KING OF THE GRASSHOPPERS

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‘In my best moments I think “Life has passed me by” and I am content.’

– Agnes Martin

THEY WERE sitting together under the bedclothes. It's a vicious circle, he thought, nice for a few weeks then you get used to each other, like a car you loved when you bought it brand new, then it gets a scratch. The snow-covered hills make such a beautiful change from green, but then winter deepens and nothing new follows for ages and ages until you're screaming for it to be whisked away by the spring. The start of everything is a liberation, its continuance something you'd like to step out of, if only onto the balcony for a fag. Soon enough you're coming home late every night and pissing where the light falls a little darker places that scream out to be pissed in as if they have neon signs flashing *Take a piss here! Take a piss here!* Wise homeowners set up huge beaming lights that come on every time a cat dabs a paw there and you and your full bladder make a smart twist of the feet and away like you were never heading

into that secluded corner by the garages, the kind of place corpses are discovered with stab wounds. There is nowhere to hide in the world sometimes, a restaurant with hovering waiters yes my meal is fucking gorgeous now fuck off you slag! Never say it of course just smile meekly and say yes really good and the waiter does his I'm so pleased but actually couldn't give a fucking toss look. Busybodies at every bus stop with their pack of hounds sniffing out lapses of etiquette, the disapproving looks for foreigners gobbing in the street and speaking with voices that sound like phlegm or beating a hedge with a stick to drive a rat out into a bucket they'll put a square of hardboard on top of and bang with a hammer until the rat has had enough. Cunts drinking our fine English lager in the street and little boys and little girls laying down a blown-up crisp bag on the pavement and stamping on it all these little annoyances to upstanding old-age pensioners who frankly had faces as sour as that when they were twenty and twenty-five and thirty they didn't suddenly get like that because they passed sixty or seventy it's just that good people are few and far between they're mostly all just cunts this fucking planet breeds cunts like there's no tomorrow so let's get that straight right at the outset there's just a total ugliness everywhere and the streets reek thank god for those days when the icy pavements come and they spread

rocksalt and sand to stop little boys making long slides it's a bloomin nuisance living in this place let's face it I only really enjoy thunder the kind of thunder that has old women shittin their nighties this is really the only kind of noise I can stand that superb crack across the sky like god is finally gonna get dirty and fuckin slap a few faces like I would if I had my way I'd go out there and punch a few geezers for no better reason than I wanted to. I often go on cunt patrol wise those ones who keep their heads lowered looking at the ground and don't meet my eye nothing to go on nothing to blow up my hoover-bag lungs into a right old fury.

I don't want to give myself airs or anything, the Borg can have my brain anytime mate. I can see there's a lot to be said for being a mindless assassin and if they give you the skills to go along with it you're sorted you've got a pleasant and happy life ahead of you dealing with people yer sensory equipment tells you are a rodent menace and the futility and vanity of what you're doing never occurs to you they're just previous associations familiar mental scenarios that you can't latch onto from the bit of human in you that's serving merely to hang the pretty impressive hardware from. The flame of the intellect, the personal individual intellect, snuffed out. You can let your hair down at last and annihilate guilt some fucking knob-job you picked up from a whore

scalded away in a quick smart and easy. In a word: *thrive*.

That was unfair, that whole load of memories that went before. I wasn't being myself. I wasn't making love on a rug I was chaffing a piece of gristle in a slit-open muscle. Twisting her nipples like a mad science-fiction arch-criminal turning the dial of the reactor into the red till the murmur he likes reverberates out of the tubes with please-stop eyes that really mean Carry on! Carry on! Harder! Harder! And you slash her back with nails I mean nails and grab her waist-flesh and there's not much of it but you stretch it out like lizard skin you fuckin want her now she's revved up good and proper and you've lost it but she knows you've really found it like few men can taunt danger the way you do and still be in control only thinly clothed in human-ness become something else a ferocious beast that can be trusted with a fluffy kitten trusted to play only as rough as the kitten can stand but rough nonetheless and this kitten ain't no kitten it turns out she's a bitch hot on hell-heat and she can fight too when her life depends on it and good that it does because then she really finds herself and gives it some throttle and she knows she's going to be yellow and blue with bruises next day but fuck next day that's just a memory of not letting go a timid life back there and she looks me straight in the eye and says fuck me fuck me! FUCK ME!

Her hair covering her shoulders in quieter moments was a strangely sufficient sensual pleasure, sitting there with a steaming hot cup of tea, a 'number 9' on a scale of one to ten she was improving in the making-a-cup-of-tea stakes. You're gonna have a beautiful bruise there, I said. I recognised my angled lower front tooth in the jaw-wide bite on her hip you could make a set of dentures from the impression it was a beauty. She was more interested in whether her tea was up to scratch. I'll give it eight, I said, not bad. Sexy bitch I nearly exterminated you last night like a fuckin Dalek you're bad you're very bad whipping up a storm in me like that I just wanted to hold her arm behind her back on the point of snapping and fuck her hard up against the wall. She had a purple wig I'd sometimes parade around the flat in there was nothing shameful about what we had and that's why I dug her and if I came on a bit too strong she always had her kendo stick under the bed to fend me off and she could use it too so I figured we were ideally suited two smart charmers with a vicious sexual streak, something disarming about otherwise smiling laughing normal folk. But I'd inevitably get maudlin and kick in doors or smash things for the hell of it like some bad juice got in my blood and rattled my windows from outside and I'd want to smash my fist down in a slab of butter and splag it all over the wall

my face everywhere and the ceiling was dripping with it like I'd had enough of having a brain that was jerking me around and I was warning it don't come too close or I'll dash you across the pavement and I'd be ripped out of it for a while only vaguely remembering meeting a young woman all I wanted to do was follow the storm I hated it as a little boy when a ray of sunlight broke up the dour day skipping under the big dark cloud rolling over the hayfields and I'd find her lingerie all over the floor and sniff it for life or death a sweaty thong like a bloodhound at the start of a trail and I'd look out the window and think a teenage girl is what I want right now but the thought was so transitory in no time I'd be in a narrow lane in bygone days picking up turnips fallen off the turnip cart or remembering the first touch of a cut-throat razor and making love on a narrow couch the days when the postman always had a smile and sunny postcards for you at the door in a smart uniform not a scowl in slovenly slacks who only brings me bills.

You never know when the blow will fall. It may come at breakfast, drinking down your cup of tea, it's constant vigilance making love. A self-inflicted wound, do you fancy another woman, does she fancy another bloke, the room oozes it sometimes and without a word nothing

is said, loudly. It comes pouring out in the silence. And at night the other's breathing sounds like it's refusing you, something is limiting you and it's nothing a swig of whisky can make go away. Ma woman in the bed beside me tempting love, but a bit sorry a bit ashamed. I don't want to disturb that that needs to grow till it knows itself and can be cast away. Amazing how romantic you can be, at times. Slowly removing her blouse, some questioning look, improvising, wanting her all the more for the chance it might fly away. Lose your complacency and you can love a woman properly. Never lose the days when your hand between her legs was all she ever wanted.

Wondering what she looks like with her clothes off, it's good to forget. Another glass of wine. Holding back from having her against the wall. She loves trying on skimpy clothes in front of the mirror, love watching her through the crack of the door.

Women so soon become nostalgias, chronic memories that can't be let go though you let go their hips yonks ago. They have given me something and they half want it back, I don't know how to say I don't know what you're looking for I don't know what you want from me any more. Life is so bloody provincial. Indian shop-keepers selling lollies ten p over the odds, furniture you bump your knee on I got rid of most of mine. Charities

make me angry with their constant whining for more money how about I whine for more money all bloody day long and those cunts who think trees are fucking noticeboards I would happily kill I've got a thing for trees I don't like to see drawing pins sticking in them it's just ugly how about I stick drawing pins in you fuck your cat it's dead and shovelled into a hole in someone's garden or eaten by rats by now. Oh, they make me sad enough, lost cat posters, especially those ones with a colour photograph of some lovable moggie, they should have a noticeboard at the end of every street for that kind of thing though and leave the trees alone.

It doesn't seem to be possible to BE anything these days, the older you get the more you fade away. I feel like I'm asserting my identity as a wisp of mist. I don't make any inroads any more and all the sincerity has gone out of me as a bad job, a wonky sideboard, I firebomb the whole fucking lot of it, better to go a day without a conversation than have to open your mouth and have shit fall out of it. You won't convince me otherwise, not now, spent too much time sitting on the wharf watching the boats come and go me, dreaming I was going out on that one and coming in on another. These guys who wear bluetooth phones all the time they forget to take em off when they're having sex with their missis they think they're so fucking important I just think you're a

fucking PLUMBER mate come off it you think you're out the Matrix? I consider myself fortunate I am not someone else, but I dunno how much that's saying better the fucking botch job you know. But seriously, I look at people in the street and I could kill three-quarters of em just lookin at em and put the others in a pen and decide later. Aaaaaargh! It's gets me so angry sometimes, fucking runts everywhere. Maybe I should emigrate, there's a natural wonder about foreign habits in a foreign land, here they're just annoying gobshites there you can admire their weatherbeaten faces and the straw in their hair they're in their natural environment and there's something to love about it not resent, as if I should resent anybody, I'd rather just not care, and then you talk to the Turkish barber as he's got his clippers on the nape of your neck and he's unusually chatty he says it's been a boring day, like always, and you smile and say yeah I know what you mean and it cheered me up it did right proper I thought you're a decent geezer and you're good with hair even my fuckin grey mop but thankfully soon some other Turkish guy comes in and sits down and now they can talk in Turkish and leave me out of it I don't think that's rude I think that's bloody marvellous guy cutting my hair don't need to talk to him don't want to talk to him rather be out that chair and away sick squid later but for a moment, I'm

reminded, people can be gorgeous can't they, it's just me and my head that wants rid of them. Still, he'd better not get too yack-yack with the old pleasantries or I'll be forced to find another barber one who understands short but not too short and let's leave it at that feller I don't care to tell ya what kind of day I've had cos I hardly know meself and what the fuck does it matter to you anyhow. I listen instead to the TV blaring out of the corner of the ceiling which I can't see staring into the blur in the mirror where my face is knowing how much he's cut off by what I can see fall down the cape I can tell if he's in sheep-shearing mode or just little fluffy tufts at a time and on the TV some kid been murdered somewhere I can't even summon up sympathy for his parents it's all so false some reality show ain't it the news I don't have a TV back home I'm never at home anyway I live more like a stray dog wandering down alleys sitting down here sitting down there watching the ships come and go and feeling now and again an intelligent affection for little teahouses where you can get stupid cream teas every blue-rinsed old crinkly's idea of paradise out in their Sunday best and I sit with em watching kids with sandcastle buckets go by with mum and dad and calm down this is my meditation hall my Buddhist retreat and some old biddy says can you pass the sugar love and I pass it and she tells me how

her husband died and she's just waiting to die herself she punctuates the sentence with a slurp they do lovely cream teas here don't they love I think it'll rain later did you bring your brolly? There is a gesture of warmth in these meaningless little snatches, the average man and woman has a lot on his plate but zero access to metaphysics to cope with it. It's hived off into stupid out-of-date moralities and hypnotised fear. Do good to people and don't do evil. Yeah, but what is good what is evil? God he slaughters people by the beachload the volcanic townload the shanty quakeload, let's learn from Him it don't matter it's just a death in an amusement arcade let's have some more and then pretend to ski some bird waggling her fat arse on moving floorboards staring into a slalom course on a TV every time I go down the pier I see that ride that drops kids from a great height like a cinema row on a gigantic forklift that drops and saves the little fuckers before the ground mum and dad standing around smiling watching their kids scream well every time I see that I think God make today the day a wire snaps or a cog jams and they all go splat on the floor or better still crash through the pier and hit the waves below I think if I go there enough times I'm bound to see a fairground disaster one day I can't wait.

I first came to this town twelve years ago moved in with a bird I was down from London for the day saw her

sucking a 99 flake sticking out of a cornet white creamy ice cream round her gob I was eating a ploughman's sarnie cheese and red onion got Branston round my gob minute I saw her I thought I want my fluids to mingle with hers I saw she had tarot cards in her bag so I did my psychic act on her went back to her place nice little new flat with thin walls she sucks and wanks me off lying on top of the bed my sperm hits the ceiling like a fucking geyser she waves it around half on her face half up the wall over her brand-new Marillion poster she didn't even notice the stuff that hit the ceiling till later when we're sitting there drinking coffee and a dribble splats her face is that what I think it is she says yeah it's raining spunk. She was a right little nympho.

Dreams are dirty so I have no worries I'm living a dirty life.

I don't exactly work if you know what I mean gave that malarky up long since couldn't be having with that day in day out nudging shit around with my nose perpetual errand boy. This bloke wants me to tell that

bloke what some other bloke told him to say. Why don't you tell him yourself, I say. It's your job to tell him, he says. Wanker. I suppress saying it, it's not my job to call him a wanker, he knows he's a wanker he doesn't need me to tell him. Fucking wanker. You're a fucking wanker mate. I don't tell him. He knows. He's a fucking wanker. They pay me to keep the information to myself, they don't know I'm going to describe him as that fucking wanker who told me to tell this other fucking wanker what some other fucking wanker said to say. Fucking wankers.

More and more it was revealed to me, back in my dingy bedsit above the launderette, thoughts perpetually falling into the spin cycle, that I was holding back a tide that wasn't advancing with this wage slavery. I could live on the dole and write books no-one would be interested in. I saw an old Underwood portable in the dusty window of a junk shop. Bought it, gave the hope a little life. It was dirty as fuck but I took it home and cleaned it up and oiled it and polished it and it buffed up a treat it did glossy black shine like a vintage car gleaming like it was 1932 again. I owned nothing much, and that was my pride and joy.

I can't hold it all in the mind at once, what I have to say. I have to begin somewhere and carry on and just hope it will all get said and maybe there will be

a click . . . whirr . . . and the secret hidden thing will come alive like a dream robot ready to board a rocket to the moon.

My heart was already broken by the time I said 'I love you'. I'd been holding the pieces in place, looking for somewhere to let them fall. Hold out your hands, I said, I'm gonna give you the lot, I'm fed up of carrying it around.

I question the value of what we are trying to achieve. Maybe we should just put our feet up and have done with it. Or chase cars like dogs used to.

When I first came here I spent all day wandering around, eyeing up women, women young enough to instruct. Women I could pluck out of the ordinary course of things and be alive with for a while. I don't say they didn't have nuthin to teach me. They taught me how to be myself, how to do what I knew how to do but didn't always do, how close I was to something extraordinary inside of myself, something almost Satanic when it's said in the holy kinda way. Not that I had any interest in all that evil shit, I'm talking more stepping out of the rush of life for a moment and saying yep, that's what I am, nothing weighing heavily on the conscience because I

was made this way and any violation that's going on is surely holy violation, but I'm just talking it up to give a feel, when it comes down to it I was steady in my purpose just don't ask me what that purpose is because only then I'll waver, for a moment, like I've got the fuckin gaffa tape stuck to the back of my hand or twisted back on itself and it's a tangle an the teller's still fuckin screamin. Apart from that I knew without thinking about it, just don't ask me questions if you don't want to see me get ugly, most of the time calm calm it down keep it on a level walk out there into the world fully in charge and take and want, simple as that, no dithering, just take what I want and better than that too have what I take want to be taken, taken by me, simple as that, nothing offensive, straightforward, here girl, come, and they come come to my side like they were always intended to be there and they know it, I've placed them where they've been wanting to be they never knew how to get there on their own. I have no nostalgia for my old life, for who I used to be, as if I ever wanted to end up an old man in a rocking chair anyway, prematurely buried, a doubt now and again, rocked by an emotion a real emotion like a possession state deceived into acquiescence again and again calling it something close to enlightenment and carrying on pulling up weeds in the garden only for a moment crossing over into what

I might have been this interlocking life for all I know I may be living anyhow, somewhere in some parallel universe, so what the hell just pass through until the box arrives or make up a story *The Thousand and One Nights* thinking it must be something like this but it's just a speck of light being swallowed by the darkness stagehands already pulling down the scenery move on move on nothing to see here and the twilight of what I want has come the weariness of having had to live straddling on the one hand this immense pulsating urge to have something exciting happen and on the other ah bugger it fuck it what do I care? Paint peeling off most of the beach huts where I like to sit down and smoke a joint, the beach pleasantly empty on a dour rainy Sunday afternoon, the sand so uniformly smooth fresh from the last sweeping in of the ocean up to the sea wall that protects this town from the inevitable, one day. The occasional passerby umbrella akimbo catches a whiff of the grass and looks this way for a moment then buries their head away from a psycho stare back at them busy in the cobblestones praying I don't get up, sitting sheltered in the little porch of *Chez Caesar* I love the names they give these beach huts bloody great padlock to protect a table and tea equipment missing that you could just unscrew the hinge on the other side if you were that desperate to take a gander at some weekend

wanker's beachside possessions I could sit here all day just looking at the sea I could put all my possessions in a wheelbarrow and wheel it down here and live in one of these glorified sheds or is that someone else's dream not mine? Mine is a carnal reality. You could fuck in there, mattress on the floor, what am I thinking, potting herbs and hanging baskets? A lick of paint, I'd paint this fucker yellow bright yellow I'd call it *Chateau Reality* hell I spend long enough squatting down here rolling up on the porch it's virtually mine anyhow thank god for stormy summers they must get about two weekend's use out of this place never seen em.

How confusing it all is, you set off in one direction and end up going in another, you wait longer and longer for less and less to happen and in the end you just explode and wreck something happening beneath the surface, which floats up in pieces saying look, see, you could have had this, but oh no you had to fire yer big mouth off you had to lay it all on the table, couldn't you have waited just a few more days would that have killed ya? It's like you're being keelhauled by your own stupidity, yet I can't help thinking the world tempts you into it the world wants you to fuck up, or learn to be so

bloody cautious you never do any fucking thing, and even then you'll screw up it'll turn out you shoulda done this or ya shoulda done that there's no escape from the permutations. But if I've learnt one thing it's . . . I don't fucking know, it was there a moment ago now it's slipped off the tip of my tongue and gone down the back of my throat . . . but if I've learnt one thing . . . retrace my steps now lad . . . if I've learnt one thing it's . . . no it's not how to fight my corner it's . . . one thing . . . god the sea is churning today, like my guts after that kebab last night, aw goddammit it's dwindlin and dwindlin mah brainz prison dogs barking at it and straining at the leash a fuckin rat on the exercise yard getting smaller and smaller searchlights comin on where's it gone where's it gone down some hole somewhere why can't I even think one thing when I want to instead of unwinding wool off the hole in me jumpah what a lovely day ah yes that's it that's IT! Don't chase after yer dreams man let em come to you, that's it, that's the one thing I've learnt. Some niggle now it wasn't the original one thing I learnt, which I seem to recall had something to do with staying calm just being an emotional flatliner on the monitor nah that's not it. Years of neglect and then thoughts start to crowd around like they've got something they want to tell me. So anyway I dunno how much longer I'll stay in this

town wandering from lamppost to lamppost passing the council flats hotdogs on the pier arranging my life like tall flowers in a tall vase but seeking some master-stroke like the fairy feller's the magnificent details of what I've looked at a million times but musta somehow skirted over the speckling flashes of light in the granite walking along the pavement like winking fossils. I need to put all of my spirit into life and live it like a madman slashes a cardboard box with a knife like he's looking for something and he ain't yet prepared to accept the box is empty he's emptied it out of its nothingness but now he's attacking the cardboard itself as if something lucid has popped his blind eyes in, burning his heart in his belly. I've been looking for myself for so long the mystery has become: what on earth is driving me? What bright flowers do I suspect are hiding underneath this pile of wilted stab-victim fond farewells this flattened hedgehog of a loving gesture rank and stale no-one has the heart to clear away ornaments floating in an oarless boat a warning to everyone don't die in the street late at night lest your felt-tip epitaph has only the nearest railings to be wired to a little visitation from the cemetery no-one has any reason to go to unless they, like me, love the choppy sea of random-slanting gravestones and armless noseless angels where goths take home sandcastle buckets full of graveyard dirt dug up

with kiddies' beach spades and Asda bags reek of glue. They never come near me, the goths, well, the girls do, if they see me burning dead things or heating beans in a can, like some watcher from the wastes, I can see their little innocent minds ticking over they're like babies generally misunderstood to be trying to look weird but actually as innocent as the thought to pick up handfuls of the warm ash and bath one's face in it. Satan is not red-faced horns and pointy tail Satan is frilly cuffs and black velveteen jackets a little old-fashioned in the world but at home leaping up onto old crypts pulling out his sword from his swordstick and fencing with an invisible opponent, a mad young romantic with stories to tell and hands that smell of gunpowder and crackle and spark. Vanity was never a problem for a Christian ogre but the real Satan is so immensely loveable it is hard for him not to love himself. Well, sometimes I dressed up and was that kind of clown for the goth girls, other times you wouldn't even notice me standing there burning dead leaves and staring into the flames like newlyweds at their first home. Oh, I materialised something through the strength of patience, I know that much. I prised open my eyelids before rigor set in, the confining stifling reality of a beautiful life together in a beautiful house forever and ever. Amen to that. Yeah, well I must have been a watcher from the wastes, what

other explanation could there be? Sometimes you don't have to look far for the answer, if you're baking clay bricks in a brickoven day in day out and spending your nights as a prizefighter in a fairground marquee then you're not going to have a lot of time for phosphorescent algae or the paintings of Rembrandt, unless you swot up special for *Mastermind* just to show no-one should take you for granted, but for the most part it just goes on and on the jaw-achingly dull daily grind now and again interrupted by the hassle of burying the dead you can't palm off the responsibility for onto anyone else. Myself, I just sit useless under a useless tree occasionally tasting a handful of earth to see if it tastes any more like food in the meantime. I sit watching worms copulate tempted into playful evocations of memories not mine just stuff I signed for on the doorstep some other name on a parcel I guess they'll pick up later. I mean, any number of passing thoughts knock on my door and recommend themselves as having visionary potential but it could just be the firelight flickering inviting me in saying come this way awhile and *belong*. Take the trouble to become acquainted with these surroundings, for this is your new home, Lord and Lady Muck have left it to you in their will, you can be happy now, you can stop pretending. O all those poor hopes child! It wasn't I who forced you to bed early. Put aside the mud and

here, bang this tambourine join the Jesus Army there is no broken furniture and leaky taps and faucets that scald you in the Kingdom of Heaven. Put aside your boob-job woman with her sexy thong and miniskirt and black latex sweating over a sewing machine into the night making ostrich-feather fans and lacy knick-knacks to excite and boots up to her ass take this tambourine and let jesus take away all your worries about the giro gone missing and the falling-down wallpaper and not even having enough dosh to buy a fucking ice cream let jesus buy you a triple-scoop in Heaven. But even the gulls are jeering away this nonsense, like I wasted my last fifty pee on the top half of a ventriloquist's dummy rollicking with laughter and mechanically falling all over the place in a glass-sided box on the seafront. Fuck off you Christian cunts!

Looking at the sea, at the town, at the sea again. Herring gulls divebombing the surface of the water, vertical drop, didn't want to go back to my broom closet, never want to go back, rather sit on a bench in the half-hearted funfair, when did funfairs lose their appeal, maybe you need to be freshly in love with a mad dash in your soul, not counting your pennies secretly in your pocket. Isn't

it tacitly implied that the years have made a promise to us, just carry on a bit further, a bit further, and it will bloom. I think I've stopped extracting this promise, it seems to me I forced the hand of life to live up to my expectations, it rarely did but that's just it, it gives you this fucking hope to suck on, like a poisoned sweet, to lift your spirits when down in the dumps, when you start listening to snatches of conversation from passersby for oracular pronouncements, some clue as to how to get out of this dream set solid this static trawl. People drive by in flash fuckin cars and you can't even afford a half-price punnet of strawberries to take the edge off, not that you want to take the edge off, not really. A huge seagull pulling a half-full bag of chips out the bin, someone I can identify with someone who shares something with me who doesn't seem at all bothered there is no further progress. Ahhh away with him the grumpy lodger in my soul. Anytime, can't I start again anytime? Isn't the clock always just starting from scratch, I don't have to see it as a constant reminder of how much time has already passed. If I'm not comfortable lying on one side try the other. Good morning you fragile illusion, I've not found your weak link yet but I will oh but I will. I don't have to pretend to nature. Ogling girls whose lives I can't understand, I can't remember being so fucking shallow so maybe I never was. Have

I really spent fifty years wondering where I'm going? And no end in sight. A lot of joy often seems to be just starting, but you gotta notice the sea is starting to trap you on a little island, you have to keep your wits about you wandering out here, at least I always have, man it *has* to take away from just enjoying it. Yearning all the fucking time. It comes to something when just finding a two pound coin in the street would be enough to set it all right again, go and sit in a café and get away from these small misunderstandings with myself, a slice of bread and butter and a steaming hot mug of tea, and what do you know, it was all a trick of the light this not-being-happy malarky. That's how life is out here, dreaming of creating a new reality for everyone but that ain't it man, bangin a fokkin tambourine that's givin up early fellah before you've even sat alone in the pine forest dreaming of redheads when you return, shoulders were made for shrugging so don't give me any of your quick-fix fake love and prayer books. Some bird strides by talking into the air her mobile held out in front of her like her passport to not being thought a mad spouter in the street like I should realise it's not voices in her head she's having a conversation with oh no it's a real person I'm talking to as if that makes it any less sad striding along 'I've got a small bottle of Southern Comfort, and I mean little . . .' agh people and their

fucking social lives. Everyone is talking on the phone all the bloody time. What *is* the point? I think urban life takes its toll when you're forced to the edge of it.

Fossilised. If it's dead, so what? Please don't tell me how vulgar I am or ask what I'm up to. Flutterings around my head I've got a feather hat on. Begin at the beginning. At the party I'm holding tonight. There'll be plenty of booze but bring some. Wind the days up, see them go.

How often have I thought, I want none of it. Narrow streets, the sky, nothing to believe in. Who can give me anything the equal of a sunlit puddle? The flowers that match my forgotten thoughts. Sudden healthiness after feeling trapped, you're enjoying something. Nature doesn't deserve renunciation, nature doesn't obstruct me. It's the artificial I detest. Getting close in a few words. A varnished surface tackily holds my cuff. Will I be reborn, having solved nothing, or will the thirty or forty years left to me make it all clear? The vast fields I wanted to master seeming tiny by comparison. A ray of sunlight a bright friend into whose house I am invited.

Take flight of myself. See it all again clearly. The cup runneth over. I'll stay a little while longer, I'll see it through. I get it, like a broken rosary spilling its beads on a polished wooden floor, an empty house, a mattress in one of the rooms, a brief stay, shy man, you're a clever one. I'm glad you've arrived. I was tiring of being so good, so goody good good. The imperceptible effect, someone watching ants. Vague starlight. Sitting at the window. A breeze stirring. Nothingness. The last bead bouncing away into silence, pursuing itself with empty hands.

The absence of sound weighs on me. A world . . . I suddenly saw it. A bright friend in whose house I'm sitting, like a knife on the table. Stopped off on my way to the big party. Fumes coming up between the floorboards. Sitting in the dead of night, like sleep I pay no attention to that doesn't succeed in chloroforming me into non-observance, awake yet not awake, shifted morelike, a settling into invisibility, watching ants. How long the eyes awaited this, this peace of fleeing crowds, this fear of me only natural. Fingers poking blistered paint. Only a moment before the doorbell chimes, and it is smiling happy faces saying come come on are you

ready yet come on we're going to the big party are you coming are you coming to the big party come with us come to the big party with us don't sit here in the dark mulling over things you've already forgotten that don't matter come with us, to the big party.

A door was flung shut at the back of the mind. Very tired of absurdity. Hanging around for thoughts. Rusty. Hurried apricot halves in syrup. Stuffed fish on the wall, behind glass. Wax apples in a wooden bowl. Relaxed, pinhole-camera eyes, reproducing but not taking in, the brain inverting the image without thought, as a mirror assaults us with a conundrum we most of the time stare directly into but rarely allow ourselves to be puzzled by, optics bending light this way and that, reflecting off the teacaddy, how early we put aside our reflection at the back of a spoon. Life a hair's breadth away from pulling its shoelace into a knot. The filaments that catch the light, floating threads of a busted spider's web. Glossy things, dull things. Things that do not matter until we reflect upon them. Propped against the mantelpiece, three floorboards, a hand reaching down into the dark between the joists. The four o'clock train is coming, nails bitten down to the cuticles. Examining the folds

of my shirt, sure I saw shadows darting in there. Perhaps a spider risking being squashed should have had the sense to lower himself down to the ground by now. The possibility of being seen from the street walking around naked, scanning angles as keenly as a snooker player. Close the dressing-gown, put these balls away. In the middle of the day, things taking a long time to sort, not this, not that, when someone asks me tonight what have you done today I'll face up to it and say, nothing. What is there to do but take my chance, follow the things that are wriggling away, waking up to answer the door. The door. If I had no door I would not need to wake up, I could push on caught in no-one's glare like an old man watched by his cat swinging in a hammock in an empty room. Christ knows that would do me, moving to my own rhythm like that. I could learn how to tie a bow tie, get the lumps out of custard. Burn holly on a bonfire, clutch the banisters piglets scurrying up the stairs squealing. Don't fry us for bacon Mister Feathers. Kids in Halloween masks and purple crêpe paper. Shouting from the edge of the circle: 'Leave it, leave it be!' They're fading for me though, pottering here at the centre, mud skippers all about and blowholes collapsing into themselves, this very same circle drawn in chalk on the bare floorboards, a candle stuck by a bit of dribbled hot wax to an enamel plate, lying collapsed

at the centre and travelling, sizzling on an electric fence, elven faces bobbing up and down trying to catch a spark of life in the eyes mutely staring but not giving anything away.

Not even a rug to pull over cold shoulders. Times enough to think some hidden mechanism has sprung. Lying in a heap the scent of dahlias from the garden. A cat purring, somewhere, a comfort when one cannot move to grasp others, cannot even conceive others. Entrusted to a cat. Whatever has snapped has really snapped this time. Watched by an eagle owl he thought was a treestump surrounded by a little dump of damp and drained pale yellow chicks sucked and spat. Don't like to see owls in cages, a circle closing in.

Swept away by a tide of fur. A crow brings worms to the open windowledge, as if to say, I wanted to do something, it was worth a try. Ant antennae are already communicating up and down the arms of an old armchair dumped outside spring coiling up from the seat like a jack-in-the-box has long since clambered down.

Myself alone reflected in derelict spaces.

Mocked at from the rooftops by magpies a noisy trail down the road like tied-on tin cans TV aerials vibrating from sudden flight dodging the purple shit of blackberry-gobbling wood pigeons aimed mostly at

parked cars. Balloons twelve for a pound. I have never owned a couch. Ferns in the front garden so prehistoric.

Even the most repugnant dreams are woken up from. Where do the days go, shorter and shorter. This room, rented by the month, seems like a place that holds me back from the life I ought to be living, and yet, if I got rid of it wouldn't there just be another room somewhere else. Life is always elsewhere when you stand next to those thoughts. Awaiting some external circumstance to come along and alter things. So I drag myself in to an awkward shelter, legs sticking out a little into the rain. A doorless daytime during which to ponder Fate, shut off from the world, today's daily tasks put off till tomorrow and tomorrow's till the next day until the hours of one day creep into the other.

Experimenting with new recipes, a contentment in play, alone, things I don't want to do not done. The shadow of time shrinking inside ourselves, creases in the day only ironed out in the night. The sodden autumn lingeringerjing. The vast winter to overooverdoo. The mist vines in twisting strands and the early darkness is of tea brought in on trays up a slant to the night. And the night sleeps its lost childhooded mischievous morning

till the fence rattles with the badly balanced fatso cat plonk down onto the windowsill outside the open window and down plonk onto the footsore flubbedy-dub and off till the clink-clank of heaving padding over the iron draincover bridge over an underground river of cack the 8 o'clock evacuation whooshing through and the hippo pounds her way down my cupboard under the stairs her door latches shut in a pronounced ping and out she goes, hopefully into a face full of spider web her and her dingo laugh. I turn over and go back to sleep, like a milkshake the froth collapsing bubble by tiny bubble. A good three hours before the postman brings the book I ordered. I am contented, like guinea pigs under a rhododendron.

Shang-ri-la is full of strangers. A zipup pencil case for school, so proud, so organised. Runny nose, nosebleed. Hankie under the pillow. The tooth fairy never brought me anything, I remember that but not protesting. Such trust in going to sleep.

You looked at me as if I loved you.

Which way are the clouds travelling?

Happiness can be like a butterfly you feel the need to catch.

Here I am as poor as the bong you want. Up some alley taking stock of my situation. No-one to say 'Let's do something' to. Shuffling-forward's best friend of wait-until-the-wholegoddamnthing-changes. Pulling the ugly face eating greens you'll stick like that if the wind changes. Wind-up false teeth chattering to the edge of the dinner table to the natural accompaniment of an oompah-oompah band. Ten goes at threading a needle if I don't get it this time I'll turn the goddamn thing right round and stick it in my eye so be warned needle. 'I don't care,' said the needle. Then neither do I, said I, and the thread shot straight through like there was never nuthin hard about it straight through the eye of the needle. Not long before the child discovers the o'clock of every intruding moment and the love of a cat who has heard the tin-opener. Plastic moustache clipped to nostrils the teacher who smells of woodwork the difference between veins and arteries the gradual deterioration of neat handwriting never knowing what the beetroot stain was on some kids' faces inability to understand the New Testament though a liking for

ziggurats palm trees donkeys and the flat-roofed house down the road where the big fat girl with Billy Bunter glasses lived who had a pear orchard and gallstones in a cork-stoppered jar. That boy who in attempting to pee higher than anyone else wet his own hair. Lying, constantly lying about everything, forced into it by the nosiness of parents who had obviously already made their own investigations. One's first coconut, won at the fair, bodging out the eyes with a bradawl and pouring out the milk, weak looking stuff, a lot of effort to get inside the thing and then, so that's coconut? Not a patch on Bounty. Hating short hair but then when it got too long hating long hair but hating getting it cut. First tits in a magazine first tits in a newspaper first injury to the forehead first bloody nose given first gate sat on first tooth pulled out after waggling around all afternoon first betrayal by friend first terrible revenge plotted and executed first hospital corridor walked down all old and echoey first fistfight and subsequent decision to specialise in bullies and have more scraps like a gunslinger invites the challenge but appears not to want it. Win by timing and strategy, have no fight I couldn't win. Be ready to kill with bare hands, pull their faces off with my fingers hooked in their nostrils. Oh, the lonely roads I walked from there, the deals with Death in the dark of the night. The magnificent

peacocks that lit up my destructive emotions and took good care of me in dovetailed seconds slotting into some greater scheme of time. First taste of freedom in being past caring. The gentle knowing eyes of some tramps, like why shouldn't God choose to sleep on cardboard and the day's newspapers under a railway archway. The decision to throw away all my stupid ideas and begin again and again and again. Have nothing, be nothing, but look at these bright blue eyes that the days sail by on. The places once lived the mechanisms taken apart the deathknell of wallowing well the hours sweated in sleep and dreams. I was already persuaded that wherever I went I took numerous opportunities and drowned them in compromise and habit. I craved a contemplative's mountain upon which to put behind me the loves that never flew the hopes strangled by their own umbilical cord, and the human stupidity that wormed its way into even the most casual exchanges. My income was small, so a plank on the pier dangling my legs in the chip-fat sea breeze had to suffice, scooping mushy peas out of a polystyrene cup with two fingers that would otherwise be up to the world. I could see it in their eyes as I passed them, an ancient urge to raise their shields, but they had no shields so their hearts thumped a little faster as I passed them I could hear it I could smell their fear like an animal knows but they were mostly lucky

in that I mostly didn't care to strip the worthless rings off their fingers or slit their throats for a wrong look since I didn't even look to notice that they were avoiding my gaze I knew they were even the corner of my eye said fuck off as I walked along the seafront like a shark on land, musing about my long forgotten academic achievements or the baloney stubbornly clinging to me like the rotting aristocracy to England. A seething seafront monster who might at any moment raise his face to the sky and let out a tortured scream, but kept the lid on like all the fucking rest of em being towed along dead-engined cars.

I have a can of baked beans in my pocket and stick of liquorish. The more I neglect her the more I give her what she never had, a guy who's more than a passing thought. I give her a chance to miss me. Not neglect, no, not neglect, that's the wrong word, let us say . . . stands back until the late evenings of her day, when I may come a-callin or I may not, standing under a lamplight looking up at her lit room feeling a draw that in the flicking open of a Zippo could be a draw no more, just a pause to light a fag before walking on, but who am I kidding, to think she might be waiting for me, hoping I'll come, tonight, this night, now, now the now of all nows, while a toaster in the kitchen pings and shoots up a slightly blackened piece of toast, who am I to

her now but a thought put aside for the betterness the lovely gorgeousness of hot-buttered toast with a thick spreading of Marmite, and equally, is it that that makes me turn on my toes and walk back into her loving arms one more night. A bath, and the cuddliness of the night a puzzling memory sucked out of me and forgotten a day in a dingy ramshackle shelter from a drizzle warmed to in the end the sea rough and people scattered. Did I even once think of her and her warm bed? I just follow the tramlines of a bruised old soul where I am on my circular route when I'm there. It is clumsy of me to think too much I could easy get to thinking I was on the run and lose the knack I have for raising a hand to scratch my forehead obscuring my face before I've even seen the coppers in a car. She knew there was something about me. The way I would suddenly change my appearance, or dye my hair. The number of times she'd not noticed me standing outside the café where she worked looking in the window, and then when she at last realised it was me she'd meet my eyes like an owl had been watching her and she hadn't seen it and before my emotionless face shifted quickly into a smile I'd see a quiver of fright, like she'd seen the me I keep under the weight of a big stone peering out. She'd rush out, I didn't recognise you! What have you done? Have you dyed your hair? When did you grow

that beard? Is it a real beard it can't be a real beard you haven't had time to grow it. You're wearing a false beard! How marvellous! You're in disguise! How fabulous.

I liked that she liked that about me. Not many would. I told her that first time I did work for a private detective, later I just said don't ask so she didn't ask. I liked that about her too, that she didn't ask. That it was just me, I didn't come in one fixed appearance, I had a whole private world hidden away. It bothered her sometimes, she wanted to know what I did when she wasn't with me, how I spent my time. I don't exist, I said, when I am here with you is the only time I am. Buy into my bunch of shit, will you, and we'll get on just fine . . .

Once she was with me when I ran into a house on fire to rescue a cat. She knew some people feared me, she could tell that by the way they looked at me. How much do you need to know about a person? Would I still be me if I was more forthcoming? Maybe I'd just fray away to nothing if you tugged too hard.

I liked her because she never seemed to have a boyfriend to touch her. Even when she was with men, she told me, they stopped wanting to have sex with her and fantasised about chasing after young girls instead. One

became a pornographer, wanted to film her, arranged an interview for her to become a dominatrix. These men I thought ridiculous for not seeing her. Seeing her as she was. Men watched her in the street, wanted her, but were afraid to approach. She was out of their league. It was the solitude in her that attracted me, the sense that she was waiting, waiting for one who could match her in that, as if the world was something left far behind. Her bed was like a bed in a wilderness, black smoke wafting through the red-streaked sky, and I a rough man from the wastes. The marks of the ordinary world disappeared, and though she washed and ironed and mended and served up plates in the day, in the night when we made love great sails billowed above our heads set adrift upon the chaos that still remains substantially hidden from hypnotised eyes. Once she looked at the lines on her hands and said, 'I am thousands of years old, the cities have already collapsed.' A coffee and a fry-up, a dollop of butter on toast, her bones thin and delicate like a bird's, she had a way of resting her face in the crook of my neck as if finally coming to rest standing there in the kitchen. We built our nest stick by stick from things thrown away or fished out of skips. I emptied out my pockets of pebbles and shells I had picked up on the beach. Sand was blown into every corner poured out of my socks. We were waiting, together, for a catastrophe,

but for us we were survivors of it already. She hung her skimpy panties out to dry on a sagging line on the balcony. Did I say she was German?

Silence knows the pleasure of not having a clucky woman. She never asked me where I was going or where I had been. Sometimes I told her, but since the only place I ever went was nowhere, that everywhere was just somewhere else in my head, it amounted to no more than: *Out there*.

She had a quietness to her spirit that made every gesture, every word, something bold. She would sit and watch me doing origami at the dinner table. If I casually drew something in the sand on the beach with a stick, she would wait to see it in expectation that it would be something worth seeing. When I drew a circle around her quickly in the sand she would clap her hands together and jump in the air and say 'You've trapped me now, I shall drownd if you don't let me out.' She'd stretch out a foot to the edge and quickly jump back as if she'd confirmed what she already knew in delight and awe, that a solid transparent wall rose up all around her from the sand. How do you do that, she asked me. No, I said, how do *you* do that?

He could still feel it, this lack of her. He saw no-one but her and when he didn't feel the connection he felt ashamed, though he didn't know why he didn't feel the connection. It was as if she didn't care any more, she'd forgotten about him. But he knew this was ridiculous, it was just time apart. Why should he listen to the messages of his moodiness, when he knew there was nothing tangible to latch onto. But it was the sense his moods signified something unseen, that had he been perceptive enough he would have seen, and so he hammered at the door of not knowing in the hope it might open, knowing it would never open. Only time would solve it, a change of mood, a new mood that revealed the old mood as so much stuff and nonsense. A spider gorging on a small beetle glistening its legs chewed off being turned around in the mandibles of the spider hanging stock still at the centre of his web, it caught his attention and he watched it for a while, a grim black corn-on-the-cob being turned in the mouth, he got up from his chair and stood there watching it for a minute or two, timeless time. When he sat back down he stretched back in his chair and thought, of freedom, of French women, of a satisfactory nothing, and knew that dwelling on desire would get him nowhere, it would only torment him, and a peacefulness returned stock still at the centre of his chaos. This was not the

first time nor would it be the last, that he had fallen into the deafening roar of the world. But, unmistakable now, it was his stillness, and the world quietened as if out of respect for a master regaining his mastery.

He knew he was called upon to be more than he had managed to be so far. All manner of realities would fall into place, if only he managed to be what he had it in him to be. The silence was dying away now, but he took some of it away with him into the big wide world, the tears he flung off his eyes not even knowing they were there until he turned his head sharply. My goodness, he had work to do if he was to get back on track. Before he knew it, it was night, the Great Bear looking down upon him. Whatever he had been thinking, it was the truth. The storm of infinity in the rustling of every tree. Car lights in the distance the gigantic feet of far away. Fireworks showering over the Ferris wheel the size of sparklers so far away you cannot hear them. The suffocating darkness sitting in the isolated nothingness of the salt marsh, a bird-watching outpost rising up on wooden scaffolding dark and abandoned like a forgotten sentry tower of a prisoner-of-war encampment, only oystercatchers and sandpipers, and me, angling the Rizla to the full moon to catch a reflection on the glossy shine of the glued edge. Sometimes it's worth being nowhere just to be somewhere.

Slumped down to sleep heavy as a sandbag, half resigned to love not finding a way, left alone again, more heroic, more glorious that way.

What had changed? He couldn't put his finger on it. Was it a spell that only lasted a morning, something the moon had dreamed up shimmering in the gentle ripples of the bay?

A vagueness the same today as yesterday tomorrow brings automatically.

She said she would never beg. That's your loss then, you said. And meant it, half knowing you may come to regret meaning it, making it necessary. You'd be impressed if she did. You told her. You hope it sank in, knowing most things go in one ear and out the other, with her. She won't retain much of what was being born between you. The strange thing is, it doesn't make you sad like you thought it might. It's like someone gave you an empty plate for dinner, an empty Earth, made it easy for you to feel it had become tedious, holding on to your want like that. Longest day of my life, coupled with a sense of losing in the long run and descending into melancholy, my name seized by sniggers god forbid we never end up like him, poor ol

Frank. I have no intention of presuming she loves me, and case the joint of a relationship. That effort in when that effort required, just makeshift effort for now, a hand reaching in to the swamp of her quietude. As quiet as mice I would scurry around her. She had transformed my life, I was worried she didn't know it and our paths would be torn asunder like some unlucky wishbone, and then we'd both have our cups of poison to nurse in the night-time. A rotten travelling companion is Fate. We flee from him like the strictest teacher, but the one whose thorny hedge fascinates the most and you just knew one day you would be proud to say you were his pupil. Because now you're riding the sun chariot and are as happy as the days ever made em with the sort of emotion you will never forget though a thousand lives may be scrubbed from the fabric before we meet again. Indelible to each other. A stain that would not come out. A sheepish step into happiness.

Being with her was a beautiful entwining, this is where you would want to be if you were dying.

Human dreams, I mean what we wish for, fragment into Eternity and we're left in the half-light, waiting, left to ponder bees on buses.

I keep saying I will withdraw, go back where I am vast, blend in to the invisible rays and know my eyes leave lullabies.

You're in some bar and the life just falls all out of it. Ships in the night. You wonder who notices it first, who will hold on the most. Usually me. First to recognise it going, last to let go of it. Some bar that when you leave it your life is no longer the same as when you entered it, full of the joy and happiness of being together. What was that step that was taken, that was so wrong? How it disappears, like a pool of heavenly wonder down a drain, that night of the ships passing. Loving words, earnestly felt and meant, sincerely ushered out, foghorns fading in the distance. So much you have wanted to say to her all this time you're not even sure she heard. You keep yourself alive with 'stranger things have happened' and 'there's always a chance' and 'our spirits are stronger than this' but always, in the end, it doesn't seem to have anything to do with our spirits, or what we once wished, it is a terrible malaise that lets things break up, and before you know it you are finding consolation in things closer to hand, work, projects, day-to-day living, and the love you had has become a few unshared viewings of photographs of moments shared.

The strongest man is reduced to a child crying in a shop because he cannot have some toy he hardly thought

to want two seconds before clapping eyes on it. Sure, we put down roots in other people's lives, but look how easily bindweed is pulled from the fence, torn from its twinkle-toed little escapade up the walls of the house almost up to the guttering. Oh, do without her purrs for one night, for two for three, for ten for twenty. That fond embrace wasn't in ordinary time, that was in a time of gold and blood, standing in the daylight of an epic poem telling the divine we were pleased with what he had made for us, so pleased. It was enough, it was plenty. To wake up in the night and have her there, sleeping beside you. Why me, why did she choose this crazy hobo.

What have you been doing today, I said. 'I've been counting the nightshades,' she said, 'they're everywhere, growing from every ledge, the town's full of it, really, everywhere, now I know it I see it everywhere, funny how I didn't see them before, chameleon nightshades. I looked everywhere for one, and when I found it they were everywhere, with their green berries turning black, like little black tomatoes, it's doing well in the pot on my balcony but do you know what, even though I looked everywhere for that nightshade when I'd dug

it up and put it in the pot I saw there was another one just growing out of the wall, right next to the balcony, I never knew it was a nightshade, or I just didn't notice it, until I found the special one, now I see them everywhere.'

I listen like a red glow dying somewhere in space. What a marvellous woman. I lie down in her scent at the bottom of the tree and fall into a light sleep in which I see the dreams that even death cannot put out the eyes of. Don't eat the little black tomatoes, get the red ones from Sainsbury's. She is off to work and so am I, though my work is where my legs will take me not wishing to be anywhere else, and so I go there, like a philosopher striding the sands, given up on unstarted beginnings and unfinished endings. Off to talk to myself in the great blue yonder. To see whether I am capable of thinking something that will make me cry. The answer for everything can often come just when you tread in dogshit, and as you scrape it off on a groyne and clean up the shoe rubbing it on a mat of wet seaweed who knows how many hells and torments have been avoided by something else to be getting on with, like a point God cannot get in edgeways so he says right you fucker step in some shit and shut up while I tell you a thing or two about how things are done around here. I look back at the lit window of the café where she works.

Good woman. She's a fucking good woman. Lyra, did I say her name was Lyra? Well her name's Lyra. Like the star. That isn't her real name. So I realised, see, that it was not down to me to overcome time. I was not living an allegory, no, anything could happen. This was not some tale of happiness that could not be complete without a tragic twist of fate at the end. Why did I persist in shutting myself away behind thorn-edged prison walls like this, bound with cords and ropes, all the bloody time. I'll take things into my own hands, when the time comes. I'd took one beating too many from Fate, maybe all it ever wanted was for me to fight back. Like phew, a danger overcome, a song too short the lullaby of the breeze in the branches. Washing my hair in sight of the sun god in the morning, my whole life transferred into a piece of pocket fluff blown away off the palm of the hand. I'd never learn her dance steps. She looked great in her kendo gear. Time was passing, but not necessarily too quickly. Anyone who spends their days gazing far off into the distance knows there is no greater conversation than that between two people who belong together, even if it's only about the sparrows coming into the room, or growing avocado stones over a jar of water, or the woman you can see shaving her ass looking down at the other building, who thinks she can't be seen but has the slats of her Venetian

blinds angled up not down, the two gay men with a pet Vietnamese pot-bellied pig, you can see it all from her window, and when the night is a perfect pale yellow mist rising up from the storm drains like something out of a B-movie you shout hey come and look at this mist rising up from below it's like some Behemoth full of screams and unfamiliar clanking iron you expect to see a model biplane flying out of it pursued by a great rubber hand and spongy-faced zombies are stalking the streets below and kids shine red laserbeam pointers out of it like a sniper lining up a target. Babbling thoughts like this till dawn, an old ferryman dipping his oar, slowly and stately across the night to the dawn. We choose memories to link arm in arm in, like when we fell asleep leaning against each other sat on the concrete leaning against the wire-net fence with the weir rushing water through the sluice gate behind us. She mentioned it to me as a special memory of hers, of us, us together, such trust, she said, such trust. And so I made it a special memory of mine, it was still alive under a pile of books and papers, still alive despite having to think, what river? Where? And then it floods back into view, who could have known it would have been that moment when love took hold, nothing forced, nothing artificially created. I sat there alone, some months before I met her, listening to the rushing water, looking at the white

froth, knowing nothing about her, but wanting to fold myself into someone else's life now, mesmerised by the water, the constant sound that must sound like this 24 hours of every day. Life is too empty to not want more. Most is easily forgotten, too. Why shouldn't we want somebody to love, though it is harder to love, without losing everything, these days. I am a fast learner who has many times experienced the unending night, nervous to put to sail in thought or memory, let alone to decide *anything*.

I take back in the night, somehow, I outsit the fucking mood, outstare it, until it knows I'm serious. Later, maybe, there'll be the peaceful wind across the sands, and the sordidness of so many sodding meaningless thoughts I'll stamp into the sand in a fit of madness tearing my hair out for it to stop, and perhaps a distant human voice will call to me once more. 'Frank, are you alright Frank?' And she says, 'Let me take you home hon, you look beat.' The shapeless course of the night is a place of banishment. The seaside is a good place to deal with one's own destruction. You think people owe you explanations but you have to make do with the screeching gulls. Just a matter of snapping out of

it, discarding the day like a newspaper in a bin, I know that, even when the sky is at its heaviest and the screams of the gulls worry my flickering eyes and restless moths come to me for comfort and I'm glad of the company. There is wonder in this life, no doubt about it. We need to know when to let the cobra sleep. A sense of belonging is not ours to keep, it's on loan. I have all sorts of little fish swimming around in my head, you can't flee that way.

So it comes down to sitting there mulling it over like you're the last person on Earth. The lonely watchman. Darkness getting deeper every night. It was never any of my business. There is nothing I *ought* to be doing, but god I act as if there is. Even the sea calls to me with its unbearable longing, angry, jeering, diminishing any sorrow I could possibly have.

It's raining so hard it's as if the houses and blocks of flats are made of mud and they will when soaked enough just collapse and slide into a thick brown sludge of a river and be carried away from here, like an exodusing people.

My eyes filled with a sleep I do not consider to have yet taken me over, I get up out of bed and look out at the wet night, flooding off the rooftops like rivers

pouring into chasms as if in defiance of the built-up world wanting to loosen the glue of window frames and pull us out of our cosy homes and carry us off.

'Come back to bed,' she calls, sleepily. But I can't, the night belongs to me and I have to attend to its wants. If I am lost, I am lost amidst everything I own, which is to say nothing, putting my emotions into a jamjar on the step that will only get knocked over in the morning. Slowly closing in on me some intangible bounty hunter. It is only a matter of time, unless I go away from here and give myself another head start. I feel him out there in the night, waiting for me to show myself, a naked man standing in a stormy night window lit up by lightning. Maybe I have to wait for him, maybe he is the only one who can tell me who I really am. 'Come to bed Frank,' she calls. I want to go to bed but sleep to me is something caught up with in an odd ten minutes flopped over on a park bench. I have something to do in the night, though it amounts to little by the morning. I will go to bed, for the comfort of her warm body next to mine, soon, soon. Does she know I am sometimes a cornered animal? That these gestures and habits of mine stem from something simply untold? Shouldn't all men hold a secret they cannot say? Save perhaps idly tossed away stripped of its meaning to a teenager listening to stories around a fire of dead

leaves, as if a story about someone else, and hell they dunno who I am anyhow, nothing to attach it to, just a story, its meaning not available, but always there to guess, like the roulette ball might find its way to your lucky number, so that it's told with nothing held back, it depends on you, to see it. And if you don't, then I quickly whisk it away anyway by changing the subject, it's for those who draw it out of me. Could be they draw it out of me for me to see, hidden away so long I forget it's there, buried deep. 'Frank, are you coming to bed or shall I get up and make a pot of tea?' Now there's an offer. 'Tea, good idea, I'll put the kettle on.'

So she's rustling about, and the deadtime looking at the half-open bedroom door is a time of hurried-up thoughts dancing with laying-to-rest thoughts. I hear her head catching the bamboo-pipe mobile like the sudden memory of a monastery in another life.

A book is the essence of one's days. It is what it is. It doesn't have to be anything other than what it is.

The dying summer leaves, the brown ones scattered into a fall in each heavy gust. This time is already passing and nothing will remain of it. In the falls is the death

of the days, days and days piled up in the gaps between parked cars, just lying there, waiting to clog up drains washed along the gutters sodden in soaking rains that will follow. She didn't want me to say I see the autumn coming in the small signs of the summer. No! she said, it's still summer it's still summer! There's a chill in the air, I said, even in the sun. The days are still lovely and warm, she said. I said: The days are growing weary remaining as they are. They want to move on, they want to change.

So I denied it with her, for a few weeks, until the great gusts took each new batch of brown leaves in a little scattering into the air, leaving plenty more green and bright, but you could see them turning, getting ready. There is nothing that doesn't pass, and sometimes I feel it with a sadness in my bones, as if everything I am is already slipping away and I cannot stop it, haven't a hope of stopping it. And even if I could stop it, I wouldn't know what to do with this unchanging lump I would necessarily become. The turn of the seasons is a kind understanding of a brutal truth. Passersby stare at the mumbling fool halfway to enlightenment in a little tornado a spinning vortex of dead leaves also blowing up the short summer dresses of long-legged spring blondes showing the Buddha their pretty panties. There it is, all of it, the untouched world. The Earthless

dust. Footsteps approaching barely distinguishable from the precision of a metronome, still staring at a point in space that is the centre of the universe, that moves with the turning of the head painting freshness on the world, taking away everything that makes the heart ache, instilling the noblest aspirations, no body no mind no old age and death, tears pouring forth from the man squatted down in the street tears of joy relieving all suffering. He shakes his head as if to find out whether it is something that can be shaken off it this bathing of his senses and finding it is not so easily disposed of stands up and places his fists on his hips and looks about as a man might who has arrived on a new continent after a long journey and who has many times had good reason to think he was only being led up the garden path with all these strange ideas he could never seem to get rid of that were heavier than the heaviest objects, heavier than treetrunks dragged by chains by elephants. It gave him cause to think, what did I do differently today? Or was I simply not looking at what so stealthily was arriving. The few clouds at sunset were smiling red rosy smiles all over their faces, reminding him of what he had forgotten to do, so used to being an unwelcome stranger in the world.

The railway track at night, reflecting the moonlight. Wandering about like a man not long on his feet, some huge gaping hope inside him, like someone ten minutes away from a firing squad, I mean ten minutes after it, ten minutes behind him, made a mad dash for it and it worked. What was there to lose, after all? Lost in the tramping of his own boots over the clinker and broken glass, the sound of more and more and on and on, the sound that can never be outrun. The railway line reflecting the moonlight, every journey ends up here, empty but the rails go on and on, as if there is the answer, along that line. So much he has told nobody, like a pair of legs with that much to carry, it might be easier to spill it onto the lines. He walks awkwardly, like he is hiding a monkey under his coat and trailing a leg that won't turn and stride, a leg that has to be dragged. Breaks out in short hopscotch runs awkward but in the night and the sweltering heat a deep deadend of elegance, a wounded thought becoming conscious of itself, like on other nights in a cramped room hard to get out of. A rotten meat he's fed his soul. Sometimes, the last guardian of a secret trying a noose on for size. The awful moment when a face peers in at the dirty window

and sees what he's doing. The breath taken next knows it'll be ten years more at least. A few trips to the theatre with friends hardly seen. Rooms full of eyes praising or damning him. Squeezing a little satisfaction, as if it could be enough, out of the unexpected flittering of two bats at twilight. Like a little boy's joy, he wants to run and tell someone. But he has not yet completed boring his hole to the centre of the Earth. He prays: Protect me from bad thoughts, and he hangs on in the empty mind watching timber float over a precipitous waterfall. A peaceful beginning for the time being, even the rage floated away and over. He prayed again: So what is the answer? Hoping to initiate a dialogue, he sucked a sweet while waiting. The big guy was thinking. He didn't appear to have an answer. Then came the answer: 'Carry on talking . . .' He'd got the big guy's interest, or more likely he was stalling for time. I mean, you come back here and every time try to get used to it, this vast fucking desert, holding out your hands like the world has something to offer, but you keep filling it with more and more shite, so what's the answer? What's the score? He went on talking, like what's this wedge you drive between people all the fucking time, what's that about? But it was all just timber floating downriver the moment it was let go of. There was nothing to do but sit and watch it. Until eventually his objections lost

interest in coming out of his mouth, and he just sat, telling silence a story about nothing.

A shrug of the shoulders waking up to bars on the window and jangling of keys. The dust that covers the chameleon's tongue. Tongue-tied father of destiny snuff out your own candle I will carry it for you no longer.

And the railway lines reflecting moonlight go on forever. And the stars are like something shaken off and can no longer see me. Tomorrow I will begin again. I will empty it out of me and leave it on the railway lines. I will borrow your eternity to decorate my tiny cell. I will bang it out on heating pipes and one day the tiny scraps will be a fictional life, an unmade bed someone can crash in if they wish, a room wandered into at the big party to lay this head down and bugger the coats just clamber over and doss down, something going on out there, but you're away from it now, just you and sleep to negotiate a contract, later maybe a smoke in the early morning with lingering heads lulled into dawn like a glider come down on its own in a dew-glistened field, the pilot safely asleep. Let me plant my feet carefully around this lot, hugging their place on the floorboards since the early hours, not too much swishing of this old coat, already they're looking up at me like a War of the Worlds tripod I'll just sit down here and write my memoirs on half a dozen Rizla papers pulled out, the battles in the sky the

Amsterdam squats the Amazon peacefully sailed down and the beautiful whore I share my bed with, stories to bond with, a spliff like a wrapped mummy for the attentive audience sculpted as I talk. 'So you showed,' says one, 'you came to the big party.' Another turns to another and says who's that and another says that's Frank. I hear my name conscious I haven't heard it for a while. I've been away, somewhere. Wandering in fallen forests talking with cathedral hunchbacks nibbling applewood smoked cheddar and silverskin onions off paper-plated tables whole Es piled up on frilly maroon doilies timid halves and quarters and powder to dip a licked finger in like nibbled things a mouse has left. A night that won't end soon waiting for something to snap inside. Every dark corner waiting to hold you captive in a bad thought. I hear them whispering, 'Frank was inside . . .' Frank this Frank that, Frank's been standing behind his life a good long time, staring out at people who think they're living it, sits on his own most of the time and people daren't go near him but now and again he comes and sits with em. When he's had enough of em he'll get out his great big Bowie knife and stab it into the floorboards like a bad fucker and they'll scatter. For all that, he's a likeable fellah and it's a kinda privilege when he comes over and sits wi'ya a while telling you his stories and people know he don't mean nuthin by

the big knife act he just wants some peace and quiet to himself now and he's too fucking ripped to get up so it'd berra be everyone else that shifts and scarpers fast because Frank don't take nos or maybes kindly though he'll mostly just stare at you till you feel the life starting to get sucked out of yer eyeballs Frank's got one hell of a stare when Frank's had enough of company.

Life is like a dream without variety. It seems solid, but I feel perilously close to knocking down its walls. Death doesn't matter. I don't know why it took so long to see this. Except that you have to be *brought* to see it, like a nipper pulled by the ear through the destruction. Take a look at *that* you great lump!

How can I be sure I am the same sameness that was the same yesterday as the same is the same today?

Haven't little bits been added in sleep? Or smashed away?

Haven't I become preoccupied by figuring something out?

Some aspect of the world superimposed upon me and drawing emotions out of me like a poultice a watery serum from a wound. Sometimes the River Styx flows through my living room. And I long for a softer bed

or a sunny morning, waking up with hands contorted into stiff closed claws I have to open out the fingers of prising them open by force against the pain. I paint this portrait of myself because no-one else will. I am inattentive to most things but not my own reality. I dream a remedy for the soul and calm down some time after midnight when there is the kind of silence you can hear the breeze rustling the leaves of the trees by. Then I am something more akin to what I find in myself in the quiet, as if I have trudged a long journey through the day, the afternoon and the evening and the early night, to finally arrive through greater and greater effort each day at the place where I might be the uninterrupted possessor of myself, the One who lives by no-one's rules, the Fate to whom all appeals are made, scrutinised over and over again and found to be the Lion who could not find himself all day. And so, certain things seem worth it. Fragments of living pull themselves into a comfortable velvet robe, and the anguish is merely everything exterior.

In the morning the clawed stiff hands will be back and the painful process of straightening them out will begin again, but for now a whole day's troubles are nothing and the faith to carry on is born, like a power. My eyes filter out the familiar possessions and place me beyond them, at a time in the future when I am

no longer at the mercy of hope and consolation to make my stillborn day chase illusions of love and being together. No, I will come here to the night to take a better stock of my situation, I will hold off from the beggar of desire counting the coins of the day. I will arrive in tattered clothes at the dusk, knowing nothing. I will pass the time lying in a room with nothing to do. I will draw myself up into the evening, distracted, but perhaps sometimes usefully so. Boiling potatoes, slicing tomatoes, a little reading, tearing up papers and having small bonfires on the living room floorboards. Then I will wait until I know it is safe to fall upon the night and have my questions answered. And if I must shut myself away for this, then I will shut myself away. That I may walk as I was meant to walk.

An unqualified seriousness of purpose begins to tell your story. Live like you're going somewhere, and the impossible will come and fetch you, take you to where you're meant to be. It was always that easy, but you were looking away by half a degree and never saw it. You were, in fact, advancing towards it with every half-hearted and clumsy step, it was only towards the

end of the journey you turned your head with great effort like turning a rusty bolt just enough to loosen it, and corrected your course.

Dead dogs quack quack butter sugar and egg. Biscuits and EVERYTHING! Knocking some sense into me at last. A couple of top-hat anarchists coming in ploddin boots. Pink flamingos down by the crazy golf, what are they standing around waiting for? The last days are moving into us like a cheap hotel, everything ready for dropping at a moment's notice. Have I got time to come on to a pair of ovaries, do I even want to? Handy game to have the brains for knocking around lochs up in the Highlands, living in a bothy with a bag of porridge oats. Enjoying being poor. Worthless. Earthless. And on top of my game. I could have told them, sharply, standing there in the street, parents of young uns going round and round in powder-blue wooden trains, that we're leaning in closer and closer all the time, trying to catch what was said, and not just old cigarette-stinking men in betting shops, but Punch to Judy, Sooty to Sweep, look I'm already old in ant years, yet it was only just around that corner I was a babby in a pram, hardly being cared for, but I wasn't to know, and nothing can cheapen any port in a storm, those narrow streets up from the harbour, shops selling fishing gear and Weebles wobble but they don't fall down, rectangular

moneyboxes painted in steam-train livery a slot for your pennies and a little handle you have trouble getting your fingers into to lift up, lions on eggs and litmus paper, pale green liquid in thin-walled glass vials that never ceased to fascinate crunch under your heel and walk away stunk the place out. Knives from Odessa a black swan on a stamp you forgot for thirty years and then you saw black swans in muddy water and all you could think was that's on a stamp. Never been with a hooker, no, never have, been with women who *were* hookers but that's different. Don't change yourself just to suit others. Be romantic, why not, be romantic, it's good to have the chance to be it may not come again. Fall in love and tear your hair out and say this makes no sense to me. Putty a window pane. Take pride in your education. Know none of this will ever happen again, for all one day is much like another when you're sitting there looking for an out. Smoke a cigar with your coffee, sniff the white powder and sniff a dog's arse if one sticks itself in your face. Ask for a better world as much as you like, but be sure to smile at the roadside entertainment. Others control the world, so it's clear isn't it, what to do? Use your brain boy, don't let anyone get their dirty little fingers on that.

(There's been a few who've listened to Frank's home-spun wisdom down the years. The German was the best

listener, she listened real good, took issue with a few things even, while getting her knickers off.)

I think about you, of course I think about you, I trust you I have faith in you, and the big white fish is heading straight to the brilliant full moon. Nights drawing in now, cold outside, put a spider out the bathroom window saw the moon thought it may be full went out to look, a fish-shaped cloud, and thought I'm getting on with life now, I had some adjustment to make, was thinking of you all the time, pining away, but then in the middle of the night a clarity comes, I love you, I know I love you, and that everything will be alright.

This idea that the world will continue to exist without me, I only see it from the side where people pop off and the world's still here, but if I am not here what is, realistically, left? The world is all in my head, even other people – who I generously allow to be other people rather than fall into solipsism – are still in my head, every last one of them, even the dead ones I never knew who I have read or heard about their adventures. But what can I do about it? That's the real philosophical question, this system was (apparently) in place before I

got here. Bananas. Bananas. Bananas. Bananas. I may as well think about bananas. Look at them who rise with the sun to iron white shirts and black trousers standing there in their underpants and socks, so many of them off to work at the same time it's a wonder the Earth isn't shifted off its axis by the weight of them. Bananas. Bananas. These rituals of belonging. A day will come. Staring into blankness only a circling helicopter for company. Sudden flashes of how it could be. A foreign pavement not this pavement, a Rue or a Strasse a Rua or a Straat, what holds me back from the squares and plazas? What was it I forgot to ask for when I had the chance? Oh, now, hurry up, don't make me ask again. I'm running out of steam, my interior gaze does not see as it saw before. I only vaguely overhear myself today, chattering away with memory. A prisoner of myself. Every time I pass the Indian bean tree I look up at the long dangling pods and want to reach up and grab hold of one and pull it off and try to grow its seeds, but I don't, I just look. Something else is about to begin, I sense it, or remember the future as a feeling, and I think I'd better ditch this turmoil and get things clear with myself, so at least a dream I cannot remember can come true. I am no longer sure I am even the same person I was last week. My constancy is the constancy of the sea, of the wind. Years ago, when I was a child, I opened

the windows to let my thoughts out. Put your best foot forward and simply enjoy it all. Give me some reason to enjoy it, says a man tied up in a sack. Years ago, I was young, but I am still young and it is a great mystery to me that I am becoming real in fiction but fading away in the everyday. As if I have gathered like a crowd to watch myself pass by.

Where am I, traipsing around supermarket shelves, daydreaming I have forgotten I want to live. Falling falling into the existential abyss between nectarines and half cucumbers, trudging on through a snowdrift just for the pleasure of getting out of there. I'll pay a bit more next time for wider aisles and fewer humans. Pictures of Saturn as you've never seen it before in *National Geographic*, something of interest amid so much that is not. The harsh day is no different to any other day, it is an amalgamated day, absurd mostly. Throw off the heavy duvet and I'm awake, like a ship that cannot now turn back to harbour. A day of putting huge spiders out and wiping raindrops off benches and eating pasties in bus shelters. And time that moves like a snail from one end of the garden to the other, until finally it crunches underfoot like crispy batter that's been cooking all day raked out as a special treat for the chippy's last customer of the night. It's a grey sky this dull lucidity. And so I thought, am I the only one to

have feelings like these, who talks to seagulls finding no-one better to talk to, save himself in the middle of the night for others to listen to with a tumbler pressed against the wall and an ear. Lyrical in its way, this stale cake. The blue glaciers, the captain says they bring alive the imagination. The rush of something coming, even sitting at the muddy bay looking at the stranded boats. Something's coming that will change all of our lives, or is it just mine? The buoy flashes. The desolation angel. Intelligent conversation.

No-one goes there, where I want to imagine, save aeroplanes that pass over but no-one sees it from the air. Space to love, to fret at first but, ultimately, to love. To hold on at the same time as letting go. To get that balance right, and then to head off. You're projecting, she said, when I said I loved her and wanted her that she was the one. You're projecting your ideal love onto me, she said. I had to go away and think about this, learn to sharpen up what I was trying to say, learn to write it into the collapsing surf on the beach. Or just lay a trail in a ghostly house in her dreams, until I didn't need to say anything any more, she had worked it out from a sequence of bizarre images her unconscious mind had fed her in the night. Couldn't I rely on the power of the inexplicable to invoke me in a direct communion? Pears I'd been waiting to ripen I noticed this morning

had brown rotten patches almost visibly increasing in size as I stared at them. I cut off the patch that was the biggest on one of them with my penknife and ate the rest. Just ripe.

So then you're left not sure whether you've won a prize or not, as if she was making damn sure I didn't idealise her any more. It made sense in a *whaaa . . . ?!* kinda way. She wanted me to be damn grateful, she'd done it for me, leaving me to stew in my own juices, and when that dawned on me it cheered me up right proper. Clever girl. Or was I just projecting my own ingenuity, and truth was she was keeping herself at arm's length just because she could. It's hard to believe the shit you come up with holding your umbrella at such an angle to the rain you're living in a world of people's feet. Always my favourite world, the one without any faces.

In company it rarely goes beyond the bonhomie, don't want to take a chance on a thought *out there* and end up an outcast not listening to the conversation eyeballing the lamp up on the ceiling like it's got more to say than these lot, oh put it down to Frank being stoned why dontcha, he'll be back with an incisive comment in his own good time meanwhile let's talk about what was on fuckin tv last night. Frank doesn't have a tv, put his

boot through it a decade ago never went back. He's like a crocodile a split second before waggling its tush into the water, one minute flies can walk all over him next there's a fuckin flamingo leg standing up out the water with no flamingo on it and Frank's licking his pink feathery lips. Who knows what they must think, they got their own drifts away from the social hub I guess, must get that fuckin bathroom grouted tonight why the fuck doesn't she ring me Amsterdam Amsterdam show me a garden of happiness I'm having a pistachio kulfi fuck the curry who do you think you fucking are with your chain-saw dangling from your hip scampering around in the tree like a chimp fucking cut your leg off mate see if I care ah a bit of anger to enliven the day like the clink of icecubes in the glass and before you know it it's the evening in your memory and the town is all lit up fluorescent signs and Croydon facelifts and pramface sluts on the promenade dark shadows of lovers in the stupid cowboy town and freaks in bottles if you know the right canvas booths before the council gets a whiff of the formaldehyde mermaids with cat's teeth apparently found off the coast of Japan in a fisherman's net and the two-headed babies one head smiling one head not they used to stitch them real good and fool you into thinking this is for real now I'm more interested to think of a bunch of Bulgarian immigrants working

for beer money in some Frankensteinian workshop in one of the lock-up garages whatcha workin on Demitri oh I sew stork bill on little black baby's head I find in suitcase it float with planks by legs of pier I got stork from zoo I use legs later. They believe it, no?

Frank! Frank! D'you want a pint? You bin away in the land of the fairies mate come back and ave a pint anan eel pie there ain't nuthin up there in the chandelier mate yow'm just taken with the sparkle. Like my old mum said they took him away they did and left a changeling in his place . . . oh yeah, that detective, wossisname he had a glass eye and a dirty raincoat and a beagle in his banger stickin his head out the windah he used to turn round jus as he wuz leavin and say jus one more thing, look I'm getting up now Frank and I'm halfway to the bar already and look Frank look I'm turnin turnin right into yer gaze and I'm saying jus one more thing, d'yuh wanna pint or doncha?

The power to endure, seems like seconds away, but can't reach it. I keep seeking in this enigma, the helpless now. Nursing something broken inside.

Watching the bubble come up in a tin of treacle turned upside down for a bit then turned right way up and the lid levered off quickly with a spoon. The

big bulging bubble. I know I'll be stronger for sitting with myself when I feel so lonely. You'd think I'd be strong enough already, but no, this brink taunts me. The departing day leaves another unknown mountain. Hold yourself together. That's all you can do. Sit it out, this absurdity, waiting for a happier emotion. Those things hiding in the shadows dare not show their face while I sit here. I hold a vigil over my own loneliness to hold them back. I find a strength in that, because then there is a purpose, invented may be, but if I guard the world from the shadow people then my own loneliness is an untidiness easily swept under the carpet, since I find a reason in what otherwise has no reason, and so a greater despair. But if there is a reason, if I have a role, even if I make it up it is still enough to steel myself against other illusions. And so you see I am a voice that speaks out of absurdity, and if I just keep speaking there is no time to dwell on the sorrow that pains me, and I have caught up with endurance just three seconds behind and I turn a terrible weariness into a noble weariness, and understand something of this imposition and at the same time defy it, finding sparkling crystals within myself by the double handful spilling over the sides purple-black crystals falling at my feet.

I become the master of the ebb and flow of a vast sea of despair, like taking my first breath on a new planet

out of the branches that tangled me. First intimations in the stretched-out flocks of seagulls heading to roost white against the dark clouds, and I watched them knowing I could conquer this if I only allowed myself the chance, and stop being lost in endless dark nights of the soul, the unbearable restlessness pacing to and fro while others live perfectly ordinary and apparently satisfactory lives. Driven like a maniac to weigh things in the mind thoughts that for others are still asleep that I whip like galloping horses pulling a wagon of ghosts. There is no doubt my mind is disturbed. But it will become a fashionable taste long after I have abandoned these regions. From one day to the next mining deeper into futility. Only the rain is a song to the soul. Sometimes I feel like giving passersby a standing ovation for having come this far, but I suspect they will not have a clue what I'm getting at.

There's always the clock in the depths of the night.

What a strangely long day.

Less tangible spectres. This is an anonymous existence. The pawing and clawing of a strength of purpose. The wind loves a creaky hinge on an outhouse door. Glass

sleeping in the windows. Avenues that look at me like an intruder. I do not sleep. I approach as a dark figure the gale a hunchback made of me billowing out my coat. A man made heavy weather of by those who must pass, who fear to cross the road lest it be taken as some kind of insult, so closer and closer they get to me the wind at their back hurling them towards me as if I am a vacuum sucking them up rakes of men treading on their own feet awkwardly as if I make them do it. And the gale blows them to their relief beyond me like scurrying dead leaves or newspaper or a broken umbrella. Suddenly on their horizon and upon them like a shapeshifter and then passed a dark patch of the world no eyes but staring out the head may even turn and it's an even more intense absence the abyss staring into them a can-opener round the rim of them damaging them and about to empty them out but these wounded souls stumble on tripping over their own shoelaces not looking back until they know or sense the darkness has lost interest in them and is eating its way forwards and they are shrunk by the encounter and next morning awake screaming from the nightmare of the jumble of impressions. The ratcatcher on his way to work a faint blue gas ring heats a kettle in a kitchen window in the early hours enough light to see by don't want to spoil the mellowness with electric light just the blue of the gas ring and a soft mist barely

rising a foot off the ground. A morning for setting off with a suitcase, never to return, before anyone is up to see you go. A crisp chill sky to bathe your face in the reality of your actions, your steamy breath in the air unforgettably associated with that day hoarfrost on the pavement slippery until you get used to it and the danger lessens your steel toecaps stubbing out frozen puddles that shatter but stay in place like a bricked windscreen and gargoyles cover their eyes from the church guttering even the rookery is only just waking. In unseen streets the whirr of a milkfloat and clanking of glass bottles. Words seem to rise slowly to the surface, shutters up at the newsagent, in they troop for the first fags and newspapers, barely a word spoke, change handed over with a grunt and a nod, as if they have sleepwalked there and it is too early for words they risk the bends if they come up too quick so better they stay down a quiet truce with a lost world just the hawking up of phlegm and smokers' coughs is appropriate for this time in the morning and batting of thin jackets with the shivers. We cannot dream, those of us who can only go on, on past the short returns home to the warmth, on past the audience of dossers, a secret never to be told under the beady watchful eyes of the magpies. A solitude one actually lives in. A life dragged around on the streets. The quiet quays at the ends of tramlines. Little men

who sit on the same seats who have no contract with their destiny, who know their stop, something I have yet to decide and in the end do not decide, just get off at the terminus. An incomprehensible form of living, but done nonetheless, to know its face in the crowd, a holiday holed up in a room with a sadness to scale with climbers' fingers. The kind of man a cat likes to visit because he knows he will get genuine affection, he'll be made a fuss of, and it'll matter to the man, who might have been tying a stupid noose moments before that now is trailed along the ground for the cat to chase bringing real amusement and fun to both cat and man. And, after the cat has gone, it is day one again, the man's past someone else's. And the stars, when they come out, are valued, eating cold baked beans out of tin.

Stave off the day by keep arriving somewhere. Whether to pomade his hair. Smartly dressed and clean-cut, or a pusher of wheelbarrows? A girl round the neck all the time, or several and places to avoid. He did his planning in huge aircraft hangers of places, abandoned, dilapidated. He had enjoyed eating across the table from her, in her kitchen. No reason to think it was too risky to go back there. Become another man out on the

streets, the same man behind closed doors. They could both go somewhere else. Where was it she was from? Potsdam? Somewhere else. Nuremburg. Yes, that could be it. Was there even anyone coming? Feel safer gone. Moving on. Doesn't matter if she doesn't come. This is who I am. Lose my edge stay anywhere too long, forget, sink in. Drift. Forget the why of it all. End up bait on a hook. Trapped on the surface. Used. I watched the grasshoppers. Get too close they take the big leap. Doesn't matter where to. It doesn't matter to me, I could live in a cave. In a hammock slung between trees. Walk for miles not having to be anywhere. On nights like these, a small fire and plenty of warning of footsteps coming this way, you find yourself. You have to come to the edge of the world to see the sparks catch hold of something in you. See it all afresh, the old thing new again. Get away from the towns, the people, the attics the cellars, and, my god, the friends, the friends you make who want you to stay as they've always known you. You forget, y'know, who you were to that person, so many things in a day. Places are just reminders of who we're pretending to be. Better if the wallpaper is peeling off the wall, if the ceiling is flood-damaged, shouldn't like to like it too much. Just a place to rest the head. The pouring rain, the same everywhere. In the backyard as a kid, jars put out to collect it a project for

the day, watching them fill nose pressed against the cold pane head tucked under the net curtain. Made a good friendship with the rain. Hey, I've got half a cucumber in my pocket. Bloody brilliant.

'Kuckumba,' she says. And 'danned aliens' instead of dandelions. I said keep saying it the way you say it it's better. You make your life out of little private amusements, you spin around each other in delightful small sillinesses. 'Gone away to think,' that's what she'll be telling herself, she won't worry for days yet. There's a freedom for you. She'll think of me listening to this rain. My potato will be baked now I think, in foil in the embers. Some nights a fire is all I want. And solitude.

'We can be together because we can be alone.' I said it to her once. But you have to be alone to know what it means.

All place every place all over the place, saying that as I lay there saying all place every place all over the place still I don't know what my eye was looking at could've'bin flowers falling from the moon or a ditch full of frogspawn leaping out it a gelatinous monster my eyes I shall say my eyes one last time and laugh at the same old ears hearing the same old collywobbles the

siren of an ambulance for a moment the pleece. I try to touch my eyes to see if they're wet I mean abnormally wet lying down dunno whether there's tears waiting to roll off on a tilt of the head don't want to try it don't want to get me hankie out to dry a wet cheek best have it evaporate into the starry night now the rain has gone now the clouds have gone the pinsharp night I could be falling into with just a moment's stalling of my ordinary way of thinking of things and the eyes would be dripping like a dripping tap with me diving after into the pool of night fingers touching the wetness like something that mattered something felt resting there on the ledge of the face something must have given the eyeballs a little squeeze and it's fine isn't it this roundabout of a great many years just keeps spinning all for a little peace and quiet. Don't tell anyone about this. Don't. No don't. I'll come and walk your street just don't tell anyone about this. I lay for some time thinking something and nothing all the doors were closed I was shut out in the corridor standing out in the corridor thinking I could like it if I just allow myself to like it time to piece a few things together lower the blinds not just on the day but on everything out there and get back into something exciting at long last something exciting close by all along but years to turn to look in that direction like a corner of the room you've never

explored before how could you not notice the wobbly pile of glass spheres stacked up in that corner before, how could you have not taken any interest in that before a corner of the room with twenty or more goldfish bowls stacked up all sizes in the corner does one day a dog not know his own tail when he turns his head round that far what's that waggly thing doing there and you've got a piece of entertainment right there in the street before coming in for supper laughing a dirty-faced kid what you laughing at son that dog that stupid dog look at that dog that's the funniest thing that silly dog and they all laugh at the dog that's all dizzy now going home like a drunken schoolboy tried his first cider can I have beans on toast for supper and watch *The Outer Limits* can I can I mum? Some kind of micronaut of memory short back and sides and a bucket under the sink where the little boys' ears are kept the red and white stripy pole like revolving rock have a Mohican for a dare no it just wasn't going to happen neat and tidy for school mum says no I don't want anything for the weekend I don't know what you mean actually but I am aware it is the source of some amusement from the men queuing up along the wall behind me he was a joker that Tony the barber always thought he got his trophies for cutting hair turned out they were for boxing when the queue was so long and I was at the end of it so could read them

without looking nosy. Hotdogs the onions had gone cold on when the hell did it all turn inside out first there was nothing then there was something then there was nothing again but a nothing that couldn't ever forget the something you know what I mean the emptiness of what was a girlfriend who'd found another bloke and hotdogs never taste the same again in another town the Woolworths is always a bit different and what am I anyway that feels different wearing a tie feels different wearing a tie with the top button done up and wearing a tie with the top button open shit what the fuck am I if a tie makes this much difference if a button . . . I tell you I could've shouted it out loud some days look I'm never going to own an oriental rug by a fine old fireplace I'm never going to own any of that stuff I'm more likely to go to the moon in a stolen spaceship than own a car and look, that hush that descends when I enter a room d'you think that's fear man no that's respect they don't know what they respect but it's respect all the same there goes a man who deserves to be left in peace he's probably got wings under that big coat of his a can of tomato soup'll do him just don't do yer tic-tac man impression with him in the room and whatever you do don't ever look at him like you're reading the contents page or he'll flick you straight to the entry in the index that says Fuck you! In a glare I mean one of those glares

deadly men have it comes out like a suitcase of nylons dumped in a layby a man who's eaten more lonely meals at a rickety kitchen table than you really want to know about facing a reproduction by Tintoretto and talking with the moths no don't look like you're weighing him up when he's looking at you you're a long time dying in a cold street at two in the morning always one with the big words well see what a lot of good it's done ya here eat the rest of my saveloy will ya warm yer belly up for the deathly hush of the dawn you've met with your fate son you've had a word with the god of men and you've been judged. Snigger that away.

After supper I washed the plate and teacup and went and sat in my armchair stuffing coming out neighbours screaming through the walls. I look on this century as a claim to be a civilisation but I don't see it no don't see it at all just an endless repetition of people who like to hear the sound of their own voice how is this a society that has or should have some say in how I choose to behave? Change yourself before you try to change me that's all I got to say just don't attract my gaze while yer doing it unless you want me to punch an eye out. I never said I liked myself what you going on about I never said I liked myself I never did I'm just a fucking rodent on the way home. I got fingers I can switch on lamps I can eat cake off a newspaper the whole fuckin problem is thinking

we're something we're not we're just fucking animals clockwork tin soldiers wound up and set marching in the direction of the skirting board still fucking marching into the wall that wall ain't gonna open up fellah that's it end of the road you want me to turn you round and set you marching to the other wall sure give you a half a minute of thinking you're getting somewhere again look even if I set you marching towards the open door you're only going to march out onto the landing and clatter down them stairs. Me? I sit here eating crumbs off the newspaper I know my place who'd'ya think I am Popeye? Since I jacked my job in I've been living like what it's like to live just live from day to day still fucking moronic but the kind of moronic I can handle Poverty's Garden a landscaped starting point for going nowhere oh I had a life sure I did then one day it just drooped like an unloved flower so I figured it's time for a different experiment in living nothing happens not even when it seems something has take it from me nothing has happened since it began this experiment it's all a ranging over the face of the moon tipping the hat to phantoms earning a new living doing a new thing eating cake off the evening paper before getting back to work fiddling about with something in a stop-gap like a plumber with his head under the sink but what I'm doing is more how shall we say it more *planetary*

but that's already getting grease on the fingertips Frank yeah Frank let's get back to Frank Frank the fucking maniac ripping up photographs down by the canal look he ain't trying to translate Ovid or some'at he's just pulling a rusty bicycle out or looking for a dagger in the long grass that's Frank let's not mistake Frank for some kind of metamorphosing hero figure Frank's just Frank lost in his head connecting sometimes with someone else's closed eyelids flickering eyeballs cavorting all over the place like a cat trying to get out of a sack he's not thinking about Third World debt he ain't checking his email he ain't polishing silverware on a shiny mahogany sideboard he ain't applying lipstick on a jolty bus he ain't heading off into the countryside like a young boy seeing hayfields for the first time in his life, no, he's naked and she's naked and they're asleep in each other's arms who knows where they are but when they wake they'll be together together like they were never apart together and she'll go to her waitress job like normal and he'll take a stroll down by the beach chuck a stick for a dog whistle a tune and think fondly that fucking wow he's in love he's really in love it's happened for him at last ain't life sweet what a cool chick and she wants me wants me like a porn star who likes squirrels and ice cream this is the life this is the jolly fucking life. It was worth the heartache wasn't it? I'll put my bloody

brolly up in the sunshine and walk the promenade like a mad git smiling smiling smiling so much the sun is going to break out of me I'll be itsy bitsy dropsy glitsy on the pavement.

What time will the submarine pick us up Frank? She loves fluffy stuff I must get her something fluffy I'll spring it on her and say Voila! Isn't it fluffy?! Get a saag bhaji and some poppadums that's another evening taken care of. Chuck her aluminium saucepans get some cast iron ones and let the happiness roll over us like two mad fools in love. I love her silicone tits two sacs of heavy water sloshing around in there standing proud even when she lies down she knows how to wear them like a fake mink stole on nude flesh she moves like a little fairy elegant a waist I can almost touch my fingers and thumbs round holding her with two hands stuck it up her arse in the bathroom when she was bending down for the soap a nice clean arsehole too tempting not to dab spit on my cock and have it in may all of your unplanned moments come back to this one grow old together and be sitting on the porch in the twilight budgie twittering away and say, Sweetheart, do you remember . . . and the electricity passes through the silence of the moment. And falling asleep leaning against each other back to the wire-net fencing the roar of the sluice behind the dirty foam, was it just

ten minutes, waking up from nowhere or a dream not remembered and there, there you are, moments forever alive, shared, walking on the moon could not be better, when humans realise they are alive some kind of crazy faith has brought them through all those lesser times. She will hug you again.

No use being with someone who doesn't want to be with you. Sometimes you can't tell. Stay away for a while, see how much they want to be with you. Missing nothing if they don't come. If they do come, it is invigorated. Vines grow up walls slowly. Grow the most when you're not watching. They won't let you see them grow, they know anyway you don't have the patience to pull up a stool and just sit there, watching. Once I grew *Psilocybe cubensis* mushrooms in an aquarium. I knew they managed to shoot up from a little bump just breaking open the soil to six inches high in the course of a day. I worked it out, the rate of growth, figured if I sat there long enough I'd actually see them grow. So I sat there all morning. Four hours. Sat there on the edge of my bed just staring at them. Not a bit of growth. Got up and went to the toilet. Away a couple of minutes and by the time I got back they had grown

two inches, like they were waiting for me to turn away, they had to preserve their secret, it was immodest to grow while someone was looking. They must have been as bursting to grow as I was to go to the lav. So I learnt things won't grow if you watch them, but luckily you just can't watch them long enough to hold things up for too long. It's the same as what happens between people. You want change but you don't know how to get it. You rack your brains trying to think what to do. Then you just can't be bothered with it any more and you turn away. And change happens. Same with everything. Stop looking. Let it happen. I don't like to be in a place where I have to jostle people to left and right just to get by, where the sound of high heels pulls my head like a puppet string. People jabbering about this, about that. Well he went to South America we knew he'd be gone a long time and that was a long time ago anyway when we thought that but all the same we thought he'd have come back by now I still think he'll come back one day. It's a warm day for October and the sky's bright blue I was going to go somewhere after this but they're probably closed now of course most of my family tree had its branches lopped off by the war just a compact little unit these days maybe there's a few seeds scattered here and there that I don't know about I can't say as I'm patriotic in fact I rather think

I'd like to be on the *opposite* side I mean I love Italy all those girls in the cafés their short dresses their bronzed smooth long legs nah never been patriotic me there's enemy everywhere I just don't agree with the traditional dividing lines based on nation and land-mass nah I'd like to see a war between evolved and unevolved and for that you'd have to cut across geographical borders start to think of it as hotspots viewed from space move em around the board looking from further out than right under yer fuckin nose where ya can't see anythin and it's all fuckin propaganda coercing thick people mind you there's an idea commandeer the propaganda shove it in books and take the long view y'know there's Nietzsche laying out the battlefield of the future for anyone who cares to look there's Socrates showing what it is to be a noble man as opposed to yer fuckin aristocracy let people put two and two together in their own way satire what a weapon man and so on and so on and before you know it you're bringing down helicopters with your clawed hand like Godzilla. Boy you've got some righteous anger built up there the water's rising up the toilet bowl and you're praying the flush ends before the rim is reached because that shit ain't going down but what the hell it's only a fuckin pub that's what you're paying overinflated prices for lager for so they clean the shit in the lav. It's a tough part of town where greasy

overcoats are always coming out of offys with bottles of Thunderbird half tucked away under their coat but the neck of it sticking out between their lapels like a pet duck their friend for the night sitting in stinking garbage round a fire if they're lucky talking shit with incomprehensible others. Walking the empty streets at night with all the shops closed that's the best time of the day when you're less afraid to die and sometimes almost will it to happen in some passing encounter but they're more likely to die than me that's the problem but sometimes you just have to engage for the sake of playing the piece knocking his king over it's only a game three in the morning an old guy with medals pinned to his jacket he's took em out the tissue paper in the box one last time read the words on the folded paper king and country he pins them on and goes out looking for one last fight his wife is dead his hopes are dead so he may as well be dead but go out like an old soldier and god can go to fuck. I see em, people who want to die, but they won't succeed in making me their means unless they're an arsehole already. You don't get to be an arsehole overnight, that takes a lot of practice. So it won't be me that does the old geezer in it'll be some young fuck and I'll see him later.

Took the cloth off the birdcage. He'll sing now, peck his reflection in the mirror who's a pretty boy then who's a pretty boy Mäuselschan is Mäuselschan's a pretty boy. A blue light flashing along the corridor that leads out to the street. A day when people haven't slept, they stare that stare that could fall asleep standing in a blink. They had breakfast but they hadn't woken up they never got off. The sun was streaming in forcing them to open the curtains giving up finally any last glimmers of a chance to try their luck under the duvet a few hours snatched from the morning won't be missed, nor lunchtime and early afternoon if it comes to that and a deep and restful sleep overcomes them, but no, the curtains open the sun streaming in puts paid to any remaining idea of that can always have a siesta, and Mäuselschan loves the sun. But the rat got the budgie and that was that. She opened the cage door but didn't notice the rat was sitting on her shoulder and the rat ran down her arm and into the cage and snatched poor little Mäuselschan, the rat went in and that was that, the pet white rat called Edward funny name for a rat I said it's a great name for a rat she said but I couldn't look at him any more after that bloodied-up little white face licking his blue-

feathered lips had to take him out to the forest and let him go helped him dig a hole to go and live in it was getting cold he needed his winter accommodation and I walked away while he was still digging down under a tree looking like he was enjoying himself I left him some chocolate biscuits and said goodbye Edward I hope you find some friends.

I should get the tram back into town. These are dad's old clothes looked quite smart once black and white photo before I was born his hair Brylcreemed back big smile for the street photographer some seaside town mum walking with him that's the way it was just after the war an ornament for the mantelpiece from every holiday greetings from Teignmouth a saved white buttonhole carnation its stem tightly wrapped in silver foil gypsies selling heather and pegs door-to-door empty streets and greengrocers posing for proud portraits with their staff outside the shop every apple neatly stacked hair combed silverware never used quietly tarnishing in hinged wooden boxes covered with black leather gilt-edged teacups hardly ever seen the light of day stuck in the sideboard awaiting visitors that would never come in forty years of marriage. Trapped in their seats by the goggle-box a shoebox full of memories that, with

no-one left to remember them, may as well be thrown in the bin. Sometimes the world doesn't seem to have anyone in it.

Our absence can be heard when everything falls silent. I have never wept over the quiet, it always feels something a long time coming. I pour myself a large bourbon and toast providence, something I've always doubted but then, there it is, the doubts have run out of momentum, that appalling blood-red momentum they suck out of stones. I am on the ground floor of this skyscraper thing and the lift is out of order. I just sit there looking at my hands, perpetually as if they're round someone's throat, I have to straighten the fingers out resting them on the arm of my jacket and pushing down gritting my teeth with the pain, rubbing them until I can begin to forget about them again. I came down here with some force in me, down to the council offices of Hell to give some infernal bureaucrat a piece of my mind. I was snapped in dim lighting with a fast film, coarse-grained me wearing yellow lenses in wire-framed glasses. A man waiting to leave the solar system every corner stinking of piss and Kentucky Frieds littering the lift. I had a little paper sachet of salt right at the bottom of my overcoat pocket been there some months thought

now was the time to rip it open and throw it over my left shoulder. There was a fortune cookie in the other pocket. Never got round to opening it up. It was time. I was hungry too. Unfolded the slip, always with that sense of trepidation. It said: 'He who ride tiger cannot get down.' I thought about it for a while, but I didn't need to, it hit me in the pit of the stomach the second I read it. Shockwave carrying me beyond Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, I didn't know I existed, it's been a thought of mine for many hours, those dingy specks of light were examining my case right now. That was the photo they published in the newspapers, me sitting there in yellow specs. I'm telling it like it's over, but it's hardly begun, time is just a snapshot and here's a photo of a million stars. Something slow is happening, don't you see, it's happening real slow, slower than real time, that's the thing, y'know they're gonna talk about this later, oh when we've gone that's for sure and when they've given up trying to correct the account. This is my sin that's soaking into you, do you not realise? It's already too late. I would have tried to save you from it but I didn't know it myself until it was too late, and by then I just decided to like it, like I didn't intend to be so evil but then I just started to enjoy it. You wanna fag? I'll roll you one, seeing as you ain't going anywhere and you look like you could use one. Bourbon? Still half a bottle.

That's right. You're goin nowhere. I'd ring room service but this place is abandoned. You want the grim details now? Or shall I save them? I'll save them. I had this grow your own crocus thing in a bowl. Three of em came up. Pink they were. Smelt gorgeous. I used to be the caretaker here. Spread your legs a bit. I used to be good in most subjects at school, except PE, could never stand that. I knew all the capitals but they don't ask you that kind of thing any more it's all gross domestic product and all that shit. Never knew what I wanted to do with my life. Still don't. But I know this much, I know what it's like to explore four walls with a spirit of adventure. I'd sit there asking myself questions, like who invented history? Can you freeze water by staring at it? Where can you be stabbed and not die? I used to want to keep bees and walk around like Friar Tuck. I was always something of a hellraiser, I had a long life in me I could tell that by the way I didn't age much in the eyes so I thought fuck it man explore. See what you can do. Stand the world on its head, come out of your shell a bit and live. You're your own lab animal in this world. So maybe you have a bit of trouble going out the door sometimes but there's nothing to stop you sticking a stick in your ear until you just touch your brain, well not your brain, not that way. It's amazing what you can reach with a bent coathanger. With a bic

biro you can pop your eye out and have it resting on your cheek. It's just a story, remember that, whatever comes out of my mouth, it's just a story. I may even cross things out later. Banalities. Parts where I just drink water for a few years. And that's all that happens. Cold water kept in a bottle in the fridge. I open up the fridge and pour myself a cold water. And that goes on for a few years. Then the story picks up again. We'll just fast forward over that. Click back into real time when I get to the cheap hotel with a hooker. That bit. The 27 channels of shit on the TV. Turn it off and look at the broken-down misery in her eyes and a little bit of wounded love, red-hot wounded love, sexy glistening doting eyes that say don't worry about the misery that's the past the past is just a graveyard. I loved her straight away, they all do she says. It takes too long to love, she tells me, just fuck me. Leave me as I am when you're done with me. I don't need anything from you and you can't give me anything. Just take, she says. Just take. Leave me as I am. But how could I not want you, I say, it's okay she says, to want me, I can give you that. She has made sense of her life and I envy her that. Let's just talk, I say. Talk? We're talking aren't we?

Those sad eyes, I could look at you forever. And feels like I have been, one of those déjà vus that come and go you pop your head up in a parallel universe

where it all makes sense and the fears of your life are gone and you're standing in front of this beautiful nymph long hair down to her hips and you want to say something but there's no point it's all obvious every last atom has obvious electrons orbiting obvious neutrons and obvious protons and the way the bedclothes are lying is written and there is no sense of measure to the shuddering wonderfulness you're facing now, like how could you forget, how could you forget that this is where you are where you really are, but then you snap back down like you turned a millimetre to the left when you should have carried straight on but you can't do that any more and you look into her eyes hoping to find again what was so recently lost it must be in there somewhere but now you're just staring like a nutjob and starting to freak her out so you blink and take it down a notch like a man deciding not to chase after the treasure he has seen slip away knowing he didn't have to try before so trying now ain't it. And the little honey is brushing her hair O world everlasting let it last let it last. Set adrift in a dreamworld together. Sweet rosebud of life, carry on, carry on. Splendid Babalon, the ramparts holding the wisteria, the snake tongues lisping sprightly at slowly passing time. She looks up for a moment from her brushing, looking through eyes that at last begin to recognise me, but she goes back to

her brushing like a little tease and I gorge myself on her colours. The taste of her in my mouth is ages old, Krakatoa was exploding when the beads of her doorway last swished and the jewels jangled about her waist, I taste it all along this river. The newspaper kiosk where I caught her eye, where much was said without saying a word, and she put her arm through mine and walked me off, as if saving me from something I had not seen. I see it now, how well she must have seen the slower course of human lives. I must have looked like a lonely cosmonaut staring from a porthole onto the world. She strolled arm in arm with me conversing in gentle words I only half understood, and mine seemed to rise up in the throat gargling upon themselves, and tears were in my eyes but I put it down to the sudden cold breeze which blasted them away before they could have been noticed. Be careful of the tramlines, I said, be careful of the tramlines in your high heels.

She steered her body like a bat responding to echoes. 'Why don't you walk straight?' I said, and then I thought it's cool the way she presses her body against me like she's always walking into me and then pulls me towards this alley or that and then turns into me before we go

down it as if she's making sure I still want to come looking me in the eyes and then off again after that quick check hanging there an opportunity to wrap my hands around her tight ass and pull her towards my hard-on a murmur of approval and then clic-cloc clic-cloc high heels striding up the alley pulling me along by the hand and I wonder what kind of wad this chick is expecting as we get further and further into the labyrinth of back alleys and iron fire escapes and Chinese chefs sitting smoking on back steps the sooty damp brickwork rising up on both sides up higher than a brick-kiln chimney an industrial gully rusty iron grilles and ripped black plastic sacks of giblets and dumped horsehair sofas and coconut matting stray mongrels curled up asleep round bust-out springs. She looks at her watch suddenly like a cabbie who's forgotten to turn on the meter she weaves through dead umbrellas. A steel door opens in a wall fanbelts and lathes and in the bright rectangle of fluorescent light that startles her I see how red her hair is, redder than I thought. I can't stop her now. I don't want to. She looked good. It was as if I had stupidly not noticed how good she looked and I couldn't understand that. It wasn't that dark. You're a lucky man. I could see it in the eyes of the guy in the boilersuit come out of the bright rectangle in the wall to light up. Nice bit of stuff!

Now you go a little into the night and you're already a hunter. Remembering the world as it was as if it still is. The night is a mantra for those in exile from the day, a repetition that can be counted on, a peace of sorts already because so few are awake. You can be filled with emptiness and forage like a fox. Her red hair. Something the size of the sun has exploded in me tonight. Some nights there is only Orion left to whom I can make my appeal. How many lives looking up at you, Orion? I have grown old in the crook of lovers' arms, but only you remain. Constant, aloof. How lost one can be in ordinary days. Is there any point so constantly yearning? One marathon ends and immediately another begins. Groping around for something veiled. A life not ordinary enough, it seems, to put aside my concerns and wonder in pleasant anticipation about holidays in the sun, a payrise, no, I can't do this, I am lost in space, and that is my voyage, a moth around a lamp for company most nights, making plans that are quickly forgotten and made over and over again, but most myself when they are abandoned in full knowledge that they are unnecessary, that planning my way through this is not the way for me, rather sitting down and waiting in the

silence with nothing in my head, and returning, years from now, to exactly the same place just as much as I will do tomorrow and the next day. And they will say of me, He was a teacher. He wasn't from these parts. He simmered in our world like a lobster in a pot. He was washed up, true, he was a vagrant. But he had an intelligence throbbing inside him laser sharp. I saw him crying once, sat down on the pavement sobbing his heart out. I didn't know where to start to ask him what was the matter? I wasn't on his level, from me it would have been a stupid question. How could he have possibly answered me? He looked exhausted. Really worn out. When he saw me he greeted me and put away his tears, like a man holding on, used to holding on, who had been holding on all his life. I hadn't noticed that was what it was about him before that moment. Like a man constantly disturbed on the verge of a breakthrough with some existential riddle that haunted him like the day before haunts the day after yesterday. Most of the time he was just a dark shape on a hill. But you'd bump into him in a narrow alley unexpectedly. I wasn't always sure it was him. Sometimes his appearance seemed changed, and he never stayed long enough to get a fix on what it was. Most the time I recognised him from afar, he had an unmistakeable way of looming over the horizon, but by the time he'd approached closer I

wasn't sure it was him any more and the doubt grew stronger the closer he approached, and he would neither say anything nor look at you, he just passed, and as I turned to watch him go, sure I had made a mistake, my doubt that I had made a mistake grew stronger as he got further away, until I was sure it was him after all, but then he would turn a corner and I just shook my head in disbelief. This happened a number of times and I have heard from others similar stories. But then they would say, well that's Frank, isn't it? That's the way Frank is. And I nodded my head with the others as if this was sufficient explanation. He was like water dripping from his own empire, if I may put it that way. He was the soul of the night and the rain. When others tossed and turned in their beds he commandeered the night as his own vessel. Only that one photograph of him survives, the one that was in the papers, but it was very grainy and it could have been anyone, except for the way he was sitting there, there was something unmistakable, like he could have just got up and walked out of the photograph while you were still looking at it. That was the way Frank was. Like he had powers he wasn't using. He gave some people the shivers. The goths loved him. I didn't even know he hung out with goths. Well, I dare say he didn't. Frank didn't hang out with anyone. But he passed through a lot of lives it seems. No-one really

knew him. So no-one knew what kind of man he was. Oh there was a German woman who told a few stories about him. Benita? Ilse? I forget her name. Some bird who wrote to him when he had a website, sent him an email from Berlin. Frank was still writing scifi back then, before his . . . what . . . breakdown I suppose. I guess that's what it was. They're not bad those novels. Well, they're shite, but they're not bad shite. In fact, I must read them again, people are saying they're actually pretty good. Some people say there's more in em than meets the eye. And the way Frank went later on, y'know, it makes you think, like maybe there was something in it after all. But some of the wackier theories, I dunno what these young kids are smokin, stronger than in my day that's for sure. You'll have me at it next. I don't care about the fuckin folklore, I'm just tellin it like I saw it. He was a tramp, he was a dirty fuckin tramp and I have no fuckin idea how he got so many gorgeous women to go to bed with him. Fuckin Rasputin man, got his cock in a bottle you seen the size of that thing? Oh you wanted to know Frank's secret. No-one knows Frank's secret friend, no-one. May never have been a fuckin secret. D'you understand what I'm saying? Everyone believes there was a big secret, yeah, sure they do, I've heard that many times, I've heard that from fourteen-year-olds. I guess something must've happened to make

Frank the way he was. But look don't ask me I'm just tellin about the Frank I knew take it or leave it. We'll all be dead soon anyway. Who cares? Just some guy. If he was a teacher man he hid his students well that's all I can say. Haven't you poked about in my head long enough? Just wipe the tape, I've been talking bollocks. Let's go for a drink, look I'll take you where Frank used to go, The Castaway, down by the pier. I know a piece of bubblegum he left under the table you can get his DNA and clone him. I love your bellybutton ring by the way. When will this appear in your zine? You want a photo? Of me I mean. You know he was old enough to be your father? I dunno what you nymphettes see in him. You got any pinks?

Fucking psychos, they get all the attention. If you're a mad bastard all the young pretty ones want you to tell them a story. I dunno what people are saying about me. Endlessly altering the circumstances of my own life. Trying to make out 'I' am someone else. I've told them, 'I' am unchangeable, it's the rest I've discarded, but 'I' I kept, I kept that for myself. D'you understand? You will do. I am my own chorus of voices, I am my own fanclub, I am my own hunter and hunted, I am my own hates and loves, I am my own victim and victor. This is my job now. I want a drink now, and after that I'll make porridge. What do I have to know? I only have to be

here. Be here today. Right now. Here. Right now. Here I am. A reluctant memory of myself. A peacock ready to put away his feathers and drink and make porridge. I could sit on a wall talking to you about this all day. Or I could keep my mouth shut and let you listen to the sea. The lullaby of the sea. The goodbye all you prisoners of the land the hello all you goodbyes. Listen to that while uniformed wankers strut about. Are they coppers or traffic wardens? What's the fucking difference? Ocean mists don't care. Forgotten belongings don't care. Grief is later. It's not got the hang of your face yet.

So what? About the way it's fashioned, I mean. This postponement of a walk in the park to get a message through, stringing out a few fools who never knew what kind of entertainment they were looking for when the sods sat next to me. There's a girl sitting next to me right now, all she wants is love she wants it to drift into her soul from the air she won't breathe a word about it if only it comes close enough to catch hold of no she won't say that she prayed to the Devil to have it happen, and now look, there she is sitting next to me and she knows it's happened now, she sneaks a glimpse sideways, oh lordy lordy lord he looks like a Beat poet thank you thank you thank you that's him alright that's you alright. But I want to go and drink and make porridge, what kind of first date is that for a

young girl with romantic hopes? Ah, when the Devil calls. There's that new quayside café opened. She's old enough to have nothing to explain to her father, who's probably younger than me. Am I not the Sun God? What is the destiny of these tall towers? Shall I tell you? They shall fall, my dear, they shall fall. Shall I buy you a noodle supper? Let me look at the unicorns in your eyes. Take them out when you go home, do not let others see. Bite this wrist twice to show that you agree. We are one now, you and me.

One gets to a stage in one's life when it can be turned on. Just flicking a switch that was there all the time but you never found it. Then one day you do a bit of magick and it works. Like, for instance, conjuring up a beautiful woman. People downgrade this and think it not as powerful as battling demons all day on the internet. But actually a beautiful woman comes with her own demons, and yours come out to meet them, long tucked away not making their presence known. She smashed in the head of Bastet smashed it in with a stone, while I was tearing paper snowflakes. We hear each other in the silences, we think the same thoughts. But sometimes one does not know what to do. The

corridors are there, but we do not move down them. We want all the time things we haven't got, and when offered them, back away. I would caress you into bloom, why wither alone in your room? Walk along the magical corridor, I am waiting at the other end. I'd draw you a diagram, but it's only a matter of turning your head. That's it, walk this strange island between dreams and be with me. You can have your own key. Find this nonsense real.

And just like that, hearts fluttering as one. We can take a huge step with help. Hug hold of me, I've got you. 'Now you see, listen to your dreams.'

So who are you Frank? What is this life you have? I swear I can still hear the broken rosary beads bouncing away on the floorboards. Sitting beaten down all black and sinister, back against the wall like some den just escaped into waiting until the danger passes, but the danger is everpresent, and I just get used to it. If you live on the edge this is what you have to expect. I remember an oompah-oompah band, and wind-up clockwork joke false teeth chattering to the edge of the table. I remember that but am graspless on its significance. A memory fragment lifted like waving gold leaf. I am back here again, but where is here? So I was mostly misunderstood, that's Frank's head, they'd say, Frank's head's like that. Who am I? Lost it big time, swirled

around like a small fly landed in the water going down the sink. But y'know what? I can see it all clearly now, the whole goddamn lot. The path of my life has at last made sense. We stood very still, her clinging onto me and speechless.

Just waiting for her to remember she loves me.

They lived in truth, sometimes vilely accentuated. He laughed with glee whenever he was with her, admiring his goddess. He closed his eyes and she clasped her hand around his neck and drew their foreheads together, tears of joy held back by their clenched eyelids.

The silent spaces of love. Watching her kick off her tights. A withholding of ice cream. A little smile here, a little scowl there. A ticklish little minx.

I am who I am, is the only answer. A patchwork quilt of days some dark material some light. Here for a while, much to do, though you can dilly-dally on that one for a long time. A life more like an angel's, or a demon's, than a human's. An angelic being, fallen into human form. Shall we have three years of washing hands and chopping carrots, and then pick the story up again? So Frank meets his missis, and she's a nice bit of stuff. Her breasts specked with gold. He holds on so tight to her he almost pushes her away. She smashes in the head of Bastet to end all spells, but still she is drawn to him. He invites her into his home a cat treading gingerly, my

home is your home, sniff around everywhere and spray the walls with your scent make it yours.

She paws at his shirt, they hold each other. He has come home.

Ours is a story still happening. The joy has hardly yet begun. A walk I took at night told me many things, at night you hear the voices of those who have failed. How many they are! I might never have spoken of emotion, had the whole sea not come rolling in on me. Who knows what anyone thinks? How many things never were? The sea unravels many things in me, then grows calm. Emptying the mind, one finds a way. Long days, running the gauntlet of the mind. Please, a little happiness, one hears oneself say it.

I am a good man. A good man deserves a good woman.

So Frank, I said, what is the truth of these shadows of the future, what do you see in the signs?

I see comfort growing out of love, the start of a new life. But I also see blighted tomatoes appearing in the vine. Had a good lot of tomatoes from it so maybe it is time it went back into the ground. You collect what you can before the frost gets them, and ripen them indoors with a banana if necessary, a nice ripe banana under the

covers. If you're lucky, I mean the kind of luck doled out by the gods, you can flourish and be in your house together before the winter, all tucked up and cosy. But it's all red or black in roulette, it's the luck of the Devil. The Dark Master calls you together to make wild sex magick around his altar. You're not going to argue with that, are you? Beats living in a gypsy caravan or her tending my pencils in a lunatic asylum. So, y'know, you think give it a go, what have I got to lose but a soul I'm unhappy with? Looking in the face of the Devil is what you see wiping the steam away from the shaving mirror, but he's away before you can go mad.

So Frank, is there any more?

Any more? I've hardly just begun. I'm talking about a complete about-face of life. It's like alleyways winding in my soul. Like that alleyway I've told you about. Where she took me along. The redhead with brown eyes. She was the right fittest bird I'd ever clapped eyes on. Took me along to this party, it was the one I was giving myself but I'd strayed off for a while to buy a Mars bar or something, when I realised where we were going I said nah let's duck in here in this abandoned hotel I'm sure there won't be too many ghosts or axe-wielding maniacs. And if so, I'll use my special powers on em. That caught her imagination and she flew with me up the spiral stairway plaster fallen mice scampering

but it must have been grand in its day the chandelier coughing dust says oh it was it was. So that was how I ended up in a dilapidated hotel bedroom with this great bird I thought was a hooker but actually just fancied me rotten from the moment I looked at her and knew this great party everyone was talking about why don't you come with me and then I get to tell her that's my party love and you're invited but first let's get a bit of privacy in the sooty walls. So already there was plenty to talk about twenty minutes into this magnificent pull. I mean, I wouldn't have said I was that fantastic a pull. So then you think, is this a set-up, am I about to be lured into the secret service with promises of women like this. But no, it's just the sheer mundane luck of meeting a great bird while nipping out of a party for a Mars bar, and would ya credit it, she digs ya. What's yer name again sweetheart? I call from the bathroom. Only joking. Then you can say what's my name? And it's always a pleasure to hear them utter it forth, the accent they bring to your name when they say it in love. And if they've forgotten it you don't have to feel so bad about forgetting theirs and can get to hear what it is again amid gigglish laughter which is good because you'd like to start using it on a regular basis.

What on earth am I? I ask it of myself often enough. When I stand up, walk out, leave disguises behind . . .

Listening to the rain, softer now, the night quieter. The rain out the open window has been there all evening, now it's two in the morning. It has kept me company through a restlessness that is demonic, pacing the rooms in search of I have no idea what. Something bearing down upon me, I have no idea what. Something filling me with dread, again I have no idea what. I feel close to some eternal dilemma, as if there is more to be said about this than can be said right away right away now. It is a feeling difficult to endure, yet something great in me tells me it is just another illusion, one that has got its teeth into me like few have before. I have turned my room upside down trying to get to the bottom of it. Is it simply a monstrous want stampeding into my life, gradually worked up from the inability to think about anything but her? I wonder if she is going through it too, a demon sitting on her sleeping form, an incubus pressing her down. Simple moments, her smile, her joy at seeing foxes peeping at us over the gravestones where we would lie down and take photographs of ourselves all happy and at ease with the world, things that actually happened, are shunted to the side, and the hope to experience such things again makes a loss of the past. Like a fairy dance you can never see again. And I find myself unable to accept there is an end anywhere in sight, though that is what it is increasingly looking

like. And so the hope strangles like convolvulus chokes a tree. The hope is a dagger in my heart, but I cannot pull it out and throw it away, as it alone knows the last destination of my heart and I am afraid to forget her. And so on nights like tonight these shuddery feelings come wafting in, and I have no strategy to deal with them, except trying to put them aside. If we are to be together she will read this, she will be able to explain this to me, she will be able to know what I went through, and may, as a result, come even closer than my hope dare project, should we ever be together again in our simple ease. There was no doubt about it, I loved her . . . but the more I loved her the more I lost sight of what it was to love and what it was I loved. Some nights are for practice in stopping oneself go mad. And better that it is raining, it is a reminder you have got through other nights like these, nights when you had not even met, nights when you had no idea such a woman existed in your future. It's there in the sound of the rain: you've been here before, it is not entirely to do with her. Then some of its strangeness wears off, this is just an ordinary madness, though it seems more fevered. And so one learns to welcome the interruptions of the day, though everything is done under the sight of the watching god of limited hopes. And the madness swirls around you for days on end, a lovesick Romeo in a drama that may

end well. And you think, where was I before, before I strayed in here? Before I bit off something new to chew and am still chewing it. Surely the other side of this there are bright happy sunny days down by the river, but none of them can be conceived without her. You go out less, you remain stuck in your thoughts, as if you must keep sight of this little bit of stagnant water, mustn't stray away, but oh how you welcome an interruption, an unexpected guest, a visitor with dope, before back to the treadmill of a love you cannot steady in your hands, that seems to want to flee. Thankfully, she sees little of this, and I also, of any turmoil in her, though to know it is there would seem strangely comforting, as if this were a general attack by demons on the both of us, and not just a lonely man's last gasp of despair at another flown lover. Hang on, all the signs seem to tell me, but I could be deluding myself. I have done often enough before. So what is it that is different now? But it is different. It is as if the world is a silent machine about to lurch to life with a loud grinding of cogwheels and pulleys, and this machine will sort like a robot all the misplaced pieces of ourselves until our lives are transformed. That is it, that need for transformation. When you call down that transformation on yourself, that current carries us . . . the blood of a sigil painted on her belly dribbles down her leg from the water of the

shower. We have set powerful magick afoot, that is what this is, that is what this unusualness is. Like a startled child, I suddenly realise it. This is all the record of our adventure. Two powerful rivers are flowing into one. The doubts are inappropriate, I see it now, because this is a magical operation, this is magick that is happening. And if I am feeling as weird as hell it must be because it serves to loosen little bits of debris in me that hold it back. I see I have come at it altogether from the wrong direction, and I stand up, somewhat manfully, in my predicament, like my next job is to catch her as she is falling helplessly through the air, and that morose feelings are just the habit of despair, the real despair seeks nothing but to understand, and once understood can repair itself and be ready to take others by the hand.

One continues solely to understand. I am a lot bigger than I sometimes let myself believe. Others see it mostly, myself only on the brink of movement, when I suck up the world and take it inside me so it may have the benefit of recent internal discoveries. So much so confused, but there is a drive to be reckoned with that will take this dire day by the hand and coax it gently out. The spoils of war will be all around, evidence that current activity links up with past activity, and the unobliging days won't apologise because they've served their purpose. When that day comes the angels will sing in heaven that

two of their kind have made it. Or will it, like so many bold ideas, wither away to an old man's might-have-beens, tending a garden that brings no pleasure any more that even the bees have abandoned. We like to know the future because we want to believe that the path we are on is true. In some parallel universe she and I are together, we will die never having considered another. All I'm saying is that I want to cross over now, cross over into the parallel dimension and leave this one where I suspect nothing ever happens, and that is its track in the clay. The universe where nothing ever happens calls out in tones of yearning for the universe where it all happens. Take me into that one, you call, I have seen it clearly now, let it be mine, let it be ours. But as always you must wait to see, wait until your eyes are bleeding with tears to see what is going to happen. A universe that came so close you could just cross over and still the desk the carpet the walls would be the same, but not quite the same, no, not quite, since gone now was all thought of failure, all thought of might-not-be, here it was all coming together nicely, there was a confidence it was about to be. And then you think, oh god don't let it slip back into the universe it was, where all shared paths go but a little way before petering out, where there is only the long stretch of days to look forward to, nursing a loss too great to say. And you just become

a man with bits of a life that never started, an anguish and perhaps, as consolation, a wisdom too, etched in the lines of his face. You can only hope that your parallel self is having the enjoyment the love the life that you crave, that universe far away now, and the point where they touched a dark crossroads in the heart that is now a crater. A stronger self than this is needed for the life I live, yet someone of my parallels has to live this one, this base life that lacks the knack to step outside of itself. Oh, I shall thrive again no matter what. There will be second and third chances, but none so petrifying as that first chance when you realise you've blown it. When it would have been easy, had you seen it more clearly. Already I have forgotten our first kiss, and the rest of my memories are being stripped and are falling from the tree. Soon it will be as if I never met her, I never had this chance, and I will be none-the-wiser, save for a deepening isolation that can often make a man look wise from a distance, but close to is a pained expression tinged with indelible regret, the harpy that plucks and plucks at him.

But it quietens the soul ordinarily in turmoil to see the closeness of the crossing, and as the days press on one's wide eyes with a sparkle in the mirror, this hardly known joy in one's being. There will be stories to tell about this! And the rain returns to whom you can tell

your good news. Is it solely getting to the end of a single thought? If so, what might that thought be, or is it all of its nooks and crannies, its winding alleyways, like a seed pushing its sprouts through rock, and the flowers bring the bees back to the peaceful garden, she is down on her hands and knees laying the King of the Grasshoppers to rest in his brightly painted cardboard coffin, brought all the way from Athens to Berlin, where it was painted like an Egyptian mummy, then to England. I said, 'Are you sure it's a grasshopper? It looks like a locust to me.' And we buried it with all due ceremony under the lilac tree in my garden. It is to the King of the Grasshoppers we owe our good fortune. Benita sat there on the crazy paving carving his epitaph in a piece of roof slate fallen off the toilet roof, a gravestone slab, sat there carving it out like a little girl, with a sharp metal rod as a tool. And I said, d'you know how they keep locusts away from villages, they tie a bat by a piece of string to the village tree and the locusts dare not settle there, they swarm on to another less foresightful village. And then I remember our first kiss and all the days are true again, and it is hard to remember what made them otherwise, save a terrible fear of losing what you had spent so long finding. Not all stories are sad stories, the best aren't. But when it is touch-and-go there can come a triumph so rare it is worth the upheaval that led to it. But how

many never clamber across into their finest hour? Turn and walk away giving up too early, resigned to another unadventurous night in. I can understand people being shy of this chaos, what a thing to willingly inflict upon oneself. So that is something of the road I've journeyed along, but wide of the whole story as yet. And still the sound of the rain after a bowl of porridge.

Images appear in the mind, her hair, for instance, but you don't know any more whether you aren't just walking a plastic doll along a child holding a leg in each hand and making her walk.

A smashing bottle out in the street sounds personal even though the curtain is drawn. Dice have fallen this way before, waiting with nothing else to do. The town clock stuck on six minutes past four. Darts falling into the rug.

The sound of the tram going along the tramlines its soft soothing rhythm and rattling windows. Quails feeding in the clover. The baked potato was black when he dug it out of the embers, a hard black shell chipping it off with a fingernail. He cuts it open with his penknife and digs out the soft flesh inside. His grandfather eating slices of apple off the edge of the blade.

I read somewhere that a great sea surrounds the land like the details of someone's life.

The lotus twists on the gloves of the sea and all bindweeds laugh. The days have lost their tameness, they spit and scratch.

All the years of my life, they sink into the fireplace and the wind down the chimney blows on them.

Without saying goodbye, the vines that climbed all over the house have withered in the night, the cold cold night. Jack Frost descended and sent them on their way. But they will be back later, emerging with their little green buds out of the hard wiry vine. And the flowers will all smile and say, 'Welcome back.' The wall the crumbling old wall is amused it is getting dark earlier and earlier. 'Wrap up there,' it shouts at little boys with sparklers coming down the lane the night air thick with the smell of gunpowder. Coal-buttoned snowmen with carrot noses will soon spring up out of the white land happy in their old hats and the cold goldfish will bump their noses coming up to gulp the air. And the fire is made of orange paper. And sitting there I have not had a thought for years. I live like a loft lives, containing many things

growing dusty undisturbed listening to the joyful songs being sang downstairs but never joining in. They will wake me coming up to collect the Christmas tree and I'll listen to their celebrations until it is time to bring it back up again, boys will slide down banisters and slippers will be two sizes too big shuffling around on the carpet. Crackers bang. Licking of gummed paper of all colours to make paper chains. Warming of bottoms on radiators. Wearing of big jumpers too big but home-made. Organ pipes on television and carols sung in churches, and I will remember smiling all the time like something has tickled my funny bone but I don't know what it is. It just seems I am happy and happiness is all there is in a little bubble of Paradise, children not knowing of sorrows locked up in mum and dad and nans and gramps, put aside for a while like something locked in an old suitcase, up here in the attic. Robin Redbreast in the holly bush. Is it blood on its napkin?

I often think about fate and what it means if everything is fated, and if so I want it to be a great ride I'm on not the crap ride. But if it's fated does it make any difference which ride I'm on? Since the *real* ride I'm on is neither of those appearances but what lies behind it all. And

anyway, it's rarely one or the other. It's a great ride with crap bits or a crap ride with great bits, and when you start getting into it it's odds-on the former will change into the latter and vice versa. And aren't quiet moments cool? I mean, how much better is a quiet moment sitting by a river listening to the birds watching the sunlight play on the water going to be if you're a filmstar or a waitress? Assuming the all-important leaving your worries at the door can be accomplished. So there's a point of similarity between all lives, so long as you leave your hat on the hook and come away a while. Now, if it was up to me, I'd regard the rest as just a story we're living out, just a bunch of fates altogether in the mix, jostling every which way and running harum-scarum through something blind to the bigger picture, the few large details we're often too busy to notice, like, this isn't a city this is a mind projection. But every season has its young crowd who think they know better, who've only just finished with falling off their bicycles and having their mums wipe the snot from their nostrils before being kidnapped by Muslim extremists appearing in porn movies and buying second homes abroad without once considering the mystery of their skull having grown larger. Yeah, I remember you when you were very loud about how many marbles you had and how nice some of them were especially the

ones that looked like orange cat's eyes so where are they now what holes in what pockets of your life did they fall through eh? So much on the shitheap of moving on, so what makes you think it'll be any different about what you laughingly call the concerns of adulthood? Oh, I've got questions for you, my friend, but leave those until your face is a little more purple and you're gasping for those countable breaths towards the end, not that I want to disturb you when you've got other things on your mind. Sure, it's always a good New Year's Resolution not to waste any more time. But look, I have so many babies in my arms I could just drop this lot on the concrete and get another armful and another and another, there's nothing special about these blank slates it doesn't matter how many get squashed just back up a minute boy just zoom out a little and look at the global perspective here look it's just ants ants ants ants everywhere bursting out of the cracks in the anthill. You want a tip? Wrap your legs around a good fuckable one and hope yer crate ain't banged around too much in transit. That's all you gotta do.

Ever met a rich immortal? A tin shack's good enough for now, plenty of time for riches.

Think about this: you will probably never meet me, but it's always possible you might. And not as a result of anything *you* do. You might meet me in the last ten

seconds of your life. I might be the guy who holds a pillow over your face, hard to deaden your struggles. I might tell you a story in a bar, a ship in the night. We may hook up and carry on together, for a month, a year, for life. Or our paths may never cross. Once upon a time I wounded this guy in a bar with a piece of glass. He fucking deserved it. I knocked him off his stool and cut his tongue another opening in his cheek. It was the bar where fate deals you your hand, evens the score if you've been a bad boy, me it made the enforcer for the evening. I could have carried on doing the crossword puzzle, sure I could, but things took a turn and there's moments in anyone's life when you don't give a fuck about the next moment you just do what you do in this one, like come on Death if you've got what it takes ave me you fuck! I knew I shoulda stayed outta that joint. You always know it in retrospect, you see the steps you took that brought you there, in off the street into this fucking dive. I think it was the blue lamp outside it called to me conjuring up the mock safety of Dixon of Dock Green *Evenin all* sawdust on the floor stripper on a podium gobshites mouthing off at the bar I coulda turned and walked straight out could I fuck some crowds you don't turn your back on *The Twilight Zone* is already on the jukebox this is your scheduled appointment with fate.

I came to a crossroads, many years back, where I had to choose. And I did, but not before I had sat down and wept. I saw how small I was, how insignificant, yet how big I was at the same time, how it all hinged on me, how none of it would be without me. I am nothing, I am everything, that trip. Face to face with yourself in the blank-walled room of the universe that wants an answer out of you right now, like you've had long enough to think about it, all your life. I wanted to plead I didn't know it was coming, I didn't know I was supposed to be thinking about my responsibility for the whole fucking lot of it. But I saw even then it wasn't something everybody gets to, not at all, they plucked you out of the stream of life to show you this, by the scruff of the neck. One day, going along minding your own business, then whammo, consider this. Explain this. Self-explanatory mindfuck. Others would have just relinquished the responsibility straight away, said 'There is a God' and gone back to it none-the-fuckin-wiser, oh no, not me, couldn't be having with any of that easy-way-out shit, I had to look the concept of the big fellah inserting himself into the world in the eye and see that that big fellah was none other than I and that what had just gone on in my brain was the closest I was ever likely

to get to mystical union with the source or abduction by aliens, whichever was coolest and more important, and whaddaya know, any and all impressions I might put on it were in any case just cooling down fragments of a cosmic implosion and by nature just false appearances, stuff to cling onto to make sense of it by in the absence of any primary experience loops to run on the ole mental projector. When there's nothing to cling onto there's always demons to talk you through it, which, frankly, is just the human need for company faced with the immense void at the heart of being. Break off a few other selves who can act wiser than you feel right now, line em up, let a new one come in when the last one dissolves by the corrosiveness of absurdity. That's it, you see, the essential sleight of hand. Though you can see through a truckload of illusions, each new one brings with it a little bit of a lag while you're deciding, and in that time it can accomplish all it needs to. But one thing was clear, I wasn't going to be able to live an ordinary life again. In that, I'd got what I wanted. I'd caught life on the wing, and as a matter of fact I was able to catch flies by the wing so lightning fast and yet gently I didn't harm them, and for months tried out this new ability, catching them letting them go, catching them letting them go, until I started to attract looks, so I just satisfied myself I could do it and didn't do it any more, like many

things. Half of me said, you look like a fucking idiot sitting there catching flies like flies were yer best mates, but the other half, the silent partner of much greater magnitude, said, enough of revealing your lightning-fast reactions, there'll be a good use to put them to in time, and better no-one sees it coming. So there I was, Ninja Boy, out doing his shopping, never knowing when I'd be called upon to drop everything and react. At first, I looked for the potential opportunity, but in time, and no opportunity forthcoming, I lapsed back into a semblance of normality and my great silent half said, Good Good, blending in is a talent too, and harder to learn the greater one is. I saw how a reputation is a thing that is built up by the years, by a slow accumulation of small effects, little pieces of oneself let out with restraint like a drop seeped through a dam.

In time people credited me with abilities I had not to my recollection demonstrated in public, which led me to thinking I must have been demonstrating them unconsciously, or took as normal things that to others were not normal. Though I regarded the things they said of me as colourful exaggerations, in time I saw that actually they were correct that I could create such effects, it was simply that I had forgotten that I could. And so I became aware that I was growing roots out into the very air around me, and the sense of pot-boundness I

had was the understated knowledge that the world was not big enough for me, that I ached for the stars. Some agenda was growing inside me like a coiled-up monster, while on the outside I slipped into sudden bursts of violence that gave a dark and edgy character to the loveable rogue that was the easiest chrysalis to sustain as a shell for what was going on inside me. No-one could really know me, that much became clear, there was too much to penetrate, and even if some made the effort it was constantly changing such that the most it resembled was bits of litter and leaves spinning around a warm column of air. Some even glimpsed it and said in shock: 'Why, there's nothing there!' Bingo, luv, but they couldn't sustain it, that glimpse, it transmogrified into a fascination with danger, since if they could sustain it, that glimpse, they would be immediately cast out of the world into emptiness, and it was easier, considering the need to go to work in the morning, and the ordinary course they had for some time committed themselves to without any great yearning for mastery of the occult, to back off immediately and make do with the tiger they suddenly found in me, which was fine as far as it went, since human company of the truest kind is often a smattering of moments of real recognition strung out sparsely on the timeline. My own nature unshielded in intimate encounters.

I was still understanding what had happened to me, only a master of anything by virtue of being touched by the angels and left to fumble my way back to two-legged existence. I may as well have been a ball of rudderless fluff, floating on a breath, before my legs touched down. Fingers all blubbery numb. I'd gone inside out like a brolly in the wind. All the planets were watching edging their arses into their ringside seats with popcorn. And now, here I was, fluff blown into the spotlight rapidly run out of cosmos for a runway. Was there something else I should've been doing? I knocked something over and broke it before I remembered the room and sucked in the familiarity like air rushing to fill a vacuum. There was a table, there were chairs, a lamp standard had been knocked over and the bulb had smashed. I screwed my eyes up trying to see something that was not there, hardly believing the walls. I have it still, sometimes, doubtless in a diluted form, that look of bemusement at my surroundings. I suppose I must have said yes, but I remember it as a child sticking my head up the chimney, flecks of soot falling like black snow pluffing on my face, and gramp said, 'Can you see light?' And I said, 'Yes, just.' And I brought my head out and mum said, 'I'll get a damp cloth, just look at his shirt dad.' I don't know why the one suggests the other, I've been running through my mind of late like a fanned out

deck of cards and I can't help thinking I'm stopping on certain ones because they've been forced on me by a magician. And the point of it will become clear at the end of this very long trick, and I'll say amazing, how did you do it? And only secondarily think, do what, what did he do what was done? Because first of all I'm bound to be impressed, just as I had begun to think all sense was slipping away. Something as solid as rock. Wasn't expecting that. No, not at all. My god, it flies. It spins in the air. These are the walls of a palace how could I have mistaken them for a prison?

So I find myself thinking, what was it all for? I haven't the faintest clue! I'm getting drenched, sitting here, and I've only just noticed, that's the fucking sea out there. How long have I been sitting here? I'm back in some old fucking life. Ah well, it's a few more bearings than I had before. Frank. I'm Frank. I've always been Frank. What's her fucking name? Warm as toast with her I was. There's a way back. I haven't wandered off too far. She may have. Ah well, fuck it, what if she has. Nothing special about love when you're shivering yer tits off. Fuck. I don't even know what day it is. I don't know why it matters what day it is. Why does it always come down to what day it is? Fuck her.

Softsoaping me. You can stop it right now. It's a one-sided conversation. Can't you see that. It's making no

impact. It's just bloody softsoap. I can pull away. You see if I can't. I'll pull away like nobody's business. Yes. That's what I'll do. I'll pull away. Then we'll see. Then it'll be clear. I can see the way this is going to go.

You can stop yer softsoap right now. I'm tellin ya.

I want her to come after me when I'm gone. I want to set my sail to my own wind. I can't expect anything, I know that. But I'm fed up of little hops and jumps. Time to be away. It's my curse, that is. But you have to show them, let them know by absence. Be like the snow, one day covering all the houses with joy, the next it's gone and everything's a trudge. Taking it away with me slowly, dirty gritty slush sinking kerplop into the drains, a new joy coming in patches of melted snow where the grass is coming up fresh and all the little birds can at last find wormies warming themselves in the sun. Ah now, it's alright now. And they soon forget all about you and what you brought, and took away again. Yes, sure, there's an ocean of tears in me, and a little bit that says, maybe, maybe I'll be back. Maybe it depends on her, not me. I've never been able to unravel this knot, always hoped someone would do it for me. No-one ever did, so I was left with doing the only thing I knew how to do,

sling me hook. Oh, the strength returns after the first few thousand steps, and you keep looking back every so often like there's still a chance you haven't really left, but the glances backwards lessen, and you decide not to put yourself through the pain, and then even hail slanting into your face doesn't make you think it'd be easier on the back. Until one day you're so far away going back is a whole separate journey. Then maybe you sit down and weep, knowing it for what it is, and how you did love her for sure, that one.

But you have more pressing concerns now. A new pair of boots, a new warm coat, maybe a new name as you keep forgetting the old one. A few memories to scatter into conversations with people who think they're your new friend, or you're theirs, when actually you're still looking into the distance and haven't stopped, though you do stop, for a while, here and there. Because you have something to find, and they can't be with you there when you do, and you may never. And that's what you're about, any fitting in is temporary. You sometimes hope one or two may be following along behind, keeping their distance, but you don't know whether it's an illusion so you have to treat it as one. But mostly you hope that what you're looking for will find you, because you're wearying and some days wonder whether you're just looking for a nice hedgerow

to duck down behind and lay yourself out watching the butterflies and drift off to sleep to wake no more. But one thing's for sure, I don't feel as responsible for finding it as I did. I'm just going through the motions now. Inability to stop is the only perseverance I have, and some I know admire my perseverance, to keep going after something so elusive, that man is driven, what a will he has. But really it's just one foot in front of the other not knowing anything else, unable to settle anywhere for long, drifting because of something I was made into not pursuing any great desire or having any fixed idea what I'm after and not especially liking the life either and sometimes wishing if only if only I could make a go of this or that, but sure finding a strength in towns getting smaller behind me in people not coming any further after me like a little pussycat who follows you up the road a little way but then stops at what seems to be the invisible boundary of its predecided straying, thinking of Kitty-Kat forked out onto a saucer and a nice bit of milk to slup up to wash it down with, no sorry friend this is the third tree along this is where I sit on the wall and watch you go. And escaped balloons floating off dangling their strings so many of those the drifter sees and thinks there I go. The lilac hours of the dawn are calling, the silhouette of the owl flying across the brightening horizon. The abandoned castle keep by

the frogpond croaking, a place to unwrap greaseproof paper and have a bite to eat. Keep your head high, you barely have the rind off another day.

'No no, I don't want a relationship I want a budgie.' She kept on and on about it, chewing my ear off. 'I don't know what love is I want a budgie I want a dog the dog will love me and it won't matter if I have wrinkles and a slack ass.' I usually switched off at this point, or would interject 'I want to fuck you up the ass'.

'Oh you're terrible,' she would say, and bite her lip in a girly smile. I loved that girly sexy smile, that you-can-have-me-any-way-you-like smile. I loved that.

Oh what am I doing thinking about it as if it was over. I could go back right now and have her.

Detours, crushing cans and kicking them into the air. Choking up on stuff, what's the point? Won't I see this once and for all? It's as if I've never walked the pissing Earth. You fucking hear me? Truth. Not something that resembles it. The pissing fucking wanking cunting truth. Poor lonely bones kicking the door in of the empty church. A place out the rain, son, don't get thinking why did you leave it so long to come to Jesus. If you're gonna have a good effect on me do me the decency of

getting on with it while my back is turned, I don't need yer bleedin heart in my face, yer upturned beatific eyes, I'm a sinner boy, scraping dogshit off me boots on your shiny altar rail. And don't I feel good about doing it. Hand round yer plastic cups of tea all yer like, I'll be grateful for two minutes hand-warming sensation and nothing more, ya hear me? You'll get what's due and nothing more. One-and-only big fuckoff devil in your place of worship, so get your buns ready. You won't be seeing any miracles tonight, save for laughs. This is my domain, Earth. You hear me? More honesty of soul you'll never find through your doors on a bitterly cold wet night. I don't even want your silver. I've made my bed, I'll lie in it. You're the geezer makes em crazy, all I ever did was seduce them of their flesh, agree of themselves to make me owner of their souls. Their decision, which you gave them to make, so let's not forget that for one more minute. If this was a fucking café I could get a cup of tea, and don't you ever put the heating on in here? It's quiet, I'll grant you. Peaceful in its way, though it stirs up a hornet's nest in me to come through the doors and be expected to be all meek and mild. But that quietens, sitting in a pew on the hard wood, chewing the fat with you. Guess I'm your only company tonight huh? Can't count all them deaduns out there splattered down with rookshit. Pretty though,

in the starlight, like a harbour at rest. I'll tidy up the graves before I go in the morning, I've wipe that dogshit off the rail. I'll just put my head down here a while, I'll square up with you before I leave.

What am I trying to puzzle out? Moving stuff around in my head like taking crates stacked over there to make a pile of crates stacked over here, never looking inside them or knowing what's in them. Can't get calm enough to have it dawn on me. Want to beat it out with a stick. Too much happens in my brain that I don't understand, it's like a foreigner who doesn't know much English trying to explain something simple to you, you just can't latch onto it and you just say yeah yeah I expect so yeah like you're agreeing wondering what the fuck he's on about, suspecting it doesn't matter to you, like you'd already have dismissed it if it was crystal clear so in the end you just point into the distance at random and he thanks you and you walk on. And so I feel like that about my brain, fucker wants to communicate I don't need dreams with daffodils in my ears and a teacosy on my head fucking brain knows I don't do crosswords just give me the shit or shut up. So gradually it shut up during the day sitting there like a sodden

sponge twiddling its thumbs on intellectual matters just controlling breathing and pulse and all that stuff, feeling kinda threatened by me and looking forward to nothing much but sitting in a jar of formaldehyde on some dusty lab shelf next to Rasputin's cock as a unique example of its type. Well I was training it wasn't I. Training it to shut up if it had nothing to say, and not to bother me with all the fucking fluff that most people take for straining hard on the lav of brainy bonced bollocks. So it shut up didn't it, well it was already torn to ribbons by my sharp claws raking through it for the odd bit of gold it was holding back for a rainy day, just to convince me I hadn't really been diddled out anything, it was just pacing itself see, but if it had any it was hiding it good and proper. So I tended to sit on park benches looking at peacocks unfolding their tail fans, y'know if yer mind refuses to place anything of beauty before it then just put yer coat on and go out and find it yourself along the gob-stained path beside the moth-eaten monkeys till you happen upon a nice arse or a cute hairdo maybe even flip through a few books in the library but even that these days is no better than the hope of plucking a diamond out yer ass I spend more time looking at the fishtank in the foyer. I guess I had a kind of truce with my brain, y'know if you really must trail your tickertape of nonsense through it then give me the

option of listening or not, because if you suck me in one more time and it's a bunch of shit at the end of the day then you'd better watch it fucker or you're going under the hammer and I don't mean at Christies. So after that, much to my surprise, the brain accorded with my wishes and stopped acting like a tosspot teenager scarpering around or a lonely labrador barking all day and kept shtum. If I was brushing my teeth I was either just brushing my teeth or thinking about her tits and fucking her up the arse there was none of this oh I really must earn some money or I'm so fuckin lonely or I must get some more tintacks or hey the honey's run out or I need some milk or I can't pay the electric nah it was either thoughts related to what I was doing there and then, a porn movie, or just the empty void of space an oblivion with a kinda spearmint taste. And I figured hey brain you've quietened down ain't ya and brain says more mumbles under its breath 'I'll get you Butler!' showing me it can have a laff with the best of um so I present it with a burnt piece of toast to fire it up and think did E equals mc squared need better fuel and make a mental note to look into Einstein's diet and then I think nah fuckit get a pair of antlers stuck on a wooden shield and put it on the wall and maybe take up barn dancing and get some tights some black tights try em over me head in the shop seeing as how they

have a no-return policy on stuff that's been in touch with yer genitals and there's no guarantee they're gonna believe ya when you tell em you didn't want em for your genitals or your girlfriend's genitals you bought em to stick up your arse or Barclays or one or the other at any rate the only fluid's been on these guv is a little bit of snot maybe and they just ain't comfortable.

And then I sit on the edge of the bath and think what the fuck you bin puttin through you fuck.

I was attracted to her necklace, it suited her slender neck. I loved the way she'd leave her nylons all over the place. How the crotch of her panties picked up off the floor was starched stiff in the morning. Even the stab wounds on her leg, self-inflicted with the scissors, it translated y'know, into the look in her eyes, and the warm memories of her draped over me like a shawl over a cold back to the blackness firelight dancing in my face expecting any minute the howl of a siren. Strange, at last, to be facing everything I'd dreamed of. So sweet it was hilarious. Like, so I got the wrong end of the stick about all those years waiting, is that what you're telling me? She shaved everything.

What's got my goat? I know she loves me, deep down. She's an angel. If I ever find my way out of this fucking steep hill. I'm just looking for empty ground, trudging onwards right foot forwards left foot forwards, what the hell keeps making me do it? An acre of cold empty land, no more disturbance for tonight. Shouldering too much, what kind of road is this, blowing a gale bringing snow with it it'll be laying quite deep soon what I would give for a nice pot of tea powdery snow maybe it won't settle just blow about. I've got some peaceful silences in me at times but right now I'd like to yell at the top of my voice Aaaaaaaaaarrrrgh! I fucking fall over and slide down the hill a few body lengths and I just get up and trudge on this is turning into a blizzard what else can you do but shake yourself off and traipse on.

I'm fucked if I know where I'm going, just carrying on, fuckers tucked up in their warm beds. Little kids'll be full of joy in the morning out in their wellies and scarves and woolly pom-pom hats making a snowman. If they looked out their windows right now they'd see one walking past. I've always been a scary stranger. It's just what suits me now.

Just make sure your clothes are fit for being forced out in a hurry. And leave a can of pilchards in your overcoat pocket, you never know when that may come in handy. Fucking gorgeous, there it is fallen through

the hole and banging my legs in the lining I could've just chucked a handful of snow in the air and danced a jig when I realised that. Doesn't take much to lift the spirits in dire circumstances, hell the night even started to look beautiful, the snow lying thick on the telegraph wires.

Glaring like a tiger at the world. A lot of misses before you get a hit, but then you see it, how you should look at your situation, and all the little worries just go. So I'm alive. Find your base level and rejoice in that. There's always the feeling of something missing before, like you were just hanging around waiting for it to occur to you. It's never just nipping out and back in a jiffy it's how the hell did I get here, you'll never find out anything unless you stray off from the neat and circumscribed ways that keep a life in order but ensure we are defenceless against chaos. Check out that sane ordinary feller he's screamin inside but it got sorta lost in ticking off the evening's television viewing in the paper. His ears are burning all the time, because, being a standard type, everyone talks about him continuously. He's average and clustered at the centre with the rest of them. They do what is expected of them. They create the world I am not a part of.

I was thinking, being born, living your life, then dying and being born again somewhere else, on another planet in another time, could be a form of travel through space-time. The years spent on one planet, ostensibly a life, could just be waiting at a bus-stop or a train station for a connection. And then you're off again, deposited out of a womb somewhere else, travelling further in the disembodied form that death gives us. It's just a form of transport. We pop in and out of existence, remembering very little of the journey, and the former lives, at least while in transit. It could turn out a thousand incarnations was just to jump across the universe, when we get there the fractured pattern is seen as a whole, and bits here and there may stand out, but they won't be the point, save at the time, when there is no other point, but now, now you've arrived, in a bigger life that encompasses all the many little lives, well then you just start living that life, just as you did all the other lives. And who's to say that this bigger overall life is not just a stage of some even bigger life, and gradually we ascend the lives remembering more and more about less and less that we can do anything about, and then we wake up one morning to a purple sky and marmalade kittens gambolling all over the

bed, and all of those lives, the small lives and the big and bigger lives, were all themselves just a dream, and though the method of interstellar transport is kind of quaint, from your present perspective there is no need to travel, because you are already everywhere at once, and you think, ah yes, in any one of those lives, even the littlest, there were moments like this, and you are simultaneously connected to them there and then, and, if you don't watch it, you could well pop out in any of them, listening to the rain, or looking at the stars in the clear black sky after the snow has settled. Marmalade kittens purring and headbutting your chin saying don't fall back to sleep get up and feed us.

Sometimes you wonder whether you've said it all said all there is to say. You get tempted back into conversations though and hear yourself talking like an idiot as if any of it fucking matters and you think why didn't I just keep my trap shut why did I have to blabber on about it sounding like a fucking expert and doubtless convincing more than a few that you are. So I wonder what is it I'm looking for anyhow. I remember when all I wanted was a revolution, or for aliens to land, now I think a bit of peace and quiet would do me just fine but it's

the self-made noise in the head that's hard to get away from, have to wind down so bloody much to find peace you feel like you've going to expire, so there's always this tenseness about you, like you're gonna a thump a wall. And you don't know who you can trust any more, everyone's somewhere else in their heads, either that or you are, just can't seem to engage in the same place gotta get out gotta escape driving me round the bend staying here baying at this led-up-the-garden-path grey moon. That's for certain no more bridges to burn. Bundling a toy parachute back into the soldier doll's backpack did I really think that fucking stupid little thing would work. Now why the hell am I thinking about that anyway and what do dreams have to do with me and what do most of the thoughts in my head have to do with me and where the hell am I and who am I? All the king's horses and all the king's men can't put humpty together again because he's a fucking numpty that's why. I just want to soak my balls in ice water till they squirm their way back into my body get pulled up like long socks. For fuck sake get me off this merry-go-round or I'll be the sandwichboard man of doom before you know it lowering my shoulders until the wooden tent settles on the pavement slipping out from under it to nip into a caff for a bite to eat before the world comes to an end I mean they got to eat sometime ain't they even

if it is fucking nigh they gotta have a piss ain't they a piss a cuppa and a scone on a cracked saucer is more nigh than the end so this throws the timing right out dunnit what's the use of proclaiming the end is nigh and walking down the streets trying to persuade us of this if we can see quite plainly with our own eyes that the greasy spoon is a lot nigher than their nihilistic little advertisement and who is it pays them anyway who is it wants us to know the end is nigh after a piss and a sugar bun are they walking down here cos they want to it's their hobby I want to see who it is who's paying these fellahs I can do that all day what else am I doing but scratchin me bollocks and talking long gobbledegook gobshites to meself looking for a place to build a fire all day long they should come lookin for me if they wants a sarnie-board man with the faith that god's a slaughtering bastard a cleanshaven pink cunt of a bloke a laff-a-minute kneel-down-and-cry all-round good feller who can pick em in the betting shop yeah I could blub for him all right I could bite the cheesy bits out of his beard and shout two beers coming right up. Fuckers.

Look, it's just a matter of going from paw to paw walking down the road till it's late like a human snail you don't have to believe anything you may as well believe what you got in your pocket and if it's nuthin

then believe that. You have to get on top of things and wear things out in right order, when the vagina's slack move on to the anus when your feet are worn out stump along on yer bloody knees plenty of men have cracked in a lot nicer situations than the one you find yourself in so look on that as an accomplishment paw by paw that's all you have to do. Most of the races are fixed that's what you say your prayers for, to have a little come your way. Look at these cunts with their warm feet and combine harvesters sitting idle eleven months of the year I'll come round here come round these rich country lanes telling them the end is nigh I'll come tolling a bell and shout don't ask who it tolls for missis it tolls for THEE and trip them into their forefathers' fears before the national grid came round and said hey let us stick one of our pylons in your field okay you daft old shit? You've wronged the gods missis and they sent me round here to sort you out you've been prayin to the wrong un and I'm gonna ave yer eyes out on sticks for the crows to peck at I'm a betting man and I bet you ain't got an answer for me beyond shutting the door in my face. There he goes, that monster of a man. Where did he come from? He appeared here one day spouting his filth and lies. Can we do nothing about him?

No sir, you cannot. You're all fucked. Don't fucking look at me! LOWER YOUR EYES! Show respect.

The shadow of a good day has passed and now the night is a bad one. I take giant steps and am more distorted here than I am in the cities. Pushing open a garden gate on its creaking hinges is an act of war. I know your fear, quivering inside, the fear of the gypsy come to sell you pegs and heather in silver foil. You needn't exaggerate me, I assure you, I fit neatly into your prejudices and then burst out of them from the inside, I do it deliberately, it is not that I am not as bad as you imagine I don't leave you that I am far worse than you can imagine so come now to the door before I set fire to your cottage with my breath and burn you up inside it. Buy my dirty fucking anorak off me buy it now. Now I'm cold give me your husband's overcoat give it to me now. I'll leave you my ring, it's gold. May it afford you protection from bad moods and sad news. Think what you will of me, I mean you no harm, not now I've seen you. I strike you off my list. Tell your neighbours I appreciate a little kindness, and have a strange charm for all my outward manner, that's it, brighten up, like the day is brightening up, smile, like I am smiling. You saw the bad side of me, but now you wear my ring and you have no idea how you could have so misjudged me. Oh, there will always be a little fear, as of ferocious dogs that can easily turn but are nonetheless allowed to play with the children. A few

trustworthy incidents removes suspicion in human minds but in beasts nothing is changed. That is what you fear, that is all you fear. Now go back inside and attend to your day, look out on the lambs in the fields, do your crocheting, and feel warm for having helped a stranger in need. Explain to your husband that the coat was old and ready to be thrown away anyway. And look at this gold ring he gave me. And the moment your husband sees the ring you can tell him the stranger was senile, we have got the best end of the deal. Go now, go inside, and heal this disruption of your insides, this stomach-churning experience that is better than being left dead at the side of the road, and thank Christ you have escaped with your skin. Good day to you madam.

'Going out or coming in?' mum would say to the cat, who'd been miaowing to go out by the back door then when you open the door for him oh look it's pouring down of rain puss and puss is hesitant to get his tootsies wet and get his fur all soaked and if he just slips out for a shit is there any guarantee this door is still going to be open when he gets back and he looks up at mum to see if she can read his mind and sometimes he would brave the storm and head out probably had other business to

attend to anyway and other times he'd just turn around and come back into the nice warm kitchen ain't going out there curl up in front of the fire instead.

Sometimes memories can come with the intensity of cigarette smoke on the breeze. I wonder whether she knows good omens are rare?

Can't seem to grasp it, something I'm looking for. I've had an empty head before. The snow was artificial was it? Look, it's the holes that are interesting. All the same, don't you wish you could settle into a nice warm place and know what it was all about? This is not the first time the rug's been pulled from under you. Not the first time you've bitten off more than you can chew. Who said I have? Look, I'm chewing it see, chewing it fine, clogged up in my mouth, a bit of a mouthful, a semi-dry paste, but I'm getting there, it's being chewed. Look, soon I'll dribble the paste into the cracks like I'm mother bird feeding baby bird and then you'll see then you'll see how it all sticks together. You having faith is as nothing compared with me having faith, look I'm with it day in day out for a lot longer than you are, so shut up about what's real and what's not real, as if that was important. That's the least of it! Now look I'm arrogant I throw a lot out of the window that that other lot like to keep around because it makes them feel like they're doing it properly, but look there is no proper,

no proper at all. You'll wait centuries for proper. All we've got is quick-fix and that'll-do, stuff that serves for now until something better comes along, which it won't, so still there's only this, for now. Look, you're deep down inside a brain, 'love interest' is buried way up there, near the light near the surface, down here it's all

nothing.

Frozen. Inert. Undermined. Throw stones at it it won't run away. For some people, this is the best bit, others want shags and cocks in cunts. A character they can identify with, as if this fellow was ruled out the game yonks back, nah, can't have him, he's just fucking dental floss back and forth in the head, not interested in him, who was that woman, that waitress woman, German woman, sexy piece, who was she, sitting with him at the breakfast table coming and fetching him from the beach. Has she just gone up in a puff of smoke now? Well, thing is, I don't know either, I don't know where she is, I don't know where my feelings for her are any more. Yes, that's better, more feelings please, more reality. The huge grasshopper, you should have seen it it was really huge, we buried it under the lilac tree see, that's what we did, I have a movie of that somewhere, and a movie of me cumming on her face as well but

that's by the by. Where is she? I dunno, I dunno where she is. Okay? I dunno. Well will she come back? I dunno. I keep telling you, I dunno. Leave me alone won't you? I just dunno. Well where's she gone? I dunno. Greece maybe. Maybe she's in Greece right now. That's where she got the huge grasshopper I told you about. What is that about the grasshopper anyway? I've been meaning to ask. You keep mentioning it, burying the King of the Grasshoppers. What's that all about? I could tell you. I could, I think I could. It meant something, see. It made something happen. It is still making something happen. What it kicked off is still happening in fact. It's out under the lilac tree right now in its painted coffin and inside painted gold and red and iridescent blue like Tutankhamun. Grass grew over it and cats scratched at the ground, the grave, and you might not even realise it was there, if you went to look, if you could go to look, but it's there alright. And it's all because of that. Tina found it under a plank outside a great cave just outside Athens. Who's Tina? Oh never mind Tina Tina doesn't matter she's just the girl who found the huge grasshopper originally see and so Tina let out a huge scream and shouted Benita Benita (that's the German girl's real name right?) so anyway Tina shouted Benita Benita come and look at this! And Benita dashed out of the cave the massive bat-filled cave rushing out into

the light outside and dashed over to Tina, who was lifting up a log (you said it was a plank) or a plank and underneath there was this huge grasshopper, although as I think I said what we really thought it was later was a locust the German word for locust and grasshopper I don't think distinguishes much so anyway Benita stooped down and picked it up (at first they thought it was still alive not just the shell of a dead departed huge grasshopper) and put it on her hand (she must have realised it was dead now) and said Wow! Tina! It's HUGE! So she emptied out all the pencils from her wooden pencil case and stuffed them in her pockets and the pencil case became the first transporting coffin for the grasshopper, the crate if you will, if this was an Egyptian relic being sent to a foreign museum.

While Benita was still stooping down looking at the grasshopper on the palm of her hand she conceived the idea of bringing it first back to Berlin and then on to London. She just had this crazy idea, you see, that we could bury it in my garden. There's already a headless cormorant there, who had his head blasted off flying over on Bonfire Night and dropped straight down onto my lawn. So when Benita told me on the phone that they had found a huge grasshopper who was King of the Grasshoppers I was whirled away by her childlike enthusiasm and joy for this plan to give it a formal

burial and said we can bury it under the lilac tree. So it became a plan. Sorry I've spent so long without telling you this, you have a right to know. But you see . . . well maybe I'm only just starting to see myself . . . see the significance of it all.

I don't think you realise how long I've sat here with my head in my hands, counting my breaths. You might even think I was actively trying to put it from my mind. Oh well you can't can you, you can't put the very stick that stirs your mind from your mind. If I could do that I'd be driving a clown car to work all the bits falling off along the road me honking madly on the horn and laughing and slapping my thigh and running out with a bucket of water to throw over people but it's just bits of pulverised paper. I'd have a couple of nippers and they'd sit on my lap and I'd tell them stories that make them squiggle and squirm, I'd have an alsatian and a budgie, Benita would be in the kitchen cooking her mountain lentil dish. I wouldn't be wandering like a hungry ghost of a man drifting from place to place unwelcome and driven. You see, I have the ideal and the actual, and I rub them together like flints to catch on a bit of sheepswool drawn from barbed wire to feed

a fire first of dried leaves then pinecones and twigs, as if one is the imagination of the other, not sure yet which is which or indeed which I want most of all, since as I have wandered I have found myself treading a tightrope between parallel universes, perhaps dependent on the spin of a quark, which hasn't come yet, or perhaps it comes all the time the same and I die to worlds galore and live to one each step another and another version of the one. But it would explain . . . no, it explains nothing, explanation is just another illusion. Ah the salt cellar from the table is in my pocket. What we wish for is nowhere near as detailed as what happens. To sleep. I am an ant tied to a thread winding it in ever-decreasing circles round a pin.

'Ass-fucking the Cuban girl,' she said, 'that's all I can think of. Round and round in my head, he wants to ass-fuck the Cuban girl he wants to ass-fuck the Cuban girl that's all that's on my mind. How about you?'

'Well,' I said, 'there's been a lot of foxes down my road. Every night they come, nice foxes, young foxes, clean not the mangy foxes that came last year. I hear them barking every night and look out the window and see them, or there'll be a rustle in the middle of the night

and I look out and one's ferking through the recycling bin with his snout . . .'

'Oh I'd love to see the foxes,' she said. 'Ass-fucking the Cuban, that's all I can think of. I don't care if he ass-fucks the Cuban, y'know, I just don't want it in my head.'

'And Gerd,' she added, 'he was looking at my tits all the time.'

'Were your nipples sticking out your tee-shirt?' I asked.

'I wasn't wearing a tee-shirt, it was a long-sleeved tight black top. Were my nipples sticking out? I don't know, I can't remember. All I remember is thrusting them out so he could get a good look at the company logo and I said can you see it all Gerd and I adjusted my tits jiggling them about so he could see all of the logo so he could have a good look and Tina she was wearing a shine-through top.'

'See-through.'

'See-through, yes.'

'Could you see her tits?'

'No, you could see her bra.'

'Did Gerd get excited?'

'First day he said have you both brought your swim-suits I know a great bath-house I'd like to take you to.'

'Did you take your bikini?'

'No, we'd didn't have swimsuits with us.'

'You could have bought swimsuits. Gerd could have bought you them.'

'No way. We put a stop to that straight away.'

'But you jiggled your tits for him.'

'That's business.'

'I thought you were in Greece,' I said, 'I didn't realise the fair had gone on longer.'

'What have you been doing?' she said.

'Oh, wandering about a bit. Usual. Nothing special. So you going back to waitressing then or is the corporate escort thing taking off?'

'17,000 euro for two weeks' work.'

'So you're a whore then?'

'Kind of.'

'So if Gerd offered you 50,000 euros to take a Jacuzzi with him, would you?'

'In the same water, no way.'

'What if he offered to 80,000 euros to stand there watching you at the side, wanking?'

'Wanking? No chance.'

'100,000 euros to stand there wanking watching you naked in the Jacuzzi.'

'No chance.'

'Just watching then, not wanking.'

'Not wanking? He can wank if it's okay to laugh.'

'A million to fuck you up the ass five times.'

'Five times? No way.'

'Just to fuck you up the ass once then.'

'A million? Nah . . .'

'How much for me to fuck you up the ass?'

'You can have that free.'

'Free? Ah, sweetheart . . . no use if you're not here though is it? How much to get you on a plane and come here and suck my cock right now?'

'That's free too.'

'But I gotta wait until you've finished whoring for Gerd. I gotta pay 17,000 just to get you to look in my direction . . .'

'Aw honey, you know I got to work to get money.'

'I know gorgeous, just teasing. How much to cum on your tits?'

'That's free sweetheart. Back soon.'

She's not there today. Gone to buy herself another business suit I expect, getting into the idea of making money at last after being in a gilded cage for far too long. I know she's busy I know and I don't mind it I don't think about it in fact I throw myself into those kinds of energising thoughts I have from time to time where ideas come thick and fast, even to one such as

me pottering about making tea, and I think of the big tumbledown farmhouse where I boil the kettle on the fire and don't have a bath for weeks and I let my beard grow long and play with it with my fingers sitting there scraping shapes in sooty surfaces and making the hottest hottest pot of tea taking the pot over to the big black kettle and I scald the teapot outside and in before pouring the water in over the leaves and under the cosy it goes and little kitties are sitting on the oak dining table next to two-inch thick red candles burned down in the middle but with castle ruin walls still standing on the outside and I lay down saucers of milk before the kitties, three of them sharing two saucers, and I reckon it'll soon be time to get the fork in the ground. I don't seem to have the crazy lovely crazy-but-lovely-still daydreams about her sitting opposite me at the table and playing with the kitties and looking at me in a dreamboat of love. No, I don't, they seem to have gone away, I'm all alone again in my daydreams of better lives lovelier lives. We speak on the phone and I say I miss her, but I don't know what I mean by it like I'm walking around with my head in a bucket I can see no further. It's always good when the obsessive love wears off and contentment returns, but then it's puzzling what's happened to everything. You feel like you should make an effort to keep it all together, so you phone and

let her phone, but yer head's drawing a blank with it, like it's in a straitjacket but it won't notice if you just don't push, so you end up being stiller than the stillest tallest tree though you're still furrowing your brow and giving quizzical looks to the two inches before your face in the middle of the night when the heating goes off and the suddenly noticed silence comes in like a moggie that's been out on the tiles slips in avoiding contact and doesn't want anything said to him. And you sit there listening, trying to think, but you can't grab hold of anything so you just feel the bubbles of gas grumbly-bumbly themselves through the stomach downwards until there's enough to lift your ass cheek off the chair and let out a bibble-bibble-bibble shuddering exhaust of a fart that would have risen very satisfyingly in the bath and would have been one to go under the bedclothes to sniff at and most certainly one to let reverberate into her muff while spooning so she could slap you all over and say 'You dirty bastard!' And a thousand-and-one nights with her have yet to be had, too few, too few for it to end so soon. But what the fuck to do about it? A Slinky only has one trick going down the stairs but you get it right it's a joy to behold. So you stick with it till it does it right. How many times have I told her now? I'm not letting you go girl. I'm sticking with you. Thing is, others, I never said that, so I must know something or

other. Maybe if I looked at this with different eyes I'd just see it going smoothly, perfectly. So better I've got an empty head, less chance of fucking it up by thinking too much. I try to remember the awful ache for her I used to have. Can't connect with it. Hear the front door next door. Off to work at five in the morning, frost on the windscreens, on the pavement. The rush of nothingness. The battering ram of the void. This is probably something I freaked out about yonks ago, now I just knit my brow quizzically. Fart. Listen to the dull roar of early planes. Tomorrow, by which I mean later today, I'll pick up the thread again, sleeping where I lie in the labyrinth. One day maybe I'll be able to understand what the birds are chirping and the sun will sign my papers and let me through. But my chair is already floating through space. And a million-and-one wonders await, just a little dulled to the awareness today and the next day. I will remember I love her when she remembers she loves me. In the meantime I'll just cling into her belt as we get expelled ever outwards. She'll thank me, one day, for not letting go, even though I'd forgotten why. You bind yourselves tight with piss-poor rope when alone. It's hard to see that it's gonna hold. But to come back into one another's presence is seeing you've been in the same room all along. Enough. I sleep where I fall.

The harder words are to find, the more you're forced to concentrate on fewer of them, perhaps repetitive too, the more a rhythm impregnates you that otherwise you might pass over, looking for flashier truths. Sentences stick in the mind like bits of broccoli between the teeth. You don't know why, but a calmness has come over them. Like a sheet draped over a corpse. So, he thought about desert islands, did he, this old codger. Had it not been for that, written in an yellowed exercise book, I would have known nothing about him. When there is nothing left no time left when things have come to an end, the bits and pieces left scattered behind take on a presence of their own. A friend found an injured magpie and cared for it and nursed it back to health. It lived in a cardboard box on top of the cupboards in the kitchen. It could fly out of the open window but it always returned. One day he took a look in the box and found gold rings and ringpulls from cans a torch bulb a button or two things stolen from the ground that no-one wanted and things stolen from windowsills that their owners were probably still looking for. A wedding ring taken off to do the washing up and left on the sill next to a cactus and a moneyplant. As if the magpie was paying rent

but like a man in a foreign country unfamiliar with the coinage holds out a handful from his pocket and invites the shopkeeper to take what it costs.

Things get destroyed along the way, who knows why. Things that would have lasted, had you not destroyed them. You have to trust that you knew what you were doing at the time. You have to think by making it less you give it more of a chance.

How little is enough? Too much is too much, it is not how much is enough but how little. Too little is too little, but how little is enough?

Something is taking me by the hand, that's for sure. Leading me gently along. All the time I'm thinking but gently, taking my socks off still thinking a peaceful calm thinking ah yes or oh right and seeing I'm covering some ground quickly while staying still. Like something changed and it was back to how it should be, that moment I was the most god could be in his universe, the duty was resting in me for a while, and of course, what was there to work out after all? It was as simple as the

night rain pitter-patter on the leaves not too hot not too cold just right the sanctity of simplicity away away from bigmouths always with something to say. This place I must have been many times, getting invited back more and more though ages seem to pass inbetween. It wasn't being reminded of something, it was just being there, no complications. Fingernails tapping on a desk. Mine. Mine? That's a word resorted to too quickly. The sound of the tapping is solid, but 'mine'? I can't think what that means. Me. Belonging to 'me'. Break it down, maybe get closer. I was going to say maybe 'I'll' get closer, but stopped (myself), stick with one at a time. Me. Me me me. What the hell is that? Me. Me me me. Me. Saying it aloud. Me. ME. Tomorrow. There's another one. What's that? Tomorrow. Where is the sense in these words leaking away to? Why does some sense remain in other words (or am I just choosing not to look too closely at the sense in these other words just letting them flow like turning a tap on?). Tap is easy. Turn it with the fingers water comes out. Need water to survive. Survive? Life and death, everything takes you (you?) back to life and death. Everything? Everything, all that there is. Is? Is? Oh fuck. Rain. Pitter-patter. Night. Easy. Just don't come away now. It's like a rail I'm holding onto, like the first thing I heard when I arrived in the world. Don't move away too fast. A swirling confusion

out there. Book. Words. Book, words. In the beginning was the word. Now there must be something in that. Beginning? Fuck. Fuck I understand. Tomorrow. When the sun comes back again. Or for me (him, hah!) an arbitrary division, when he gets up. Ah, another day. A separation by sleep. But not a separation by sleep on the floor for an hour or two a separation by sleep in a bed (that thing in there, object words present few difficulties as gloriously knowingly arbitrary, I'm just this fucking lot of stuff banged together with nails, more difficult when you break it down into wood and metal, wood from trees metal from rocks, trees from seeds rocks from oh fucking Big Bang kaboom! But that's a theory. Like religion but more elegant, why go to church when you can go on the rollercoaster? Mind you, I don't like the look of that thing. Aren't I still in brackets? Close it) and continue having made a hop outside. What was that, a damp patch? Holding the bedding up with my hard cock like a marquee get a few girls in here chatting round the pole. In the deeper recesses of the mind is a porn cinema. Fucking comes into everything. An illusion of a material universe. I often reflect that huge roadside posters of sexy women that turn me on are just dots arranged in a pattern you can see that quite clearly close up but over the road cor look at those tits that ass that bronzed lithe body

with water droplets steaming off her sexy bitch I'll fuck you up the ass but then hang on it's a bunch of dots and some of them are the size of golfballs you only have to cross the road have a wank to a bunch of multicoloured golfballs what kind of crazy shit is this. I mean, look at a nipple under 20× magnification and it's a planetary surface just terrain so how come I decided 1× magnification was just right how come lifesize is a turn-on but 100× is exploring a new planet? I sit there thinking about this kind of shit. Y'know I like to know what I'm fucking man. But you go along with it don't you? What choice do you have? Explore it or fuck off. We're doing God's work when we bend her over and inspect that crack, anyone who thinks otherwise is a duff machine it may look like they're gone into mass production now but they'll get phased out.

Wittering again. So. Me. Let go of that rail man. Me is just a hyperdimensional construct, a container so to speak. For some a deadly reality since they exist only within the container. For others, it's like a hobby. For this one, it's his hobby to be him. He drops it if something more interesting comes along. Most of the time he's out of the container without even registering it, just floating, spouting. Hardly thinking about it any more. When God clambers into his brain it's cramped at first but that's only because he's sitting in the nosecone

of a Saturn-5 on the launchpad, this mother soon gets moving. Well, that's when he's in a fucking bollocks mood, lot of the time it's just nudge up mate like a tramp wants to sit next to you on a parkbench but instead of sitting next to you he sits in you just sits right down in you and tries your hands out and blinks your eyes to make sure the mechanics are okay then he'll take you for a walk through the park like you're on a right old dopey acidtrip and he's full of joy for everything like he's never seen it before wide-eyed child in the world he is but then you get to figuring that actually you're showing him around you're showing him your little patch of the universe I mean he must have seen loads and sure you'd like to hear about it you'd love to hear about it all but right now you can't help but be impressed that he thinks your little bit is just wonderful it's like he's saying my god I never realised how beautiful some of this stuff was this is the stuff you're taking for granted jeez don't you realise how lucky you are to have all this right under your feet and you go like er yeah I guess. Then he's off again you see him squeeze out of you and walk over to some beautiful babe and for a moment she's looking at you through him he's transparent he's gone over to chat her up and in just a moment he squeezes into her and brings her over and gets her chatting to you and you can see his sparkle in her eye and you think fuck

this is mighty weird but kinda alright and you just go with it go with what the moment has brought you not that you ever in your life thought it could be like this then as you're looking into her eyes and she's chatting but you're not really listening too hard just enough to interact you're too busy thinking you're fuckin hot fuckin fuckin hot and then he squeezes out of her and back into you and the cheeky fuck just reaches out your arm like he was operating a puppet and touches her cheek with your hand draws close and plants a smacker on her lips and then quickly he squeezes back into her and fucking writes you a blank cheque know what I'm sayin?

Things get lost. Always. Things get lost.

They fall through cracks. They're swept under the carpet. They're thrown onto the fire too quickly without reading. Without a final read, save one forgotten.

I try to hold myself back from being too hasty. But sometimes haste is just the right thing. Pull yourself away without thinking.

Regret. Let regret burn up too. Savour its burning. Try to read the burnt words on the grey flakes before it's a powder of ash.

Masks. So many masks. The birds always the same, hopping about the bare branches. And me always the same, watching them. Nothing else. Afraid to say that, nothing else. Too close to death those words. Fill the gap with cotton wool words, distance yourself. Stop holding your breath now, you can come out of the pantry. The monster's gone away.

Kids chasing a dog on the beach in a little cove, their dog, dog looks like it's enjoying it, dog's better at this game than the kids are they can't catch him he always gambols out of their way before they dive on him good game this I wonder whether the dog knows it's a game they're playing looks like he does how come the humans are never as good as the dog but what if it wasn't a game and one of the kids catches the dog and stabs a fork into its eye? I muse, leaning on the rail, watching the ocean bring in the grey foam of toilet paper papier-mâchéd building up into mountains on the beach. A solitary crow strutting on the sand surrounded by fifty gulls. I throw him a crisp he knows the crisp is for him but the wind catches it and it falls short I throw him another and another some guy standing chucking crisps on the beach eventually the crow gets one and the gulls don't like this wog among them and they flap about him and

one tries to land on his head and he abandons the crisp. There's an understanding between me and the crow he knows I'm throwing food for him not the gulls and when I rip off a bit of bread from my roll for a more weighty throw into the wind I know he knows it's him I'm throwing it to and he gets it. I'd like to see all the crows from the town get called down to the beach for a punch-up with the gulls blacks against whites I'd like to see that that'd be worth watchin. But the crow's mate arrives and they fly off together back to the land back to the lampposts and gutterings back to the trees and balconies back to the helter-skelter and crazy golf, leaving the gulls to their feast of lugworms coiling up their casts. I could get a little cornet of crabs' claws. Some little girl giggling like fuck what you giggling at you little scamp and then I see it little boy's dropped his ice cream ain't he she's still licking hers so I give him my last pound to get another what a stupid fuck am I now it's chips out of a bin for supper. Still, keep away reality from a little boy's eyes another day thank you mister he says he can hardly believe it maybe someone did that for me when I was a boy a little kindness in a day otherwise hard to swallow I'll remember that sitting cold in a doorway later wishing a certain light up there was on and not an empty black. She could be back. I dunno.

And all I can think of is fine-cut marmalade sharing it spread on toast she has a bit I have bit nice real nice and she asks me about the royal crest and this what it says on the label by appointment to her majesty the queen marmalade manufacturers and I tell her you're eating the same marmalade as the queen love and she looks at me shocked and says really the queen eats this no I don't believe you I got this at Tesco and I say look she eats HP Sauce too I show her the bottle she has this on her chips.

A huge bumblebee flying round me tying me in invisible thread mum always said stay still stay still it'll go away but round and round it's getting dizzy-me in a tizzy-me huge as two toffees stuck together. But bumblebees the bigger they got the less dangerous they seemed to be they got friendlier like you could stroke em stroke their furry stripey jumpers and they wouldn't mind. Eventually it flew off like it was carried off carried off on the palm of the wind.

And then an oildrum is being pushed off the top of a block of flats no it's a brazier glowing coals falling. I don't remember. Like a meteorite hitting the carpark. The smell of tar fiery horrified faces at the windows. I don't know. Metal bunkbeds top guy wanking shaking it. I close my eyes again. I don't know. Sometimes it's raining so hard you don't know it's raining any more and rather than stopping yourself getting wet you give up and feel the freedom of not caring that you're wet and pretty soon you don't know what wet is any more like a fish doesn't know you only worry about it when there's some other option like warm and dry and the minute you think warm and dry you worry about catching your death out here in the cold and wet but sometimes in the summer it's warm and wet and then you don't know where you are warm and wet is better than warm and dry and boiling hot and sweating buckets. Warm and nice and cool and wet you can live with until the sun sets and it gets colder and you start shivering and you want to get dry but can't get dry and can't even build a fire, but maybe eventually you come across a corrugated iron roof held up on wooden posts at the four corners and it's a rectangle of dry and if you're lucky there's dry wood too under there and you can light a fire and dry off watching the night rain spitting from the edge soaking the earth in slow millimetres inwards while

the fire bakes the earth at the centre bone dry and the bone dry spreads out keeping the encroaching wet at bay and when the front of you's dry you turn round and have your back to the fire staring out into the dark and cold and wet one lucky rectangle on the sopping wet Earth. It's then, you have a peace like the world is yours, and you can do anything, but for now curling up round the fire is all you want to do and tomorrow could be yesterday for all it matters.

I've been thinking about God, about how he has to spend a lot of time with himself, what a blessing it is to forget himself.

Time off the eternal problem, think about wet shoes instead, or trying to tie a tie right. The damndest thing, a tie. He never created this, this was created by some bit of himself broken off not thinking to check back whether this was a good idea. Too short. Too wide. What possessed him to buy one with lobsters on it? The lobster, now that was all my work, unadulterated. I did that. I didn't do the tie. Fucking tie! Tie you fucker. For the umpteenth time undoing it and starting again. Fuck ties. I will never wear another tie (so why are you keeping two nice thin ones in your drawer eh?).

So I made it to a house. Settled in. Few weeks passed. Uneventful weeks. Asleep most of the time. Bare rooms, suitcase in the corner still unpacked, the place from which things mustn't be allowed to stray too far. Feel happier that way. The quick chuck-in jam the lid down press in the latches and dash. Laze around as much as you like, so long as you can still do that. Jackdaws everywhere. Common here, common as starlings. Tugging sandwiches outta bins like old hands.

Nodding off, looking at the world through slit eyes, flickering like it's not really there, some other world wanting to come in, bright and warm and orange, sun on closed eyelids. The warm bright orange world.

Sometimes don't know what's going to be there when I open them again. Forgetful warm bright orange. And I let it stay at arm's length, the world is nothing more than a note pinned to a noticeboard. There's no going back now, only thing that can reach me here is a cloud passing across the sun, and should I have fallen down the trapdoor into sleep then not even that. Could always wake up to the sight of an angry woman about to cut off your erect cock with a pair of scissors. Oh the shit you think, the shit that comes to get you to open your eyes when you're quite content not to. I don't need to look to know she's not there. But now you've ruined my nice nap with your filth I may as well rouse myself.

I've warned you before. I don't need your kind of alarm call thank you very much. If my trousers are on fire let's have straightforward language about this, Hey Mister your trousers are on fire. I peek with one eye. It's night I thought it was day. I grab a snatch of impressions and go back in. My trousers are not on fire. I have not rolled onto the fire. It's still raining. No-one is trying to cut my cock off.

When does she stop being just anyone? Already the sand is full of the wind of the stars. Whoooooosh.

It was drummed in to me. You have to make something of your life. You have to amount to something. You can't just slope off out the back door and away across the fields, you have to shine boy, you have to make something of your life. I didn't like it. The pressure. I still don't like it, because it still drives me, this need to make something of my life, now it's nearly over and I wonder, have I made something of my life yet? How do I know? How can I tell if I've made something of my life? Who's judging? Who tells me I have or I haven't?

It bugs me sometimes, for no reason. Like I've got to dwell on something may as well be that. If it wasn't that it'd be something else, like the table is too untidy, they're digging the street up again, the library's shit now they've improved it, there's a fuckin wormhole in this apple, why hasn't she rung. Sometimes it's like I'm sitting here staring at a fruit waiting for it to ripen, day in day out. But it's not as if I can't see straight, when I put my mind to it. Furrowing my brow trying to think something, something enchanting. I could carry on a conversation with a thousand flowers.

I realised today that the neighbours I hated who moved away and I was glad they moved away because of their fucking yapping dog also owned the beautiful grey cat who visited me and I never thought of him when I was glad they moved away, just thought haven't seen Moby lately then I thought oh no I'll never see Moby again Moby's gone away and never had a chance to say goodbye. I stood there with the rake in my hands the sad realisation coming over me staring at the back garden wall that he'd never come along and jump down and lollop over to see me again. As if to make up for it, the tits decided they liked my nutbag hanging from the washing line after all, even if next door's was better, proper titball an'all, and perches for bigger birds. I was annoyed with the little birds for not wanting my nutbag

and then suddenly the sun came out and they decided they liked my nutbag after all. I must tell Benita, was all I could think. And two small daffodils starting to flower by the grave of the Grasshopper King. The first sunny day of the winter, felt like spring.

And I couldn't honestly remember who I was, not really. I'm just anyone. No-one. I attach myself to these memories, but they're like the wallpaper that comes with the room. A kind of hole. A helicopter hovered directly over me peering down and I gave him the finger right up into the air and up into the barrels of his binoculars and up into his fucking copper eyes, then I got right back to cleaning my garden chair scrubbing it with soap and water. It's not much, but it's something. And I carried on floating in this guy's life until a sadness overcame me in the evening that I couldn't work out, unless it was because she hadn't rung. I was little more than a midnight caterpillar getting comfy. Hoping nothing would eat my brain in the night. Huddle up in something that'll never end. He was already nowhere, no further to go. Light to read by, wolf pack trotting out of my eyes. To what end is my mind churning things over, cowbells in the snow.

Frank, you have to go. You have to get out of here. Why are you just waiting for them? Is this how you dreamed it would end? I don't believe you. It don't

believe it. Come with me. I'll hide you. Give you a new face. Maybe I want you to take me out there with you.

It doesn't matter. Don't think about it. Just carry on.

And he goes into the kitchen and screams.

Just a little scream. But it will have been heard, as something mad, something in pain.

But no-one will investigate. Days spent crawling about the floor go unobserved. Madness we only see a tiny sliver of, when it makes its way outdoors. Only animals see it all, animals that visit, make different sorts of house calls, that come to the back door not the front. They have an idea what is going on. And the tree at the bottom of the garden sees more than it lets on. But helicopters get the finger. Fucking cheek of it.

Long days stretch out. Stretch out in the sunlight. The bumblebees are first to claim it.

A buildup of oddness in me I want to speak about. I don't think I've fully got to grips with it. It's there, like a huge thing in the day, like I'm looking through an invisible concrete block.

What is this? What is this?

I have hardly begun, yet I am close to finished. It's all fallen down. I can't say I want anything. Absence.

Like trying to hold a little ball of air, still too clumsy to manage it. The mind ought to be better. Hard to miss it when it's gone. It's nothing. Is this what it is? Straining to shit a thought. If I let go there ought to be freedom. Maybe I can't let go, but I'm not holding onto anything. Much. How can I hold onto it so tight, so little? I am at the place where something may happen. That at least is moving closer. Did I get to grips with this before? It doesn't matter. How can it matter? It'd better not matter. If I don't go through the door marked 'Oblivion' yet, what am I to do until then? And how can it have any meaning, any importance? I do not even want the things I thought I wanted. I feel I ought to want them. Because wanting nothing there is nothing, it is empty, and anything seems better, though it is not, not really, only for a while. It is here that needs to be got to grips with. Right in front of me. But it has no handles. Have I come a long way? Only to get to here? There are no answers, and questions, they don't form. So, sit with it I suppose. There is nothing else to do. Sit with it and see.

What is there to say about anything? Have toast and marmalade now, no other salvation. The world is for other people, and they don't exist either. Get on with it, why don't you, the promised destruction. What are we waiting for? I'd better put that scalpel away. Out of

sight. Something tells me I am close to being capable of anything. And something else tells me I should be careful of an act of finality on the spur of the moment, precisely because I don't know why. Out of mind, away, away in the drawer. This habit of giving advice to a mind that cannot understand it from a mind that doesn't know why it is doing it. So it is a habit, a thought that blows the door open, but all there is is the wind, the great engulfing emptiness of the wind. Nothing comes to fill it but still more emptiness. Weak and tiny strong and gigantic, it stretches itself in a moment. And so I trust friendship though I do not know what it is, I trust love though it escapes me what it is. Only my own breathing, when all is said and done, only that to remind me I am still alive. Vague things, that cannot be focused upon. Much much more needs to be said about this, but what can be said?

Some hours later, my faith is borne out that it is all controlled by the mind. The distaste at the familiarity of my circumstances can turn around and become a pleasant feeling of belonging, of getting somewhere. So then, the mind cannot be trusted at times, since it convinces me something needs to be done, done *out*

there, when that is a lie. Nothing needs to be done, or, rather, nothing that cannot be done with the ease of one thing after another. No crashing ultimatums needed, though I note that is sometimes all the mind can come up with when it cannot shake itself off itself. But still, the faith that it is an illusion keeps me going, that it will shift of its own accord, and again I will be back to appreciating the birdsong as dawn approaches, quietly, not thumping my head as before.

Already the snails are slithering over tramps asleep on park benches, and there is an expectant air to the morning. A coming mood is rehearsing itself alive to the possibility that today is the day. The day for what is hard to say. The day for more ants than could ever be expected. For finding a knitted hat in the street. For gasping at a glint in the sky in the moment when it still has the chance to be something unearthly. For an unusual songbird to make its way to the garden from Africa. How little will really make the day something special.

The world is strangely amenable, accepting a meagre input like a sprig of holly at Christmas and providing more joy than could have been expected. Away with 'it would have been nice if', and 'my day is spoilt because of you', more little matchstick men arranged at the kitchen table in a moment of idleness. The days that

are no more . . . are no more. Really, I have to intervene, if only to stew apple on the stove. Pull this fucking cracker on my own. Finish off my Brussels sprouts and wash the plate. God knows how many snapshots from the past I have to tear up before supper. Bright-eyed me out feeding ducks and punting on the river with a bunch of bastards I never saw again.

Oh, by this time, sure.

Look on the bright side, at least I wasn't crippled by television, even if it did mean I had a huge effort to think what to fill my evenings with, which were gone before I'd quite decided in any case, something and nothing having come about. You can't know, no, not if you've got a television, even if you don't watch it, which is what everyone says, no, because if you've got one, even if you don't watch it, you've still not smashed it in and chucked it out. That's the difference. But I never get that far in explaining it. They think they're like me, I can see it in their eyes, and so I shut up. They're identifying with something they can't even touch. I pull away, further than they think.

Have I said something today? That's the thing. It doesn't matter.

I'm talking to someone, but I lose him. Like when I turn on the tap and think oh fuck I've washed a spider down. What does it matter, not knowing anything. I

know a bumblebee can't get out the bathroom unless I help him. I know a wilting plant needs water. What is this other thing I rack my brains about? I don't know whether we will get married and be happy. I don't know what the point is of daily living. Of daily shitting. Of daily feeding. I know how to make a crumble. I know how to tie my shoelaces. Celebrate what I know, away with what I don't know. I can make bread. I know the names of colours.

I have a grapefruit in the fridge. I know what I like in a cunt. A nice one to lick.

It's not improper, is it, to lounge about all day doing nothing.

Slowly, peacefully, is the way to go.

Where I am doesn't matter. It only matters when I think it matters. A solitary bird singing on this frosty foggy morning. It is only when I let life pass me by that I have time to see things as they are.

In the darkened house at night it looks like there is no-one at home, but a blind man lives there and it makes no difference to him.

Of course, I want to be with her. Grasshopper, jump into my heart.

Listen to the things that are said, when you are very quiet. Vague soft gentle things. They make it seem more possible than ever. And the need is gone. Which was

only a habit anyway. Something brought your breasts to my hands. Your hair falling down over my thighs.

She is beautiful, she is so beautiful.

Cover your path with fallen pine needles, so no-one can see the way you've come.

The smoke from the crematorium chimney. That'll be us too. Find me again, before we are old.

When I awake, I will see that I have left the book I have written in a dream.

I am lost to know where to go. You end up staring at an empty plate, imagining food on it. Tucking in, salivating.

I don't know what is the thing. I would dare, if I knew what direction. Put my best foot forward by golly. Throw peanuts in the air and catch them in my mouth. I can't deny that nothing – side-splitting nothing – rips open my eyes more than feeds them. There's still a lot I want to say. Just not now, maybe. I have to keep going nonetheless. Have a mad old giggle about nothing. Throw some more away today. It'll make you feel like you're getting somewhere. Slowly but surely. It may be time to stop. Take stock. I've taken to lingering.

Fishing without a bite. But this is part of it too. You have to be here with me for everything. Even the fly on the tablecloth traipsing across the spilt salt. Even for my wee-wee hards after sleeping. Through the sunny days and the rainy days. Waiting. An outhouse. A confiscated football on top of a pile of coal. For the flashbacks and tears. For the going to boil small Charlotte potatoes and dwarf green beens in the middle of the night. Be here with me. Keep me company. Like she said, she gets to hear about it afterwards, the times when she isn't there. The hunter goes bang bang and the child flicks over two toy deer with his tiny little fingertip. Why not get him a toy slaughterhouse for Christmas? she said. She told me how she'd noticed the scene in the child's bedroom at the client's flat. I told her of the battle between my nutbag on the washing line and the proper feeder and titball on next door's washing line. I was sitting out there in the sun today, I said, for a while they were preferring mine to hers, what's in a titball anyway they seem to like that. I was thinking of buying a birdtable made of wood but I'd feel such a fool bringing a birdtable back on the bus. She said: I'd like a man who was bringing home a birdtable. Yes, she said, I would. I think you should make it a palace for the birds out there. Come back, I said, come back to the magic don't lose yourself out there.

Although the phonecalls get shorter, I don't find myself worrying. It is like a depth has been touched, in stupid silly things. Go out there, she said, go out into the garden with a hammer and nails and show them what you're doing, build them a palace to feed them, be banging and sawing till the sun sets, all day long, building a birdtable and then you'll see, the old woman next door and her titball will be like nothing, they'll all come to your table by the lilac tree. Show them you mean business, she said. And I smiled that kind of smile the sun smiles on the day, that the flowers smile to see the bees.

She said: I feel like I'm being sucked into a world I don't want to go.

I said: It's just for a while. It's temporary.

Frankfurt tomorrow, she said, then back to Cologne.

Things start as vague notions. Maps are laid out on the table of the mind and something starts. I remember the pleasure I got from playing a flute at midnight.

The lover is a road we take. Empty out the drawers, empty out the life. Stand, confused for a while, but then just head off. Think about it while the gas ring bubbles and jostles the potatoes in the middle of the night. Soon a solitary bird will rise to sing in the darkness. More and more the birds are coming to see me. And I am noticing. I don't have to do much more than sit. The

crack is running through the world on its own. This is what I am given, time to think about a few things.

The idle ambling about. Bottles thick with dust more candles are bought for. The enamel pot of stewed apple. A corner I make my own.

There is a music that starts up and tells you the way. An empty road. A sunny dusty empty road. And solitude. I'll probably have to be going along it again soon. Little blips of love. Sometimes it seems . . . this was the best chance of the lot. But that too. One day it is not as it was the day before and you try to work out what happened exactly. Since it seems nothing has. What's changed is that you're back to yourself, your own road. She was there, just a little way behind, even the last time you looked back, she was there, coming. Then you look back and she's not there any more. And was she really there before, maybe it was just a mirage. A hope kept alive. But you know what? The strange thing is that when you're alone again, that's when you have the greatest chance to be together. All it needs is her. She has to do it. This hard exterior intent on heading off alone will crack just like that, if she suddenly pops out on the road again. Saying, I'm coming with you

Mister, did you forget me? No, I never forgot you I'll never forget you. What other explanation is there for the brightness in me? I just had bad luck before, picking ones who wouldn't know it was down to them. Who didn't care, there's the end I'll have that, that was them. Not her. I don't think so. How do I know that? I have only one answer. The King of the Grasshoppers tells me so. And every little grasshopper by the side of the road jumps a little ahead of my step as I walk along the dusty dry sunny path, and they stop a little ahead and look back at me, first one or two then six or seven, jumping ahead of me, urging me on, follow us they say follow us. And I'm smiling with tears in my eyes making diamond sparkles of the sun.