

He roared with a phlegmy laugh on saying this, as adults laugh at something smutty in front of children. I assumed it was rude and shut up and didn’t question him any more, too embarrassed to ask him what he meant. I must have gone as red as a beetroot. He filled his pipe with tobacco, pressing it down with his thumb. He lit it with a match burning down to a curling thin charcoal stick puffing out great gouts of smoke as the tobacco took, and said: ‘Yo great knock-kneed cloth-eared closet-itis.’

I didn’t know then that there was a small clutch of ‘whim-wham’ nonsense sayings that were used to deflect questions from inquisitive children, that have mostly

died out now, that were mysterious in origin even in my grandfather's time. Once I asked him whether I could go down the shed with him when I saw him taking the key off the hook, and he said no. When I asked why not he said because he was going to be making 'a whim-wham for grinding smoke'. I took it this was something children should not see. Later in the afternoon I was sent out into the garden to pull a few sticks of rhubarb for mum to take home so I took the opportunity to creep down to the shed. I stood on tiptoe looking through the grime-caked window. I saw him in there moving around making something. He saw me looking and shooed me away.

He'd never let me think myself too clever. He'd say, 'Yo'm so clever yo am, yo con see through a brick wall yo con. An when yo've sane through it, yo'm lookin at summat as ay theer.'

Sitting here in my dressing-gown, thoughts come running swiftly. 'You *look* like a writer,' she wrote, 'don't ask me what a writer looks like. Like you! Hah!' I came back to the fourth letter from a sweet and funny Romanian dentist girl, when I returned to London two weeks after my father's gangrenous intestine surgery and subsequent

stroke, aspiration into the lungs causing pneumonia, decision to reduce noradrenaline and adrenaline, and death during the penumbral lunar eclipse.

Sorting quickly through the pile of letters waiting for me to find the airmail envelope. Another new photo in it.

Friend knocked on my door with a bag of skunk third Saturday after dad's death. A couple of snaps of dad, one with mum in, secured at the edge of my clip-framed Buddha painting, never before had photos of my parents on display. Sometimes, I just look at my room, the things that have assembled themselves over time, and see it all as evidence of an immense pattern that soon slips from my grasp. The jigsaw of my life and the lives of those connected with me. That ginseng root from Indonesia on the mantelpiece, the cards of condolence and sympathy, that one of a bluebell wood that arrived twenty minutes before the hearse came ('Just like where me and your dad did our courting,' said mum fondly). And the painting I did of the three orange balls of light in triangular formation that passed over my head at twice the height of the sycamore floating as soundlessly as thistledown.

Today I thought, which image is dad, the white-haired old man with tubes and an oxygen mask unconscious in intensive care, his chest being pumped up and down

by a machine, a warm corpse, his flesh unnaturally hot as I placed my hand on his forehead, but perhaps staring down at me and mum, perhaps seeing my tears, perhaps feeling my hand in his. He had always said, over and over again, when he was angry with me: 'You'll shed crocodile tears when I'm gone.' I was so glad they weren't, but what a pity I never told him I loved him until he was full of tubes, couldn't hear, speak, or see, and his hair was white.

'Dad?'

'He can't hear you son.'

So many times in the past I knew he wanted me to say I loved him, as a kind of forgiveness for unspoken hurts. Small decisions and inhibitions can so easily grow over the course of years into a tragedy, and regret that it is now too late. And yet, I think I always knew this is the way it would turn out, as if it could be no other way. Now he is dead, I wonder, who was my dad, now I have access to the entire span of his life. Is that him, in the navy during the war? Is that him on his honeymoon? Is that him, hitting me as a kid? The last few years all he was was an old man continually complaining about the pain in his stomach and not being able to go to the lav.



I learnt the difference between magic and science in a startling moment as a child. I was riding my bike out into the countryside when I spotted a freshly dead blackbird on the grass verge, its bill the colour of peaches in a tin. I hopped off my bike with my penknife in my hand intent on taking home a grisly trophy, a blackbird's claw.

The leg proved tougher than I had imagined, I had to work the knife all the way round the writhled dark skin. Convinced I had hacked through enough to have the claw off with a tug, I pulled hard and horror upon horrors the claw twitched, closing up in my hand, and out again as I fell back in the fear I had mutilated a living bird. It was a taste of pure sin. But the bird did not rise to its feet, still it slept on the verge. I poked the ominous bird with a stick at a safe distance. It did not move. After half an hour I took my courage and examined the corpse of the blackbird and found that my penknife had not cut through the elastic tendon, which, if pulled taut, mechanically closed the talons. When I had pulled away holding the end of the leg, ripping apart the crinkled outer sheath of flesh but only stretching the tendon inside, the claw had literally come alive in the centre of my palm. It had been a potent illusion, quite real at the time, but the magic claw seemed less magical upon scientific examination by my young developing mind and I stretched the tendon like a rubber band until

it snapped, and stepped over the dead bird, kicking it into the undergrowth, riding all the way home with the blackbird's talons gripping my skin piercing through my pocket. One day, perhaps emptying out boxes of discarded toys in the attic when mum too has gone, I will find that blackbird's claw and twirling it in my fingers evoke memories that come home to roost.

I was ten when I first read about the splitting of the atom. I was afraid to walk around for weeks, in case I split one by accident. Caught one with my elbow, or cracked one open stamping down my feet in a tantrum.

It is easy to wonder many things about life when you are a child, like whether you could stab someone with an icicle, or bring down an aeroplane by thinking it.

I tried to have a childhood I read about in books, running about in fields on a sunny day, splashing about in brooks, climbing gates, and collecting things I found on my bike rides into the countryside.

I remember catching newts, and being the only one on the canal bank who knew what an axolotl was. And that time I pulled a caddis-fly larva out of its case and forced it to build a new one out of bits of brightly coloured plastic and glitter. The first time I saw an

ichneumon fly, and a jay, and pondered scaring off the bluebottles gathered round a dead and decaying piglet so I could take it home in my plastic bag and boil it in caustic soda and stick its bones back together like an Airfix model. The time I knew I needed glasses when I stepped in a cowpat mistaking it for a rock, which don't squidge around your foot when you stand on one. And I made a boomerang, which the kid next door stole from me but I got back when he threw it and it landed in our garden.

My dad went a little potty when I was thirteen. Kept bringing back old clocks that didn't work on the handlebars of his bike. Kept mumbling about having his friend's brains land all over him on HMS Mauritius during the war, suddenly recoiling in horror on the sofa while we watched TV, like he was there all over again. The days in the lifeboat, like he was there. He told me he believed in God the one time I asked him because he prayed for a ship to appear on the horizon and rescue them all and one did. After ten days at sea. Only after he died did I discover he was never in a lifeboat, it was just a story, a scene from a film. The Mauritius never sank.

He had to have electroconvulsive therapy at the hospital and take lithium. Then he was better, though his hair had gone all white and he was now old. He had been away a long time in his head it seemed to

me. Even my cat was an old man and I was thinking of going to university. Absorbed in chemistry. My world was entirely chemistry. My mother peered out the net curtains as time and time again I staggered out of my shed laboratory coughing and spluttering, crashing the door open, my lungs full of sulphur dioxide or some other noxious fumes, the look of discovery plastered over my face.

The lazy hazy days of childhood. A wide carless pink-blossomed avenue on a mellow summer's afternoon. Soapbox go-carts pulled by rope, confetti outside the chapel railings, score draws read out through open windows. What a blazing bee-buzzing day it's been.

I pluck a dandelion clock, drawing it up like a ping-pong ball balanced on a drinking straw, sticky white milk dribbling my palm. The rusty weathervane creaks on the chapel roof, the breeze pluffs the seeds and I finish the job with a great blow from my mouth. I remember thinking then, at that very moment: 'Where will my memories go when I am dead?'

Dad started writing down his memories of being a fireman on the steam trains, it was going to be a book he would call *On the Footplate*. Mum typed up his notes

for him. He showed me the typed pages when I was doing my A-levels and I laughed and ridiculed him and his naive way of writing and said: 'What d'you want to write that for?' He didn't write any more, and in later years when I repeatedly said I'd like to read what he had written he said he didn't know what had happened to the pages. Since he died I have asked mum whatever happened to those pages and she says she doesn't know: 'Probably under all the piles of junk somewhere, maybe thrown away.'

Just looking through the last ten or so letters he wrote to me in London that I kept when a sentimental mood stopped me destroying all of the things of my past, there's a little bit in one that made me smile, reminding me of dad's enthusiasm for simple things: 'You know what? Mr and Mrs Blackbird have made a nest in the conifer tree in the back garden. He sits on top of the tree and sings to us.'

He was a simple man who placed bets on horses, enjoyed war films and westerns, and liked tending his chrysanthemums and sweet peas, laughing at the antics of the blackbirds. His diaries were filled with what he had watched on TV, what horses he had betted on, and how many sweet peas he had cut that day.

Visiting hour, and he no longer recognises me, but sees brightly coloured birds flying behind my head.

Doesn't know who I am but the beautiful childlike joy in his eyes to see parrots and hummingbirds flying behind me through the ward makes me feel all is not lost. The stranger at his bedside has brought him an aviary.

In his coffin, a quietly daunting sight, an unhatched egg in an abandoned nest, cold to the touch. His cheek, lingering fingertips find it clammy like chilled putty. It was still all an enigma, I felt I was shuffling my feet through it all, a little dazed, yet alert like a fox is alert for cracks in the ice crossing a frozen pond. I have seen hunting animals look suddenly hunted, casting their heads in all directions. The same music plays, over and over. And the mouth of a jar looks like a halo. At times like these I feel magnanimous spirits are just coming to fetch me, and time does not exist. And still the same music plays.

Little things you remember. When I looked through the curtain to see whether the hearse was coming there were a few people standing around outside the betting shop up the road where dad used to place his bets, waiting there for the hearse to pass so they could pay their last respects. He used to take his book of photos over there to show them all pictures of himself in the war. Mum said dad must have had a premonition. For two weeks after he died, mum kept finding little messages to her written on the back of betting slips tucked in books

and under cushions. He'd written them while she was out shopping and hidden them all over the house, she never knew he'd been doing it. She found one putting on her best shoes that she hardly ever wears just before we went to see dad at the undertakers, scrunched up in the toe-end. It said: 'It has been a lovely day in the garden today. I have been digging with the big fork. The lawn looks lovely. When the flowers have gone they will come again.'

I only found one of these messages on a betting slip myself, in the leaves of the book dad knew I always liked to look at when I came home. It read: 'DESCENT INTO SOLITUDE.' I wondered whether it was the name of a horse.

Walking down a dusty dilapidated street in old Antwerp, I stop outside an old petshop. The door, like most in the street, is boarded up, but there are no boards on the window. Something in the window has caught my attention. The window is full of straw and twigs and branches. I can't see anything else. I see a man's reflection pass by me, looking with me for a moment but then walking on, no doubt wondering what does he find so interesting in there. I didn't know myself. When

suddenly I see something move out the corner of my eye and my glance darts to it, the entire window I am startled to realise is thronging with large chameleons clinging to the branches. Living in full view of all who pass by, yet invisible to all but a few.

Memories are like ghosts occupying the empty house of the past. They have nowhere to go. They like for us to remember them from time to time. The lights come back on, briefly, and what was may yet join hands with what is.

Lying on the floor in a high fever covered over with shawls along with the presents under the Christmas tree, my first real Christmas tree, in the lounge. The aroma of Norwegian blue spruce. I'm so so angry with her, waiting for her all day lying here alone and helpless, we had an awful row that a whole day on I am still seething about. How right they are those who say 'Never sleep on an argument.' In brief moments, I think: 'What if today she were knocked down and killed, how I would regret thinking so bad of her all day.' In the midst of



such a thought, my tears of self-pity turn to tears of joy, apprehensive joy, on hearing her key in the lock. She comes through the door laden with shopping and expensive bags full of glittering presents, how beautiful she is as she rushes over and stoops down to give me a big hug. Her freezing cheek against my blazing skin, oooh shut the door it's cold out there.

‘Welcome home babe.’

‘Chéri...’

We spent the afternoon in the Egyptian gallery at the British Museum. We leave charged up, walking hand in hand, but then she climbs on my back insisting I give her a piggyback. She's in her silver disco dress and scarlet tights and black stilettos. We're staggering down Great Russell Street past the railings of the British Museum in bright Bloomsbury sunshine, passersby avoiding our fantastic crazy happiness save for a few Hell's Angels cheering us on.

I am kicking in the womb willing reality into existence but mostly dozing off and sucking my thumb this dumb

thumb I have in my mouth a world away from shaved armpits and bones resting skeletal among the hyacinths.

They are snowing me under thoughts of the world to come, to me just a dream something that has not even happened yet to him out in the dream it is happening to him right now. Does he sometimes know he is still in the womb? That his face is as yet without detail and that it will not be fully etched in until the acid seeps into the deep wrinkles around his eyes and the veins bulge dirty blue in his hands clutching the bedclothes and the rain outside reminds him of other nights sat listening when he was younger and had plans.

I know there is something coming out something emerging a mad white flame of tremulous wonder scarcely any blood vessels and heart at times pulling out innumerable drawers of the mind in search of matching socks of sense. A little egg and herring.

Places of decay hold the most charm, and brief moments of love. The mystery of gaining companions, a wonder so many were not mediocre. They could have been, endlessly so. Wise choice early on not to be having with that.

It's raining it's pouring the old man is snoring.

Such a splendid sound, the rain pouring down. I have the desk lamp on the curtains open the sky is getting very dark.

There is only one thing which is finished, my life recorded in these pages and moved on from. Things nobody, as far as I can see, has said are always happening, things lingering in the air that bury themselves here. Every day, just write. So fast and furious I don't have time to pick up dirty towels off the floor and scarcely have a moment to record that I lay down in filthy clothes not having time to wonder what my next move will be, or whether this thought is lousy and that one morbid and if I toss and turn in bed just get up and puke that little man inside me out who is two thousand times worse than the worst little bugger clapped in irons of grief and contemplating suicide the moment the clear blue sky is spoiled by the wispiest bit of cloud riveting his days together with frustration and futility. Start again from scratch and leave the skin on the milk to grow thicker.

I leave these fragmentary notes not knowing whether they smell bad, or what they're arriving at, I'll surely

not go back now, I have found my way flicking biscuit  
crumbs out of my belly button after a decent breakfast  
in my own bedbug bastard bed.

Sitting upon a throne gnawing a bone  
Walking through the halls avoiding falls

Bones and flies and bloody rags  
And rotten fruit turned liquid

Birds tearing linen perched on the kitchen table cracks  
in the walls waiting.

Childhood is too strong has to be diluted with the rest  
of life but when the end comes I know I will say All  
the things I never did all the things I have no time for  
any more. There is no warrior in me to nurture any  
longer. I can stay here indefinitely. Hours and hours not  
being hungry for more and then shame at my wasted  
life. Soon all my books will be gone then I will dispose  
of the furniture.

I make potato croquettes to survive. It is a thing done  
in the day, a little cookery. The story of my life is the  
story of a doll sitting in its doll's house.

In this little house I am provided with all my advance needs. Just the space to be. Back and forth between rooms. I will stay here until I solve its mystery. I have to let the fire burn itself out before I understand.

I have seeped in, imprisoned myself in an endless succession of rice dinners. Ghosts out the corner of my eye are just as real as other people, forgotten journeys just as real as ones never started. I am piled up in a room with all the rest of the junk.

It is a foolish thing this drowsiness that stops me doing things that cotton wools life like a tortoise put away in a cardboard box for winter.

A grasshopper jumping high in the bath this morning, jumping higher than the rim of the bath. Tried to eat a ripe banana but it broke as I unpeeled it and fell on the floor.

Noticed blood in my beard glancing in the bathroom mirror, then I recalled it was only strawberry juice from a snack of strawberries in the middle of the night getting up for a piss.

It's hot, things are full of memories, but broken things, things as if they are no good any more, cracked glass in picture frames, handles that come off doors, a place that simply cannot change any more, that is exhausted, it can only fall apart very slowly, carried away in pieces by ants, anyone living here could not alter a thing, it is set apart from the sunny day outside, it is set adrift on rumbling foundations but will not fall. Anything you pick up seems to have significance. Take a book from the bookcase and an aged clipping will flutter to the floor like a disturbed moth. All of it should be thrown away, but none of it can be. It must fall apart of its own accord or rely on vandals or fire to put an end to it. Children went from here dressed in brand-new blazers once. I do not know how many coffins have been manhandled out its door, probably no more than sofas the other way.

Everything is a little darker than it need be. Bony fingers clutching that stick. What was in this box? There are tins of apricots in the larder ten years past their expiry date. I remember this shopping bag. It was me that wore down the wheels of these Dinky cars on the granite slabs outside. How many skeletons of small animals are buried in this garden? I am too small to do this on my own, I should have brought someone with me. But there is no-one, not the one who would have

come with me, she is far away, she would have come, it would have been different, it would have made it alright. It's as if nobody lived here, it is a museum of one's life become a stranger. Children are passing by in the street outside. One points and says: 'I wish that was my house then I could go in.'

And then, I am a boy again, sitting playing patience at the dinner table covered over with a tablecloth. I recognise these curtains and this windowsill. That's the electric fire I electrocuted myself on once, jolting me back. And now there I am playing cards with myself, but I don't have the will for it and gather all the cards into a pile, destroying what I've laid out so far. And I sit staring at night falling, a white frost descending, glittering on the chrysanthemums. And I go outside and watch a star traversing the sky, a satellite perhaps, or Skylab. And I want it very much to be a UFO but I know it's just something manmade. It seems my longest relationship has been with the night sky, looking, hoping, yearning to be taken away from this planet. Come back, come back for me, don't forget me, don't leave me here all alone. The chrysanthemums are sparkling in the moonlight, frosted shirts on the washing line stiff as a

board. Still I am unnoticed outside, the back door wide open letting all the heat out, mum and dad in the front room watching television. All ahead of me, my future, awaits. Even then, I was called.

I may as well be a boulder moved by a glacier to my present spot. I am imperturbable.

I'm listening out though, listening out, for the penetrating music of the spheres, for the unearthly sound that is a ship on the horizon for one marooned on a desert island. I sit still, seeing no point any longer in moving beyond the need to fetch in provisions, little shops that bring light rays to a focus out of the general blur of the world.

Perhaps I have come to that place where my wanderlust has found its bounds, where the light of the dying one fades, and one had scarcely lived though there was all of space and time in one's grasp. Never here enough.

At some point I came to believe the world doesn't exist. I lived but made no effort, save in short bursts. Sometimes I thought I may be wrong but it didn't seem I could do much about it, I carried on as if part of an illusion, though I had no better idea of who or what I was, only that I wasn't what I appeared to be. It all seemed to last too long, yet the days sped past, and I said to myself one day maybe something will happen to show me a start of my life, something I can believe



in. But I rather felt it was getting to be too late, and if I had made a mistake then I would just have to live with it and carry on.

What is that ungainly flapping sound alighting on the houses? Escaped vultures from the zoo sitting like senile maniacs in black cloaks.

An old man arranging a shell collection in a partitioned drawer, divided into many square boxes, for a brief moment admiring a nautilus shell he has a *déjà vu*, a realisation that he is caught in an eternal regression, but then it is gone, as indeed is he, just bones and the shiny buttons on his waistcoat falling one by one plink plink plink through his ribcage, a memory floating nowhere yet eternal and indestructible, as if one day the blown and scattered fragments will reassemble, as if that very moment while admiring the nautilus shell there is an understanding of everything, and then it is nothing.

From the very beginning in the womb, I understood that to want anything too badly would take me from a nice warm place, it would be a false offer, they'll say come this way and be free. They won't say free to witness the cold, the snow, the ice, free to stare out of a windowpane for ever. And then it's just a waiting game,

finish it early or see it through. They won't say free of envy, free of sloth. No, they'll say come and see the fun and games, come and play in the snow, and for a while it seems like that.

Summer flashes of lightning at twilight.

Millimetre by millimetre the soul of a continent crashes to the ground, but no-one notices, a slow sluggish decay, at each turn it seems like it could be a new opportunity. No-one remembers the point at which they became resigned, it was always a mix of fresh hope and stale despair. It was a matter of boosting the former over the latter, until no-one cared any more, and then dead whales would be washed up on the beaches and cliffsides would fall into the sea as if in a quickening of the march, but was just long attrition breaking off a piece in another millimetre's crawl.

A moment has no beginning and no end, it furiously consumes a whole lifetime.

I have to seize hold of something inside me and express it like a grenade going off and harshly and

without doubt execute my fate. No more chewing over old concerns, cut it all away with a sharp knife and say right my new life begins on page one and this is page one. The rest, fuck off with it shove it over a cliff kick it over a daisy-fringed precipice fuck off you ill-serving life and let me open now the book of my new life with force as if storming a building and throwing myself into a hail of bullets not fearing them knowing they are not real and construct from this wreckage of wasted years something quite other.

The silent struggle with the past as if to rid it of all elements of the present and solitude contracted methodically in a room in the hours before dawn until he exhausted the strength of the night and diluted it with the coming of the day and the edge of his hand lifted sharply as if to strike its cheek.

Behind the back wall the night sky has a dreamy air, when folk look up they see autumn coming in the constellations and feel winter's first bite by a sighting of the Pleiades, though in the day the sky is blue and

butterflies flit to and fro still with the smile of spring. The little pink flowers will lie as a mournful crimson dust edged by particles of frost. The trees are shivering. Their last leaves last until the snow, the blue snow and mitten holes and scores of starry eyes blinking and the bees have gone, nowhere to be seen singing their humming songs and smiling with the lips of the sunrise floating through fields of dandelion and burdock.

They change so quickly these worlds I once supposed one world woken to anew each day but now are different worlds woken to every few moments.

I longed for faraway oceans even while sitting on the beach as if the ocean I had was not good enough. At first I thought these people had magnificent faces, but then they were just the local crowd and blended together. They had the widest sweet smiles but then I just thought what huge mouths they have. I longed for a place to rest my head that would not shift like the dust in the gentlest of breezes or for the seconds to expand into years and the years to collapse to dust, but what I feared most of all was still being here after it was all over.

There is not enough to fish out of the dawn and early morning so I sleep on and await the great continental

shifts of the afternoon and the tectonic plate grinding twilight and that is when I really come alive and ask myself are these pants too tight would I benefit from a larger pair and my fingers fumble with the buttons on my shirt and the springs of my bed exhale enormous relief if only for the sake of the pot plants that need watering this enormous agenda of daily life and noise through the walls of great plasma-screen televisions of people who really know how to live.

The light is fading fast words blur into one another what new things today am I incapable of doing shall I leave my nails another day before clipping shall I resign myself to the maze of fantasy and little walks through the rocky enclosure.

Fading memory of Earth, nothing in space but what has been brought, roots reach down into the soil only inches before the metal, the core of their existence a vacuum, and in the imagination nothing is real but then . . . was anything real, was there even a before when there is only fading memory to gainsay its existence and I can only deduce, from the indentation into brittle paper a time of letterpress books, a piece of wood riddled with woodworm holes evidence of something that must have

took time and occurred in the past. Why would anyone create anything like that just to stir a latent sense that time existed when the natural inclination is that time never existed? Footsteps on the pavement. A magpie clucking hidden in the branches. I am not fooled by the one constant scene, the one I am supposed to be living now, it is just a temporary anchor, a chosen calm water to return to from my adventures, a cave in the metropolis where I am relatively undisturbed and have my basic needs looked after through a conspiracy of laziness fallen through a hole in the system, were I an alien chameleon just landed on Earth it is to such a bolthole I might make my way, but it may break up any moment, I should not get too attached, it is better that it is dusty I should not like to like it too much when it is only an illusion that its walls are solid. Like a man waiting for a comet as a sign, my safety is in not feeling completely safe. Perhaps there are other apparent constants I return to, the womb for instance, not yet convinced I am not still there, and a journey through deep space, but each has in common a desire to fool me I am there, and then there is the home in my shiftings, home in my inability to see anywhere as home, home in the great fluidity of change, home in a dreamlike fever a constantly blinking out nirvana the extinguished flame and then the blackness and then the

stars in new constellations sitting under a weird tree that has no name with long dangling orange pods and a million years of history flashing on the stormy sky.

As a boy I hoarded pennies and wanted to know what it would be like to die of the cold I would wait until my fingers were blue and I saw little villages in the steam out of my mouth. I kept a bottle of ether in the shed and would pour a little onto an old rag and hold it to my face until I felt the need to sit down quietly. As a young man there was nothing I liked better than to enter the chill of a dark and gloomy wood and listen to the birds. The odour of loam and leafmould picked up in handfuls from the forest floor. When my mouth was bleeding and I took a drink of water from a tumbler the swirling red smoke of blood. All these things only a fool would leave behind. Whirling round and round and round until stopping and staggering sideways and lay me down on the grass and cats too round and round and round chasing the stick of grass and the cat too lurches sideways out of it a stone hurled from a slingshot crashing graceless into the long grass let the cat whirl around and around and have as much fun as me. A long good sleep on a life full of discoveries days and days to

listen to the croaking of the frogs and confide in the gods of safe seas and the birds of the woods thoughts punctuated by a green woodpecker's hammering lazy days.

The clock has stopped. Bigger wait. Nothing stirs. Snow-white hair. Sitting. Survivor. Just sitting. Eager steps of youth outwalked. Shards of the same day splinter under his flesh, deeper and deeper. Backwards and forwards, no longer any pride in standing so far apart. Clouds pass across his bright blue eyes. Foothold in nothing seen.

Dirt-track crossroads long ago. The only crater it leaves is in me.

A shave and a haircut, no need to look crazy too. I have returned from the war but what war? All cigarettes and movies and getting married here. Vegetables I don't know the names of. Half suspect I am still in space. I laughed until the tears grew bitter cold. The houses across the street have their windows boarded up. When did that happen?

The great deal I remember is as nothing compared with the small amount forgot, there were my daily habits and accustomed facial expressions and where I am and what day it is. Every day, if there is ever another



day and not just the same one blinked away, is like a familiar place in the mountains, a different stream by a different patch of grass I momentarily wonder have I been here before? Travelling on while never moving, the familiar becoming the unfamiliar. I brush my hair out of my eyes with my left hand combing the fingers through and think I have done that before, the body knows a shape the mind has forgot, and so learn to rely on this and cut the ropes and drift off. People sometimes look at me as if I was an escaped monkey, or a man pushing a piano through the streets. Not many get past page one. This glassy stare fixes them in the eye and they're unnerved.

In the evening I grind together stones for something to do, hastening erosion. All day and all night I work stretching the stems of daisies, wearing my fingers in foxgloves, getting done what must be got done. A bumblebee knows what the new day holds and gets down to it from the first moment of the sun striking the undersides of the leaves.

I try to learn from the bumblebee what I must do, but I feel like an interloper, as if all I have to do is sit and watch, that my job is to indulge my laziness. Work

begins when I realise I am to record it, place a bucket under the drip.

Slowly, slowly, it fills. I am not to mind.

I said my goodbyes in writing, many times, because they would not be believed quite well enough until I disappeared completely. The literature of *farewell*.

I fell to life like an absent-minded tornado, sometimes spinning wildly out of control towering high above, other times forgetting where I was and who I was supposed to be.

Constantly laughing at the funny faces in the clouds, a job did not seem the thing for me, unless it was a job where I was paid to act bewildered by the world and pluck at my skin tenaciously as if removing imaginary insects and rave senselessly about the huge meteorite about to hit Earth and stroke dinner knives fondly in the work canteen spending my nights writing letters in blood or skulking the streets like a hyaena. In my delirium the telephone rings bringing frogs into the room. Many nights I have wondered will the dawn ever grow again?

I've neither left nor returned, I am simply looking up,  
like a child at the moon, a thousand years come and gone.

One day, fully backed into the corner, I will come  
rushing out and god forbid anyone should be standing  
in the way, because good and evil are alike then, and  
power is all, and everything is lost and found again. And  
all there is is the wind grit between my teeth, just then,  
don't attract my attention, don't turn my head, don't  
wish I was looking at you, as there is the beast, and that  
moment shall last for ever, just a momentary turn of  
the head, and frozen for all time like a statue standing  
in smoking ruins, is I.

The Winter Angel doesn't seem to have the melancholy  
of an evening of silent growing old. Christmas dishes  
left out in the yard for the rain to wash or the frost  
to crack. Doesn't seem to have the energy to tell the  
time, which tells nothing of lapses into eternity. The  
trees with our house between, unchanging song of  
collapse. Twenty years walking up the same alleyway,  
its crumbling walls, a cuckoo remembered, cuk-coo

cuk-coo, running and sliding on long skidways in the ice, the silent people left behind, sketching his house through the trees fastened to the ground like a hot air balloon, fingers slipping off ears hoping it would not be repeated. How to tie a piece of string to the loose soil, a problem solved by tying it to a plastic bag full of soil and burying it. And he smiles at his ingenuity. A brief flirtation with corduroy. The wind slamming the door shut open it again so it will slam it shut again. Spinning and spinning in the daisies, becoming full of yellow buttercups, lying in long grass the greatest childhood privacy. The smallest movement of the wind which will wipe out his thinking. So few dead birds in open view, the war cemetery rows and rows of white crosses to the horizon.

My luck was good but still I lay awake looking at the door the wall knowing this was what I had to satisfy me for a long time. And after I got up and dressed nothing much changed. The bread was a day less fresh, clothes piled up in the dirty pile, and when I was wide awake still and perpetually I felt there was so much further to go, I wasn't sure waking up wasn't a regression from what was possible.

There is something woken up to, you're on a train that's always on time, though it's years late. Out the windows it's a mist, they're probably run-down buildings being hidden, or another world fading from sight. Wandering the corridors of the empty hotel, the night chained in the courtyard like a brutal dog.

What is killing my guts and spilling them out, like a bloody brown paper bag letting loose its liver onto the cobblestones. I have lived through all of my booby-trapped afternoons. Pecking out the eyes of the sky.

I would forget, after a few hours, that I was behind doors and windows, or, rather, that I *wasn't*.

And it would come with the finality of a suddenly slipping-away revelation. One moment, there it was, my undeniable true circumstances; the next, not even the recollection anything had occurred.

Thoughts of the past held in the flow of time. Deep slouching armchairs of hell. Lonely midnights. Boring holidays. Flowers wired to railings. Convenient moods that broke things up. Painful afternoons listening to it

rain, only rain. A defiance to bid good day to the world,  
and there finding oneself bigger than what seems to  
be. How many years so easily dispensed with. Sunlight  
slanting through Venetian blinds. The quiet recluse.  
Part chosen, part forced; part accepted, part regretted.

I don't want to be alone in the next room, I want to  
come in and join you. Standing there on one foot in the  
streaming-in sunlight. I like her better than the ones  
before. Or perhaps I have changed, see what I really  
want now. Like anyone, fear putting effort in that so  
soon will come to nothing, but I should not mind, I  
should let it be, let it just be something one moment  
there next moment gone, if that is what it wants to be.

Attend to things, raise my hand as if I have the answer,  
let the door slam and the shriek die down.

From the high windows the sunset reflected flooding  
the ruins with light. And the day that is dying has died.

As if this world were a consolation for an abyss of silent  
memories, a way to stay swimming across the limbo of  
the afternoon, excessive years left in a deserted building,

boots taken off a dozen times and then no more. He wrote down everything he could think of, it was his only contact with reality. The menace of the tormenting house, itself in a state of innocence, confronting no-one, it would be devastated to know it had grown sickly to the taste. He would find it, what he had to get down, hidden a hundred times and then offered with a hand that said take this, take this from me, it's yours.

Burned logs chewed in half by the fire. The tiny salvation of reaching morning. Bluebottles hover cautiously over spilled molasses.

Don't believe deliriums.

Same plate, same spoon, same room.

Chucked fags surrounding the high-heels of hotel whores exploring reflections in a chunk of glass in the sad heavy rain. The world will go on dreaming.

The vigilant dawn.

The visceral roses that grow spikes out are lost in a fog I am pleased to call my thinking. Thoughts float upon the surface of my mind like that unpleasant foam that scums up on dirty canals full of old rusting bicycles and cookers tipped in by short-trousered little urchin kids who run away. The weeping willows bend down their boughs to the filthy water and tickle with their twig tips slimy leeches and sticklebacks, here on the towpath of a stagnant forgotten mind. Only in winter, with snow on the ground, and the water frozen over and coots and moorhens skid-walking, is it at least a delightful journey, winding behind the backs of houses where boats haven't been moored for a hundred years or more and old old picnic tables upside down and buckets with holes and broken deckchairs live. I used to walk this towpath as a child, fearing a bigger kid would run up and push me in, but generally liking that it was mostly an abandoned way, where only old men walking old dogs chuntered along and sometimes smiled at you as people do out in the countryside where passing of people is rare enough for a greeting without it becoming a monotonous obligation, as it must have done in cities.

There were rats in our garden bigger than cats, but I don't think I ever saw more than a horrible pink tail disappearing into the undergrowth. Mum said they came from the canal. I touch down on memories like



flat pebbles skimmed across lakes or not so much lakes as big quarry holes filled with water like dirty sandy baths the sand monster has forgotten to pull the plug out of after he has had his bath. Our feet sunk into the oozing suck of the dredge marsh petrol rainbows stretched out over the surface of every puddle. What dreams I had then, what dreams I nursed. What dreams? I forget, I mean I forget holding on tight to any dreams all there was was the thing that interested me before the next thing came along. My biggest goal was to leave, to get out of this place, to go to the big city, though I don't know what I expected to find there. Perhaps friends, here in this city in which I hear on the news today a young woman's skeleton was discovered in her flat sitting in front of the television, which was still on despite the three years that had passed, her armchair surrounded by Christmas presents.

But I am a king in my own way, better than a king, in that no-one bothers me and all I have to think about is the mystery of my own inertia, now the disenchantment I thought would kill me has itself worn off the way the enchantment did, slowly, like mould grows inside a cup. And, like God after creating the universe, I find myself at an almighty loose end, dunno what to do with myself tonight an eternity. Well let's see. I could go out into the night with a torch and look under rocks, or I

could go and look in the bathroom mirror to see if I remember yet the face I have. If I am not just coughing all day with no time in-between to ponder, then I am lying on cushions on the floor trying to decide whether to let my eyes close and go to sleep or whether to pick up a book and read it. Or I may with some effort raise myself to my feet and go and sit at the desk, where I will stare mindlessly at a pair of scissors lying there and wonder if it would be possible to cut off a finger with them.

Coughing, coughing. The middle of the night. Goals reduce down to maybe the cough will be gone in a week, that all of life is nothing but a cough, a cough that takes over all of life, a cough that when it goes will provide a life without a cough in it, that will be a life full of possibility again, yet that life with a cough in it at least was absorbed, there was nothing else to think about and do but the cough, when it goes I will have to make my own way, I will have to put some effort in, or, rather, not and feel guilty about it, as if I am wasting away. It seems better to waste away through nothing I can help, a cough that won't let me do much else than be a cough and think about a cough and a cough going and what a glorious thing it will be when it is gone the cough. When there is no cough I look for something more, but when there is the cough I look only to the

end of the cough, as if not having a cough any more is the greatest thing I could achieve.

Perhaps there is a heroic story to be found in having a life so much less than the average, a life of peering out of the window, of looking at the sunset, of waiting for a cough to go, of drawing a finger through the dust, of hardly being here, yet not knowing where else.

How will I set down the great story hung up like a hat on a peg? When all I survey is a dining-room table, a mug with the handle broken off, and a dirty saucepan, when all my coats in the closet smell a little grubby, and my one pair of shoes has holes. How long the daffodils last! What value for money. But what does an insect own? What does a bird need?

I can wait listening to nothing much as if it was plenty, and have it be plenty, open-ended, itches to scratch, the sound of scratching, and more waiting. Blood wells up in a fresh scalpel-sliced wound an inkwell for a sharpened rook's feather. The shabby man trying to recognise himself in shop-window reflections, picking up bruised abandoned fruit off the market floor ahead of the dustcart, looking through old shoeboxes piled up around lampposts. How will they appraise the debt I owe by the manner I pay it back? Will it all be as clear as day to them?

When I thought I was just sitting there doing nothing,

staring into space, just out of sight asteroids were colliding, planets revolving, while the clock tick-tocked on my mantelpiece and the cogs gradually tooth in tooth turned, and I sat there watching small flies troop across my desk, thunderflies before the storm, and then, without the least intimation in all that time, I'm back on the case, and actually I was never not on it with all my lolling around and nodding off, that was me simply digesting a big dinner I ate fifteen years ago or more, and I never suspected it, I just carried on like one going gradually blind, who tries to get a fix on how his face looked just before the final curtain fell.

All those shiny objects I kept a polish to, it must have seemed important. The bird singing now knows I am listening, at four in the morning before the dawn comes, I think the glow of my desk lamp must look like a nugget of gold sparkling on the black tarmacadamed road to a bird flying the length of this street. And so this man sits thinking like a lighthouse keeper of forgotten things, that show themselves at first as vague shapes forming out of the smoke of blown-out candles. So much has been forgotten. What to make of a man's life, who can make so little of it himself? And yet, by dwelling on the hazy shapes details emerge. It is a wonder to have the hazy shapes. In clouds, drawn with a finger in dust without thinking, sometimes in a sound, an unexpected

sound in the middle of the night. Reminds of things not anywhere in his mind any more, in my mind that is, since it is no-one else's mind, that being another of the things he forgets, that I have to remind him about, though when alone, as most of the time he is, it hardly matters whether he is he or I or I am him or me. This seems, the least of it.

So pardon me if I lapse, or speak as though I had no body and were a disembodied voice, because my sense of place is out-of-place, as one asleep and sleepwalking through the day.

Lately, on the horizon has come a sense of flowing into a strange shape, of having passed beyond waiting, and so I naturally wonder whether what I have waited for has come and it is just a matter of recognising it. But if you ask me what I have been waiting for, I cannot answer with any clarity, and to try to define it now would be to place form on what never had form, save that I routinely remarked that I would know it when I saw it. However, I had not taken much account of the idea that it might arrive without me seeing it, that I might only sense its arrival and would have to go around feeling for it with my eyes closed. But one thing was clear – was it? – was I still waiting? It is possible to cease one's waiting for no better reason than one has tired of it, it no longer offers anything of esoteric interest,

to wait, wait all one's life for this thing of which you know only that you will know it when you see it. Yes, perhaps I was simply tired of the entire façade, this man who was waiting, so earnestly waiting, who spent his life waiting. Perhaps I was waiting merely for something to happen, as a hibernating creature awaits the warmth of a spring breeze delving its fingers into its woodpile, or the buzz of early bumblebees, and it was something akin to this that awoke me from my waiting, but it had already passed on by the time the waiting was over and I never got a chance to see what it was that ended the wait. Venus may be shooting rays at Pluto for all I know, and it was this I was waiting for, or something even more distant that I have proved sensitive to. What now?

If I have stopped waiting, let us say given up my wait, whether because it was futile or because futility serves better than banging bricks together as a way of cracking nuts when you have cotton wool in your ears, or some such nonsense . . . and so onward . . . to *what*?

As fleas have cats on their back, there is a ladder to climb here. I am stuck, but I do know what I expected, and with a little imagination I dare say I could conjure up out of the thin air and marginal circumstances I have surrounded myself with some semblance of what I sought like one who screws his eyes up in a vain attempt to focus.

There is a bird out of the window I could shoot, its song is so dull. And it is still dark so he intrudes on the silence of the night, my silence. Go to bed, he tells me, go to bed, you have left it altogether too late. But there is a natural incline in the tiredness one has dragged through the day that levels out when the eyes begin to flicker shut but one trudges on. I sometimes wonder whether I had to work hard to have so little in my head, a useful amnesia easily shaken off but indulged, looking where fingers point. And out there the great big black night, distant goods trains rumbling clackety clack clackety clack, and the bird you could have shot keeps time and is no longer obtrusive but is finally etched on the soundscape of the night, and as you still your breaths in tune with it it sinks into the night and you're not sure whether you can hear it any more, and the night is dead silent.

I wonder if I might die this year. It comes over me, this thought, this feeling, I wonder, will it be this year? And I think of all the things not done, all there is to do, and wonder why I don't make haste to do them, or regret more the things I haven't done or the person I haven't become.

And I wonder what I have become, after all. I know this much, I must have done something to be able to blow away these concerns like a cobweb in the corner, to have them disperse, and I think I have become something simply forgetful, something light even when it seems burdened and weighed down, and dying comes to me like just sitting down and shutting the eyes for a moment, a cup of tea set down at my side, and not opening them again. And that is all. I am gone. And the room and its contents are for someone else to deal with. Someone will pour away that cold tea, which will probably have a scab of slime over it, or may even have evaporated down to a hardened film. Or maybe my eyes will open, and the tea will be lukewarm, still a worthy drink, and I gulp it down, and follow it with more similar days, remaining substantially alone, and for the most part not concerned, blowing the concerns away and falling into a light oblivion, warm as the womb is warm, not knowing whether I'm going backwards or forwards, just suspended in a warm nowhere. But will I know the time, when it comes, will I have time for what is, after all, one of the few goals I would like to fulfil, to leave no possessions, to be a corpse in a bare room, nothing under the bed, nothing in shoeboxes on the high shelves, save perhaps a handful of things, a few manuscripts I wrote I imagine worthwhile, photographs



of me at various stages of life, and then that is it, nothing more. Nothing treasured, nothing collected, just the barest marks of a life lived in the mind and words, with a face to put to them.

And I think of all the things I never did, the wife and children I never had, the places I never lived, the languages I never learnt, the people I never spent much time with, the things I momentarily saw as my life tumbling into formation at last, the coming about of the life I desired, that I got excited about, briefly, until it became obvious it was not going to turn out that way, that fate had made a fool of me again for wanting what was dangled before me, and I think now I can hardly remember those things, passed like shapes seen for a short while in the clouds . . . it's not such a difficult thing to see that we are dogs trying to dig up the edges of our reality, dogs left alone in a room trying to get out.

Water cannot hold its ripples for long, they subside, easy to make some more but they're different ripples, and so the placid surface that is always returned to, which holds no memories, is the place I return to. It is not as if I have to hold this stillness still, as I once thought, it is more that I can't be bothered to lift my hand to drop a pebble in. I thought it would take strict discipline to stop constantly disturbing the mind, but in the end it is achieved just as well through lethargy.

That canal bank in the wintertime, gazing at mattress springs coiling up out of the ice.

We said goodbye long ago, without saying it. Leave nothing, save the few things previously mentioned, without the corpse. Go away to die, take a tent to some remote region and lie down and die in it while a storm rages outside. Be eaten by animals. A friend thinks, I must give him a ring, but the urge passes. It is as I would want it.

Well it is only natural to want to die when you feel you are largely finished anyway, when you have sat through enough dull days with a chirpy expression on your face telling yourself there is a little bit here that is okay and a little bit there, only every so often being made to face it, the dissatisfaction you dredge up every time you throw your bucket down into the depths of you, which by now are pretty near the surface, welling up like slurry from a sinkhole ready to explode. Oh yes, and there is a violence in you too, a violence you hardly dare look in the eye, that you try to keep a cap on. A dangerous violence, because with it comes a sense of being in control of something at last, being able to affect something, if only to make widows and orphans, mostly though just a seething beast sitting in a corner hunched up breathing in a peculiar soft slow rhythm through clenched teeth. And I see myself attacking

for no reason, to satiate my nature. And in this rage consummate this lurking violence, but instead I just sit watching the beast inside of me out of the beast's eyes breathing the beast out of the beast's mouth, simmering down, holding it all within, for I am stronger than the beast, and I absorb the beast's energy taking the beast away and leaving me capable of anything I will. But I will nothing, I just savour the feeling of being capable of anything, and I know the times will change because they have already changed, though nothing outwardly has moved.

Did I just want to see what it was like, when I walked off into solitude, oh years ago now. Or was there little choice in the matter, that I couldn't have done anything about it had I tried. My saving grace is that I know it will pass, seeing my situation thus, pass and put a happier complexion on things, but certainly, while I am here, let me say that this feels all there is, that this feels the true base of my reality, for all I will deny it later, and betray my present self for a few drops of hope. Every time, I sell him out, who crawls through the desert, who dares to look life in the eye and suffer because suffering is all he's got. Even now the ridiculous angels are fanning their wings all about, raising the dust, and as if they were invited, as if I should be glad to see them. And I cry at them, 'But what about *this*? What

is the answer for this?' But they'll placate me, tell me I am drinking of the fountain of delusions, and I'll see it their way, as always.

I hate myself for abandoning this wilderness, this barren landscape where nothing grows, that I know is the real world that I disguise from my eyes because I do not want to suffer. At least it is an honest place, where God is not good, and the world is not a happy place, when I see it clearly. It's never entirely gone. A moment standing in the garden looking at forget-me-nots grown up splendid and blue in a place they have never grown before, thriving without my help, without my water, and I look at them and hear the birds twittering, a few gulls high overheard crying, and ladybirds look perfectly content wandering around the rims of flowerpots, and the daffodils starting to wither to make way for the poppies springing up at their feet, and for a moment it is a beautiful world, and I am happy to sit down alone in a chair and read a few poems in a book, the sun hazy, and I recognise it as one of many many lazy afternoons when all is right in the world. So how then do I descend into the torment of life, the hours and hours stretching out. Where does this agitation well up from, how does it subsume me and persuade me life is dead and broken, and this is the real reality of it. But I see through it even while inwardly

acknowledging it as the way of things, this swirling malfeasance that comes. I have seen too much to go back to that joyous city, which in any case is an illusion. But an illusion can provide happiness, this much I have to concede. It must be important that I know what I know, that I do not live blindly or unconsciously, but it does mean there can be no going back. I am locked into a course and I must see it through.

There is one thing I know, I am stronger than any devils. It has taken me a good long while to get this way, it is something I have applied my will to, though I was forced into it as much as chose it. Oh I chose it alright, I remember that much, I cannot pretend that away to forgetfulness. I know how to seethe. And pity any devil that approach me then. If I apply my mind I can at least put to work these forlorn moments to build up the blackness and forget my other self. No devil possesses me, I become what I am, broken black wings.

I hide it away, I cast my features into a smile, I lighten my countenance, I walk away with them as if I am one of them, back to the joyous city if needs be. But my pupils are black holes and I listen out like a hawk. And then I am alone again, there was never anybody there, the visitation was myself upon myself, yet somebody left, and took with them my hatred of life, took away my dark heart, took themselves away,

and left me with a smile upon my face, a light heart, and the newfound knowledge that is ages old, that I never lost just misplaced, somewhere nearby. And my eyes flit from side to side out into the darkness of the room, sitting by the single lamp, letting them be if they're there, letting them know, if they're there, that in a moment I shall rise, and they should be gone, I give them time to go, I even say it, as a command, 'Go now, go now.'

I want to leave some idea of who I am, I want to break into your consciousness and show you, I want you to see with your own eyes. I've come back from somewhere, you see, and there is a desperation in me that I don't have too long left. I have come back from somewhere else, back here, a place to tell it, a place where, though confined, I am not closely watched. I'm not lying, I'm not, about the urgency, the sense that I don't have the time or control left that I had when I swanned around setting nothing down, as if I could do it anytime, that time just stretched out, and I did nothing, I just sat and idled the days away, dreaming, daydreaming, trying to figure something out, which I soon forgot. And I thought, how can I tell it by simply recounting a sequence of time-bound facts, not that any could be verified, a life history, born on this day at this time in this year. It was raining outside. Was

it? I don't even know that. The paint was peeling off the walls there were heating pipes running all around the walls the ceiling was high there was a smell of old cardboard there was a drainpipe there was water going down it gurgling down the drainpipe. Am I making this up? No, I was there, I saw it, I heard it. Let me tell you, seeing as you have convinced yourself you have forgot. Yes, but all I remember, or I should say what I remember most is a childhood of isolation, of friends I didn't see enough, of staring out of the window to see if there was anyone coming for me, to ask can Stephen come out to play today? And I would hear it with joy in my being upstairs in my bedroom. I remember it I remember it. But I remember more than this the days and days when no-one walked with their bikes up the gravel drive to ask can Stephen come out to play, and I stared and stared out of my window at the telegraph pole, and only in winter was it alright, when the winter scenery was something new to look at, or in a storm, when no-one would be out to play. They would be at home like me. Or not really like me, they would have brothers and sisters, or have friends around who came around before it began to rain. But mostly, the rain was company for me, the pouring rain, I loved the pouring rain bucketing it down sheeting it down at first it would be spitting and mum would rush to get the washing in

off the line and finish the drying round the gas fire and then dad would come in from work saying it's pissing it down out there. And my frogs loved the rain belting it down splashing up the water in the washing-up bowl they were in by the back door. I would forget anything that had been bothering me when it rained hard and heavy and for ages and ages, and the darkness that came too, drawing a big brooding cover over the houses, and lightning and thunder oh how I loved the rain. But when it was sunny all I remember is standing and looking and wondering how many more days would I be alone. So you see, time has passed very quickly though it seemed to drag, as time does drag when there is nothing to do but stare out of the window.

I have a sense of something greater that I could at any moment turn to, as if I have been gone, distracted, the merest of moments, by an entire life I can barely now recall, as dreams that made me sweat with the chase are lost no sooner than I have tangled bedclothes to bind me in a cocoon fallen prey to another world that is in itself a dream.

The life you think you are living happened so long ago so much else has happened since that I could not



even conceive of a way to tell, save to say, you are so much more that you do not know, have faith, have faith, just look a little longer at your feet, at your forearms, and realise, you have not been born yet, you cannot die if you have not been born, you are a thought of mine, and as a thought of mine you are for ever.

Do you think I understand? Think again, you share in my mystery, I am merely of a different order. You yearn to know, but do you think I do not yearn to know also? Oh realise the seriousness of this, this is all I ask, sit down at the crossroads, weep as you take it in, this miracle, this accident.

I try to wipe the slate clean even at this late hour. He's staring into space he doesn't know where he is and that's because we've left him, and more went before us.

Away they go, imaginary selves. I'll not look.

Writing, in the dark, just a dim circle of light half in it half out it. Did I leave a demon constrained to a triangle? The thought comes to me, with no more fanfare than one who thinks did I leave the gas on in the kitchen? It would have been twenty years ago. The mind plays tricks, best to rely on my sense of doing things right at the time. Absent-minded I may be now, but then I

was not. Demons! Why did I consort with demons?

But that is all in the past. Well, everything is all in the past. So why then do you demons visit me now? Have I requested your presence? I have, haven't I. And now I must pretend not to know why so that you can tell me, is that it? Is that our little game to play? Oh, the rules, they come flooding back, do not think you will get one over on me. Oh, you're right, I forget, you *like* me, you speak among yourselves about me, you have never forgotten me. Yes, but do not think I have lost my edge just because I *have* lost my edge, because I will show you quite plainly that my edge is and always was . . . how easily and quickly I can find it again. Ah, I see you stand back several paces, I take that as the true measure of your respect.

Old fart talking to himself again, remembering times of power, and the caution it chastens a man with. Oh thank the day I got my fingers burnt, since now it was over and I knew how bad it was to be, I had a measure, I knew how far to fill myself with darkness and still be in control, and how much I could exceed it and how long I had to banish everything in my sight, and I knew the degree to which I could rely on accidents and coincidence to make up for my oversights, as if by the luck of the Devil . . . and then I was free, truly free, in my bound dark heart.

And so where am I now, demons, you tell me!

You know where you are, master, you know. You are lost.

A good answer, one you hope to persuade me of, I dare say. There is no need, I am indeed lost, what you say is true, I know it.

Do you wish us to remain silent, master?

Do you wish to speak?

Yes.

Then speak.

We have watched you grow and develop, from the shadows. We have seen you fall and not get up, but just lie there. We have witnessed your loss of purpose, as it gradually corroded your heart over the years. We have seen you become ever more hemmed in. Yet, your strength has never left you, your strength has increased, it is far greater now than it was the last time we spoke, seventeen years ago.

Thank you. I agree with your assessment. A pitiful state, a waste of talent, a squandering of time, yet a strength within that exceeds what I set out to achieve. Only nothing, nothing at all, to apply it to . . . save endurance. Are you to drop a little hint?

It is not for us to tell you your purpose, it is not for us to provide your direction, you know us better than that.

So why are you here?

Because you called out in the night: 'Anyone, is there anyone?'

I see. I remember you. I can tell you now that at first I feared you, because I no longer fear you, and I cannot say you ever did anything to make me fear you, save what demons do to show their power like a peacock its feathers. Who would criticise a lion for roaring?

The silence of the night, which is foggy outside, brings a simplicity. I sit down here at my accustomed hour looking at the shimmering waters flowing through me, and am happy to be nowhere and to be going nowhere. I am at once confined between narrow planes and free to roam anywhere without moving. So naturally my life has seeped into my imagination, leaving behind the sack of the body. I used to think the world of the imagination was second best, consolation, until I found it easy not to be where I was, to soar out there into the blackness of space. The impressive solidity of the physical world, where time dripped into stalactites of longing, where I could rap my knuckles on a door and feel the texture of things and hear the calls of birds, was in my mind anyway. Magic, I came to realise, was our ability to delude ourselves we had been the cause

of certain isolated effects, missing that we had been the cause of all effects, that there was not one thing in our lives that we had not been the cause of. When things didn't turn out as we had hoped, it was because we did not want them to, because dashed hopes sink deep into us whereas fulfilled hopes are soon forgotten. Why would we want such experiences to sink deep within us? Because, while lying wounded, we have time to think.

I know it is close by when a chill apprehension comes over me. But I have come to prefer vague shapes to defined ones, blurry shapes that accept better the cast of my thought.

My world is very sparse. It is not enough to imagine oneself into such a world, one has to be there, one has to realise that imagination is real, one has to let go of where one is for where one might be. I don't know why I should create such a sparse world, with no people save those who come out of the fog at night, who may not even be human.

You have thrown yourself away, and, strange as it may seem, it is this that is your accomplishment. And so the memories of childhood drift in, as far removed now as the light from a star that no longer exists. I have lost so much, yet I have lost nothing, the world is still in its museum. It is as it ever was in its various times. That's happening now, what happened so long ago.

When you no longer see people socially it is easy to be something else, to forget the conventions you conform to in their presence, to slip off and become something none of them knows or would recognise.

And the longer one spends alone, the more one can simply expire during the day, and do nothing of any worth, to live as an undiscovered corpse for days and days on end.

The remnants of a life once lived sometimes die out slowly, blinking like sluggish tired cat's eyes being lulled into sleep gazing at embers in the grate glowing orange but inescapably winding down to warm ash ever so slowly as an inevitability if not stoked or added to. And this is the way the world is disappearing from me.

I must, I suspect, await news like a man living in a tall tower in a wilderness scans the horizon for a post horse dispatched by the Emperor. But otherwise watches the moon on the waters flowing ever eastward cooking small meals and drinking tea on the dusty floor wondering whether he ever actually lived or was it all

just a dream, and the people he knew lost for ever in a structure that crumbles to a pile of dust.

Everything fragments as if it never was and never could be, the dark cold night falls with an icy pressure that crushes ants to frosted delicacies and silences the grasshopper's song for another year and the unharvested tomatoes rot on the vines hanging like bruised memories until the rain washes them into mud.

Nobody can hide from it, the statement the day makes.

I sink away from life, I sit and pull away from everything I have known, I throw away the ties. I keep trying to think of a solution but more and more the solution appears to be to accept it completely, to just sit and sink, like staying in a dream knowing it is not real. The birds the butterflies the flowers the insects, they all seem happy enough here, I feel on the brink of learning what they know, of giving up on consciousness to sink into unconsciousness, to drift like a dandelion seed.

There was a little shop I used to love visiting as a kid called Rookery Trading, it was the only shop in the

street not boarded up or pulled down, it held out against the bulldozers. It sold everything, it had fishing rods and fishing nets it had cowboy hats and sheriff stars it had joke dog poo and itching powder it had penknives and car jacks it had little jeweller's screwdrivers, walnuts with dancing figures inside them, garden gnomes and tyres and it was all crammed into this tiny shop and I'd stand outside its window peering in at the array of things hundreds and hundreds of different things knives stuck in a piece of bark and clockwork robots and air pistols and peashooters and enamel badges and Halloween masks and things I didn't want but were fascinating like casting reels and fish-flies and tinsnip lures. Sometimes if I had a few shillings to spend I'd venture inside past the flowerpots and wellington boots and carpet tacks and there would be bicycle wheels hanging from the ceiling and nets with footballs in them and bicycle pumps and hot-water bottles and anything you could hang from a ceiling was hanging from the ceiling. You had about the same space to move around in there as in a telephone box and the owner would be behind his counter surrounded by more and more goods and he was peering out at you his fat porky face and scruffy unshaven chin and glasses mended by Elastoplast on the hinge and he'd be there all day hardly moving surveying his realm behind watering cans and Action



Man and water pistols and spud guns and plastic lemons and chains and padlocks and nails of all sizes and cheap writing pads from India and mousetraps and hamster wheels and dog-bone biscuits and slug pellets and a box of military tunic buttons and old coins with people in fezes on em and he'd say, 'You after anything son?' and you'd say, 'Jus lookin.' He didn't mind people coming into his shop just to look at what he had he didn't seem too bothered whether he sold anything or not all day it was his life to sit there in a knocked-down street surrounded by his worldly possessions and anybody could come in and have a look and there'd always be stuff cheap enough for any kid to buy just to buy something. Little reels of caps for cap guns was a favourite of mine. Don't cost much and you can always get a use out of them. But if I didn't have any money I'd just look in the window, he'd done it out so people could look without even having to come in. And he'd change it around and make little scenes with toy soldiers. The whole row of little shops was being knocked down to make way for Sainsbury's and a multiplex, his was the only one still open all the rest were boarded up they couldn't demolish them until he'd gone. Behind there was an acre of rubble, though you couldn't go there as it was fenced off and had guard dogs. Rookery Trading added a simple richness to a child's day. You see shops

like it even now, they're stripped of their goods but you can tell by the light-faded circus posters, a bit of green Lego on a dusty dead wasp shelf, and somehow they survive empty, they don't become laundrettes or hairdressers, they just get dustier and dustier and workmen dig up the pavement laying yellow pipelines outside for months on end like they don't have to be in a hurry to finish outside an empty shop and the street lights always fall darker there and the moon reflected in the window falls on the face of a clown and walking by at night you get a feeling in the pit of your stomach like when the bus went over the humpback bridge and you know you come from a town of dumped tyres and rubble, where even the fair was mud-spattered and weary and the best fun of the fair was creeping behind the canvas booths and wandering where the caravans were parked and ferocious dogs were tethered to iron stakes, where you could find bits of pink and green fluff and cartridge cases and toffee apples laid out on a tray to set like Dalek eye-sticks.

Great big blue skies and walking for miles, finding your own peace out in hayfields as the houses grow smaller and the car noise dampens down, the big sky flop on

the ground and look up at the cloudless blue that sings of the great future to come in growing up, never lose the sense of this day out wandering alone when lying back hidden in the hay is enough and what more is there? When you're lost and alone, just lie back, how can you lose the big blue sky on a day like this, and remember it on cloudier days or imagine it from a bit of blue poking through.

And remember this too: no matter how much you forget it's never far away, it'll come back. And so I lay on the ground looking up at the blue sky and all the days seemed long and bright.

The shiny black berries of the deadly nightshade, I wanted to touch them and pluck them and squash them in my fingers but I kept my distance from the plant, this was a plant to respect, I would stand there for ages just staring at the berries like a treasure I didn't want to own. I loved its name, deadly nightshade, who invented that, what a beautiful name. And I would take friends to see the deadly nightshade I had found, and we stood around staring at it in wonder, if we wanted to poison anyone, ever, here was our secret flower, secret too in that it would keep our secret, no-one would ever

know, the plant was too proud to tell who had availed themselves of its berries, and the deadly nightshade was a dark master I visited, I sat nearby and tied knots in long sticks of grass, glancing up at the black berries, I held my hand underneath them not touching perhaps daring one to fall into my palm like an evil penny from a witch.

Look now, see the clinker strewn along the disused railway line, there's dad standing on the footplate raking it out, remember that little seat he sat you in clamped to the crossbar on his big bike, riding back home from an afternoon in the countryside collecting dried horse manure from fields stuffing it in a sack and there it is slung over the handlebars in front of you. It had a red and green tartan pattern that little seat, and look, stop dad stop! There on the verge as you're riding home is treasure, it's a jay's feather, you're going to keep that for a decade or more, it will be one of your favourite possessions of all time, and then you'll lose it, and it won't matter. There it is look, you've spotted it. That was put there for you, do you not realise? That was yours to keep, a present from a world that loved you and welcomed you. If you don't remember, you will,

you will. In tears you will remember. And then it will be gone, and it won't matter.

The wind is howling, I am back. I cannot say I have returned, as I never went anywhere.

And rising up from behind a ruined wall in a demolished house there is a stream of bubbles being blown by a little boy with his bubble dipper just bought for a pocketful of pennies and away the bubbles go some catching and bursting with a soapy plop on the rubble and the bubbles float through the ruins like the probes of sentient life exploring a new planet, and all of life is short trousers and scabby knees, and girls and careers are as yet unrealities, all there is are the swallows swooping about the sky and telling us summer is here. He just blows his bubbles, and it is enough, until the shadows of thin dogs lengthen and it is time to go home.

To a child the long shadows as the sun goes down are a delight, I remember standing there looking at my giant self and shuffling my feet forward to watch this big man back off, bending him up the wall until nose-to-nose why he was no bigger than me.

Higher and higher on the swings getting a rhythm going, some said if you went up too far you'd swing right round so I'd slacken off when it felt a little too high. A dour playground in the park, a sandpit full of turds and a paddling pool full of broken bottles. But it was a good place round and round on the roundabout wooden slats you'd jump your bottom onto when you'd got up speed, a slide that seemed enormous that some kid had fell off the top of and cracked his head wide open. I don't remember anyone I played with. I liked to go there as the sun was setting and be alone with my sadness wandering around the rectangular pool looking in someone had put tadpoles in. I'd sit on the roundabout on my own just edging it round with one foot or maybe I'd get off and push it and get it going fast and jump on and sit still at the centre watching the world turn round nothing else to do. I'd walk over to the witch's hat and see if I could get it spinning on my own you really needed kids crawling all over it to get the balance for its lopsided spin. I'd go over and sit on the high end of the seesaw and *clonk* down it'd go and that was it for the seesaw the seesaw always rubbed in my loneliness. Then over to the sandpit and maybe there'd be a young dog digging a hole and I'd go and play with him and throw a stick for him and he'd bring it back and he'd sit with me in the sandpit his long panting tongue

all happy and dangling. And I'd walk along the railings so I could go through the bent one it was more fun to go through the bent railing than the gate though I don't know now why that was you could walk all over going through bent railings you could go through the bent railing that led down to the canal and walk along the towpath and then out another bent railing by the undertakers and then you could go through the bent railing by the market and come out by the bent railing by the shops kids travel everywhere by bent railings, how soon you forget that as you grow up and can't get through the railings any more.

I liked peering down into the cellars of pubs when the draymen were delivering the barrels. I liked listening to the humming of electricity pylons out in the fields. I wandered around new houses that were being built when the workmen had knocked off for the day, looking out the back window onto fields imagining it was my house.

On a school trip to Cannock Chase the teacher had us draw pinecones and fir trees and deer antlers. He took us to look at the Bottomless Bog. For weeks afterwards I pondered the Bottomless Bog, sinking down and down into the mud and silt and never getting to the bottom. At school in lessons I'd daydream about the Bottomless Bog and imagine bog monsters crawling up

out of the bog and stalking the night. When there was a high wind one night and some tiles went clattering down onto the ground I thought there must be a bog monster up there any minute it would come crashing through my window and I imagined it so intensely that the window crashed in and the bog monster lurched in me under the covers fingers crossed.

When I remember the buzzing of great big bumblebees floating through my long sunny childhood summers, I remember myself into it always on my own, and though there were friends I played with it is not this I remember at all, when I look back I see myself alone picking king-cups by green ponds, alone brushing my hands through cuckoospit in the long grass, alone sitting in holes in the ground, alone exploring the grassed-over rusty railway lines. I don't seem to want to remember the friends I had, as if they let me down or I let them down. And when I look back to my twenties and thirties, it is as if I have taken the people out of them to remember instead a pure solitude. I am alone in a fast-moving sea of people and events, I am not a part of it, and I am not noticed. It goes on around me but I have taken myself away. Even at the time I was aware of this uninvolved



being, but I did not think it would be his memory of events that persisted. The self that played the games and loved the people owns nothing, he flattered and was flattered he caressed and was caressed, he got excited, enthusiastic, disappointed, despairing, but he has left little trace. Only the lonesome voyager remains, and he is almost imperturbable. His is the quiet nodding of the head, no more details needed. And then the people come flooding back, all of them, even the most seemingly insignificant encounters, and especially those you have loved but forgotten you loved and still love.

Let me touch on what I've felt in old houses, and that mouthful of dust you taste that rises in a cloud when old walls are pulled down and the plaster and bricks are still held together by five layers of wallpaper, the house is pulled down but the spirit of the room hanging on that bit longer in flowery wallpaper. Winding the clocks on the mantelpiece before going up to bed, my dad in his dishevelled pyjamas, his white hair awry, his jaw held like Popeye his bristly face unkempt, it's almost as if he hasn't seen me sitting here on the sofa, or is ignoring me, his pyjama rope hanging down. He turns round as if holding onto an invisible rail encircling him, twisting

himself around jerkily. He gives me a smiling almost laughing shrug, what can you do eh? He doesn't say it, but it's what he means. In that shrug is all the same acceptance of life's foibles he had as a younger man, when he was well, and I was a child, but if I wait just a moment I will see it is feigned, and he'd rather cry, or just sit down and have a proper conversation with me, but we keep to our well-worn distance, and, believe me, I want to reach out to him, but I can't, it's all too late. I wish he would stay that bit longer, so everything can change, so I can overcome my long-held inhibitions, my only doing what I've always done, never taking his hand, never putting my arm around him and saying 'I love you dad.' I watch as he shuffles to the door frame, for a moment he stops, it looks like he is going to turn round and face me, but he just says 'Put the lights off when you come up' and I feel the anger rise up inside me for having been told this so many times, as if I can't be trusted to do it without being told, and I answer back sarcastically, 'No I'll leave them on all night.' I feel his rage about which he is too weak to do anything but stifle it as he shuffles to the foot of the stairs. I hear mum call down, 'Tell him to unplug the television when he comes to bed.' He mumbles it for me to hear, he's given up, just fulfilling an obligation, he's told me, I've reacted in the customary way. And I sit in the silence, listening

to the stairs creaking as he's going up, thinking back to how strongly I hated him that day, and how it bent us all out of shape and we cannot get out of it now, and have long since stopped trying. Shattered lives, an aftermath filtered down and trickled into moments, an apocalypse that came in childhood without warning and departed leaving the rest of life to see it as such, to recover the broken pieces of the soul, some buried in the deepest abyss, which were in fact the pieces I chased with the greatest urgency first of all, though it unleashed the hatred the beast feeds upon. To this end I forgot about any other life and became what my plunge made of me. I needed to know how dark the darkness was inside me. Still I feel this power I fastened onto, and, curiously, at the time I did not consider my life was any different to anyone else's, I took it as what must happen one day in childhood, that everything is blasted apart and hatred wells up in an eruption that leaves the walls standing and the surface appearances intact, but rips your heart out and then says here is the next day and the next day, and the next day, wear out the years my son and I will show you the rubble of this town before you're done.

And a blackbird sings, it sings *I was not born I will not die*  
*I was not born I will not die*. And chuckles.

And green caterpillars, we more often have a green caterpillar crawling on us than we realise, that is in danger of being squashed if it remains on us for much longer, and is going nowhere as there is nowhere to go on us that is any use to a caterpillar, unless they are heading for our ears. I notice them more on my black trousers than on my blue trousers. And as a child I was always finding red money spiders on me but never see them these days. Adults jumped about excited when I found one on me exclaiming that it was lucky, if I left it alone and didn't harm it I'd come into some money soon. How much, I'd ask, but their knowledge of the red money spider ended there. Mum said she had never found a red spider on her in all her born days and gramp said that's why you're poor Marge.

A red money spider was the luckiest thing in the world back then, luckier than getting the biggest half when pulling the wishbone of the Christmas turkey. What a wonderful ritual that was, almost faded from my mind. Curl your little finger around one side of the greasy old wishbone and mum or dad or gramp would

take hold of the other side and you'd pull. I saw later on that it was easy to tell which way the bone was going to break and I'd pick it up so I'd get the big side and that was when the wishbone had no more luck. But I still closed my eyes and made a wish and mum'd say have you made your wish yet and I'd say shush I'm making it. I can't remember any of my wishes. I preferred the red money spider, pretty little thing crawling on my arm or my blazer.

It was unlucky, mum told me, to open an umbrella inside the house and to put shoes on the table. It was bad luck to put a hat on a bed and though I didn't have a hat as soon as gramp told me this I saw his face sink and I saw a coffin being manhandled down the narrow stairwell and I saw a top hat on a bed and I just thought when the undertaker's men came to take away the coffin one must have put his hat on the bed before struggling down the stairs with it. I don't think I ever saw a coffin being manhandled downstairs but I always associated narrow staircases with coffins coming down them in old houses. If you put your hat on a bed it would mean someone would die in that bed soon. I remember seeing a lot of coffins as a child.

A hearse came past our house at least once a week, you could see the coffin through the glass. Three black limousines and the hearse, every week, and it was exactly

the same when dad died except then me and mum closed the door behind us and walked out to them. When I watched the hearse go by from my bedroom window all those times as a kid I never imagined it would be exactly the same scene one day that would involve me. Or maybe I did, and that was why I found staring out of my bedroom window at this scene so creepy, in a way I couldn't explain but put down to the creepiness of the palaver of death rather than it being a scene from my future spliced many times into my childhood, as if this was something I should take note of for a reason that could only be understood with the unfolding of time, and take note of it I did, with a morbid fascination, the slowly passing black cars, men in the street taking off their hats, out of respect they said but more likely superstition, perhaps everyone sees a funeral procession as an intimation of their own death, but to me this was a scene the same every time, as if it was the same bit of film repeating every week for years, and along would come the black cars and stop outside our house one day in the future, and that would be dad in that coffin, and that would be the only difference in the film, and me and mum would come out of the house and walk down the gravel drive conscious of eyes behind every net curtain watching us, and we would step into that loop of film and be driven away to the body cooker

and the fake vicar and the meaningless smoke would go up the chimney and the bit of film from childhood melting sooty celluloid jammed in the projector like a Super 8 porno reel of dad's I once found in the attic I tried to get to run through his second-hand projector hidden at the bottom of the wardrobe I'm looking through the lens to see what's gone wrong when the film burns up from the heat of the lamp and the white light flares out and momentarily blinds me a split second after projecting naked bodies cavorting onto the retina that private screen at the back of my eyeball and I fall backwards in the fear I have done myself permanent damage like looking at the sun through a telescope and so when they said wanking makes you go blind I could see that there was a mechanism that could bring this about if you were stupid enough to stare into the lens of a projector at the very moment you burned a hole in a porno film. Now the world was full of traps for the unwary, I could see that clearly as the sight gradually returned to that eye out of the bruised fiery red haze. Narrow escape from a booby trap laid by a devious god. From that moment on I took care not to be a victim of a malicious irony I saw coiled up like razor-sharp springs ready to whirl off like wrist-slicing Catherine-wheels the moment you lifted up some object you should not be lifting, as if everything was primed to go off.

A bird got in the house and was flapping around head-butting the window. We all had to come out of the house and leave the back door and windows open, we stood in the yard peering in like there was the most evil firework in there and the blue touchpaper was lit. A man passed in the road and saw us standing out there in the yard at the side of the house like fearful peasants and dad seemed to know him and called, 'There's a bird in the house.' And the man smiled and nodded his head and went to cross himself but pretended he was waving instead with a Parkinson's hand.

When we thought the bird had escaped we went back in and dad looked up as you might for falling rafters. It was like a day out to the seaside that bird getting in the house.

I passed it on the bus one day with mum, this amazing tree. Wow mum what's that tree? That's a monkeypuzzle tree, she said. Immediately I saw the whole tree was made of monkeys holding together and staying very still. 'I can see them,' I said. 'See what?' said mum. 'The monkeys.'



Mum laughed and the fat woman behind laughed too and mum exchanged a glance and turned back to me and said 'Don't be so daft, that's just its name.'

I kept looking back as the bus sped away, no, she was wrong, it was full of monkeys making angular shapes and having the last laugh. Why would they call it the monkey puzzle tree if it wasn't monkeys making a puzzle? It was so obvious, I couldn't understand why adults couldn't see it. I took all my friends to visit it and of course they all saw the monkeys holding hands and holding tails pretending to be a tree statue. We made a game under the tree where anything we wanted would instantly come true. I said I'm a big game hunter and straight away I had an elephant gun in my hands and I went Boom! Boom!

Where? Where? everyone cried and I said '*There!* are you blind? I've just got the rhino that was charging us.' And they huddled around getting in closer to the tree looking this way and that. Boom! Boom! 'I've just got the lion,' I said. That was close, they said. And we peered up at the monkeys and they were all staring down at us and waving their tails like giant catkins. Another said, 'My turn! My turn! I'm an octopus and we're all underwater now' and he starting squiggling his arms around and we all instantly jump back and shout 'It's an octopus! It's an octopus!'

In childhood the summer days lasted for ever. Probably then is the only time we experience the lassitude we see in a dog lying in the sun between bouts of hunting and biting out fleas. Long drinks in glasses made for milkshake, creamy froth and a waxpaper straw. Time to sit and dig holes around yourself, to have a change of plan and make it a moat and fill it with water and sail a pop-bottle cap on it with a beetle for its passenger.

Some knowledge picked up in fragments from the dusty floor and pieced together tell that even now, when all is broken and beyond repair, the whole is still whole in the hands of an idiot God who must come to learn what the fragments have to tell, though it take an eternity to rake through.

Even when I was a child there was an uneasy feeling I could not place, that all of this was not mine, but me. I didn't know what to make of it, when I seemed so *small*,

falling over and scrazing my knee, trying to climb trees, picking a tortoise up and looking underneath its little legs walking air in a momentary panic.

A few saw me best on parting. I don't know why it always had to come to that. I seemed most myself on saying goodbye for ever.

Perhaps I am the Spirit of Loneliness. I know I come from a great city, I know I am recognised in the streets of that great city. I know I am far away from it now.

The stars await the ending of the illusion of the day that veils them. Just to get inside the moment like a little boy crawls inside a cardboard box. The crushing day.

The days are as long for birds as they are for me, whose lives are so much shorter. How do they keep so occupied, so alert and apparently interested in the world? As long for cats as for me, these days that bore me so but cats are content with. To sit still and just look about, why should I want it to be any more than that? How long an ant's day must be, yet he shows little sign of flagging under its weight.

Perhaps I am too complex an organism, evolved too soon for there to be anything to do. At the party early, no-one else has turned up yet.

Even the things I am sure happened have something of false memories about them, these sands are shifting all the time.

Falling pieces of tinsel in a kaleidoscope, like the kaleidoscope gramp made for me. He snipped up the coloured tinsel wrappers from the chocolates in a box of Quality Street, metallic reds and greens and blues, a few bits of gold and silver. And he encased the snippets of tinsel inside the kaleidoscope he'd made from glass and black tape. He handed it to me to look through. I had never seen anything like it before, beautiful patterns falling into one another with just a little shake. I looked through it for ages and ages sitting at the table in front of the open fire and gramp would occasionally call from his leather armchair smoking his pipe, 'Seen any good uns?'

There is a glorious day coming into bloom for ever in me, that laughs at fear of death.

This is the seat I sit in more and more frequently, and I forget I forget because I want to forget.

I have forgotten already that I'm always here.

An old-fashioned clock and watch shop in an arcade in Lima, Peru. All the clocks and watches are ticking but show different times. I stand looking, having no idea what time it is. I imagine it as a magical shop and peer through the window at the watchmaker repairing a clock. I have a room in the city with a washstand, a basin, and a jug for pouring water, an iron bedstead. I don't know what I'm doing here. I think about the clock shop back in my room at night. As I am heading back to my room an ugly woman with thick glasses says something to me in the corridor. I don't understand, my Spanish isn't very good. She cups my balls in her hand and squeezes lightly and says, 'Fucky fucky?' I decline and go to my room.

Did the beautiful woman who slept with her head on my shoulder for a thousand miles, who gazed into my eyes that starry night where the grey sand-dunes of the Atacama desert meet the sea, whose cheek I touched gently with my fingertips, who told me I was romantic, have to have been on her way to Lima to meet her fiancée to get married? I will never forget, after I had taken my backpack from the boot of the coach, meeting her eyes so briefly, she was with the man I took to be

her fiancée who wore a white suit, and his brothers or friends, and she looked nervous meeting my gaze as if she didn't want me to say goodbye in case it caused unnecessary friction, and I nodded as if to acknowledge this unspoken concern and hauled the pack on my back and turned and strode out into dusty dirty Lima not looking back. Did I read it right? It's over and done with before you can make another ending.

This book of myself must always return to its bare room. My beard grows long, my hair unkempt, I take pleasure in seeing no-one. I learnt to be more alone than I once thought wise, and then to push on further. Perhaps they will write 'Explorer' on my gravestone, though I came to a halt for many years. A life spent alone questioning the stars.

There is an old superstition that if you bid farewell to someone standing on a bridge you will never see that person again. I remember we looked down at the water and I dropped a penny and it bounced. The cut was frozen over. It began to snow, I shook the snow

from my sleeves several times and brushed it from hers. I looked at my watch to see how long before the bus was due, that is how I know we stood there exactly eleven minutes, chatting about how it was, and it was wonderful wasn't it. I admired her angora scarf, I lifted it and held it against my cheek and caught a whiff of her perfume from it. She had mittens on, red and blue and orange stripes. A tear clung to her eye, I saw as we were both leaning on the bridge wall looking at the frozen canal, snow starting to settle, I turned my head and saw the tear welling up in her eye, it looked like it was freezing over.

'All things come to an end, don't they?' she said.

'Yes ...'

'Why is that?' she asked me.

'To prepare us, I suppose,' I said.

'Why can't things just carry on as they were?'

She added, so as not to be misunderstood: 'I know they can't, but what makes it so?'

'Everything changes,' I said, 'we get caught up in wishing, forgetting we've had our wish and it came true, for a while. To wish for it to last for ever ...'

'Your bus!'

I had no time to finish what I was going to say. The bus was coming round the corner up the road. I took off my right glove and touched her frozen cheek with

my fingertips. 'Your hands are always so lovely and warm,' she said. I kissed her lightly on the lips.

'I'll always love you,' she said, mittens gripping my snowy arm, 'you know that don't you?'

'Yes. I have to go. Bye.' I dashed alongside the bus as it crossed the bridge, churning up black slush. I was climbing the stairs to the top deck as the bus pulled away and it was around the next corner before I got a chance to look back so I never knew whether she stood there to see me off or immediately walked away.

Beginnings and endings, they stick in the mind more than in-betweens. The storm has broke, it came and went, now all I hear is everything dripping. Some people make a go of it for their entire lives, or I suppose they do, they may just be like two bottles of milk on the doorstep of an empty house quietly curdling.

'Good morning Mr Crow.' I still say it. A raucous caw out the window in the wet tree.

If anything, I will remember the birds and animals I've spoken to, who have entertained me royally. Never changing their tune a whole life long, and the howling wind that seems to have a rider, the miracle that I laid my hands on her, on her breasts, lying there, moving



gently up and down, taking the greatest indulgence the dark has to offer struggling never to be forgotten, unshatterable nights checking in to the hotel of memory, our warm faces before the naked fire that set us alight, coming to cease on this shore, ceasing all the moving while all about us moved, hanging onto our lives in bodies that fit together. Love in old years sings like whales down deep and carries far.

A railway station, green walls, hanging baskets all along the platform dripping having just been watered. The excitement of waiting for a train. A crescendo of slamming doors before the off, the guard raises his flag and drops it, blowing his whistle. Dad's bright happy eyes before he was ill, his whole life ahead of him. Mum making a cake in a huge mixing bowl, she lets me take a little on the end of my finger off a spoon. It was a simple world.

'Hello Mr Crow.'

I liked the birds, I liked the trees, the wind was good, and the rain when it poured down was especially fine.

Salt spilt on the vinyl tablecloth. The salt was kept in a small crystal bowl. You took a sprinkle with your fingers. Sometimes it'd get spilt on the tablecloth and mum would throw a pinch over her left shoulder, to blind the Devil, she'd say.

The white-painted wooden windowsills were mushy if you pressed them, the condensation had got into them and if it wasn't for the thick white skin of gloss paint holding them together they'd probably have crumbled away, too tempting to poke my fingers into, but didn't want to ruin the paintwork so left them to go mushy on their own. Sometimes I'd forget while leaning my boredom elbows on the windowsill my fists holding my face up looking at the garden in the rain, kneeling sideways on a stiff-backed dining-table chair.

'If you're bored, do some drawing,' said mum, 'or look at something under your microscope.'

'Doe wanna do any drawin,' I said in a sulk, 'looked at everything under the microscope already.'

'Well would you like to shell some peas for me?'

I loved shelling peas, I could do that for a bit. I brightened up. Mum gave me a damp brown paper bag full of bulging peapods. There was an art to this, getting the peapod to split open by the application of a thumbnail. It was as satisfying as cracking open a walnut and getting the little brown brain inside to come

out whole, both hemispheres, just lying in your hand like some kind of perfect thing had happened, and I'd look at them, turning the walnut halves round in my fingers admiring my handiwork, you just knew from the sound of the crack that it was going to be a perfect one, well shelling peas was a bit like that but not as hard to get right as cracking a walnut. I'd pop a few of the smaller peas at the ends of the pod into my mouth, as they were likely to be sweet ones. I'd put the peas in an aluminium colander and when I'd finished the bag I'd take it in to mum to show her, she'd be in the front room doing crocheting with the telly on, which she wasn't watching, dad'd be out at work, at the sorting office, sometimes he'd bring back foreign stamps for me that had fallen off letters.

One day I laughed at dad when he was tying newspapers to the legs of his trousers. It was lunchtime, he was just about to go to work. It was pouring down of rain. Streams falling down the windows, he didn't want his trousers to get wet where they stuck out from under his coat. He had his cap on and his big coat and he was wrapping newspapers round his trouser bottoms and tying them with string. I just laughed and said,

‘You’ll look ridiculous walking down the street with newspaper legs.’

He said a wise thing: ‘No-one looks at you in the rain.’

And I watched him going off down the road, head into the storm, no umbrella. No-one was interested in his newspaper legs.

Ever since, I have liked heavy rain for the privacy.

I have had people tell me, ‘Oh, I wish I could live as you do.’ Of course, what do they really know of how I live, but all the same I tell them, ‘Well why don’t you?’ I tell them nothing of this other self for which I am a disguise, that has not risen yet, though I suppose that comes out piecemeal in perceived eccentricity, which is a convenient mask for one who picks fruits from unearthly trees. If they knew the degree to which I am an entirely regimented soul, how at odds this would seem with the man who does nothing gradually growing older whose big ideas of youth have shrunk. Sometimes, I think myself no different from those who shout in the street, or sit on low walls all day long with a can of lager. Sometimes I have thought of sitting down and joining them, to see if it is possible to elevate the conversation, for I have often yearned for a convenient

group I could go and join when the fancy took me. Why don't philosophers sit around all day on low walls? I think, could I turn them into philosophers, philosophers of the day? But always it comes down to keeping my own company. I sit on low walls of my own. Sometimes I have pondered sitting in the street telling fortunes, or in the winter months keeping a hot-chestnut stall in town and engaging people in conversation around my wheely brazier, passersby stopping to warm their hands, rubbing them together like men about to get down to business with things to say, the words coming out of their mouths on clouds of steamy vapour. It could be a splendid life, but it is the image that excites me more than the reality I suspect. I have thought how wonderful it would be to live in a tree, to become a curiosity in a big city in the way holy men who live at the top of poles become a curiosity in distant wildernesses. But I would just be hosed down by the police as a filthy tramp and ordered to move on. The practicality of many of my ideas lacks something, and I think the bare rooms I live in with a little garden where I grow poppies and sweet peas and herbs and sometimes tomatoes, mostly undisturbed by the world, probably serves the best, because, you see, I have forgotten this other self I am that touches the night sky and extends in all directions, who has a purpose he forgets to tell me, but who like

fate moves me where he wants me. He is, I suppose, my destiny, but he is not who I will become he is already who I am. Now and again he lets me into the whole of it, but not trivial details like whether I will get married and have children or die a painful death or live in another country, he lets me ponder these things myself, should I care to, knowing already the answers, but he shows me that these are not the thing, these are incidentals for all they could matter to me, because, he assures me, there is something more important, a journey you are on that you cannot even begin to imagine who conceived it . . . but he tails off into silence. After a while, you stop peeling off the onion skins, you've got the picture in a general way. I ask him sometimes, where are the Porches of the Great Men? He sidesteps the question, you're not a joiner, he says. There is a kind of relief in hearing that, rather they should come to me than I go to them. That no-one comes seems some special magic cast to keep them away, that could be lifted at any time, should I will it. This other being I am knows all these tricks, and laughs at my impatience. He lets me realise that he too has been waiting, do I think he has not, and impresses me with the ease with which he casts away such a concern. That is something I have spent a long time learning from him. Gradually, we are moving closer, and I sometimes think my forgetfulness

is actually *his* forgetfulness. The plain fact is that in forgetting we are closer than we can possibly know.

Let out the flies.

A distant dog barking that bark of faraway days. It reminds me of scabby-kneed walks along the pavement rat-a-tat-tatting a stick along the railings a fat man in shorts shirt off comes out with a bowl of cold water and throws it over his car, job done he strides back in his sandals flapping. Pockets bulging with small pinecones I've had a good day. A startled blackbird flies low across the road doing its alarm call.

I sent up smoke signals waving mum's best teatowel over a garden fire of dead leaves and wooden crates. I got splinters every day.

Rolled-up newspapers with squashed bluebottles stuck to them, left lying on the windowsill. I remember dad climbing on a chair with a rolled-up newspaper to take a swipe at a wasp up near the ceiling. I looked at crushed bluebottles and wasps under my microscope, the veins of their wings, their complex eyes. I took up butterfly collecting but gave it up after I had killed one cabbage white and one small tortoiseshell in a killing jar with laurel leaves I had picked in the park and cut up

and crushed a bit and put at the bottom of a screwtop jar with cotton wool on top of the laurel leaves. And I caught a cabbage white in the garden with the butterfly net mum had made me out of an old net curtain and a wire coathanger stuck in the end of a garden cane. I trapped it at the end of the netting and placed the jar under it with the lid off and forced the butterfly in, quickly screwing the lid back on. I sat there watching as the butterfly gradually began choking on the fumes from the bruised laurel leaves, I marvelled at its coiled proboscis hanging out like a thirsty dog, the butterfly stumbling around in circles on the cotton wool. I didn't like it, what I had done. When it was dead I pinned it out on a cork placemat, getting its wings in the proper positions while the butterfly's little body was still supple, and put it aside to set. I caught a small tortoiseshell and placed it in the killing jar in the same way. A very pretty little butterfly. But I couldn't stand it, seeing this pretty little thing suffer like this, and I opened up the killing jar before it was done and emptied it out onto the table, wishing him to fly away as if nothing had ever happened, but it was too late, after a few stumbles the butterfly collapsed by the mustard pot. I told dad I was giving up butterfly collecting and dad agreed with me that it was cruel and after that he didn't kill as many wasps and bluebottles either.



I am distracted by a large bluebottle zzzuring around the room. Dog barking Saturday afternoon. The restraint to avoid rolling up a newspaper. Going mad to the sound of clattering pots and pans, everyday kitchen of the mad. The grime and clutter. There must be sense in small doses of boredom, find it like a knife down the side of a greasy cooker. 'Go away fly.' They listen you know, flies, if you talk to them when you've just about had enough of them. Straight out the window, or rest for half an hour in a corner. Now I'm lifting a basin off a quivering red jelly on a plate, and the fly is back and has brought a friend, travelling so fast there is a loud bump and they crash into the windowpane and drop freefall for a split second before going off to be diluted by the big world outside. I can see my little boy features turning his head and half letting the jelly plop out and half guarding the jelly with the basin, the fly is ruining my enjoyment of watching the jelly come out I'm not watching the jelly come out and by the time I concentrate on what I'm doing again it's slid all the way out and wobbles on the plate, another delight but not the whole delight and I curse that fly for making me miss my first jelly come out. Wait. Did

I ever empty a jelly out onto a plate? We scooped it out of the basin didn't we? A wobbling jelly on a plate, that's something from a comic isn't it? The way I never had bangers n'mash as a mountain of mash with the bangers sticking out of it like in *The Beano*. Can't even be sure I emptied a jelly onto a plate now. No point being too possessive of memories, they all have to go some day.

Line up those skittles, those plastic skittles. Plaster-of-Paris footprint of a badger. A plastic tennis racket. Another plastic tennis racket. A furry tarantula attached to a tube with a rubber bulb at the end you could squeeze and make it look like the tarantula was moving. Maybe I did empty out a jelly once. How would I remember that very distinctive *plop* sound? It's important to get it right, and yet it's just something fished out of the bin, the bin of having lived, the bin of having seen them land on the Moon, not so real as standing on the bridge as the steam train came under with a full head of steam, chuf-chuf-chufchuf chuf-chuf-chufchuf chuf-chuf-chufchuf.

Fudge, craneflies, representing a fractured existence, watching potatoes grow, watching sweet peas reach up the canes. Imagine being at the dawn of the Space Age,

what a privilege. Is that why this time was chosen? Out of all time some time has to be chosen. The safety of the room. Far off on a distant star I am the light that has reached here.

Yellow chuckie egg dribbled on my bib. What is this anchor in the present, can I not pull it up and drift more in time? Dashing backwards and forwards from birth to death and back again like dashing from wall to wall in the playground playing British Bulldog. Finally admit to being lost, in a place where I share none of the ordinary concerns of living, clutching memories for orientation, but none of them make the position clearer, floating like a bubble, passing the time with building blocks wouldn't work now, winding up a tin mouse and watching it go wouldn't work now, staying in bed longer only eats up part of the day. Hunger is a useful necessity. Moulding silverfoil around my fist, I tear it off, bored already. Thinking is scraping. Perhaps I should get a whistling kettle. I cannot believe I am an advanced being on an important mission. Biggest decision all day: whether to throw away these socks that have a hole coming. I decide to get more wear out of them. The years speed by and all that happens is my windows get dirtier and I still don't clean them. Feel rushed even doing nothing. I open a box of matches upside down. As I am picking up the matches I wonder

whether I purposefully did this, for something to do, something apparently imposed on me to do. It sounds like there is a lion snoring in the tree, covered from sight by leaves. It is a large bird snoring in the middle of the afternoon, cars going by. A bird has his feet up in the tree, swinging in his hammock. It makes me drowsy listening to it, drowsy like listening to a lover's breathing asleep next to you. I could rest my head on my hand, elbow on the pillow, watching a lover asleep for ages, lightly stroking so as not to wake her, her hair, her belly, her breasts, perhaps she only pretends to be asleep but she pretends well. She is dreaming of me inside her, her eyelids flickering invitation, she is reaching out of her sleep as far as she can without waking herself, she lulls me into dreamland, my eyes slowly closing, her legs are clammy and part like clods of earth being turned, she holds me in her dream.

If I am not here, I am nowhere. Forgotten, forgotten. Shells on the beach, shells pushed into sandcastle walls. Seaweed draped around it. Who knows where the world goes? I tire of feeling responsible for it, weary of preserving anything, would be more of a fait accompli to have it disappear completely. How to forget what

remains? Tropical fish. Tropical fish in a tank exploring underwater ruins.

It doesn't matter. None of it matters, never has. The biggest message of hope I ever found, that. When I put on my big coat to go out on a cold day, not one step I take matters.

May as well find company, then. The bleating sheep will be bleating again soon enough. I throw up my hands and don't know what to make of it. Some days just sink into a hole.

He feels he must do something about the sameness every day. But why must he? The only thing the matter with it is that he feels he must do something about it, as if it is not right, that it cannot be the same every day, that he is a failure if he allows it to be the same every day. He must take upon himself the labour of advancing, though he has no idea where he should advance to. In the silences he hopes to hear the voice of . . . he no longer knows. He has longed so many times for something other he no longer knows what he does long for, except something defined as not this. He has spent his life looking out of windows at the world, he has looked so many times he no longer knows what he is looking at. He would feel better if he had a wound to tend, though he shies away quite rightly from a wish to become incapacitated. He should make good

use of the time he has, of the use of his hands he has, of the eyesight he has, the ears he has, the mouth he has. Others would be glad of them, make far more use of them than he does. He needs to buck his ideas up, as his dad used to say to him often. 'You want to buck your ideas up.'

Ah yes, that's what he'd say. You want to buck your ideas up if you plan to go to university. You want to buck your ideas up if you expect to get a good job.

Once you have come to the edge of the abyss and peered into it, and ultimately crossed it, what going back can there be? Save as a half-hearted player in a game. You can't read the newspapers any more when you have X-ray eyes. Always, always, buck your ideas up, look further, don't confuse the planes. Confusion too is a creeping vine, stand in its plot it will cover you over. The voice speaks out of the hollows, you're just dreaming in suspended animation. Break a twig and listen to it crack, feel the force of that begin a propulsion, moving, moving, stand up with your eyes closed and turn, turn around and around, picking up speed. Now stop keep your feet planted firmly on the ground and open your eyes, feel the dizzying sway. You have just done something amazing. Whirl, whirl, whirl. Rejoin the world anytime you like. You've been away long enough.

Just remember Earth is spinning, you have to whirl to get back on. Easy to forget when you've been so still so far away.

Once fragmented through time and space, it is hard to find a quiet moment to settle in, since it must be temporary. How glad we might be to reclaim our boring moments, use them as empty vessels in which to rest and wait, to think through what has happened to us, happened to us mostly without us yet realising, it is easier to be distracted, taken away from it, the existential event that has forced itself upon us that generously stands aside and gives us a little room to come to terms.

A ball lost in the long grass several summers, green algae grown over it. So useless now no-one wants it even if they find it. A good place to sit and hide, therefore. To wait out the afternoon, peering over the tops of the tall grasses, waiting until everyone has gone. A small boy who escapes the world with fading labels of rusty tin cans and bits of string. A growling dog comes, a big black dog its teeth exposed, I am in its lair. So I stand

up, it goes away, I sit back down before anyone sees me, before they know where I am. A game of hide and seek, but I don't want to be found ever, I want them to go home not having found me, I want to win but have none of the glory of having won. I want to ruin the game but take it to its logical conclusion. If you don't find me why should I come out? I won't hear them giving up. I've got things on my mind, like why can't this be everything, why must I want more? Everywhere I go there are piles of rubbish, things are rusting, bottles are broken, I sit in the rubbish. I decide I am just like this lost ball, kicked into the long grass, a short search but no-one can find it, the years go by, it stays where it lands, no-one cares about it, a new ball is bought that bounces better, that is brighter and more colourful. I like this ball with me here, dirty white and going green, slug trails all over it. All the time, I am thinking, what am I doing here, I want to cry for myself, heave out huge tears, but I don't or people will see I have been crying and ask why and I'll have no answer, no answer I can tell, that I don't want to be here, that I am bored of everything, but then I see a new beetle, a big shiny blue beetle, and it is a marvel the first time I have seen a beetle like this and I look around for something to put him in to take him home with me, there's an old plastic cup that will do but just as I'm reaching for it the



beetle knows my plan and flips up its wingcase and flies, flies heavily away like it's carrying suitcases, so it can fly too this jewel and I am happy again and the sun smiles widely through the railings and sparrows frolic full of joy and I find a sweet in my pocket I am sure was not there before and I unwrap it and it is the bestest sweet I have ever tasted and I sit there and think did I make a little prayer to god in my head without realising it did god send the beautiful blue beetle to rescue a sad little boy and I get interested again in the mysteries that will be with me for ever though they cannot be answered unless you sit very still with your eyes closed so still you can get up out of your body while it's still sitting there and walk around invisible and get through the railings you can't get through with your body and pick flowers to smell that are still there attached to the stem when you've picked them and you don't have to keep stooping down to tie your shoelaces because these ones don't come undone. And it's always sunny and you must have had all the answers now because you can't think of any questions any more. But back on Earth it is getting chilly, the sun has gone in for tea and so does he.

I have begun pulling up the floorboards for the fire, like a man in our road when I was a boy. He was led away to the slow ambulance by two men in brown cowgowns who looked like greengrocers. Shaky on his feet he snatched at the air with claw-like hands. A few days later the rumours began, repeated as fact at bus stops, going unchallenged in their veracity, that Mr Witherington had pulled up all his floorboards for the fire to keep warm that winter. I wanted to go and have a look in his windows like other boys, to see for myself if it was true. It's true, some kids said, he's pulled them all up, there's a great hole in the front room. Then I heard that Mr Witherington had been tunnelling under the road, that at the back of his house was a big pile of earth he had removed. I stood on the bath craning my neck trying to see over Mr Witherington's fence to see if I could see the big pile of earth. Mr Witherington never came back and some said that it wasn't an ambulance that took him away, it was the people from the loony bin who come for you when you try to tunnel out of your own home. I always liked digging holes in the ground, I didn't see what business it was of theirs if someone wanted to dig a hole in their front room and start tunnelling. I wondered if anyone else was tunnelling out of their house right now, whose front room had no carpet and sofa and telly and sideboard

and bookcase, but a big hole, floorboards stacked up in the hall, and they were shovelling earth out while from the outside it just looked like a normal house.

Dad said he wor right in the head, he was touched. He said the same about me when I threw a tantrum, 'He's touched, ay he Marge?'

Banging in the head of a boiled egg in my eggcup with a teaspoon, pulling away the bits of eggshell, slicing the top off, sprinkling in a few crystals of salt, dipping in the bread soldiers lined up on a plate. If you ask me where I've been when I'm sitting there with a glazed expression I'll be able to say I've been back there. There was always a frozen pea or two on the tablecloth when I sat down to eat. I hated this. I called for mum to clear them away. When dad was old and I had nothing to say to him I hated the noise he made with his eating at the table, like a cow chomping, and I'd impersonate it mercilessly. Whenever I returned home from London almost immediately I stepped into the child I was. I sat on top of my bed staring at the wallpaper. I stared out of my bedroom window at couples and felt bored. Such an empty life, I could hardly believe I had endured it, and now here I was enduring it again, for a weekend, and I did not have any longer the strength to endure it that I had as a boy. But the excitement of my life in London gradually drained away and I was left staring at

a different wallpaper, looking out of a different window at couples passing by in the street. And this seemed to characterise the shape my life was bent to. I remember a sausage dog a magician made for me at the Sorting Office Children's Christmas Party, he stretched the balloons and blew them up fast and tied them even faster into a sausage dog and handed it to me, like he was handing me my life, look I've made a sausage dog for you, this sausage dog is all yours, you can keep it, take it home with you. I'm the kid who got the sausage dog, not the giraffe, the sausage dog, that was mine to keep.

It withered, it came apart, I put it out of its misery with a pin and let out the magician's breath into the room.

I have often said to myself my life will begin when I just finish this, I just have to finish this off that I'm working on and then it will begin. But what I most have to finish off is letting people forget about me, it is that that keeps me in limbo, a lack of courage to cut things off dead, keeping a pot bubbling on the stove, tasting the flavour always of a change of mind, keeping it on the tongue. Of course I want to take down everything brick by brick, set fire to what remains and scarper. But I also want to pull it all towards me and embrace it, put my arms wide around it like a child a huge teddybear and own it as mine and love it. You see the dilemma. What

is the adult equivalent of keeping tadpoles in a bucket? Hmm, did someone say I couldn't keep tadpoles in a bucket? Except now I can hardly be bothered to go and collect them, I prefer to sink like a stone plopped in a pond. I enjoy it when the buckets and bowls in the garden get filled up with rainwater after a great storm. I leave them to attract their own flora and fauna. Mostly black slime.

So much can happen in the time it takes for a cigarette to burn down resting in an ashtray. He could have just been having an argument with his lover out in the kitchen. The smoke slowly rises. It could have been the argument that will split them apart. The ash remains intact, does not fall. It could have been an argument about something quite trivial, whose turn it was to wash up, a dirty knife fallen on the floor and left. He could have been meaning to speak to her all day about that, he could have left it there himself when he saw it, just to make the point, waiting until she came back home, so he could point it out to her. How do you suppose that got there, he rehearses, fuming over nothing and he knows it, but it's one thing too many of late. He only means to point it out, to say it has not gone unnoticed.

She finds it extraordinary that he left it there all day, dripping Marmite onto the lino. Wouldn't it have been a simple matter for him to have picked it up and washed it? As it was, she was late for work, and why doesn't he get off his arse and do some work, and was in a rush, she left the knife, admittedly unwashed, on the table, her bagstrap must have caught it as she turned to dash out after a quick gulp of tea. He knows she saw it fall, what is all this stuff about 'must have caught it'. It tips her over the edge, out comes a tirade of her own dissatisfactions with him. He storms out, back to the living room. His cigarette has burnt down. There is an unpleasant smell of burnt cellulose. The ash has not fallen, it has held its shape. He touches it with his finger. It crumbles into the ashtray. It is over.

Shaking my head like old men do mouthing where has my life gone. Triangular stamps and scrumping orchards. A blackbird is exactly the same today as it has always been. That little dash across the closely cropped grass, stop and look about like something clockwork. Seeing it through the railings of the infant school, I still turn to look at the blackbird, it is never something consigned to the corner of the eye that I no longer turn to look at,

no longer interested. I'm still interested in Mr Blackbird.

There's an old man who wears a flat cap and always sits on the greasy wooden benches outside Burger King. He held a door open for me once, he was standing outside a shop opening the door for people most of the day. After that I noticed him everywhere when I was out and about. He'd be walking down the road and hawk up a great gob of phlegm and I'd have to step over it and then I'd see his great gobs of phlegm all up the road and have to avoid stepping in them. Then one day I saw him sitting on the greasy wooden benches outside Burger King as if stuck in a trance, just staring intently into space. He looked like he was away reviewing his life, flitting about in childhood, moving into fantasies, turning over mental earth exposing all the wriggling dirt-clad worms on the surface, and for a moment as I passed him I thought, that's me, that's my world before his eyes in the vacant hypnotised stare, in his pyjamas now it's still light but it's time for bed, dad says so, time to go up the wooden hill, have the night-lights lit later to keep the scary monsters away. A candle lit in an old tin can, living in a demolished house, clothes soaked, the chimney breast still standing, rubble as far as the eye can see, forget whether there are houses still standing, could probably answer that question with a little thought, just staring into space. It's quiet, a few

kids playing in the rubble, that's all, when all has fallen away there are only memories. Maybe head north, hills, fires of fellowship, tell stories, try to fit in. Old man on a greasy wooden bench, you are staring into emptiness, none of us are here for very long. So much to do. And yet, how little. Footprints in the snow, deep footprints.

Wind-up mechanism I find in the street, a joy to watch the cogs turn. What a splendid metal is brass. Long flowing black hair of Japanese girls. Women in camouflage trousers. Rigged up a stovepipe, very cranky, like something out of Dr Seuss. Grass on the roof, turf I found stacked at the side of the road no-one seemed to want, shovelled a depth of dirt over the corrugated iron roof and laid down the turf. Now how long have I been living here? The highpoint of the day is still the many times I make tea. These children's tennis rackets might make a good pair of snowshoes. I scavenged a good amount of aluminium foil, I can't see anyone making any more of that. A strain having to be so strong all the time, a good woman a shoulder to cry on, being strong for her don't have to be as strong as you have to be for yourself. If there is purpose, I raise my glass to whatever it served. Here's to the sunset, here's to the rustling



leaves. Look, here's all the happiness we've been keeping for you, until you were strong enough to carry it. I've come all this way down the funnel of the generations, dripping like blood into sand, soaking through, it's all clogged together in me. I almost remember sitting in a signal box, tending a cottage garden, in sepia times, creased times with dog-eared corners. What do I owe them? What do I owe to the little bit of each of them in me? Am I the one with the strength to call a halt to it? To hold back with my raised palm the stampede of the generations? To say, I will not take forward your pain and suffering, I will not continue this wish for it all to have been different. But then, if I do that, I will not take forward their simple joy of seeing the cowslips in the field by the side of the railway line, the claaang of the wheel-tapper's hammer, the pretty dresses you made, the warm sunny days you thought would never end, the bashful smiles at a girl you would love, the brassy boldness of asking her out, striding up to her in the street in your brand new demob suit, feeling so smart and with confidence in your step. Shy girl outside the grocers, you liked the look of her, you'd just come out the tailors, you looked the part, the crease of your trousers was as sharp as a razor, your shoes were shined like they made you shine your boots in the navy. There she was counting the pennies in her purse. You went

over, asked if you could walk her home. You impressed her, she agreed, you talked about what was on at the pictures. He asked you to go with him Saturday night, it was Clark Gable. He walked you to the top of your street. You rushed in, excited. I am both of you. I live downriver of your parents, your grandparents, your great-grandparents. A package handed out of a mist, I have opened it up because it was addressed to me. I sit writing in dust on slate, that the rain will wash away.

Years flash by stirring a cup of tea.

Waiting, then not waiting any longer. What changed? Nothing changed, this tick-tock same as that tick-tock, but time like a beetle on its back righted itself.

The mystery stops being a mystery, the pebble in the shoe is out. The fading days do not know what to say. Do they want to say 'Remember me?' or 'Goodbye'? Gravity will pull tears out of your eyes either way, as you're drawn away. The tears do not know whether to say 'So glad to have been here!' or 'So sad.' What can I tell you? That there was so much pain before there was none? That there were joys as keen as in a dog's eyes? That the end turned out to be the beginning? Look at me now, I'm smiling with tears streaming down my

cheeks. You know why. Of course you know why. I'd help you along if I could, but you see I'm sitting in a room just off your life. Whatever I've done, don't ask me how I did it. Trace with your finger this big smile. Of course. I'd have said it before now had I been as sure. Of course.

'You'd talk the hind legs off a donkey, you would,' I said to her. She was jabbering away nineteen to the dozen. I wasn't listening.

You know I've spent my life out here on the ravaged plain, not caring about anything or anybody, much too occupied with something other to think of my standing in the world, achievements all invisible, save that they are written in crow's feet in snow, danced about the ice before it cracked or melted or someone sank and no-one went there any more, a hole in the middle where that child went down, it's still not fenced off, but children in their mittens are kept away as if by an electric fence, pacing the perimeter promising themselves they won't go near crossing their hearts and hoping to die that they'll have nothing but the truth to tell when their parents ask them later 'Did you go near that pond I told you not to go near?' no mum I didn't I didn't go

near it. Circumambulating, why won't the ice melt and take away with it that hole, shouldn't we tell someone won't his mother wonder where he is oh why won't the ice melt and take away that reminder of what I don't want to remember any more. You can see it in my face you can see a lifetime of it in my face so tell me what you've been doing tell me what gentleman's laps you have sat on since mine. Tell me something anything and I'll reciprocate tell you the things you can't even begin to guess at and all the things even I have to dredge up, like that pond, dredged it all up they did but never found his body like long john silver gone to his watery rest. Whose skittery little footprints are these in the hoarfrost coating the ice there were others here who were they who are they and they trawled the streets nearby asking what youngsters went down to the frozen pond to play and did your son used to go there oh no we told him not to officer and I can hear it all on the landing ear over the banister don't don't don't ask me to come down and say myself I know nothing about the hole in the ice it could just be a big rock someone has thrown in and eventually you forget about it put it from your mind like a bad Sunday so far from your mind you never think of it again, who knows why it pops back up to the surface now and then like a big bubble of marsh gas dislodged when poking the black

slime and silt where great diving beetles rest with a big stick a bubble of marsh gas rising rising up elegantly slowly jostling its way through the waterweed to break the daylight between the lilypads in a great awful belch of long-forgotten stinkiness.

‘You look far away,’ she said.

Your whole life can float up like that bubble. One minute you’re seven then you’re fourteen twenty-eight thirty-eight forty-seven sixty eighty then pop! It breaks the surface. Time goes by, women you can’t get any more pass you by in the street, you forget you couldn’t get them when you were younger or you could have done if you’d tried but now you won’t get them if you try so no use trying no use trying back then either at least you thought that then, now you wonder, if only I’d tried. It’s a little demeaning to chase after anything, especially things you want, better to have them come to you, they don’t have to do much to gain your attention. Praise the God, you’ve heard them talk, nothing there, just something momentarily resembling something you once wanted. Open the door, let me back into my empty house. Imagine this place populated. No privacy. No time to mourn the passing of the time in which you could have had children, best it end with me, this uncertain affair.

‘What are you thinking?’ she said.

‘I’m thinking about the past . . . well, not thinking about it exactly, letting it wash over me. The hours pass that way, when you don’t have company.’

‘The past. You never spoke much about your past, when we were together. There is only the present, you said.’

‘Well that’s still true,’ I said, ‘yet we didn’t spring up overnight like mushrooms, we have a history, our own private mystery . . .’

‘That time, do you remember . . . in the back of the cab, and I said to you, oh look there’s a fox, and you turned to watch it trot away, and when you turned your head back and we were looking into each other’s eyes . . . do you remember?’

‘Yes, yes . . . the cabbie was looking at us in his mirror.’

‘Your eyes . . . it’s how I best remember you, remember the best of you . . . you could take me anywhere with your eyes . . .’

Anywhere, yes. It was love. What was meant to last that isn’t lasting there and then, it doesn’t go anywhere, it is where it was, the clocks stop, the moment persists, the walls come down, the old woman pricks her thumb sewing a button back on a blouse, a bead of blood she licks it and looks up, a quarter to nine, I wonder what that son of mine is doing, so lonely here in the house without Ken, nothing but television to keep me

company, nothing on it's all rubbish tonight, go to bed early, hope you're happy son doing whatever you're doing, and the fox was staring at us too, standing on the pavement, I shall sit in this chair alone until she comes to me until she comes to find me I shall banish time I shall remain here until whatever it is of the world that is of any importance makes its trek to me I shall not go in search of it I shall not . . . eyes in the mirror . . . I close both eyes and you close yours I kiss you I breath deep of you a tiny hand disappears below the ice . . . and it all, all of it, disappears in a blinding flash.

‘The cab, yes, I remember.’

‘Don’t be sad,’ she said.

How does life get away from us? I forgot what I was looking for. No-one came back to find me. I sat down and waited. Night fell. I pulled my jacket around me as best I could. I was lucky, it wasn’t a cold night. Drifted after that.

That man across the street never goes out. Little trips to the shop, that’s all. No-one visits.

Wrinkled hands, something fetal about the way the walls close in. I hear the leaves rustling in the breeze, it is a kind of . . . wrapped up in myself, yes it is a kind of womb, say it. Back there, or not left yet. Did I dream my life before I lived it? They want me to come out and play. It's fun out here in the snow. Come out and play. What was before? I keep hammering on that door. Won't open. Trapped in that direction. Want to go back before I had these hands, this face. Wrapped up inside, I'm every place and no place. There's mum blowing out the flame of the night-light, she thinks I'm asleep. I just want someone to take my hand and lead me away, it doesn't matter whether they know where they're going so long as I don't have to think about it any more. The world I carry inside of me is too big, and I've already shrunk it to almost nothing. A few scraps piled up to heave onto a bonfire. Open-toed sandals, could never wear em. Glitter sticking to the faces of clowns I painted. A leaf pressed in a book. Gramp, talking about something, 'Well, he's took his eggs to a fine market, ay he?' Who's he talking about? Is he talking about me? I can't get everything back in the box. It won't go back in, I'm on the verge of a paddywhack. 'Gizzit ere,'



says gramp. He empties everything out on the table I watch as he puts everything back in its place it all fits inside and the lid goes on. I've learnt something here, everything fits back inside, it doesn't get bigger when you take it out of the box you have to be patient with things, figure it out, you can't just go charging around. When he's not looking I empty out the tobacco tin again all these cogwheels and screws and washers and springs and ball-bearings and I start stacking them up in the box like he did neatly filling out the corners and I sort out things that don't belong in the box because they're a bit rusty or a washer that's a bit bent and a piece of grit like you find in your shoe and I blow the dust out of the pile and put everything back except these bits that are no good and the top goes back on and I call gramp gramp I've done it better I've got rid of the rubbish and he looks and agrees with me and he gives me a stiff piece of paper to brush the rusty and bent bits onto with my hand off the edge of the table and I can go and throw them away, except for one ball-bearing that isn't really rusty not very rusty that I can clean up that I put in my pocket when he's not looking it's better than a marble it's better than the giraffe house it's better than smoking sweet cigarettes. 'Yower mum sez yow cor ave a ball-bearing cuz yow'm bound ter swollerit or ave summonz eye out.'

Something in a bubble floating away. I thought we'd go on a long journey together. We did in a way. I know. We always want more. Never think what we have is enough. The expression on your face when you realised you never really knew me, that I was someone else, that's when you started to know me. Don't you see? Can only go so long on a level, evolve, change with me, or go your own separate way, that's the way it's always been with me. I may appear sad to lose you, I believe it myself for a while, just to experience it. Do you remember when you were out bouncing a ball on the pavement, and it was your favourite ball ever because it bounced so high, and one day you slammed it down on the pavement with such force it bounced real high higher than the houses and it came down in a garden with a crashing of glass and you walked on leaving it behind, your best ball. These mopy eyes these sad eyes these sparkling joyful eyes these happy happy eyes. Wear it lightly, the world, littered with dark forests. Move like a cat, every afternoon welcome the sun if the sun comes welcome the leaves when the leaves fall. Draw the curtains on the day when the day is just beginning. The leafless trees greyer than an empty restaurant, the

red eyes of the beast that is you staring, staring in, days go by day after day and daylight catches like tinder alight and burns up the hidden night out of this world prised out of this world till the footsteps on the gravel return with bloodshot instincts.

How many years has this strange habit been going, to look on longingly at fragments of a different life you could have made, because that's what it's all about. You see through it, sure you do, but you indulge it still.

You've gone away now. You're like the tide has gone out, that long walk to the sea. I can't place your face any more. You blend into others, you are all one person. You are a bird in a cage, pretty girl. You're an old doll put away in a box. I'm going to forget about you now. I'm going to open the door and let you fly away. The Devil himself is going to let you fly away.

Sitting on the stairs, see it's snowing, lifting head up out of dark tears dark wooden staircase. That's something. Spent many nights alone, why should this one be any different? But it is different. Pulled up in a taxi to the

empty house. Not sure any of these keys will work. No-one waiting for me. Night I've dreaded so long. Rehearsed. Bowl of filthy water in the sink she never emptied away. That's one thing I didn't expect. As if it has proximity, as if it still has a little warmth. There'll be a letter to me at the bottom of the wardrobe I expect. She mentioned it once. Will she have little to say, or will it be a letter the like of which I have never read from her? Waited so long for it to be too late, can only shake my head. Time to press the cruel buttons in the control room. Get it over and done with, give me the tears, go on. If you've any compassion at all, send an angel this night. I know we haven't always got on, you and me, but I do know . . . oh, there they go, tears rolling down my cheeks, both cheeks. God she's got some junk. I may pray. I may just pray. Unaccustomed as I am to take to the stage. Acting ungrateful all these years. Pure white snowflakes drifting down. That's something. The shed roof's white. All those houses out there. Must have seen me arrive. 'So he's come home at last, so that's him. The man at the post office said she had a son.' Got the whole house to myself still I go to the prison of a childhood bedroom staring at the wallpaper burning the electricity into the early hours. I find myself opening the bookcase in the front room at three in the morning, still ever so carefully in case its hinges creak and she hears me prying

into private papers, old letters tucked into books, the habit of sneaking about when she's asleep so ingrained that for a moment I forget and then have to remember, like a train going over points.

I've watched what's been going on, quietly, standing on a corner, just watching, not intervening, not making my presence known. Once I think you saw me. But you were going under, you'd only have seen me step back, back into the shadows. I've witnessed it all. It would have been a strain I think, were I not made for this. I talk to you in dreams sometimes, or when panthers are heading off into the evening and there's just the firelight, the moths, and that peace you packed away in expectation of shipping out soon, that you don't get out very often any more, but sometimes you can be persuaded to open up the boxes and take it out again, strum on it like a plastic guitar awhile, fondly remember an egg-and-spoon race, and saying look at my pink beard holding the candyfloss. Wondering what the cat is dreaming about is he dreaming about catching butterflies. Pancake day, the sugar and the lemon lined up, how many can you eat says mum and they pile up and up and you get through them one after another

while they're still warm they look like the surface of the moon with its craters, you didn't even know I was there, watching, witnessing, you were lost in your joy. You know I looked at you through cats' eyes, dogs' eyes? How could you know? C'mon, throw the stick, that's all you have to do, we'll have you out of your glums in no time, it's simple enough, that's it, there's the stick, now throw it and I'll run after it, or this mutt will because that's what he likes, and you love seeing him go you love seeing him respond to you it's just you and him and the stick. And me. Yes, I was there. You remember that twisted swing, the chains all tied up? And we untied it we set it free. You were never alone, even when you sent me away I didn't go you know, I hid, I hid behind bushes, behind walls, I looked out at you. You wanted to be a sad little boy, you wanted to feel justified, you were being punished for taking a stand but taking a stand was important to you. You forgot all of this, but I made notes, recorded what I saw. Wait till you get back home. It's all on hold for now, we have to get through this part. Before you go, you'll see the volcanoes, you'll see the great frigate bird. I made a note. We'll go and see them, when all this is over. Don't you know how vast you are? Everything attracts your eye. Just now, a dozen beetles drowning in a pond, you fished them out, set them upright on

land, let them breathe again. You took an interest, you weren't too busy to make this *your* job.

Don't be too impatient for things to change. The lazy days reading. The time to think about a few things. Why wish it away so soon?

Slowly moving around like a sloth through the rooms. Forgotten aspirations. Tense shadows.

Down deep beneath the cracks is another world throwing off the shell of this one.

Already I sense a sack over the head pressganged into memories. No, I'll hold back. Today I'll hold back.

Things on a shelf. How hard to have nothing. And then what?

An hallucinatory fragmentary life buckling out of existence like the steel of a sinking ship under the pressure of the deep.

Goodbye to a great many things.

The length of a whole childhood left over, play in that until we decide what to do with you. Have fun with balloons. Explode things. Think about corpses

and being naked with a girl. See your toys die. Throw an old shoe into a tree. Figure it all out and forget it by the time you're called in for tea. Poxy shoe. Poxy book. Don't say poxy. Why not what's poxy? Poxy shoelaces won't tie. Poxy jaw's come off this poxy skull. Poxy skeleton kit. Let's have a bang bigger than the last bang. Bastard zip what's wrong with this zip don't lose your temper with it bastard anoraks don't want another anorak shitty brown nylon and the zips don't fasten properly want a parka with fur round the hood don't want a duffel coat want a parka everyone's got a parka I want a parka. What's snuff dad? What's snuff? Pretend to be sleepwalking pretend to have lost your memory pretend to be dead. Muddy water in a jar. On the windowsill. Watch the mud particles drift to the bottom. That's the most amazing thing. Look mum, look! I swirl it up and it's muddy water but if I leave it it all settles at the bottom isn't that amazing mum? Look mum look it's clear water at the top you could drink it. Don't you drink that, you don't know what's been in that water.

Hanging on top of an ugly little bubble, burst why don't you, pop, sticking my nails in, a fast way out of here.

The birds were still singing, till the sun went down. Now it's just a fruit getting ripe, ripe enough to get a



bite taken out of it. Something sticky on the pavement stretching up on the shoe. The stars are coming out. Pockets of madness in my brain, pockets of nakedness out on the lawn. Lend me your ten thousand friends for now, I'll speak to them in private. You know how that's done, don't you? She is looking good, chick getting duckweed anklets. There is no pain in her life right now. She's paid her entrance fee and the battle's gone away. She's saved this much of herself from the TV. Nothing wrong happens when it's playing out right. That's right, sit down in the pond in your nudeness and when you get up, that's it, you're seeing the effect, the duckweed clings to your hips and dribs and drabs to your thighs you've made yourself a beautiful duckweed skirt. She's so happy. There's a lot of happy people here. This is the world I understand, the whole world, and I am sand and he is sand, smiling, and it's dark now and it's night now and the mountain falls on nobody else tonight.

The sun makes the bed too hot to lie in. Two smoking cans in the yard. Burning letters. Are you dead yet? Bottled happiness no longer get the fizzt screwing the cap off. This one's flat try another nope that one too. Spider abseils down from the ceiling has a look goes

back up. Get a haircut you grey bastard. Bottle in my hand I lie awake. Don't want the blue sky want the black sky. Conveyor belt of twitches. Light of suck. Hungry too lazy two miserable sandwiches up there can't reach stale anyway. How do I get stains on my hat? Too much stuff on the table. Smoke, smoke in the yard, something's burning. Letters. Letters. A bundle of love letters. Something has gone out of my life, but it went long ago. Razor slashes across the daylight silver leeches sucking up the sky watch them swell. Is it dead yet? Shall I stamp on it mum? Red gas moving like an exotic dancer.

I've counted to a million, I'm coming ready or not.

There is a hole in the night when everyone has gone to bed and the pantry mouse is scratching. Space falls right down into the garden.

Even the stars whisper I can't dance with you any more, find some other night.

Some of today is still visible. Silence fills my footsteps like the sea those in the sand. I get beeches mixed up

with leeches. The far-off sea, I reel in my enthusiasm.  
The inbred State propaganda the façade of a hundred  
years of lies.

Thank god I have stopped caring. The half-empty  
cup that toyed with being half full now thankfully is  
empty. Honestly empty.

Helpless toads as tall as trees houses against the  
horizon about to jump.

Many years went by without work for angels, who  
let their hedges grow eight foot high so they could no  
longer see the street and no-one could peer in while  
walking by.

Months of steady work, standing still, lying dormant,  
I've often had the sense of being vindicated, when the  
time comes. I return to toy with things past, it has no  
more meaning than a bluebottle's manic wringing of  
hands. A moment of great vagueness, extraneous to all  
meaningfulness, elbows hinged on the abyss, blue eyes  
finding themselves again, in the remoteness of false  
pretences of gods and devils and has-been truths, and  
rose up before me the long and tall wall of their gaze, a  
vision of empty philosophy its immediate cause in my  
own flesh this feeling remembering forgetting thing

this laughable instance living as if I was someone else someone who must have been happy who never existed, dead, a dream of what I am but not what I am because what I am comes after me from the pit of a relentless task, head resting on a sloping desk sudden awakening from a ruler slapped down next to it and quickly putting away schoolbooks at the end of a lesson the bell about to ring inkwell with no ink in it decades of names scratched with compass points into the desk lid and filled in with blue ink from blobby cartridge pens. In these shadows I wander as if from sleep a foggy embarkation remembering everything but nowhere to put it that will be safe. Running down cloistered corridors a world in which one does not have to think for oneself just be in the right place at the right time no time at all to dwell on the meaninglessness of life, on the contrary, getting drawn in, the fascination of the biology pond standing around it on concrete flags peering down we're out to catch a hydra how big is it sir is this one sir uuuhr a leech look at that go a waterboatman sir sir I've found a water scorpion. Look at that whirligig beetle zooming round and round it's like when you put a piece of potassium in water and it doesn't know where to go it's going so fast nowhere all over the place.

In an idle moment towing a boat out to the island, pulling both of them up onto the mud, kids playing

cowboys and indians in the wood. Places where elves lived and you could find old rusty snuff tins. Journeys out with a Pacamac and a tube of Smarties and an apple for later. In the duffel bag a plastic sandwich box lined with damp blotting paper a homemade vasculum for collecting wild flowers. Memories crumble away like parts of the cliff slide down into the crashing waves. Holes in the brain big enough for deathwatch beetles to squeeze through without needing to chew.

No-one knows what he wants but him, we could sleep our lives away never knowing of his presence, this eternally shifting gaze like a child's voice singing baa baa black sheep drifting on the breeze, ephemeral and disembodied. And I think he is in my feelings like a watersodden log will not dry and I look at everyone else with his infantile tenderness, exclaiming great joy at seeing a spinning seed drop to his feet and he picks it up and holds it high and drops it again and again to confirm it will definitely spin and spin each time what a marvel. He is teaching me to follow in his footsteps, to not want anything more, to look on the world as a silly little workshop he made to amuse his friends. He had no ulterior motive, but he is sad to the bones the way it has turned out for some people and he wishes he could get inside them and shake them out of their old clogged dust.

I couldn't even be trusted to bring the right bread back from the shop, my first errand was my last. It was a big deal. Even the bushes in the garden were shaking their heads from side to side in disbelief that I could bring back the wrong bread, tutting they were. The disappearing frontiers of sanity. Why confine yourself to the always thought? Going around in a Zimmer frame for the mind, you mustn't think this you mustn't think that, only mad people think like that, well if so, I choose to be gloriously mad and beam like the cat that got the cream. I'm tired of waiting for my stupidity to be revealed by thinking as everyone else thinks. Stinks I should say. I prefer to wait until the shapes I can only vaguely make out become clearer, because they sing of caring less and loving more the interiors of scraped-out shells and decorated occult realisations, pages upon which nothing is written that can be easily understood radiating in the infrared secret sayings of the masters. Rubbish piles up in the sun uncollected, quietly breathing its chest heaving up and down with movement of hidden rats. Now and again throw an old shoe at it and watch them scatter in all directions.

Something in me pleads with enclosed rooms. I've never dared reflect the light dying in myself. I don't speak the language. Either I was given orders or I give orders, either way it is like a flare has gone off in my eyes, disorientating me. I suppose I will regain what was lost, before it has become mere nostalgia, while there is still time. I haven't ruled out that it was intended to be this way, it saves me thinking I have failed. I reduce action to a minimum to avoid straying too far from where I lost the thread, knowing that is no guarantee, since it may be that I should have taken action to prevent an imperceptible drift, but not knowing what action I could take to achieve that at least frees me of the responsibility, and should drift indeed be necessary to regain my position I have not foolishly forestalled it. I don't bother praying, since God knows my heart if he exists and can sort the tangled strands better than I.

There is a city where I will weep for having kept the faith to allow myself to be. What I create in dreams shines like gold glinting moonlight through the forest. I am full of the smoke of morning fires boiling a little water in the sunlight, and the determination to go on in half an hour or so. I write this by the roadside by a cool stream, I write this both where I was and where I am. Flowers in the potting shed, older, with victorious dreams. The pleasure of not being known for

who I really am, absconded from everything. Summer evenings I am like a reptile taken sail on a log floating across a lake. I will make it to the island, I will make a new life there.

I was a little boy sitting with his suitcase on the steps of Mrs Smith's sweet shop after it had closed, run away from home but got no further than around the corner. I wonder what I had in my case. Was it a few favourite toys? I cannot think it would have been anything practical, or perhaps there was nothing in it at all, when you left home you took a suitcase so I took my tiny suitcase. But as soon as I had left and got out of sight of the house, my plan had nowhere further to go, so I sat on the step learning that leaving home required somewhere to go, there was more to it than punishing one's parents, it would have to wait. So I went back at teatime and remained sullen in my bedroom, my tea eventually brought up to me on a tray by my mother, who I did not look at as she placed it on the end of my bed, the raspberry jelly wobbling, the fruitcake with marzipan and that slice had a whole almond on it, but I only glanced at the tray and quickly averted my eyes, and mum went away like a dismissed jailor, and when there was little chance of her coming back in, by the time she must have gone down the stairs, I dragged the tray over and chewed the jelly like tough meat I had so



much bitter anger to grind into my teeth, and I peeled the almond off the marzipan, a glazed roasted brown, and bit at it like a vicious bird. My tiny suitcase on the floor I violently kicked into the dust under my bed. It is best to be forgotten, I shall show my feelings by not coming down for my favourite TV programme. And my thoughts turned to the deadly nightshade I had found out in the country.

The gold we own in our dreams is lightly let go of, it makes no difference to us on waking, yet I was rebuked in a dream and wondered what I had done to deserve it when I awoke, and the feeling it had a meaning I should penetrate persisted throughout the day and into the next day. Even in our dreams we do not like people to laugh at us and easily suspect absurdity has an agenda we should be aware of.

Beaming in the moonlight a private smile, a dream of love to make a pale existence serene. What at other times retreating waters reveal.

Oh the contented years go by, minute by minute, and thoughts condemn them as insufficiently trodden, lacking in brilliance, rather be frozen on a mountain than comfortable unextending oneself in a cosy room.

The grey rags of a thousand years of finding myself, the pride on becoming a biped, knuckles too soft now for scampering over rocks. Doors made to fit me as coffins are, or a convenient average. Thousands of years go by fussily flapping my wings on rocky outcrops, getting the lie of the land, only to have to descend and fit in with them as their cities were raised up, to come to know their concerns as they themselves were raised up to walk tall. We each of us watch over a species an eternity, come to know it. They think they are human. Cautious thinking, they do not wish to spill over the bounds. They peep out at each other, from their rooms, from their streets, from their rooftops. Sometimes they come close, lying heads on pillows and gaze into the mystery that is the other person. They don't know where they are going. They settle in each other's hollows. Their souls mate. They become one and know it as a place they never left. All their lives they were reaching out to this, intensifying the echoes with every passing encounter. Sometimes, when quite alone, closing the eyes and feeling the presence of the other, even before meeting, as if the world is entirely this struggle to find each other, to hold on long enough and learn to accept the lessons that draw fragments together, that integrate the scattering of the seeds sown in the world, that made the world, just two paces from

me, who waits in the darkness for the floating by of she who has lost her way, and I will pull her out of the river with a hand that has waited an eternity to dip down into the water for the fulfilment of a single task. And so I see it at last, how little is required of me, and yet how much depends upon it. I have been prepared to go one way of a million ways I might go. Nothing more.

Living in me, a sharp turn when needed. That is all. There are angels standing by, but it is I who must do this. Angels cannot intervene until the final moments and there is no guarantee that they can rescue anything. They cannot touch the flesh, they cannot hook fingers around fingers. They can help me to know. As the time gets closer there will be a slowing down. It cannot be timed by clocks but one way to tell is to strike matches, when the time comes there will be a noticeable slowing of the time it takes the match head to ignite. A day ahead the match will be igniting in distinct slow motion, though everything else will be as fast as usual and perhaps even a little faster. Listening to music, passages may appear to slow down. You will find yourself holding your breath for longer before expelling, without intending to hold your breath. There will be extended periods of utter silence. You will notice more the sound of your own footsteps. You will unwittingly obey the impulses of the body to twist a certain way. You will see birds

of prey circling. And the beast that is man will evolve and escape.

I accept the curse. I choose to be used. Cast out still wearing the crown. Despite it all, I retain the dignity of one pursuing the Great Work, all things that lead to the thought, the conviction, that an illumination will follow though my correspondence betrays I am angled to the light as a prisoner.

I have changed the order of things, I have made discoveries that shall not be told until my disappearance is old. I will not be findable when the truth comes out, when the clear sound emerges from the din.

They shall know me as one who had the key of things. I annihilated my self and greyed my face with the ashes of ideas.

The fog that is lifting leaves the metal cans still smouldering.

The doorbell rang. I didn't notice at first the person standing there. Big big snowflakes dancing dreamily in the street lights. Victorian Christmas card street outside.

‘Yes, it’s snowing,’ she said, ‘did you get the parcel the postman left?’

‘Yes, I brought it round, I gave it to the man.’

‘Oh, he didn’t say.’

I shut the door and waited until she had turned the corner out of the front gate past the hedge and into her own gate, then I opened the door again. It’s snowing it’s snowing fabulous and pretty, my eyes wide open like a child’s, great big fluffy flakes drifting down, and no-one’s watching, all the curtains closed, everyone in their caves bathed in television light oblivious to the white world stealthily arriving outside, they’ll see it on the weather forecast. Over the road a little girl dashes up to the frosted front-door glass and peeps out of the letterbox, she flaps it open and shut open and shut, to attract my attention, she’s saying, ‘I see it too and now so do you. I was here first you know.’ I closed the front door and ran all the way down the corridor to the back garden. Dark, dull, and moody with no street light, the haggard old firethorn wearing its wizard’s robe of squally snowflakes, still with its red berries, casting spells into the night. I rushed back to the front door like one gone mad. Now the bin tops were covered white, the laurel leaves were already sagging under the weight. Big fluffy snowflakes blowing the pavement kisses, one flobs my glasses.

This afternoon the whole world is dripping. A sudden muffled thud, roof avalanche across the street. Lulled by the lost might of a distant sound. Chilly in short-sleeves I look out of the doorway, old frozen snow slips off a laurel leaf finally relieved of the weight. Icicles are melting.

I went for a walk in the slush. Coming back from the shops I saw an attractive girl walking towards me hand in hand with her guy and suddenly felt a great longing for a lover. I turned my head to avert my gaze and caught a glimpse of myself reflected in the undertaker's window juxtaposed with a display of dried flowers. Momentarily feeling inadequate and sad I stepped out without looking and nearly got run over in the deep black slush churned up at the side of the road. These feelings dogged me all the way home, as soon as I came through the door instantly I became bored of my life, my head full of confusion. Was it simply seeing that beautiful girl that caused my mind to feel that longing for a better life again? Whatever it was, what broke the mood was an old girlfriend ringing. Much laughter between us. She told me that all seeds germinate in darkness and she was so happy for me that all looked

black, because it was going to grow into something really marvellous.

I am now going to put on my big coat and walk the long corridor to the garden to say goodbye to the last gleamings of the day and hello to the night . . . I took a candle out and a cushion and sat there listening to the wild wind in the trees, cupping my hands warm around the candle flame to stop it being blown out . . . peace, the weary load cast off, the tring of a microwave from a lit half-open upstairs kitchen window, cutlery rummaged from a drawer, my head turns and looks up . . . the stars, the beautiful stars.

Calm, indifferent, as if nothing's transpired, the tall sycamore tree.

*The End*