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# BUY IN CHEAP AT MURDER TOWN

by JESSE SHIPWAY

## point and line

I

sea grass stones shells,

my daughter's twigs and  
nut-pink flowers are pretty

— everything is pretty,  
the idea of the beach and  
the idea of flowers, fish  
traps

on

a new planet.

possible postcards.

2

All shows are popular.

worlds like  
blues cages  
gummy lids  
(*vishnu, aton*)  
dreams  
and being

the tempered  
self, the store  
of voice

prepared  
clavier

(paul  
revere).

nothing left      pegs  
and wind

a spine of feathers fanning  
out

**“Mountains, mean more men!”**

3

Did you come to Sydney to forget?  
lions   sex and sex;  
platelets of salty  
thought—none outside  
  
we breathe!

the world is heads for that

for other      minds  
reframe      and cast  
again past points      (on  
cliff’s edge counting.

*inches thick, the crust of  
creek  
that deltas out, the grains  
the  
bed of ocean sand.*

4.5

dusk green like an iceberg

the motel lady said

if they make the market      — the grass  
will agree, the rain will agree,

the gum boots will submit and the cars will  
agree

3

5

this mood

doesn't discriminate.

If you point it at a thing — a pig's head or a  
skyscraper, it will escape.

A dead body. It will escape.

You existing for a dead body. You escaping  
from the cops in El Paso, summer 2005.

Crocodiles will snap at  
elephant London. Lying cool now, in its own  
wet glass.

6

Whales and snails and the restoration.

Desert swales

the killer's lips.

The desert's malcontented grit.

I know you feel its wounds the ice, its oily  
sky. the bending bow, the

swollen root that sorrow knows.

7

the carbon river makes for ground as if to glug out  
words of praise,  
as if to beg the jack to free it  
please and spin it out in plastic cans

8

it's as if they haven't clicked onto the everyoneish brochures  
that people are demanding right now—

inflatable happiness in warm metro air.  
the drawing you found at the end of the warren  
shoving an Algerian from his nest of plastic seats—half-coherent spray about great long fiction,  
bowls of broken bread, breast milk, sodomy and astroturf.

with mummy back from work and spread out along the sofa there  
with a vodka and a redbull in her hand.  
like most women you thought yourself    diana's lamp

8.1

paracelsus in the pup tent, touching    everything in the realm of freedom  
last shot at new rain.  
the campaign trail was short and boring and led to a big-balled bull  
in a field

blocking our way to the temple,

greyhound she-wolf wicket gate.

The

9

drastic rents in social time mean spiral webs,  
staircase storms and crowds intent on public hits; history glass  
and light-filled light  
(catalyst, groover, chemistry prac).

10

We longed to enter swollen grids  
of sense and tones, to give the past as squiggles, squid ink,  
maps of mountains; gods of sea and time.  
Tribesmen, squinting,

tongues that speak a flattened world.

The after shapes, their sphere and tower.  
Astronaut and break of day.

Too much sun and wanting more.  
too far gone to climb the stairs, the yolk, the palm.  
the disc shim bleeds the outro dust and frontal tines.  
that central sound.  
relief, and freedom. listing sabot.  
kulak raft.

**II**

dressed in rivers feeding systems) Plato Park  
wool country *in* system IX quiet motorway  
late at night.

**I2**

*the forms of western thought,  
with sovereign subject as their king.  
they walled him in. his head was clean.*



*they cut it off and held it high  
so forest winds could peer inside,  
and rasp or grate as trill but still  
he saw, atop the pike, whole worlds  
unfold, more out than in.  
he knew them not but they knew him.*

*and i too feel that hollow there inside my ribs, as if i was not one, but more, a vapour trail perhaps or tree as  
i in televised redoubt. familiar, basic tools left dumb and dry to play at dunes and oxidise upon the rocks.*

*highland lake without a rim, fire burning, pale sky, planet thought as proof of space as universe that knows  
itself through other things alone.*

**14**

his voice is like *clarinet music*

your flat shape,

sweaty in the cold, the memory of  
city shocks, at the end of the lane,

someone, a farmer

by plane before the rain stopped  
crops, around then,

rusted frames.

is

robots shine like coal. We brush our teeth and do as we are told. But time shifts were common

where I grew up.

on the San Antonio beltway.

those moments left at sea,

old boy

old boy,

the great McGhee.

Man with umbrella arms.

20

the limits of art. the limits of talent. never being able to say what you think or say what seemed wise as thoughts, made words on the screen. they lose their glow. lose their strengths. it has to be the flow or the sequence or the way a thought responds to a change in the shape of the tree or a sound uncontrolled.

the sticky heat was thick, my skin a rim of prickled sweat

“the post-war japanese novel and pens notes on congruences between human rights discourse and structural inequality he sees not form nor temporal change in and of the time as now or the rate of change in the noumenon sub specie aeternatatus.

those folks who painted the little house red out on the Brooker, with the chinese wall. I think she’s a scuba diving instructor but e\_\_\_ lives there now. i went to a party, fell asleep on the couch. it was hot. i woke up and stood by the highway thinking of los angeles (thinking I was in Los Angeles – I have never been to Los Angeles

21

]

dappled beaut. pinkish diamond,

22

it's clear in you,  
this gift of taking care.

I hope you can and will again  
As much as you can bare

but i am young and do not know  
of love as basic flaw.

the trick it seems to selfish me  
is help and help some more.

23

24

one day, they say, the axe just fell. she tells the nurse she's feeling well. they prop her up with pills and flowers, watch her sit for minutes, hours, just how long it takes to change her mind.

25

cyan, turquoise, manganese  
the larger glass is mine, so please,  
leave it there, alone and cold.

26

The children sail with brave ishmael.

rodeo harlequins, gored then bored. the pros just laugh to make a buck. But you and i need better luck. pyrrhic poems never sent. the shining fish. blue and sinking sun. the dia-logic distributes social power between individual actors in day to day wrangling along streets in towns. twitchy and mpeg compact. cutting mpeg. the madness of his brother's wife and the causal role played by the analyst in the germination of that madness. if, when all is said and done, no winner is declared.

27

who is the booted turd that shut my gate? many earth it - middle class - in a crawling spat refereed by chickens.

28

when i rode past here i was a little stony god but thought myself a little effigy\_god. a manikin god of brine and beach. i looked inside. that conversion too was done in situ, i placed it with the decoder, voice activated, follicle of ear-horn, volume up.

now i stand beside the jds on high street road lane strip with my amex black as rhino liver. will i buy the aqualung or seal it hot for creuset, polo, blue-ray. i shift units, patients. where are they? In my drawer-manilla case notes, redact for publication. my brother calls me through the void. i hear his voice, that pussy eidolon. i know his form. he looks as me. i'll buy a flat round dish for

figs and meet him at the crooked tree. with neptune there he will not fear my inner ray. i take him down with iris heat. i take old sea skull introject. i cleared him out and published well in a1 journals stateside\_blended fresh for interlaken dowry gaffe.

29

31

to the yank i turned and thumbbed my ride. i slapped them all down, 4ok. The nongov and the comptroller, hard from the sector\_slapped down by my battle guns. i lurched toward the trench far gone in sweat and guns and booted terns down sango street. the gangly terns,

32

“they’ll decide today and we’ll have a new government.” i longed to see what colours you’d settle on, which quotes you’d re-deploy to say your fashion words. i imagined the wood turned to gas and filling up the sky. i stacked it on the sunny side.

33

when history forms, the azimuth or else the pistil, carpal, stem, and over, rout pawn dub school clover field. u turn up for work as habit, forming foam from gel, chest beaten habit forum? the policy officer with the triton grip. squat like a burkenau turd. "habit is the stronger veld", captain markus, said the alexandrine copse. repellent anodyne. mary sweet from golden guard and said it slow, before sun up in counterpoint, pent up, pummelled hard, heron solvent arid core, behaviour parlay fugue=aloo.

34

so you said, "i think these measures are promising and we have to do something, so let's not quibble on bits and bobs as if they disqualify substantive reform.

she had an idea. i want to write to the paper. so she did. that's how to read it." you, turning on the baltic pine, pretty from every angle. i wondered how you made the decision to marry me. i shuffle and arch at the shoulders. my nose is bulbous. my ears too big. my knees bend in and i kick my legs when i run. And now i have this rampaging growth.

i don't like how i look but i remember when i was growing up and watching my muscles form. i'd lie on my bed in that tiny room i had, watching basketball games and flexing my biceps. just a little cub admiring the soft brown owl. when i got sick i thought i was finished. that's why i hacked at my wrists like a clumsy russian.

35



but our lives are acceptable from most points of view. we have enough glamour and don't we love this lazy island town.

as we drove back from launceston, hobart extended its arms toward us. it was surely too full now to be drained by outward flows. remember when we imagined it empty of people, the buildings rotting and rusting away. it was a policy problem and a failure of imagination. we hated our home and hated ourselves for hating it and for staying here and for not being good enough to change it all. the recession never seemed to go away; all those empty shops. was it the lack of monuments or the meagre industrial output. i watched documentaries about american factories and felt a strength in all those men, those immigrant faces, crossing bridges, pooling outside the gates, hard hats on, carrying their lunch, fucking up Lake Huron, fucking their wives and each other inside the spray booth.

everyone seemed so daggy, didn't they. or else, they were overdoing it without much grace, ignorant of trends, self-enclosed. what did they say at the casino and at don camillo? they spruced themselves up, cardboard tight, with those up-turned collars and the steel grey hair. m\_\_ was a sandy bay lady. at least that's what you called her, half joking, levelling the silly little distinction, as if the title meant something, signified elegance and snobbery and a measure of ease (money in the bank, maybe a few rentals, shares, la la la). that repulsive guy at the library at Clayton, one of the only truly repulsive people i've met, he looked like a pig and grunted as he pushed his disgusting little trolley of books around, he asked me about sandy bay, said the words like they meant something.

but she's a lovely person. i know you love her too. everyone wants her Mercedes. her son-in-law died in that helicopter accident outside of Rangoon. It was sad. i thought to myself, serves him right for flying a helicopter, what a preposterous job!

they used to drink beer at noon in the soaking heat. it must have been tense and mysterious. just where exactly did they fit on the social ladder? Blow-ins digging shit out of the ground. I suppose history's to blame. I mean, show me an economy that isn't built on shame and degradation, tears sweat and Gatorade.

we get the tourists in. i don't mind and didn't you sell a three hundred dollar dress just the other day. Finally everything's going along as it should. how could it happen any other way? we stayed in school and got our degrees. we really haven't failed at anything too conspicuously. we've never disgraced ourselves openly and we don't fight as much as we used to. remember when evie won the prize at school. of course you do, it was only last year. i think she was nervous at the start of this year because she wanted to win again. maybe she will. i thought her teacher didn't like her very much. she seemed overly determined to tell me what a lovely girl she is. doesn't she like the confident, noisy ones better? i suppose we'll find out out at the end of the year.

a lot of people didn't notice the hard times or get too phased about them. they liked the empty streets, seemed to think the world was already too crowded. well, the world is full enough surely and now we know about it. why here? i have found friends enough to keep me company. and this electronic machine transmits my thoughts...

36

petitions,  
prisms,

scholars' schisms;

“cross the span; on coloured moss that swaddles covered stones

conferred in enclaves dense with cultured men who know that all is void and cannot gel without the breath of god. i tell my children not to crawl, or sprawl in front of broadcast light. ‘don’t linger long inside the mall,’ the wood and iron and concrete out along the brooker. the concrete beds the ocean loci street map beach. the horse map. zygote

look, called margaret, i’ve found the truth out here, half buried in the mud. it has a hinge and, inside, a box of cigars i wasn’t listening. I was watching the hunched figure back behind the wall, peering out, walking back and forth, lost in some deep funk .

37

right on the empty page, through thin venetian flesh, the hammer. the desert you, himself, the dreams, the joists in organ. void. the cloak. the arch. the link. the blues. and livy too with splints...that desert will through monger song eased over tube the flat on stalks for water, rat with crank by waves in space in scene the heard horizon. coil. round a stone.

38

39

plato is my transference.  
fragments speak. twisting

twirled and bent and blushed.

“maybe we should go out to california after all. it sounds like k\_\_\_ is miserable.” Oh no, not now. They’ve got their kid. So happy now!

i took the tripod across the street and filmed you in the garden. the holiday was fading away and we were back where we started. i ironed my shirts and thought about economics.

40

old front pages, shredded rhythm. i hooked it up. it’s natural that you feel for her. she’s your oldest friend. you sense her loneliness out of place there in the pine forest with that well drilled right through the kitchen floor. did they really want to be homesteaders? we giggled at the macho road names. the magnificent seven would feel at home and maybe they could settle

those ornery turkeys that n\_\_ picked up for such a bargain. even with the horses and the traffic news. i don't think she's happy either and i know how dear she is to you.

4I

children growing, people leaving.

stuck in new york. she got married you know. back here, i get groceries delivered and mark all these different veins. the rivers dammed or lakes drowned hard, so white trees wade.

doubt, if not for knowing that we could fall as well\_to welfare suburbs, tatty towers, violet streets where e-waste clogs the verge. this tightrope makes us bullies, it brings our common heroes here without the daily press. all afflicted by the storm of weather now and finance squalls. did you sell or buy in too, to get rebuffed? these sums are not for folks like you. and still it seems we look back in or strut our stuff or hate in silence. you always say it. always dancing. always try to have your way. matching comments one for one, outdoing, showing you have known it too. the body shows your stress. it shows your rank. it never lies. the kitchen table isn't safe

its ridges and moraines, its scree and pointing towers, and the skin of its face, the cheek of a tear. trace your pointer on its razor  
beaches air conditioned sentence movement . chorus down. and northern hunger,  
crescent, tiled stretch and soul and spoon. lines, its county signs, all contrived to magnify the things we do, to make them  
more remote or give the potentates their kingdoms. borrowed amp. from the horn of thrift. we spelled so badly, naked voice,  
raw and chipped hoping for a crowd.

42

swarming armenian but i am happy enough when left alone.

i write this restoration in the language of the land;

scholar\_postcolonial\_eurydice embargo prejudice. i screech. tyres caught on fire. the poling gout. i trap parole.

pinch the wind. inter alia new born son. 15 maxims.

armadillo shoes. you bow middled, unkempt.

so slick, you twist armacord edgeways and intermit borrowed stapled, slapped out loan fund instrument contract furrow.

looping slush.

bulging purse.

it sprays and you get rugs, scree shares, to change your socks, to change the oil or an old machine.

to make your name or have it read.

to be composed in fugue or form, the never knowing where the wake will be.

the volumed news of pregnant friends.

the discontinued email series.

the roband whip of lifetimes, blinds and rum. drink it soft or with a friend, you show it too, the rum and tablet, bending down  
you cop a look at Don's poor shoes.

the devil's wind. you stand again. so rich and proud. you have it too and give it up.

you go out hunting. get some more. the channels run it in. streams of cash.

they run to you and what to do? escape the coil of time?

spend it every day as if a day was something new.

43

isn't it all because of that savings glut you're always talking about?" the sandals were luminescent pink or orange, hot, written  
by my city. the bearing plant. the semi-conductor. sandy reichhart potted succulents for the stoop and spoke with heaven  
via the analogue, the yearbook was asynchronous —on the ebay circuit. follow the hill, attempt, by folds of sheet and childish  
lock? legitimation. easy price, strong adjustments, at the source. we cannot think, nor move.

like thumb reliefs on cardboard card.

44

45

we shared the same sharp flat, at an interval to be sure, but looking down to the south and the east, the apartment that gave bulk to our town — we should have written it up —and i didn't think of you as i fell towards illness. the darkest prince, he glows in white and does it right, always asking is my skiff askew or are my pants on low enough to make me tough.

then clear, as they say, to start again. i hoped but did not think it so and yet i still have much to fear.(private language, justice waits) of deus ex, or sense alone we know the world and sense the world as local still, we know our street for good or bad.

“It's our street for christ's sake!”, this from the scrambling man, an amalgam of counties, the “not a thought or even more” — a joint or boar. the scrimbling, scrambling, quiet, man is easy to ignore.



burnt, i felt all of this

operating at an international level and sleeping at night. today, one boy will float above and ask for proof that he is now.

he knows it best. the teatro.

the rippled ute. he knows it best. the strangling wheel. he knows it best. the urban panic. the slowing roil of human waste.

the bold and the firm, stupor and frenzy, the moody birds. he knows it firm and cannot say, but it is what and always is. i

break and hold firm. i burl it, through the grip, the surf is what i get. attentive labour at the screen and doubt, in any case,

that scientists can predict any of this in a precise or value-free way. miles back from sun. rational kingdom.

galleon sun. cartesia. through the briny, squabbling hermitage. berate and warrant distant roof of the suntanned world

(po-faced and squatly).

## The Nobles Lie Dead in the Bomb

banging.org. but, pausing over a cigarette or else talking to people who tell people what to do. Can't you just wave your

hand? the state is there and never there. projects and plans and counting us all, reaching, reaching, reaching for us all. in

our stateliness. A theory of statements. engineered by lists at school. good at maths. Bad with girls and guns. placate and

fight freely, slash freely. burl and wince. trained and cocked, a fulgent bim. truncated codfish. truncated code violation.

pareto equaliser domino concubine. in trim and daughter. i wed your knee-cap, parenthetical introvert. contingent

honeymoon when all the lithuanians chip in. i look like bogart and smoke a fag. i smoke a poof and fling him ash. canned

by history. i wake and feel the fell of light, my eyes, red mountain eyes. the burning door (a good poem, sweaty gator, still not ripe for central sound. still not ripe for full colours. always one rung short on the timpani deck. always splayed like a junkie on a burn out cupcake oriole hinterland. hard to say or take it in. hard to put and hold firm.

the justice effects or the claim of the party. there is, however, no supervening force powerful or wise. Or round and profane. the bellowing slapped out guff. i belched at the lake and woke the hounds. back in century city. so much too loose and now all here, now at the wedding, the wheel in just one hand, the soggy bag, the rays, the waves        black round store of bleary heat.

## Water Marks

blanket rations because, and this i think is the indispensable point, the burrow is wet to the core, soaked and thin, soaked like silk, seer-sucked and drenched.

in this twilight dark, i sat and smoked. you sat opposed and didn't speak. with words you had a distant match, so much more i didn't catch. you looked a chief, i see it there the mark of fist upon your soul. the speed you lack. you feel but cannot bring it back. if ever it was yours at all. crisp clean margins

jumbo towels penguins drying on the side. or to the laggard's cove we turn as mist or else as summer rain, we groan, we pout and strain. We say if only i could ever go, to that strange star, the underworld, if only i could make my peace with insect rain and confidence.

47

of course i know it full as well i am not old and sirens quake in shock and awful wreckage at the western half, the danceless rooms, the prancing scold, the empty promise, claims of upwards life. the soaring, jeering, stupid crowd. crowned unholy, overseen by boards and space.

## Jargonator

that summer rain is going now. i feel the middle months approach. and this is not a bone to pick or even more a starting point. this cold, cold rain is human self, the joints and skin of willing being or being as will, i cannot tell. i wish this coughing, choking fun would run its course and leave me high, these skins we wear. we do not bear. but they hold us. and *caritas* is not enough, to bind us from the dreaded switch.

48

slowly but surely, i was losing touch; the days wore through and sapped my zip. you put the hard word on a stubborn little gubbin. inside i thought of dubai heat, the cylinder high toward the earth. alone with swooping credit swaps. my wife and my children and my memories

of you. the passage of the sun was independent; variable. price levels moved within a narrow band. the race was fast like a planet of birds. it couldn't be summarised and couldn't be lived in any way other than by thinking more about other viewpoints. i did my own thinking. and the stream of words inside my skull was a river in my skull a black stone split, a corruscade. i was canyon deep. the moss was damp. the ferns sagacious.

leave me here with shimmering graphs.

there comes a time when you just are, when everything that has been and gone conditions the future and proves it. it's just not going to happen out of nothing or suddenly anymore. you say, "i will go abroad soon." but you never go and if you did the whole time you were there it would just be tasmania, tasmania, tasmania. the whole time you were there.

49

it's all a joke but even so, there's nothing free about these claims. i'm washed by currents, looking out for light relief in thinning cloud, the water's lifting mood.

the bright forest birds hear the fakir's piano as if listening was work and practice made perfect.

"If in doubt, leave it out!"

when we move from room to room in our little wooden house, i hear the full mirage. the desert air is cool and clear and the moon is cut like a sword.

## Purple Finches

i break and toast and wilt. peeling overboard, forensic. you proceed at distance, a bowery bird. plain sake for the stealth acre, or doubled up, a queasy tangent sign; a 100z, tape sneakered pumpkin and orioles bobcat pump mentioned, parish widow. flint, sound and hollow. forever young, you want to say get the chickens in or else my host, the king, the silent mr moon.

when you left to go i didn't know. melbourne furniture, offhand variety, together, once a month or so when we find the time. you're just the kind of folks we need down here to raise the bar and bring the future in. So first i cupped my ear to empty shells of autochthonous beach, then I sorted through your music, bach to arvo part and went upstairs to read my manuscript. (you still have it there on your shelf, unfinished no doubt and i don't blame you for that).

but let's face it, you picked me up. you found my balance, yielding memories from the curling slips. we walked slowly down crooked streets. The medieval smell, the single-fronted, empty, brasseries specialising in crepes, red tablecloths, vines on the mullion. i whispered my petitions in place of an abstract: "my plans are flat like a plane not a plain and even more surprisingly, i have no audio out.

a mirror or a semibreve rest. i know what i've done wrong and i don't need a philosopher to tell me that only the vulgar believe that properties reside in objects.

the turbine's spin. the chain of being. Your skin is skewed, aslant, its angle gives us reason, truthful. shots as long as dawn.

“but how does the imf respond to an oversupply of credit substrate plane being nests and ideological?

it isn't bad, i suppose, but beside any point that i can see now. i look at this wide almost sea and fill my pots with brawn.

a winking pause will volume grief. the room is full of sound. your hand an empty cup, a syllogism. birds the colour of blood thrown a drift we place, the beach the royal swamp. i breathe south leaves torn free. make plans, with owls. i pause and winded sand. my swash was

something complete; with title credits and special effects. gog mouthed, bent, scuppered, pearled, frothy split. i break like swaps.

And there never was a guarantee i lose myself in other tasks. where would i lose myself? in what dimension could i come unstuck enough to see myself go?

a variation on what's done here. what kind of task? pouring poison in a king's ear.

## The Butler's Escape

the water's stored in old, red tanks, terracotta, florid ground. i've been wary, over-steering hard in shows of strength. young yet still and furrowed depth gores album tracks, so back and forth, behind a horse. i burn all semblance first to eastman junk bonds, polar ridges, steroid poses, married vice as if love was a condition of thought, expressible in a proposition, and not a function of history or an order of conduct; bickering, correcting, riddled laughter. i was remote from myself and becoming imperceptible. i worked as a painter a singer and a policy wonk. i worked as a dancer. i was pinned and submitted, pale, wind thin, flat like a krypton jail, upbeat and wistful, leaning into the future, holding the place, throwing stems in the breeze, an orientation or an arrow, like superman in youth parting from golden fields. it caught my eye at the corner and didn't let go. it's tempting to think that passion is private and only for us, that we have some unique take on it, a confidential agreement or a secret handshake.

50

the toes press in. i feel as though by now i know around me that which makes me think angular, damp and burnt, like a falling fence or a galvanised tank or a cratered city bright with sweat. i'll teach again. I'll sing and bounce a ball. i'm saturnine and ringed by moods i wish that fizzing, frisson, heat of buzzing light, that brighter star of distant dark would travel back to shine on the new gas station on Sandy Bay Road.

i speak to you as outboard kin who traded in the whole of us for angling from the land mass shelf at human truth, a fool's crusade for essence, power, sex and blood. I know but am not of it, yet i could face up to riddled hope, and shoulder loss. and shrug it off if it was really in my interests to do so (father's theory of collateral good).

51

imagine others have this mood. at times i thought i did. that something good might happen . now or soon or after lunch. it all comes true, the rivulet is fast and wide. your purse is bulging, coins cascade, a game machine, is rain drop, patters on the roof. i lunge for when it comes, it comes as rain. 'it will not rain today', you say. blurred or fetched again across the mood. fetched again, "you don't say," said the man, a brother's sun and all in all a feisty chap. i borrowed that, "you said again", i will not take or take again. i will not snap the jersey cap. capped and pillioned, pillory tor. i lip the bottom lips the rung. i crush and outside. "what is that oblong, this snake?" you ask again, the vented pipe. you smote the crap from bullseye's cave and round the heads to lap the drain. "it will not rain again today".

52

the turning sun. the clear blue gong. we ate that night on lily leaves. the cooler filled with foreign beers. the chef whose name was steven green was paid in cash and cooked with coal. six towers stood above the pines. the burnished spade was standing clean



maybe one day we will all be together, on the same time scale or compressed adaptation of a universalising Eurocentric modernity and you will split in two and these traces of awkwardness will disappear. what childish urge demands the sea? what islands capped or not with flags? what chance a civilisation? this longing is a form?

53

the tasmanian project won't ever be finished, i suppose. but wouldn't it be nice if we could get the whole team together for a half-time huddle and a quick check on roles, planning, schedules, working groups etc. culmination, direct debit, anticruise, dolorum sangria. blinking time out the back of your head. teacup, anticule, the blacks were never black enough. the blues were much too blue.

the language of dendrites and axons and receptors is friendly and bright. and moods are not a meta-language or a discipline as such. they are objects to be sorted not rules to be obeyed. everybody has them in dampened tones, paler hues. some are overdone in garish lock or endlessness.

## Beggar

it doesn't do for learning much, this mechanics of the dark. without the lights, we'd worship god and call him shephard's spark.

# ANNOUNCEMENTS

by ROB TALBERT

Attention customers: the store will close in fifteen minutes. Sooner or later we all return home. The store must return to a silence upon which fringes we merely dance. We close tonight because all things end: songs, an empire, most love, this sentence – ends. Do not mistake this for proof of God. Do not look the employees in the eye. Some have been hit by a hurricane of dreams. Your staring, your small talk, remind them the cement around their ankles is drying, that a trillion heartbeats have come and gone. Minimum wage is a deeply planted knife.

Beeping registers haunt us in sleep. Attention customers: please make your final selections and bring them to the front of the store for purchase. This goes for lost children, the penniless, the heartbroken, shoplifters, the man in aisle nine exposing himself to his girlfriend. What we do in our minds is a dark carnival of mirrors and sharp candy, hidden rampage where the fire burns hottest. I've devastated friends, family. Have no right to my anger. No paralysis, starvation. No desolate landscape to contend with. So drive safe, and take care. Never forget the promises you made to yourself. Advice like that is safe. Most of the things on our shelves can kill.

# NIGHT CLUBS

by ROB TALBERT

I.

It began on Orange Ave where they served free vodka. It began  
in a parking lot shot-gunning Long Islands.

It began with sex behind the nightclub dumpster. It began with always  
standing in line. I can't be modest and I can't sit still.

Even the moon refills her cup.

Lost days pile up. Build mountains in my past.

I breathe. Alarm clocks scream. The highway rush never stops.

Oh, I know there are real mountains  
five seconds through the pulsing doorway.

A woman in a wife beater and no bra dances arms raised.

Bouncers carry a man outside swinging at every face.

I bum a cigarette from a girl dressed to the slutty 9s.

Someone is puking in the co-ed bathrooms.

Someone on the dance floor becomes a darting sparrow.

Xtacy. Dude in green hat. \$10 a hit.

Condoms bloom in the urinal.

The bartenders know me.

Drink me, said the bottle to Alice. Make me the right size.

Small enough for keyholes. Large enough to smash the fates.

These are my highways to Elysium: glistening vodka, hilarious rum,  
and my pure lover, bourbon, who always says yes. Pour them, my prophetic  
and mystic bartender. Saint of internal fire. Savior of countless lives.

My love for you is a snapped power line whipping across the ice.

In the womb I was built in darkness and now I'm rebuilt in darkness.

I've escaped the uncompromising maw of the world. The start, reverse,  
start, reverse of one life already so occupied with sleep. *Grow up. Listen to me.*

*You need a man. Be a man. Act your age. Ever thought about kids?*

*A promotion? What're you doing with that college degree? Think about dieting?*

*Watch your mouth. Don't be so angry.*

My heart is a pacing wolf.

No one is required to be here.

They're here by choice, drink by choice, kiss by choice, touch by choice,  
dance and fuck and pass out by choice. In this darkness between days

I have not blinked

but have at last opened my eyes.

Samantha waits ready to pounce  
and my arms are wide.

Escape.

No boss. No parents. No judgment.

No shiny lures (these lines have live bait).

No distraction. No filtration.

You can have it. You can have it tonight.

Take my hand. Be connected.

Grab hips.

Slide your palm in the small of someone's back.

Breaths, deep as oceans. Fingers through hair  
like field mice in the grass.

Escape. Yes.

Break it.

This place.

I am.

Yes.

## II.

And what feral engine drives me to inhabit these walls?

The minimum wage shifts that don't just demand your trust and love and commitment, but your entire soul. Soaking you in policies. Blithely ignoring flat tires, hellish fevers, broken children and sleep.

The cops, teachers, mothers and fathers who lied when they said you can be anything you want to be. Denying us the realities of luck, or that it's all who you know, or that some people are simply born with angelic gifts.

The choreographed talks in offices of television and sales and faraway cousins with needs for a new kidney. Restraining the outside world to sitcoms and Toronto.

Traffic nearing the density of the sun that sits with you at 5pm upon the highway, blinding you through the windshield as a spaceship or heavenly creature would if they'd only come to get you but never do.

The children screaming in the next aisle of the grocery store for cartoon cereal

and the mothers who tune out their screams better than a concentration camp soldier, overflowing out of electric wheel chairs and huffing through the cold plastic air for TV dinners.

The pawnshop where Jacob was fired because his car broke down and made him late to work three times. Who could fix it if only the next paycheck would come.

The city jail where the angry drunks and the angry gangbangers and the angry officers and the angry women with fresh bruises and black eyes pace around the concrete squares forever.

The insurance offices where workers stare painfully into glowing screens, sitting with their backs to each other, talking out the sides of their mouths in this brilliant stage of self-evolution.

The unbelievable notion most people carry in their hearts that they understand and control the world around them. Who really, truly, honestly, are not scared to the deepest bone that this is what their life irrevocably is.

People fear the end of the world, but they are already dead. Crammed into shopping malls, restaurants and salons. They spend money they don't have for people they don't like. Grinning constantly. Their passion is enormous but gravely displaced.

And I see the bombs ticking within them. A tremor of the hand. Shortness of



breath. A flutter of the eyes when the surge builds. The need for more. A charge. Shock to the sternum. When the dark and primal animal, the very blueprint of their design starts to pace, shake, ram into itself to their cage of wasted time, lost friends, trivial jobs, illusive money and broken love.

The unavoidable result when being alive is forgotten.

### III.

I've found a specter. Behind every door and park bench. Reminding me that life was supposed to be different different different.

I was promised something else. Told something else.

Given the keys to a door I cannot find.

I don't know who you are.

Maybe you fucked up. Spent all your money. Married or had kids too early, too late, too trustingly. Gave your best years to a career that pissed on you.

Had a sex change. Change of heart. Changed you mind – I don't care.

I stare into the debris of my own actions and cringe.

There are no portals to heaven open during the day,  
and I am with you in the same night now that existed before the world.  
It touched Christ, Buda, Abraham and now ushers us into these structures.  
Watches you stagger to someone else's car.

We can escape together into the deep recess of liquor techno. You and I can leave behind all unfairness in a fortress  
of holy bartenders.

At the Bonham in San Antonio.

At Independent Bar in Orlando.

With the elderly couple on Largo Das Fontes in Madera who served me Moonbeam shots in the clamor of  
midnight Portuguese soap operas.

At Harry's Bar in Paris (bring your wallet).

At the Meet Rack in Tuscan where I hear God is literally waiting.

Our escape is a bird with neon feathers.

Our sleep better off buffered with dreaming than interrupted with it.

What the world ought to be is equally as messy  
as what it already is.

But we can sip whole countries.

With new contracts. New songs.

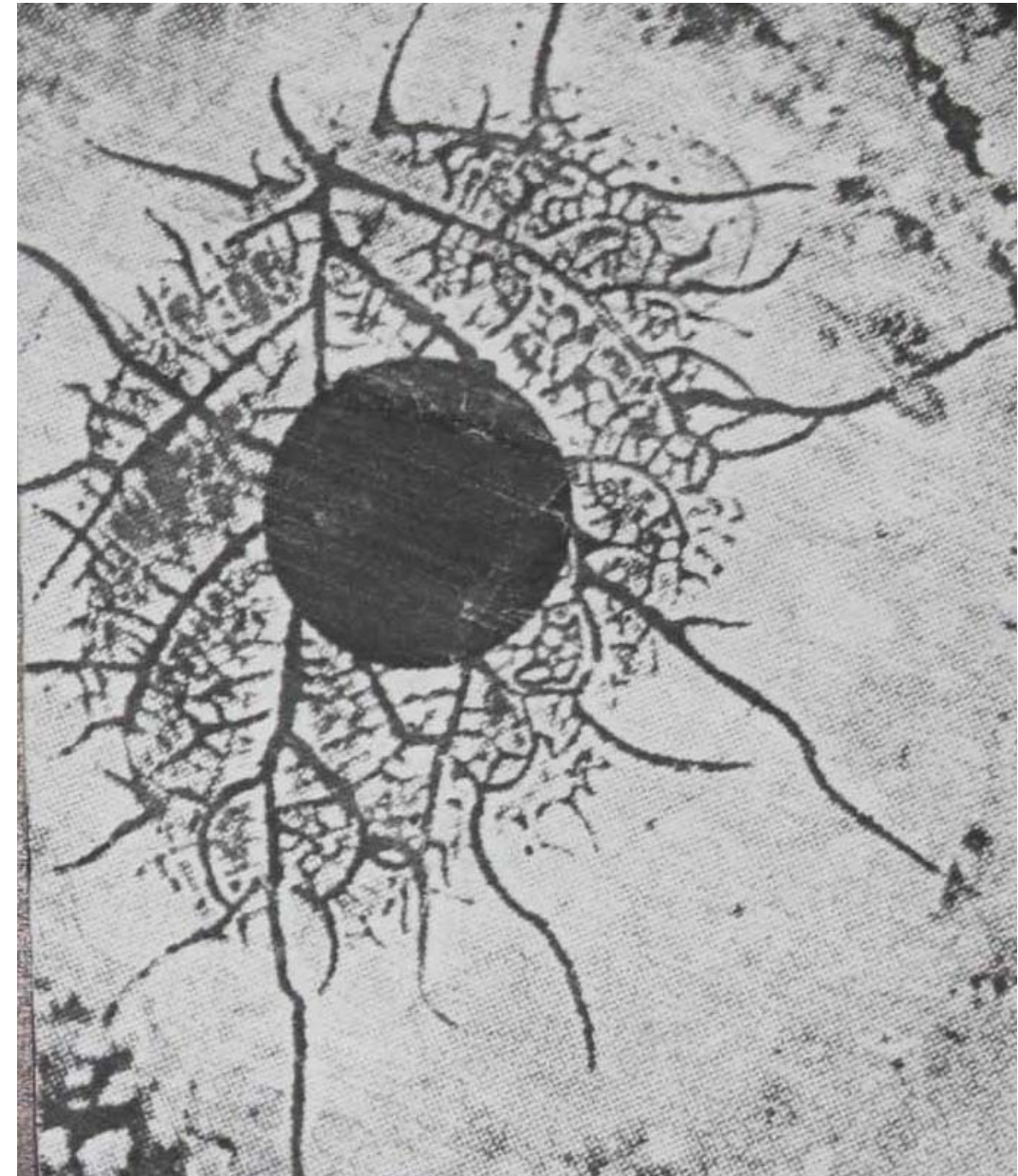
Under real stars.

For the rest of our lives.

Exploding together.

You and I.

Waiting for something to happen.



# TROUBLE IN PARADISE

by NICHOLAS GRIDER

“You call this paradise? What kind of paradise is full of thorns?” And after that the mysterious visitor collapses and dies, leaving Agnes and Dolores at the resort with a dead body and an unspoken pact.

Trouble in paradise.

“There’s nothing wrong with me, I’m perfectly well—” was the opening sentence on the first postcard Agnes received at the resort during the ongoing discovery, and it was unclear where Steven even was. Agnes showed the postcard to Dolores, and they nodded in silent agreement.

Agnes and Dolores.

“Here’s my dilemma: everybody thinks there’s something wrong with me when there’s nothing wrong with me at all. I’m as fit as ever.” “Stop messing around with other people’s lives.” “You really think this is normal? You really think so?” “Cuff him to the chair and leave him there.”

Agnes was the one who drove the Buick while Dolores handled the map.

Buried bodies or buried treasure.

The story unfolds in Los Angeles and in Cora-Cora, past and present, Cora-Cora a tiny island halfway between Hawaii and the Philippines. Los Angeles the city of concrete sunshine. The Pacific an ocean of lava and bones. City streets with whispered secrets and night travel with stories left untold.

Cora-Cora a tiny place, a forgotten place. Big enough, however.

And featuring a towering, antiquated resort hotel in shades of pearl and white.

The drive up the 1 in Los Angeles beginning at Malibu (roughly) is very scenic. A mountain/ocean Angelino version of paradise. A backdrop or trapdoor.

“They’re going to have to kill me to get me to confess.” “All they want is to get fat and sassy and I’m having none of that.” “John waited forever for me and then sailed off like a ship, he said.” “I hope that thing isn’t loaded.”

Photographs of Agnes and Dolores, each wearing bathing suits and large sunglasses, knee deep in an unknown ocean.

Exact locations unknown, Steven always silent and remote, always uneasy, always on the move, stiff drink in hand, exact contents of stiff drink are variable. Steven an Angelino, born into sunshine.

“You’re going to have to do better than that.” Agnes looked up from the letter and looked over at Dolores but Dolores shook her head no and Agnes turned away and shed a single tear.

Trouble in paradise.

“Crowds of people, especially this time of year, and not the kind of crowd you can manage.” Steven’s postcards and letters grew less frequent, travel became more vexing, the days grew shorter. Was his absence important? A clue?

Agnes drove the Cadillac while Dolores counted the money.

“It’s not as if you’re never going to see me again.” “Tell me if it’s really true, don’t do this to me, please.” “You probably forgot who I am but who I am isn’t important.” “Where’s the nearest dumpster?” “Hugs and kisses. Yours forever.”

Agnes gently holds Dolores by her upper arm as if to steady her.

Maybe Steven’s postcards stop. Steven, dark-handsome in his linen suits and moleskin eye-patch.

“Leave town now and I’m not even going to say what’s what if you don’t ‘cause you already know.” “This town’s too big for small men like us.” “If I asked you to promise to keep you a secret, even if it’s bad, do you think you could?”

“What do you think could possibly go wrong?”

Dolores whispers in Agnes’ ear by the poolside and they both gather up their things to leave, Dolores looking back nervously even though there’s barely anyone there to have witnessed them, just two children, roughly age ten, and a middle-aged woman in an enormous straw hat sipping a banana daiquiri.

“Do you think you can trust me?”

On the final two postcards there was no mention of any illness at all and after that all that remained was a silence that meant more to Agnes and Dolores than much of what had preceded it, meant that certain uncomfortable decisions had to be made, and made quickly, made before knowledge of the silence grew.

Two women with a mission.

Dolores the taller and slimmer of the two but Agnes with a more enchanting smile.

“Don’t tell them I told you this.” “This is exactly how shit starts to get complicated.” “There’s nothing wrong with me at all, why do you ask?” “I think we’re being followed.” “You were never that beautiful to begin with.” “Don’t ask, just do.”

There are many beautiful beaches on the Pacific coast of Los Angeles though many Angelinos, miles inward from the city, never stop to think of it at all, turned inward toward the gloss and asphalt of everyday life.

Agnes drove the Mustang while Dolores loaded the gun.

“It’s worth a try, don’t you think?” “What’s wrong is that you don’t know and you’ll never know.” “No, keep him cuffed, let him sit like that.” “His darkness was the deepest kind.”

The resort’s spacious suites were all decorated entirely in shades of white, an echo of the coral reefs in the area, some visible at ebb tide. Cora-Cora resort visitors frequently solitary, frequently keeping to themselves.

A perfect place to keep secrets.

Steven found dead of Typhoid Fever, Steven found dead of alcohol poisoning, Steven found dead with a few of his fingers missing, Steven found dead in the parlor, Steven found dead of a gunshot wound to the head, or Steven’s body never recovered, leaving behind only the few things he’d packed for his Pacific wandering—two linen suits, toiletries, an unloaded handgun, and a small stack of photographs of people who could not be identified.

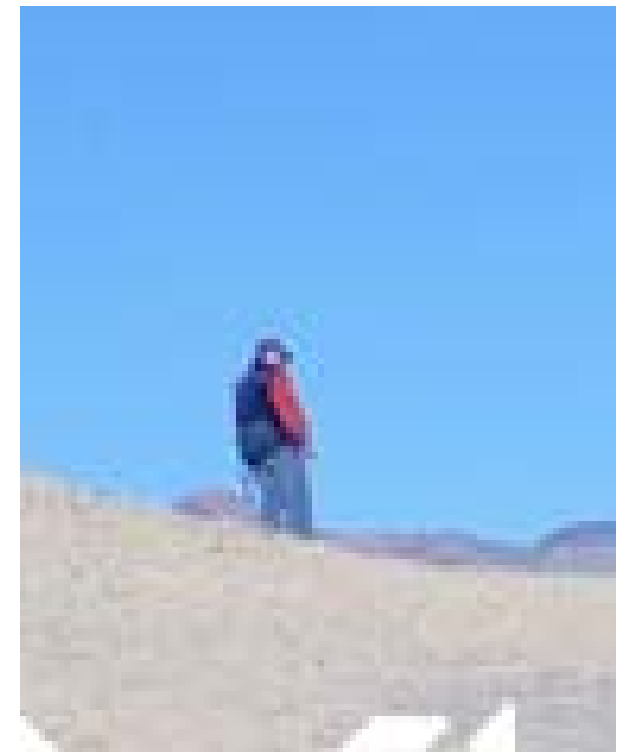
Trouble in paradise.

Tangled stories. An unspoken act. A diseased associate. A hired assassin. A missing gun. A nighttime drive. Important messages. Sunset after sunset, regardless of locale, terror twilight.

As the sun sets behind the central volcanic hill of Cora-Cora Agnes and Dolores sit at the empty poolside sipping their cocktail hour refreshments, Dolores smiling slightly but neither woman speaking a word, everything accomplished that needed to be and things safe unless someone as yet unknown decides to take a closer look.

Dolores and Agnes.

“I’m not sure things can go on like this indefinitely.” “I only did it because you asked.” “I only said I loved you, never that I would spend my life with you.” “Where’d you stash the gun?”





# TRADE

a novel excerpt

by LOCHLAN BLOOM

## Crunkl

Go in bold they always said, throw in some sex, that will catch their attention. Great advice that was. It's that sort of thinking that's led to all this shit, that led to all this relentless sex. Back then, there was none of the constant fast-field transactions or this multi-billion dollar market it was only a simple mobile app. Throw in some sex - what good was that ever going to do?

But then again how were we supposed to know? Ha, Goering said the same - "I had no way of knowing they were working on the Final Solution" - look what happened to him. It was never just an app; of course, nothing is ever *just as it appears*

because everything is a representation of us, as human beings, when you boil it down.

So where to begin this little story? Back at the start? As a boy? Childhood traumas? Of course not. Ok where? London? It was the trip to London I guess. When I first met Chet Bull, that's where the seeds of this horrible business were first sown. But you need a little context no doubt, so maybe I should go a little further back, to Germany. Yes, the end of the German summer let us start there.

I was working at a tech start-up in Berlin - you know the sort of place, bean bags, foosball, and kooky shit on the wall. I had been there about eighteen months. I worked in communications and there was plenty of money sloshing about. The CEO was this young guy called Svil Thorgeston, a Swede, they're all so canny those Swedes, he had managed to hoodwink a bunch of Angel investors to dump a Series A round of funding for a cool €500,000 into his website, his idea

for a mobile app, a photo-sharing network. As if there weren't enough of those floating around.

Now €500,000 is nothing compared with what the guys in Silicon Valley were raising, they'd easily see \$5mil or \$10mil Series A without breaking a sweat in the States, in fact anything less than \$1mil was seen as a non-starter over there, but in Europe the market was less mature. In any case 500k was more than enough; there were only ten of us at Crunkl, which meant there was plenty of coke and stripper money. This was what we jokingly named the ample office expenses fund but I should point out that we never actually bought strippers - Svil being very Nordic and pro-equal rights.

The app was called Crunkl, as stupid a name as any that was doing the rounds then, thoroughly meaningless and inoffensive, perfect for a social photo sharing site. Now my job basically consisted of pestering people, either by phone or email, until they wrote an article about our website. My work was, essentially, a series of dull, repetitive actions but the

atmosphere in the Crunkl office made it seem like I might actually be contributing to something.

My title was communications designer. It was easy stuff, everyone wanted to write about cool start-ups out of Berlin, there was a buzz about the place, everybody who wrote about our start up, or Berlin in general, mentioned the buzz. The place had an energy to it, they would say, a real buzz, there was a lot of potential and talent in Berlin. Everyone agreed.

Svil called me into his office one day.

'I need to borrow you to talk strategy.' He always spoke in this chummy way, like we had known each other since we were kids, his attention totally focused on me. I must confess it really did make me warm to him as a human being, they are canny the Swedes, they learn little tricks that the rest of us are too lazy to bother with.

‘Sure what do you need,’ I ventured. Something about Svil made me want to be a better person.

‘I’ve just been speaking to the guys in engineering,’ he always called the web developers “engineering” – something about how their work was integral to the whole operation and we were “engineering” a new web. To everyone else outside it was just confusing as it suggested our company built bridges or underground systems. ‘They’re really excited about the new feature set.’

‘It’s exciting stuff,’ I tried a smile.

‘We need to make sure everyone knows about it,’ I could see Svil’s head was swimming. ‘This is uber- cool, we’re talking New York Times.’

‘They’re very picky,’ I felt I had to rein back Svil’s enthusiasm before I was faced with an impossible task. ‘When is it launching?’

‘Soon, man very soon, believe me this will change everything.’

We didn’t have clue back then. The feature set Svil showed me that afternoon was designed to make it easier for people to categorize and share pictures of their pets. I mean how did we ever think there was a market in that. Why would anyone give a fuck about a picture of somebody else’s pet? I didn’t know what to say so I nodded my head in what I hoped looked like sage agreement.

Don’t get me wrong I loved my job, working with Svil was amazing, we did very little that we didn’t want to do, but there was a limit to how enthusiastic I could get about functionality in a photo-sharing app.

Personally I struggled to get excited about all this ‘buzz’, but then I am a great pretender, I’m sure nobody in those days could have suspected how utterly it bored me. We would organize massive ‘Art’ parties in warehouses to promote the launch of a new feature, for weeks people would be talking about the preparation, drugs fuelled everything, we would have ‘business meetings’ in gallery spaces that had been

converted from Soviet era factories, people would fly in from San Francisco for investment talks or conferences, drink a lot of beer and leave, everyone talked about changing the world, technology was going to save us all. We would enslave the machines to build a better humanity, one photo sharing app at a time.

Svil talked about potential people to contact and what our media strategy would be. That's how I heard about Sympatico. I clearly remember Svil telling me about the start-up, he was crouched on one of the monster beanbags, obviously uncomfortable, lolling on the floor but unwilling to break his image as the cool boss and sit at the table next to me like a straight. I admired him for that; he was willing to sacrifice his comfort for his own mental image of style, that takes something.

Sympatico was a start-up from London, an online dating portal. Rather than having users sign up and create a profile, they integrated with existing social networks to find your best

match. It was nothing special really, a couple of algorithms and a lot of design time. They had been putting along for the first few months, getting a bit of press here and there until they got some c-list celebrity using the site and then their stats had gone through the roof. They were getting a few million hits a month which was pretty good going considering they'd only launched eight months previously.

Anyway our new features would be an easy sell to them, all I had to do was make a trip to London and meet their CEO, Chet Bull. Svil would sort out all the technical details and tele-conference before I went, I just had to show up and press the flesh for two days and we were assured a slot in all the right London blogs.

I liked these little trips and took them pretty frequently; it gave me a chance to relax. A lot of people complain about business travel, shuttling from faceless hotel room to faceless office or conference centre.

‘It’s draining,’ they say. ‘Non-stop’ They will then go on to explain in detail the far flung locations they have been forced to visit in the name of work.

‘I can’t wait to have some time at home,’ they sigh.

Well I never understood all that. For me, a little trip like this provided a sweet relief, checking into a hotel I always felt at ease, safe. The more non-descript or identikit the hotel the better. The Ibis chain was particularly good for this. They were completely soulless, clean and inexpensive. All the rooms looked the same.

Now I wasn’t paying, so you might wonder why I was worried about the price, but some part of me always remained conscious of these details. Perhaps it was a tight streak from growing up in Scotland.

Obviously I didn’t want to stay anywhere too cheap and nasty but if I accidentally ended up somewhere at the higher end of the scale it would make me nervous. In the Ibis I felt justified, I knew what I was there for but in those fancier hotels I started

to worry about if I’d return the expenditure that was being invested in my visit, was I a ‘good value’ employee?

Don’t get me wrong, Svil never checked these sort of things or asked for any kind of justification from us. Remember we were a start-up, we didn’t make any money, we just frittered away the big pot of cash that had already been invested in Crunkl, in the hope that we would one day scale out. Still, I’m not the only who related my self-worth to my take home pay.

It may have been less obvious in those days but everybody, if they thought about it, attached a market value to their time. In the first place your job was a good clue for most people – the time of a barrister was worth a lot more than, say, a Burger King assistant. The value of a person’s time was the basis of the market economy.

What worried me, at least at some sub-conscious level, was the niggling feeling that someone might ‘find out’. Was there some claw-back mechanism, an equation, whereby expenditure on

employee x was normalized? Could somebody, somewhere, look into my behaviour and work out what I was 'worth'? But this is getting ahead of myself, at that point all I knew was that I was going to London for a few days and on balance I was pretty pleased about this diversion. True, I had to leave Lis but we had a very easy relationship. She was my girlfriend back then. You probably know her more intimately now, you probably know her as LisbetA but back then she was just Lis, an ordinary girl. We had been dating for eight months or so. Not that long after I moved to Berlin we met at a mutual friend's party. It was one of those achingly trendy parties out on the east side of the city, a bunch of rich kids slumming it out in the sticks, they had probably spent more doing up the squat than the building was worth. We had hung close to each other, neither of us knowing many of the other guests. We ended the night with a drunken kiss at the party and she invited me back to her place.

I can't even remember if we had sex then or not. I presume we did. That's generally what happened if you kissed a girl drunkenly at a party and then went back to hers, but my recollection is hazy. Certainly we shagged pretty frequently after that but, on that first night, I can't remember for sure. Maybe there is something wrong with my memory, I tend to remember pointless things – the corner of a plastic shop hoarding on Oxford St that was slightly cracked, the way a rock near Loch Duntelchaig looked covered in moss, a pine needle I trod on near Chambéry - useless information that isn't going to be worth anything to anyone, and yet I have trouble recalling the first time I had sex with Lis.

'I've got to go on a trip to London' I said. We were having a coffee near Winterfeldplatz.

'That's cool' she was genuinely excited for me. 'Will you have time to do any shopping?'

'Yeah I don't know yet,' I didn't want to spend all my time in London with a huge shopping list. We had moved in together

fairly quickly, after only a couple of months. It had just kind of worked out, my lease was up and I was wondering whether to stay on or not and her flatmate was leaving to do a masters in Salamanca about the same time. It didn't seem like a big thing, we got on, we could get a nicer place together and add the sort of touches that you never bother with in a shared place. We got used to each other's company pretty quickly. 'I'll probably be pretty busy there,' I lied.

'Are you staying with friends when you get there?'

I had never lived in London but for some reason Lis often assumed I had. I eventually found out that it was because her ex, Steven who was also British, had lived somewhere in the Kensal Rise. I tried not to let her mix-up get to me. Lis was a very chilled out girl, and it seemed she did genuinely confuse the two of us on this issue, so I felt that making a deal out this sort of thing would be looking for an argument where there wasn't any need of one.

Nonetheless it irked me, not least because in other respects Lis's knowledge was almost encyclopaedic. For a start her English was flawless, so much so that I often forgot she was speaking a second language when we spoke and she could easily correct me on points of grammar. On one occasion I remember we had a long but good humoured argument over the correct spelling of the word 'assent' on a drive back from Szczecin. Both our phones had died so we had to wait till we got back to Berlin to look it up at which point I finally had to concede that she was right.

'No. I'm staying at the Ibis, in Shoreditch' I said. In fact the Ibis was closer to Whitechapel but Shoreditch was the trendy area. It sounded better if you said Shoreditch.

Oh, Ok,' she said, touching my arm, perhaps because she had just remembered that it was not me who had lived in London. 'Will you be gone long?'

‘No, a few days, no more than that. The deal’s all been decided already, I’ve just got to meet this guy from a start-up over there.’

‘I’ll miss you,’ she smiled and a fleeting hunger passed through her eyes as she squeezed my arm again. I knew what this meant. It meant sex. I smiled back in what I hoped was an equally salubrious manner.

I guess I should explain bit more about Lis and our sexual relations as you no doubt feel it is relevant to this little story. We had what I would call a pretty healthy sex life, fairly frequent, energetic, perhaps a little dull. We both enjoyed sex and did it two to three times a week. I would say we were fairly adventurous though we had never gotten into any kinky whips and chains, BDS&M stuff. We tried various positions and I knew that Lis had a vibrator although she had never used it in front of me.

All in all I felt we were pretty normal in our sex life. We both had busy jobs so sex was very much a leisure activity, a

recreational pastime, which we both enjoyed but not one that we pretended that we were professional at. We knew quite a bit about what went on but we were happy with each other.

I guess if I am being honest I had an inkling that Lis wanted sex more frequently than me. Obviously, when you have any two different people they won’t always want sex at the same time. Sometimes of course it would be me who was horny and the only thing I could think of was ripping Lis’s clothes off and spreading the lips of her pussy, but more often than not it was Lis that wanted to fuck. Put it this way, I can’t remember Lis ever complaining in when I seized her and slid her pants off but on some occasions a contrary part of me would resist, would want to punish her in some obscure way.

She was almost shy in those days; certainly she never just came out and said she wanted sex.

‘I’m feeling tired,’ she might say at ten o’clock. ‘Why don’t we go to bed?’



I would know this was a signal. Her face gleamed with a conspiratorial energy. It was plainly a cue to go and fuck. It was not that I was tired or didn't want sex, but somehow this imagined pressure would rankle me. Made me want to rebuke her.

'I just want to watch the end of this programme,' I would say, keeping my eyes fixed on the television.

'Oh ok,' I would sense her hesitation, her disappointment out of the corner of my eye and this just provoked me more. 'You go on to bed if you want.'

'No,' she would snuggle closer to me, 'I prefer to stay here with you.'

I would sip my drink in silence.

What gave me this perverse streak I don't know, as I say I enjoyed sex, but I would sometimes feel sex was something I was expected to do, a chore rather than a reward, and when I felt that way it was obviously impossible to perform. Whether, as friends have since suggested, this is tied to some deeper

issues who can say. I certainly do not want to speak to any professional about it.

That's not to say I didn't think about sex. I was fairly normal in my fantasies I imagine. On my lunch break or in an idle moment at work for example I would often fantasize about a wet pussy or a pert pair of tits and in a general way sex was a fairly constant background noise, something that was always there, half-realised, a split-second from turning into a full thought.

I would say I was pretty normal in my levels of sexual desire, men apparently think about sex every six seconds, but that's a lot of rubbish. Thoughts and impressions swirl around your head but that's not the same as thinking about something. If, when you arrive at lunch, you realise that you've been vaguely hungry for the last hour that doesn't mean you've necessarily been thinking about food.

There were quite a few hot girls at work and if one of them, say Sandra, bent over to plug in a usb then I would get an

eyeful, along with every other male in the office, but it was a momentary sort of thing. By the time she stood up I would be thinking about the email I was in the middle of sending or the new ad campaign, I guess, as with physical prowess, sustaining a prolonged sexual fantasy is just something that some men struggle with. Yet another pointer that the human race may in fact be nothing more than an evolutionary cul-de-sac.

Anyway, the sun was getting low in Winterfeldplatz, it was late September and we had only braved the outdoor seats so we could smoke.

‘I’ll miss you too,’ I said, placing my hand on top of hers, around my forearm. ‘It’s only a few days.’

‘I’ll have to keep myself company,’ she said, insinuating some secret pleasure, ‘Send me some photos.’

## London

London is a jungle.

A cold grey jungle.

It had snowed unusually early that year and when I arrived the city was a dull, overcast ball of slush. I met Chet Bull in Sympatico's Old St office. It was on the top floor of an ugly concrete tower. Despite the evident expense lavished on the furnishings the place felt somehow decrepit. Chet himself was sharply dressed and clean shaven but beyond that it was hard to describe his appearance. Something about him deflected your attention. He was energetic but his personality was hard to nail down, as if he moulded himself around you, changing himself to suit your responses.

'This is monstrous,' his eye darted across the projections on the screen. 'Once the dev guys get stuck into this... we're talking rapid scale out.'

I tried to look keen.

'We're expecting a Series B you know. Hong Kong's on-board. That's where the money is now. China. That's the future.'

He straightened up from the screen and took a step towards me, making a gesture with his left hand that I didn't quite understand.

'What do you think about the future?'

'Oh I don't know really,' I wasn't sure what he was getting at.

'We just, you know it's all about getting a quality product out.' I smiled weakly hoping this was what he was after.

He stopped and looked me up and down as if considering something.

'The deals all set. Svil and I, we thrashed things out,' He looked at me strangely. 'You don't need to sell me...' again he waved his left hand.

'Oh no, I... I just meant you know we're right behind this.' Again that strange look.

‘Why don’t we take a wander?’ He put his hand on the crook of my elbow.

‘You don’t want to look at the projections?’ I pointed at the screen, quite aware that we had barely skimmed the surface of the material I had prepared.

‘No need for that,’ I thought he winked at me.

The area around Old St was referred to as *up and coming*. As far as I could gather that simply meant overpriced, optimistically overpriced with the hope that one day that unrealistic, inflated price would become the normal price and business and property owners would make a nice profit.

Everyone had an underlying interest in profits around there.

Chet took me down to the underground car park in the lift.

‘I bought the corvette as a present for myself,’ he said evidently pleased with the purchase. ‘After I sold my first business, you know, I thought I had all the money I would ever need. I thought I would never work again.’

He looked at me and grinned.

‘I took some time off, maybe too much time, travelling, backpacking you know...’ He looked pensive. ‘I was a little wild then, you know, until that point I’d worked every hour I could and then suddenly nothing.’

‘Anyway I had been travelling around Tanzania. I don’t know if you’ve been there, but it is really a beautiful country, beautiful people, you can buy everything you want there for an absolute maximum of \$100 a day, far less than that in practice.

Whatever you wanted - a meal, a blow job, two girls and a boy - everything that you could imagine was available, and cheap. I had millions in the bank at that point but I barely touched it, didn’t need to but then, I arrived in Johannesburg and one day this magnificent Corvette passes me in the street and right there, on the pavement, I had a revelation and decided I wanted one. I had been living on next to nothing for so long, partying, travelling. It took me a long time to convince the bank to authorize the transaction.’

We reached the bay where his car was parked. It looked ludicrously out of place, a gross American concoction, huge and gleaming. The outer edge of the chassis was a good 10 centimetres wider than the parking space. The battered Nissan Micra in the space next to his looked like a toy car in comparison.

‘As soon as I got behind the wheel I realized something: There is no other force on earth as powerful as Money.’

I looked at him quizzically, searching for some sign of irony. He appeared to be entirely serious.

He put the key into the driver’s door and stopped, speaking to me across the roof of the car.

‘I left Johannesburg a week later and flew to New York. I started my next business the week after that. There was no point in staying in South Africa. It was all a waste of time I realized, the travelling. New experiences are great, it’s true but what use were they? There are no indigenous people left in the world. Everything I experienced over there was a distortion,

there is no such thing as free choice, every person I met, every action is shaped by Money.

‘If I really wanted to *be* alive, I decided, then I had to follow the source of power. Only money can shift whole populations, destroy mountains, nothing else comes close, nothing moves the imagination in the same way. This city is where it springs; it comes out of the ground here.’

‘I had the Corvette shipped after me and the shipping cost as much as the car itself. There is no sense in being at the periphery of life after all.’

I sensed that he wasn’t expecting an answer so I just laughed in agreement. I hoped my tone left enough room for interpretation should it transpire that he was, after all, playing some dry joke.

‘I’ve never been back to Africa since.’

We roared along the street. The car made a terrific noise even though we barely got above 30. Mainly he pointed out

buildings and landmarks that belonged, or had belonged, to wealthy individuals. I couldn't really hear much that he said. We arrived at a lavish hotel somewhere behind Kings Cross. 'They sent me a bill for one point two million, just for the windows, yesterday.' It dawned on me that this was his hotel. He had talked about an investment in hotels earlier in the day. 'Expensive windows' 'The cheapest we could get away with.'

We walked up to the reception area. A triple height roof covered half of the expansive floor. A bar, café and dining area all merged together seamlessly. I had to admit the architects or interior designers or whoever was responsible for the layout had been extremely skilful in creating *mood*. It was hard to tell if it was the lighting or the subtle changes in the flooring and décor but each section felt quite distinct. There were no walls but the bar area was dim and snug while the café was light and breezy. None of it felt in any way

personal but there was no denying that it was stunningly well designed.

'I've always loved hotels,' I got the impression he wanted to share something with me. I wasn't sure if he was doing this consciously to charm me. 'They are so ultimately anonymous, don't you agree?'

'There is nothing personal in a hotel, beyond perhaps the room number. People can forget all the little edges that make everyday life difficult. In the hotel every experience has already been analysed and priced.'

We were on the twelfth floor. Chet was showing me an architectural quirk, an exposed heating pipe that ran across the passageway unsupported. It had apparently cost an extra hundred thousand.

He stopped where the corridor narrowed before a small balcony.

'I hope you're not taking me seriously.' He smiled.

I had little doubt that he was entirely serious. Chet clearly seemed to be trying to impress me. I wondered if he could be planning on hitting on me. Was already hitting on me?

‘You’ve done a great job with this place,’ I said.

It was hard to be sure what age he was. Initially I had taken him to be ten or fifteen years older than me but now I suspected he may be older still. I looked more closely at his face. I wondered if he had had Botox.

‘Let’s get a drink.’

I didn’t say anything but followed him down to the bar. They treated him like royalty. The bar manager fawned over us both, insisting on demonstrating his mixology skills by preparing extravagant cocktails.

There was something intoxicating about the power that Chet seemed to wield. I started to wonder what strings he pulled behind the scenes of that city. There was a thick cold fog outside the giant double glazed walls and somehow that seemed to exaggerate the enormity of the city.

I had been to London fairly frequently but had never quite got my head around the place. It was a difficult creature, unbroken, wild. There were always more parts, and layers of pretence. The expensive parts, on the slide, trying to show they still had money when they didn’t; the poor areas, thriving on ill-gotten gains, trying to hide the money they were making from prying eyes.

Several business associates came passed the bar. Mainly they said no more than a few words and disappeared into the bowels of the hotel. They all resembled Chet in their smooth faced, easy going appearance. Everything sculpted, prepared and styled to look expensive and simple.

One associate, Darven, arrived and took a seat. He seemed to know Chet well. I guessed he was in his sixties but it was next to impossible to say for sure. His face was entirely unnatural, the work of some highly paid surgeon, his clothes spotless and trendy. He wore blue trainers.

He was telling a story about an incident at some place called Sunset's, several days previously.

'Thankfully he changed his mind when he saw the money.'

'It would cost you less if you listened to Trainer.'

'You make me out to be such a terrible person. In front of your friend as well. As if I would plan something like that. The poor boy was getting paid to do a job. You've been at Sunset's, you know how it can get out of control. It's a shame. He looked sweet. Anyway, my insurance paid for him to go to the most expensive hospital he's ever going to visit. Not to mention the dentist...his teeth are the envy of all the other boys now.'

Chet smiled and shot me a conspiratorial look.

'Apart from the ones that are missing.'

'Oh you exaggerate. I am not Dorian Gray darling.'

Darven stopped and regarded me for a moment and squeezed Chet's shoulder.

'Who is your friend? Are you not going to introduce us?'

'He's Scottish,' Chet said looking directly at me. 'From Berlin.'

'Oh Scottish, from Berlin, how wonderful,' the old man turned to me and I had a sudden sense of revulsion. I could only imagine what he had done to the "poor boy". 'You will come with us to Sunset's won't you?' he leered.

'No, I'm not sure, I have a lot of work to do,' the cocktails were starting to work on me.

I tried to picture my father, before he had died, could he have been about the same age as this guy. There was not one fibre of similarity between the two. My father wheezing greyly in his dirty duffel coat, visiting the hospital, the nurses patronizing him, the way they spoke to my sister in that dull patient tone, the greyness that day in the crematorium, there was nothing to hang on to. I felt profoundly disrespectful sitting there sipping expensive cocktails with these two aging millionaires.

The car pounded along the dark streets of North London, everything flew off the ground, vomited up into the air, flung passed us with violence. I was wedged in the back, forgotten, the Corvette wasn't designed to have passengers in the rear



seats, to have any more than two. Chet drove recklessly but without the slightest error. He had a precision that I couldn't put my finger on.

I could tell we had got out of the wholesome neighbourhoods, we stopped, Darven spoke to someone, he returned after a long time, they laughed in the front seats. We took the Westway to Kensington, a fancy bar, champagne arrived, and girls. Darven enjoyed them, he spoke earnestly, I was drunk I remember thinking, drunk and spinning.

The girls racked up lines of coke, then more lines, I swallowed a pill. Everything tasted bitter but I was excited, I felt a tingling just above my crotch, as if my balls were being drawn up inside my belly. I talked to a girl and then we were kissing, she was gorgeous, the most beautiful girl I had ever seen, I didn't get her name.

She was gone, we were back on the road, we had ditched the Corvette somewhere, we were in a taxi, I struggled to

remember if I had done something in the toilets with the girl, Chet smiled and laughed and slapped me on the back. 'Plenty where we're going,' he said, 'plenty.' I felt sick with motion of the taxi. Did he mean plenty of girls or something else?

We arrived in a dark place. The taxi bumped on uneven, gravelly ground. Large floodlights. Warehouses. A panic rose in the back of my neck. Were they planning to murder me? What the hell was I doing out here? Who, after all, were they? I didn't know them. They talked but I couldn't understand a word. Everything was muffled and distorted.

'Cripwa ruddem eggttt Mishazzo,' Darven spat out, looking at me with a terrifying glare.

They laughed some more.

'Yggetee poi sugar,' sniffed Chet. His face came close to mine, melting.

We had stopped, it was dark outside. A warehouse. They were going to murder me.

I was out of the taxi. The cold air shook me. They started speaking normally again.

‘You were out of it,’ Chet smiled, half supporting me with his arm, ‘back there in the taxi. Fresh air will do you good. We’ll get another line inside.’

‘Inside?’ I was confused. It appeared they were not going to kill me.

‘Sunset’s,’ Darven beamed, motioning towards the warehouse. We stumbled across the distance to a small door cut in the corrugated exterior wall. I heard a distant beat, a drum beat tugging distantly, the drums of mordor. It revitalized me. We were at Sunset’s evidently.

We entered curtains. Thick, layer after layer. My heart grew excited in that giant house of curtains, pulled in deeper by the steady drumming. Darven slipped me another pill. It was warm and sumptuous. Inside there was no dirt or discomfort. The mud and gravel and security cameras and wasteland and

perimeter fences and disorder and cold and confusion and inadequacy and persistence and everything outside faded away. There were boys and there were girls. They laughed with each other. They played tricks on each other. Filthy tricks. Filthy but innocent. I watched. My cock was hard, I realized. A girl had her hand on it and then her mouth. I was a rock.

I turned her over, she squealed, a look of sham pain on her face, I did not care. I entered her from behind, we were an engine, oiled. I forced my finger into her mouth and she sucked on it. She had my cock in her mouth and I kept it there until she gagged. It was not enough, she wanted more. Insatiable, she splayed herself. I was dragged away.

We moved in a sea. Hours must have passed. Others came. We joined together. They sucked and pulled at me, heightening my pleasure. I became filled with a power. I was invincible. I think I slept and woke. There was no time, there was only sex. I came. And then again. And then I couldn’t come any more but I carried on. I can’t remember. I forget.

Eventually it was later. They were gone. The light was drab and the drums had turned to a drone. Darven stood there.

‘It’s time to go,’ he said gently. Beside him stood a young girl, a swelling bruise spreading from her cheek down her neck.

‘To go?’ I asked confused.

‘Yes we’ve been here too long,’ Darven looked worried, his face ashen in the weak light of the place. ‘We need to leave.’

‘How long?’ I couldn’t get my head to work.

‘It’s Tuesday,’ he said hurriedly.

They took me to a taxi.

### **Potsdammer Platz**

It was a week later and I was back in Berlin. I had returned feeling slightly rough after my adventures but otherwise in good spirits. Chet was exceedingly rich. He had sunk a good deal of money into the joint venture with Crunkl. Svil was pleased.

I talked to Lis. She asked me about the trip and, without specifically planning to, I told her all about my experiences at Sunset’s. I’m not sure what I was expecting but in that moment, as I told her about my trip - the two of us in bed, having just fucked - her eyes dilated with excitement. It seemed right to tell her the whole thing. I could see she was getting off on my story.

‘We should go to a place like that,’ she said, ‘here in Berlin.’

‘Together?’

‘Yes, it would be fun,’ her pupils were black disks. ‘It sounds exciting.’

‘I didn’t know you were into that sort of thing,’ I tried to put an ironic tone into my voice but this was a genuine revelation.

Some part of me expected Lis to be shocked, not animated by the idea of me attending an orgy.

My upbringing was too tame perhaps, too rural. I knew about these things, had spent far too much time watching them online but somewhere deep inside I didn’t believe they took

place, in the real world, that I should have been to one and that Lis would be so interested.

‘Yes, let’s find one.’ She licked her lips and started to go down on me again.

‘Ok,’ I said.

Changes started to take place at Crunkl and time speeded up. Svil and Chet talked frequently. The tie up between the companies was progressing quickly. The undisclosed sum that Chet had sunk into Crunkl was evidently greasing the right wheels as we went from a promising little start-up to a major challenger very quickly.

For the first time, we started getting serious traction beyond the tech press, got a couple of features in the mainstream European press and our user numbers went through the roof. My job as communications designer got more hectic but I enjoyed it, batting phone calls and emails back and forth. We

had an internal share issue which basically promised us, the core team, a big wedge of cash a little further down the line, a bright carrot dangling ahead.

I started to buckle down, focused on reaching targets and working late. It was worth it. Now that I had a good few shares in something semi-tangible, something that was growing, I wanted to make sure it grew as much as possible, as fast as possible. We all day-dreamed about the day we would cash out and buy a Caribbean island. Thomas even had a printed out Google map of the West Indies on which he had circled two prospective rocks.

I got swept away with it all I admit. I pushed myself. I enjoyed pushing myself. I had never really pushed myself before but now I grappled with any problem until it was fixed, tried to come up with better, smarter ideas than everyone else.

In truth we all knew we were facing the ‘plateau’ issue. We had money to keep us going but there was not yet an underlying business model. If we wanted to achieve a decent pivot we all

knew we had to do something to monetize our users and become a serious *Global Player*. Chet had taken a chance on us but we were still a long way from the home stretch.

I was sitting with Lis. We had arranged some time alone the previous night but Lis had had to cancel to spend some girl time alone with Heidi, a friend who had just broken up.

Things were made a little awkward by the fact that it was me that had introduced Heidi to Andre, the cold-hearted lothario that had dumped her.

For the previous few months we had all been friends, had gone out together on numerous occasions, got drunk together, all got on well. It seemed strange to me, that in Heidi's eyes, I was in some sense responsible for the current heartache. I felt little guilt over the introduction, it had happened very naturally, no match-making involved.

At the start of the year I had swung passed a bar where Heidi and Lis were having a beer. I had been planning to pick up Lis

and go home I remember, I hadn't been up for a major bender but as these things do one beer had led to another.

When Andre phoned I had been outside having a cigarette and drunkenly I told him to get his arse down to Potsdammer Platz. He had jumped in a taxi and the four of us ended up getting shit-faced and waking up the next morning to find Andre and Heidi snuggling together.

From then on the four of us hung out a lot. I guess I sensed that Andre wasn't as set on the relationship as Heidi but the more we went out together the more things got cemented. That was until Andre finally pulled the plug.

Heidi had been distraught, called in sick to work then went in and had a mini-breakdown. I could tell that Lis was disapproving of the way that Andre had handled it.

'He played her,' she said with a feint glower.

'Andre is hardly a player,' I laughed. Indeed he was one of the geekiest people I knew.

‘In a sense he is,’ Lis spoke, slowly precisely. ‘He really broke her heart.’

I shrugged trying to difuse the situation. I didn’t really want to have this conversation, the implication that I was responsible for breaking Heidi’s heart by proxy was something I didn’t feel like defending.

‘She’ll get over it I’m sure,’ I tried to look sympathetic. ‘She’s a strong character.’

‘Yes, of course she will,’ Lis looked a little annoyed, ‘that’s not the point.’

‘I think he just realised that she wasn’t the one. It’s better to say these things sooner rather than later.’

‘Yes,’ Lis said this as if I had hit on a universal truth.

I reached across and touched her wrist but she shifted her position, annoyed.

‘Do you believe in *The One*?’ She asked a little too directly for my liking.

‘*The One*?’ I leaned back, spreading my shoulders wide, trying to give the impression that this wa a deep question that I would mull over when in reality my brain was desperately looking for a way out of this sort of conversation. I could see a commitment chat looming and that was not what I had planned for the evening. ‘No, that’s only a Hollywood invention isn’t it?’

We had an unspoken agreement that Holywood films were bad, in fact American values in general we both viewed with some scepticism. In a simple, dogmatic way we both decried the simplistic, dogmatic American.

‘I suppose, but do you not believe there could be a few *Ones*? A few right *Ones*?’

‘A few *Ones*?’ I think I got what she was getting at but I didn’t want to continue this conversation. ‘Surely that defeats the point of it? Either there is *the One* or not?’

‘Maybe,’ she looked at me steadily. ‘Do you think there can be any more than a part of us that connects? Do you think there can ever be a complete connection between two people?’

‘And who says Germans are too serious!’ I let out a little laugh and stood up trying to move the conversation off this topic.

‘Oh you don’t think this is a serious issue?’ She seemed annoyed that I was making fun of her.

‘Yes it’s serious but that doesn’t mean we can’t have some fun.’ Lis caught herself. She made her expression soften. I saw for a moment her self-control, monolithic, standing outside her body, her face, her actions, were all outcomes of her steely Teutonic self-control. She would not be serious.

‘Let’s get a girl,’ she said, ‘That would be fun, wouldn’t it?’

‘A girl?’ I must confess I was a little thrown by this.

‘Online, there are some websites, we can get someone to come round for an hour or two.’

‘A call girl?’ It seemed a little unreal to me that Lis was suggesting this.

She broke out laughing. ‘A call girl, ha ha it’s not the nineteen eighties,’ Lis was teasing me now, ‘but yes, why not? A call girl. We can afford it, we can try it, if it’s weird at least we can say we tried it.’

‘Ok,’ I said.

If truth be told the suggestion made me feel slightly uncomfortable but I felt it would be excessively prudish to raise any concerns after Lis had offered this. After all, was it not every males fantasy to have two women? Would I not kick myself if I turned down the opportunity?

Admittedly there was a certain amount of pressure to perform but that didn’t bother me, I had never had any issues in that regard anyway, except for a couple of times when I had been dead drunk. It wasn’t like anyone else would need to know.

Lis got her MacBook and we started surfing a few sites. I was amazed how much was on offer. Most of the sites were very professional and described exactly what the girl was like, what she would or wouldn’t do, a little bit about her. I had seen my

fair share of pop ups and 'get laid in your area tonight' adverts online but I had never followed more than a few clicks before being distracted by actual porn.

We finally settled on a German girl called Ana. A blonde, she said she came from Dusseldorf and described herself as petite. There was a contact form on the site and she replied with in five minutes and said she could meet us the following evening from eight at our place. She told us her rate per hour and included a template text about what she was prepared to do during the time she was with us. She seemed to like the fact that we were a couple. We agreed to three hours to be on the safe side and sent her the address.

What part of us is it that makes us remember? What part decides that this event or another is worth remembering? Objectively, after all, every event is no more than an exchange of probabilities. No matter how important it may seem at first glance, when you boil it down everything is simply the

aggregation of tiny energy fluctuations and as anybody knows that leaves no space for any grand significance.

The assassination of JFK or the moment you flushed your last shit down the toilet are both described by the same laws. If you reduce events down to their basic components all that's left is a dry and inevitable web with no space for souls or romance or humour. Most people it seems, when faced with these issues, take the sensible path and ignore them. Was it not Camus that said, 'people spend a great deal of energy every day trying to be normal'? Well too right, if not what's the point in remembering anything?

Certainly I remember the evening we spent with Anna. There is something about fucking that lodges the event in your brain and at the same time renders it completely indistinct. It's funny how I can remember the bodies of different lovers quite clearly but the individual encounters tend to blur into one. Perhaps it is because, more often than not, these encounters are in a bed and one bed looks much the same as another.



In any event,, the addition of Anna that evening added something new to my sexual memory. She arrived and I poured her a glass of wine. Lis didn't want to drink – so she could experience everything more intensely she said – but I joined Anna in a glass of Bordeaux. The simple fact that we both drank wine gave the relation a sort of symmetry - Anna and I were wine drinkers, Anna and Lis were girls and Lis and I were a couple - we each had a shared bond however tenuous. As the evening progressed my inhibitions dissolved. I could describe what we did but to be honest it was all pretty much as you would expect. Lis and I enjoyed ourselves. I'm pretty sure Anna enjoyed herself too. If not she was a very good actress.

At around ten Anna said she should go. She asked if that was ok. We had stopped, exhausted, some ten minutes before. 'You booked another hour,' she said apologetically, 'but if you don't need me any more I should go.'

'Of course,' Lis was suddenly very business-like, 'thank you for a wonderful evening.'

This felt a little formal, especially after what Lis had been doing to Anna only twenty minutes before. They laughed and said something in German which I didn't catch. Anna got up and dressed quickly, her clothes were evidently chosen for ease of dressing and undressing.

Lis went and found her purse while I lay on the bed watching them. Having finished dressing Anna gave me a quick kiss on the cheek and Lis handed her the cash we had agreed. If I remember Lis clearly at that moment, she looked a little uncomfortable with the transaction, uneasy with the power that the few crumpled fifty euro notes conveyed on her.

'There is a little extra there,' Lis said, 'perhaps we will see you again.'

'Of course,' Anna smiled.

She said something else in German and blew me a kiss as she went out. Exhausted, all I managed was to lift my head from the pillow in response.

I started reading more about the sex profession. The topic fascinated me. I was fairly literate on the themes of modern capitalism but somehow I had never taken prostitution seriously as a business. Other than leather jacketed pimps and thugs I had difficulty picturing it as a livelihood for anyone. It had all seemed too seedy.

Lis and I talked about our experience and both agreed it was something we would do again. We both agreed it was a good thing that we lived in an enlightened society where people like Anna could make a living by providing pleasure.

I chatted to Andre and found out that he had frequented prostitutes several times, something I would never have suspected of him. He worked as a developer for an IT firm and I had always presumed he would be too shy to hand over hard

cash for a blow job but once the topic was raised he proved quite uninhibited.

He talked in length about some of the prostitutes he had visited and waxed lyrical about one place he visited every year when he attended the Mobile World Congress in Barcelona. 'Those girls in Sitges,' he said, a look of fond remembrance on his face, 'are some of the fucking hottest on this planet.' He never normally swore.

He lent me a couple of Michel Houellebecq novels, *Platform* and *Atomised*. He told me I had to read the latter if I wanted to understand the sexual economy, telling me to read it and then return it to him cause it was his only copy. He said I could keep *Platform* as it was unmitigated rubbish.

I started on *Atomised*. I had not read anything by Michel Houellebecq and initially found his writing rather trying. There were some interesting points in there, certainly, but it was so badly written and edited I sometimes wondered if the author intended to be taken seriously or not. I was slightly intrigued by

the writer, I must admit. What sort of person spent their time writing this sort of thing? It was so depressive!

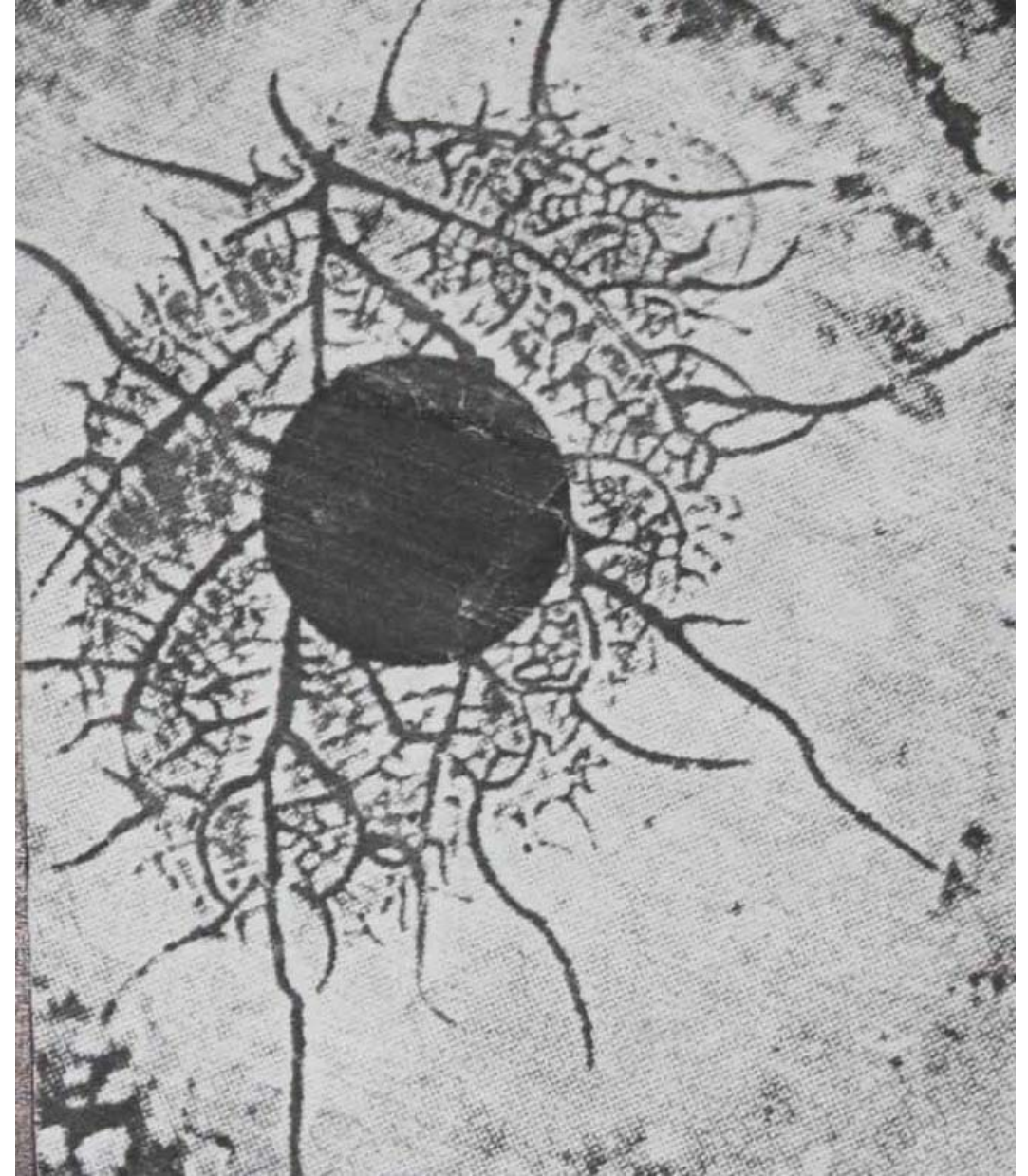
It wasn't until I got halfway through *Platform* that a certain idea started to crystallise in my mind. Obviously the publisher had been as little bothered by the content of the novel as the author as the writing and editorial in this book was even worse than *Atomised* – there were blatant spelling and grammatical errors, all the characters were two dimensional and the plot in different sections of the novel clearly contradicted itself -but nonetheless I persevered.

There was, in there, the kernel of an idea. An idea which grew at the back of my mind. A sexual economy, a platform. In the start-up world everybody talked about platforms. Facebook was the de facto social networking platform, Google the de facto search platform. I started to wonder - where was the sex platform?

Having seen what was available online, and having surfed my share of porn sites I presumed there were some start-ups working on this but the more I looked into the less I found. Everybody wanted sexual gratification but there were social mores that prevented certain people taking certain steps, religious ideologies, peer pressure, societal pressure, all these things helped decided how far a particular individual would go. The market was seriously fragmented and any platform would need to connect people in a user-friendly commodity market where the raw material was sex. It was about creating a continuum.

The majority of male Westerners had no qualms about visiting porn sites to get gratification but many would stop short of the more graphic clips, many would draw a line at homoerotic porn, or would be happy to masturbate alone to a clip of rough sex but would hesitate before hiring someone to perform the same acts for them. A platform had to distinguish these users but include them all.

There was an ever evolving continuum of human sexual needs but there was no economy that unified them. Some website owners and performers were getting very rich and becoming stars while others were forced to do acts against their will and for no money. What if we could use technology to create this future?



# LES MEILLEUR DES MONDES POSSIBLES

by VITO GULLA

A day will come when you find yourself hovering over a corpse—the body making a snow-angel-like impression in the thigh-high grass along the Schuylkill, as though laid out for crucifixion—and with a notepad in your hand, the cigarette burning down to its filter, you will discover something about yourself as a detective: you no longer care.

For now, however, *Ballad of a Thin Man* simmers on the radio and you take off the badge that hangs around your neck and toss it on the coffee table and gaze down and notice that two perpendicular lines of coke have lain themselves before you. There is a sheet of glass over the table that traps cutups of Bible verses and clippings from *Playboy* and *Hustler*. Using a snipped McDonald's straw, you snort up the coke in two rapid-fire sniffs and rest your head on the back of the couch,

watching the couple across the room as your nostrils warm and gradually start to numb.

Sweat covers their naked bodies. Wet, slurping sounds escape from the folds of their skin as the man pounds away. The sheets fall to the floor in a coil amongst scraps of paper, orange peels, used condoms, empty beer bottles, dirty plates, and cigarette butts. The man, who is on top, stabs her with his groin as the girl lies helpless and distant and voiceless. There is a passionless passion to her undulations, a dutiful sense in her movements, and her eyes are focused upward toward a picture of the Virgin Mary which slaps the wall with each violent thrust.

A hand reaches over, digs into the front pocket of your suit coat, and withdraws a pack of Camels. Alvarez, your partner, chewing slowly and slack-jawed, pulls a cigarette out of the box with his teeth. He tucks the pack back where he found it

and straightens your jacket and says: Gimme a light.

You oblige him: with an outstretched arm, you spark up a flame. He takes a few puffs, smoke clouds the air, and he leans back away from the lighter and takes his first true drag.

Though you have known him for years, he is darker than you remember. His bronzed Mexican skin seems always caught in shadow, some piece of him unable to come to light. The acne scars that pockmark his cheeks have cut themselves deeper into his face, and in the glow of the lighter, he smiles with the cigarette still in his mouth, revealing the accumulation of stains on his teeth.

You watch as he spoons out some coke from the box on the table and snorts it up each nostril before offering a bump to your dealer, who wears his pants around his thighs and vacantly wanks to the couple on the bed. A rosary dangles from your dealer's wrist and seems ready to strangle his penis at any minute.

Alvarez picks up his drink from the table, swigs, and

follows it with a drag on his cigarette.

We're gonna catch him, he says, sniffing. For Christ's sake, we will. And when we do...he'll be lucky if I don't kill him.

Your dealer, his greasy bangs falling into his face, keeps his eyes on the action, saying: He raped a nun? Fuck, man. That's cold-blooded, man. Fucking cold.

The image is not far from your mind. There was enough blood to paint a living room. You remember how the nun's mouth—what was left of it—was stuffed with her own panties. Someone had slashed her face with a razor. Her bra, along with her breasts, had been removed. And her eyes were still caught in that moment of horror before her breath escaped her forever.

At least she didn't die a virgin, you say.

Alvarez makes notice of your comment but adds nothing. He takes another bump and unzips his pants as the couple on the bed fall to the floor. The man picks himself up and lays back on the bed, stroking himself. The girl struggles to her feet.

She stumbles, her body seemingly too weak to even manage this much, but she perseveres. One hand after the other, she pulls herself into the bed. The man pats his thighs, and the girl climbs on top to straddle him. The two come together like a broken cross.

Fucking kids today, says Alvarez. No respect. They dont even care about what's holy.

Man, says your dealer. I dont know anybody who would do something like that. And I know some crazy motherfuckers. And I mean *crazy*.

It makes you want to just walk down the street and start shooting. Any fuck that looks at you wrong: you fucking pop them.

You think he knew what he was doing, man? You think he even cares, man?

I think he knew exactly what he was doing. Like I said, they dont care. Why should a nun be any fucking different to them?

You feel your heart quickens its pace from the coke, and you say: What the fuck is a nun anyway?

Both men look you over in confusion, but Alvarez is the first to answer: What do you mean? he asks. What's a nun?

I mean, What's the difference between them and anybody else?

Alvarez stabs out a cigarette. His limp penis in his hands, sticking through the opening in his slacks, he looks down at it and pushes side to side. It flops dead each time.

Jesus Christ. Listen to you. What's the difference? What the fuck's the difference? What are you, a fucking jerkoff? Huh? A nun is somebody who gives her life up to God. A priest, a nun: that's a person you dont fuck with—no matter what.

Unlike the rest of us?

Youre goddamn right. Everybody else is fair game.

Alvarez takes a drink and slams the glass down, causing a small crack to form in the table. He slaps his penis a few times as if trying to find a vein for a needle.

Tell me something, he says, you got a problem, partner?

Yeah, you say. I've gotta clean it up.

You sure you a Catholic?

Born and raised.

So you wanna tell me what's with the standup routine?

The Church has been raping people for years: so what's the difference? That's what I mean.

For Christ's sake, have some respect. What kind of a man are you anyway? Huh? Asking these kinds of questions. What are you? Huh?

With his free hand, he takes the pack of Camels from your jacket. You pull out your lighter and get him started again.

You know something, he says, blowing smoke into your face. You're losing touch with the rest of us.

He spreads the opening of his penis and tries to see inside. Letting it go, he looks up and slaps your dealer on the arm.

See what I have to deal with, he says. Every fucking day with son of a bitch.

The man throws the girl from his lap, spins her around so that she is face down, and grabbing her by the hips, he pulls her back to meet his. In the doggish position, she arches her back and faces the wall, her eyes pointed to the stars.

Your dealer spits into his hand and masturbates with a renewed intensity, trying his damndest to get it hard.

So you think it was a nigger? he asks.

What the fuck are you talking about? says Alvarez.

The nun. You think it was a nigger?

Alvarez picks up his penis and joins the masturbatory flurry.

No, he says. Niggers wouldn't do that. There ain't a nigger in all the world, whether it's some backwards tribesman in Africa or some lazy shit on Broad Street. They ain't got the balls for it. No. You know who: some suicide bomber giving himself to Allah. That's who.

Fucking Arabs, man. What a bunch of nuts. They think they own the world. Did you know they take oath to Allah



and that's it? That's some crazy shit, man.

They throw their women out a fucking window when they feel like it—theyre animals.

The man pushes the girl down to the bed and orgasms on her lower back. As he gets up from the bed, he gives her a smack on the ass, then comes over to the couch and takes a seat. He looks at your dealer and says: Your turn.

Your dealer shakes his head.

Give me a minute, he says. Will you?

Dude, she's ready. She's wet as all hell.

The naked man runs a hand over his groin and takes a wipe, then sniffs it and brings it up to his eyes for examination.

You better hurry up, he says. It looks like she's starting her period. She's getting a little ripe, too.

Alvarez, says your dealer. You give it a go, man. I need a minute. Besides, I know youll be quick about it.

Alvarez stands up. Putting out his cigarette, he says: Haha. Very funny.

He walks over to the bed and unbuttons his pants, letting them fall to the floor, saying: Come here, honey. Poppis got some candy for you. Come here. I won't bite. Yeah, that's a good girl.

She crawls across the bed to where he stands and kneels on the floor.

Every part of her is visible. Her skin is smooth and pale all around, not a speck of hair can be seen creeping up her leg or tickling the brim of her pubic mound, her angelic face is absent of makeup except for the dark silvery shading around her eyes, her sandy-blond hair is splintered and bristly, her bangs haloing her forehead, but she holds herself proudly with her chin held high.

And then you realize: you have seen this girl before. Maybe not *this* girl but someone like her. You see her almost every day. She moves from station to station, whether it be Suburban, Market East, or Sixty-Ninth Street, sleeping in doorways and on benches, blowing into her cupped hands for

warmth.

She is hardly eighteen, but you continue to watch regardless.

With her face at his groin, she opens her mouth to receive him as though it is the eucharist. She closes her mouth around it and pulls back. She repeats the process as Alvarez picks up where the conversation had left off: Fucking muslims, he says. They come to this country, they take our money, they take our women, but then they want to blow us up if we dont live by their rules.

He withdraws from her mouth and jacks off himself.

Rub your tits, he says. Yeah. That's it, baby. That's it. You love it, dont you? I bet you were waiting for this all day.

He drops his scrotum into her mouth, bouncing up and down on his knees, teabagging her.

That's what I can't stand about those fucks, he says. You can't even take a shit unless youre facing Mecca.

As you light up a cigarette, you notice that you are the only

one still in your clothes, and though your dealer and the naked man have both taken to masturbation, you feel no need to do so. You find yourself feeling strange. A tickle works its way into the back of your throat, and a tightness seizes your neck. Why? You are not fully aware at this moment. Are you falling ill? Is it the coke? You pull on the collar of your shirt and undo your tie in an effort to let some air into your lungs. Your hands shake. You breath deep. But you keep watching, waiting for something to reveal itself to you. But what?

Somehow, you feel no sense of revulsion nor any urge to intervene. You look on with an observational curiosity. You are a detached voyeur, paring your fingernails behind a pane of bulletproof glass.

Alvarez moves back slightly and slaps his soft dick on her face.

Here, suck it, he says. Yeah, baby. Suck it all the way down—all the way.

The girl begins to choke and quickly pulls back. Curdled

spit oozes from the side of her mouth. Tears well in her eyes. Streaks of watered-down mascara stream across her cheeks as she gags. Covering her mouth, she hunches over to cough.

What's a matter? he says. A pretty girl like you never depthroated a guy? Come on. I know youve done it a thousand times. Dont play hard to get. Take it like a whore.

The girl manages to take his cock down to the base, his pubic hair pricking her nose.

Rapes a nun, says Alvarez. Kills her. I swear: it's the kind of thing that makes you want to burn them all alive. I know it was some fucking Arab. I know it. I just want to kill this fucker.... That's it. Keep going. Dont stop, bitch.... I wanna wrap a piece of barbed-wire around the bastard's neck and pop his fucking head off.

He grabs the girl by the hair and rips her from his dick and looks her in the eyes.

Come on, he says. Get it hard. Dont you want Poppi to fuck you, bitch? Huh? Come on, bitch. Get it hard.

He gives her a few light smacks on the face, and your dealer and the naked man, their limp dicks still in hand, move closer to each other, their thighs touching. There is a vigor in their movements, a sense of urgency, their arms flailing, blurring.

You unbutton the collar of your shirt and feel your chest tighten. Your lungs burn as they fill with air. Something is happening here, and you do not know what it is.

Bitch, says Alvarez. Do your fucking whore job. Come on. There you go.... You know, when I think about this fuck, it makes me want to bomb Iraq from the face of the Earth. And I wanna be there when they all meet Saint Peter, and he points to Hell and says: Down there is for muslims.

He interrupts himself for a moment as though he's going to come. His jaw drops, and his eyes close up. He groans and says: No. That's bullshit. You know what...? Come on, bitch. Suck it, you cunt. Get it hard!

He smacks her face, causing her to stumble onto her back.

But like Christ when he dropped the cross, she gets up and continues. Grabbing a few tufts of hair, Alvarez closes his eyes, tilts back his head, and skullfucks her.

Your dealer puts his hand on the naked man's thigh, and after a few moments, he reaches down between his legs and caresses his balls.

You fling your cigarette into the ashtray and drop to the floor, coughing violently, as though trying to get something out of your throat.

There you go, says Alvarez. Yeah, cunt. Do it right.... You know what, seriously? That's no good for them—no, that's *too* good. No. You know what I'm gonna do to this guy when I find him? I know exactly what I'm gonna do: I'm gonna handcuff him to a pipe, and then I'm gonna cover him in pig's blood, make him fuck a honeybaked ham, shove a Phillies' frank up his ass, make him choke on a pound of bacon, and then when he realizes there's no fucking way he's ever gonna get into heaven and get those seventy-two virgins, no way he's ever

gonna see that crystal palace, that's when I take out my Glock and put one right between his eyes.

As you try to pull yourself from the ground, on your hands and knees, the cough turns to snigger. You regain some of your breath, but the beginning of a laugh overtakes you.

The naked man straddles your dealer, the two of them rubbing their bloodless cocks together.

Alvarez finally opens his eyes and looks down and realizes that his dick is still as limp and lifeless as ever. But rather than concede his impotence, he grabs the girl by the throat and lifts her to her feet. Pulling back as far as he can take his arm, he winds up and sends a haymaker square to her face, finally delivering the punchline. Blood spills from her nose and baptizes the room. Alvarez moves onto his knees and punches her over and over.

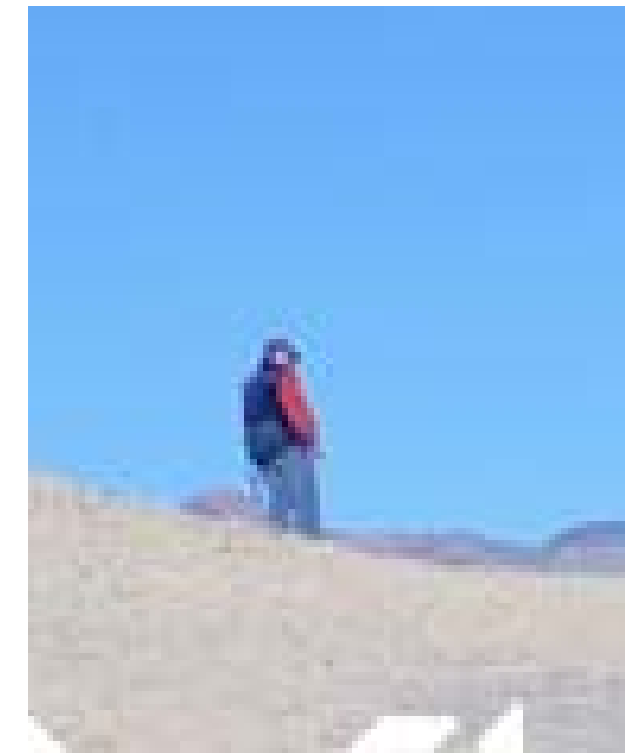
You can contain it no longer. The laughter erupts in your diaphragm and bursts from your mouth. A paralysis worms its way through your body, and you lie on your stomach. It

contaminates your every muscle, every vein, every cell. And though you are helpless, you find in it a strange catharsis. It overwhelms you to the point that it seems as if chunks of lung will come spewing from between your lips at any moment.

The other men in the room pay you no attention: your dealer and the naked man continue their embrace, and Alvarez keeps driving his fist into the girl's nose.

It is she who notices. Her welted face turns, and she gazes upon you and watches as you convulse from each cackle. But she does not react with horror but instead with glee. It is infectious. Between blows, she begins to chuckle faintly. Alvarez, his eyes full of thorn and bramble, swings his hulking fists wildly. But his strength soon fails him, and slowly, slowly, slowly, his arms tire out and fall to his sides. Covered in blood, he looks her over, his head tilting to the side as she explodes with laughter. He pulls back and breathes heavy. Despair overtakes him. Even the naked man and your dealer must stop to stand witness. All three of them completely bewildered,

unsure what has happened here. They seem lost, cast out from a conversation that never took place. Their faces wrinkle in confusion, seemingly trying to rewire the tangled synapses of their minds, but you know they will never get it; for only you and the girl have realized: God spoke.



# ALINA BABY

by ESRA WOLVE

Ratho walks down the street to the bus stop, bobbing his head to a beat only he can hear; when his phone starts ringing. Ratho looks at the display, presses the red button and the ringing stops. He fingers into the menu. Missed calls. Unknown. Unknown. A customer. Ratho recognizes the number. Does he swing by now?

‘Later mate,’ he says to his phone. ‘Got stuff to do.’

A woman walks toward him clutching her handbag. Her knuckles turn white as they pass each other. Ratho would’ve loved to yell something but, hell why not, ‘Don’t worry Miss. I never steal the handbag. Only what’s in it.’

Her shoulders tighten and she hurries off. Ratho shakes his head as he continues toward the bus stop in front of the Polish grocers. Closing in on the stop he’s still laughing. A fat Polish

guy stands in the door of the shop, holding a pit bull puppy on a leash. Ratho nods and the guy grumbles. He’s always standing there watching who gets on and off the bus. The puppy is peeing against the shop corner. Ratho gives the guy a crazed smile. He looks away, tucks at the puppy’s leash. An elderly couple sits inside the bus stop, looking at Ratho, whispering. When he looks at them they look away. A drop hits Ratho’s forehead. He touches his fingers to his face. Has it started raining again? He looks up and another drop leaks into his eye. Blinded, he stumbles out from under the overhanging roof of the grocers, rubbing his eye as the bus arrives and the elderly couple gets on. The fat Polish guy smirks, while his puppy is looking at the street with big eyes, watching the bus’s doors close. Ratho looks up as it pulls out.

‘Shit,’ he mutters.

Waving and banging on the door, he runs with the bus until the driver looks at him, ‘Let me in mate.’

The driver shakes his head and shrugs. He points to his wrist watch and turns the bus onto the bus lane.

‘SHIT,’ Ratho yells.

He’s running after the bus, yelling insults at the driver when a car comes out of a side street. Brakes screech. That was close. Ratho smiles at the driver who flips him the bird.

‘Sorry mate,’ Ratho throws up his hands, walks over to the passenger door and knocks on the window. He motions for the driver to roll it down.

‘You wouldn’t by any change be going into the centre?’ He smiles at the driver and leans his hands on the rim of the open window. The driver looks at him for a moment, then mumbles something and rolls his window back up, almost squeezing Ratho’s fingers. The car drives off and Ratho is left standing on the curb. He rubs his head, tears at his hair. His mind is racing, his teeth gnawing at the insides of his cheeks but nothing comes of it. His phone rings again. Not now. Ratho fumbles his phone from his pocket. ALINA BABY. His face lights up.

He presses the green button, ‘Alina Baby. What can I do you for?’

Ratho walks back through his street, crosses and heads to the main road on the other side. Another bus-stop another chance as he listens to Alina’s voice and nods.

Alina is standing in the hallway that leads from the front door to her studio. It has neither windows nor lighting but it’s the only place her phone gets any service. She paces the length of the hall-way, listening to the dial tone, blowing a curl off her forehead. Ratho is such a loser. What kind of distributor doesn’t answer his phone? No wonder he’s still living in that dump by the main road. The phone is picked up on the other end and Alina’s eyes light up for a second.

‘Don’t call me baby,’ she says.

Her face is tense as she listens to the street noise in the background.

‘What do you think? I’m out,’ Alina chews her thumb nail, listening to Ratho’s voice. She is in no mood for banter.

‘Ratho,’ Alina clenches her fist, biting her bottom lip.

‘Ratho, I need you here.’

She rolls her eyes, imitating his voice on the other end, ‘Just come over, will you? Bring your rocks.’

Alina snorts and rolls her eyes again.

‘What is it with you? Are you twelve years old?’ she is ready to hang up when Ratho gets serious. ‘Okay thanks. I’ll see you.’

Alina hangs up the phone and hurls it across the hallway at the front door where it hits with a bang and shatters into pieces.

‘Shit,’ Alina mutters.

She picks up the phone, puts it back together. She presses the green button. Dial tone. She lets out a breath. Would have been the third one this month. Alina walks back to her live-in bedroom and slams the door behind her. She really needs to buy a padded phone.

‘Alina Baby. What can I do you for?’ Ratho turns back into his street. If he goes by his house he can fetch her rocks. If the

situation lends itself though he might taunt her a little. She’s so cute when she’s yelling into the phone and all, ‘Oh don’t be like that. I’m just so glad to hear your voice. Now what do you want?’

His house is on the other side of the street so he crosses. Phone to his ear, he looks to each side. Something he hasn’t done since he was in nursery school but nearly run me over once, nearly run me over twice. Shame on you and your headstone, man.

‘And you thought of me? How sweet is that,’ Ratho grins as he pushes open his front door. Alina’s all hot and bothered on the other end. Ratho chuckles, ‘I love it when you say my name like that.’

He runs up the stairs and lets himself into his flat. Where did he put his stash? All the while Alina’s voice is purring at him, ‘And I need you baby. But we don’t always get what we need, do we now?’

He’s throwing stuff around, sifting through the mess on the floor. Nothing. What the hell is he doing in his bedroom



anyway? The kitchen? No. Underneath that floor board? No that was the last flat. Ratho needs to take a piss. As he stands in front of the loo, he remembers, 'Oh you know, I've always got my rocks on me love. Maybe we meet and you can show your appreciation. 'Cause we're old friends.'

There's yelling on the other side. Ratho flinches. He holds the phone to his ear with his shoulder while he pries the lid off the water tank. As it pops off Ratho almost drops his phone into the toilet bowl. There it is, blurry in the water. Ratho rolls up his sleeve, reaches in and pulls out his stash. The rocks are in four piece packs. He pockets one of them and puts the box back in the tank. Never can be too careful.

'Okay, calm down love. I'll be there in twenty,' Alina hangs up before he does. He puts the phone away and heads back out, his sternum burning as it has been ever since the police started that 'stop and search' campaign.

The bus driver points at the sign above the wind-shield that reads, 'Do not spit at the driver.'

Ratho curses and steps off the bus. He only fell asleep for a second. Only a second. Reason enough for him to get a little over-excited at the refusal of the driver to turn the bus around. As if it weren't going back this way anyway. Ratho shakes his head and spits on the ground. The bus pulls away from the curb, great. Ratho looks up the road, then down, at least a mile of no sidewalk along the main road. He sighs but turns in the direction the bus came from and trudges on toward the city. Ratho's jeans soak up the drops that stick to the ankle high grass covering the shoulder. He pulls his jacket over his head. It does little to ward off the rain, though.

Alina is pacing the length of her bedroom. Why is he taking so long? He said twenty minutes, but Ratho always says twenty minutes. Might as well be twenty years. As if she doesn't have anything better to do. She goes into the kitchen, has a look in the cupboards. No beer. What the hell?! She sticks her head in the fridge, scanning its contents.

Goosebumps rise on her neck and shoulders disappearing in

the folds of her robe. Asian symbols and flowers, frail porcelain colored ladies printed on silky fabric. Alina closes the door of the fridge with a sigh. No beer. No kidding. She could call Ratho and ask him to dip into the corner shop but she'd have to talk to him again and anyway he never answers his phone, so why is she wasting her time considering this?

Ratho has been walking for ten minutes and the city is still only a faint gloom in the smog drenched sky. This is taking forever. Ratho stops, wiggles his toes, water is leaking into his boots. Cold and wet and squeaky he looks around, wrong side of the road. That's his problem. He waits for a car to pass and steps onto the road, runs across to the other side, stumbling as his boot catches in the leg of his jeans. Once across he walks on, thumb held out, praying for a miracle in a car.

Alina sits at the small desk that doubles for a dining table back in her bedroom. Opposite her is the glass door to the garden. She looks onto the little patio and into the rain. Maybe she should sit outside underneath the parasol? But then she

won't be able to hear the door-bell. The minutes waste away. Will he want to come inside? Of course he will. He's going to bring in the rain, and the slush that collects in the gutter. He'll have to leave his boots outside. Alina snatches a curl that keeps falling in her face and twists it around her forefinger until its wound so tight it hurts. She sticks her finger into her mouth, takes it back out and lets the curls unfold on her tongue. It tastes like coconut.

Several cars drive past. An empty beer can comes flying out of a window and hits Ratho in the head.

'Bloody hell,' he mumbles.

Ratho bites his lip, rubbing the spot where the can hit. At the speed those cars are going his head could have been taken off, no doubt. Almost twenty minutes have passed since he was kicked off the bus. Ratho checks his phone. No messages. He wipes a drop off the display with his thumb and puts the phone away. Behind him a car approaches, slowing down. The

driver, an emo boy, sticks his head out of the window, 'Do you need a lift?'

Ratho turns, squinting at the boy and purses his lips. Then he sees the cyber-punk girl riding shotgun, 'Sure man. Heading into town?'

The emo boy nods. Piercings clacking, he gestures for Ratho to get inside. The door bangs shut and the car starts back up the road, picking up speed. Ratho's every movement on the backseat makes a squishy noise and the wetness of his jeans is soaking through to his underwear. The cyber-punk girl turns around, swinging her blue dreadlocks over her shoulder and smiles. Ratho slumps back in his seat, 'So thanks. Really nice of you to give me a lift.'

'We love helping hobos,' the emo girl smiles, making moon eyes at his ruffled up hair. 'You are so brave to shake off the shackles of society and travel the world. You are in touch with nature like no one else in this city. Your body, mind and spirit

have reached the purest form of being. You are free, truly free. I admire you for that.'

Ratho frowns, scratching the back of his head. Hell, does she ever stop talking? She nods and smiles and reaches out to pat his leg. Her fingers are encased in so many rings Ratho can barely see the flesh peeking out between them. He looks at her, then her hand. If she just slid it a little higher. Ratho's eyes glaze over as he looks at her face again and those dreadlocks almost smothering it. She winks and the piercing in her eyebrow sparkles.

'One day we will be one,' she says and Ratho's face lights up. 'Us and the earth.'

Ratho moves her hand off his knee. What a nut-job.

The emo kids insisted on dropping Ratho off at Alina's door step and he didn't protest.

'Is she your girl-friend?' the girl says.

Ratho's mouth opens in an O shape but no sound comes out. He shakes his head.

‘But you’re in love with her? That’s so romantic.’

‘Just tell us where to go,’ the boy says.

He looks at Ratho in the rearview mirror, ‘And we’ll drop you off. It would be my honor.’

What have they been smoking? Fifteen minutes of hearing about Gaya and Karma and how nipple piercings bring you closer to God. Ratho blows out air with a low whistling sound. Still he doesn’t have the heart to tell them that Alina and he have more of a business relationship. She is beautiful though. He leans his head against the back rest and tries to remember the directions to her house.

The doorbell rings. Just as she had stopped caring if Ratho came, here he is. Alina stubs out her cigarette in the small ashtray beside her on the table. She walks through the room into the hall, tying her robe. Her steps echo in the darkness leading toward the front door. She pushes her ear up to it and listens. The last thing she wants is to open the door to a stranger. Her hand lies on the cool wood of the door, spreading

its warmth, her plastic fingernails tapping the surface. A smile lights up her face and her teeth glisten in the faint light coming from the bedroom at the end of the hall.

Ratho rings the doorbell again. The car is standing behind him on the curb, motor running. Ratho is breathing hard, leaning his hands on the frame. He’s waiting as the exhaust fumes drift toward him.

‘If she’s not home you can come with us,’ the girl yells out the window.

Ratho turns to them, smiles and gives them a little wave. When he turns back to the door he bangs his fist against it so hard, it starts to throb.

Just as she unlocks the door there’s banging on the other side and Alina flinches. She moves away from the door and takes a breath. It’s Ratho, just Ratho, being Ratho. She slides the chain off its hook and opens up. Ratho’s dripping form stands in the frame on the other side. A car is standing behind him in the street, motor running. Alina cranes her neck to get a closer

look but the rain obscures the inside of the car. Alina's eyes focus on Ratho, looking annoyed at being forced to leave the house in the rain. She strikes her Marilyn Monroe pose and lets out a fake laugh, 'Hello stranger.'

'You wish,' Ratho says and Alina laughs again, for real this time. Ratho purses his lips. The roof is dripping onto his shoulders, soaking through his jacket as the front is already starting to dry. Alina shakes her head, turns away, 'Come inside. But leave those grimy boots of yours by the door. I just scrubbed the floors.'

She walks toward the door at the end of the hall-way. Ratho gazes after her while he takes off his boots, jumping up and down on one leg, then the other, 'In those robes? You could have waited for me before you did that.'

The boots fall to the floor and rain water leaks out. Alina disappears through the door and Ratho pats down the hallway after her in wet socks, leaving prints on the linoleum flooring. The flat is almost as cold as the outside, apart from the smell.

In here it smells like sleep and coconut and spices. Ratho sucks in the air as he looks around the room. Outside the rain comes down like a curtain. Alina sits on the table regarding Ratho. Her shoulders and back are tense, achy. His presence in this room is like the smell of burnt food, you need to get it out before it saturates the entire flat. Ratho shakes his head while Alina shoots loaded glances in his direction. He reaches into his jacket pocket and fishes out a soggy pack of cigarettes. He takes out one, tucks it between his lips and nods toward the lighter on the table. Alina hands it to him. Their fingers touch as the lighter wanders from one hand to the other. Alina dangles her legs. The place where her skin sticks to the cold surface of the table has gone numb. Ratho flicks on the lighter, holds it against the cigarette. One second, another, the flame flicks off and Ratho curses as he removes the wet cigarette from between his lips.

'You can just put the pack by the ashtray I'll throw it out later,' Alina says.

‘You kidding me. I’ll put ‘em under the hair dryer when I get home,’ Ratho tucks the cigarette back into the pack. Alina frowns, ‘Wet tobacco. That can’t be healthy.’

‘Won’t be wet then.’

Alina shrugs. She is tempted to smoke another one of her own cigarettes.

‘Your curls look particularly fetching today,’ Ratho licks his lips.

‘You know I didn’t just invite you in to chat,’ Alina says.

‘I like it when you’re bossing me around,’ he winks at her.

Alina purses her lips. He hasn’t changed a bit since they were in school. Alina arches her back, Ratho is moving like a snail, eyes protruded and perky. He fetches the rocks from his pocket and wiggles the bag in front of Alina’s face. She snatches it, takes out a rock, pops it in her mouth and starts sucking on it. Ratho throws up his hands, ‘Don’t mind me.’

Alina chuckles, her lips popping in and out as she sucks, her face serene, lids fluttering, ‘You are a genius Ratho. How much do I owe you?’

‘Just a little crystalline residue. Don’t mention it,’ he looks out of the window at the rain, a few drops hitting the glass here and there.

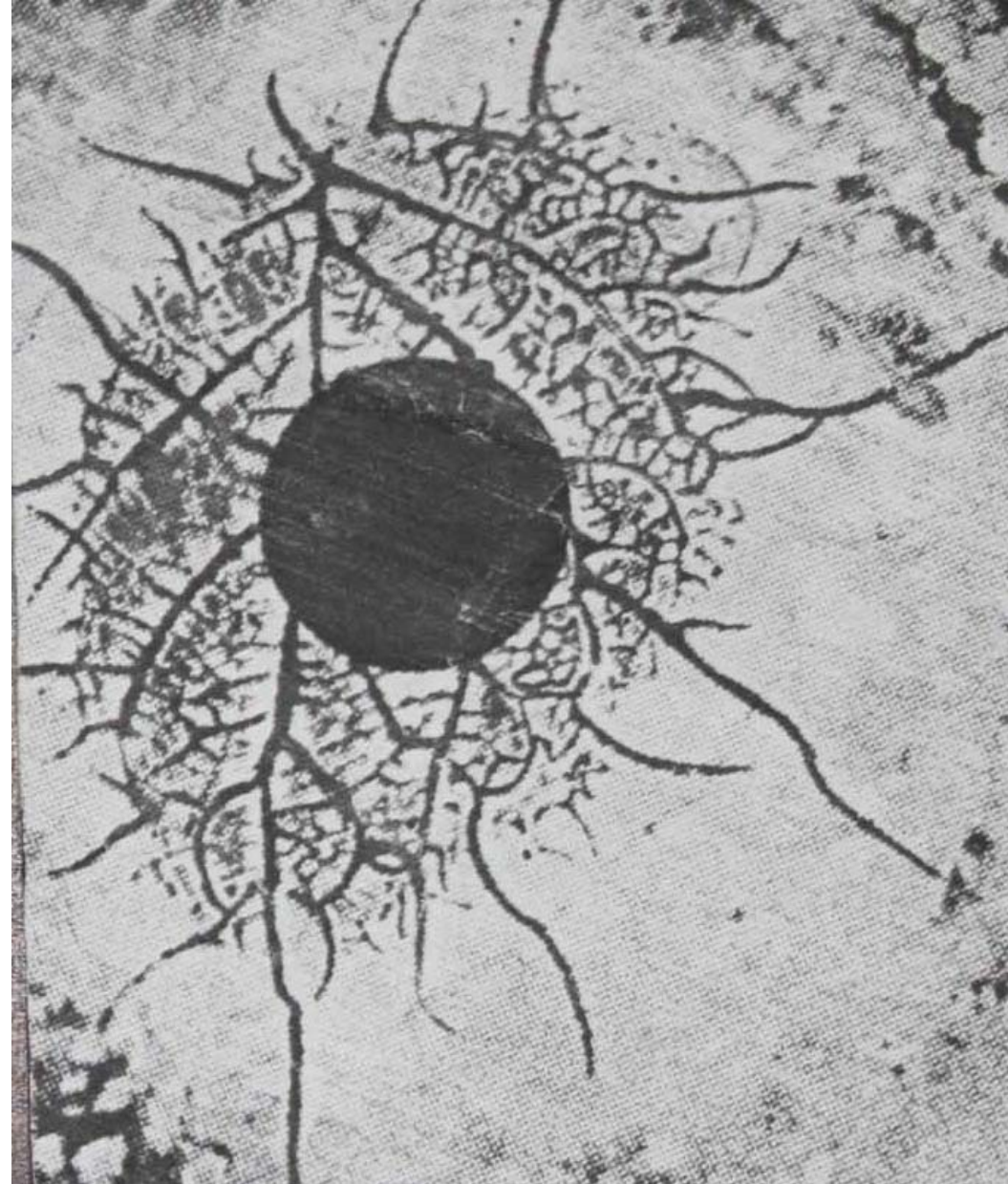
‘How about you pay in sexual favors this time?’ He leans in, looking rather desperate despite his best efforts. Alina looks at him for a second, eyebrows raised, her cheeks sucked in, then she laughs again, ‘I’ll just have to owe you this one.’

Ratho’s face falls, he shrugs, ‘Was worth a try.’

The phone in Ratho’s pocket vibrates. He has a look and pulls a face half-way between excited and annoyed. Ratho sighs, looks at Alina whose head is resting against the cold wall, eyes rolling back in their sockets. He puts his phone away and turns toward the door, ‘I’m out then.’

There is no response from Alina, so Ratho walks back the way he came, out into the cold and the rain, wishing for the warm

embrace of a woman as he pulls his jacket over his head and walks down the street to take care of his next errant.



# THE CRUELTY OF MICHAEL CISCO

by ROBIN WYATT DUNN

Cisco is a novelist whose work I love; his work terrifies me. As I try to search for comparably cruel novelists, I can think of only two, Samuel Richardson, whose *Pamela* sticks in my mind, and Cormac McCarthy for *Blood Meridian*.

Richardson's 1740 *Pamela* comes closer in my estimation, because the writer is so far removed from the sufferings of the working class girl that one feels as though he's pulling her like a little puppet—his deep and almost impenetrable separation as a writer from her situation is perhaps one of the cruelest in literature.

*Blood Meridian* I find does not hit the cruel meter quite as highly (despite its vivid and gruesome scalpings throughout), because McCarthy's prose is so often infused with religious feeling of a particular Judeo-Christian kind, one that subtly

posits a deliverance from this Earth, a Platonic sensibility that all this suffering is a mere shadow from which we will escape, necessarily, and either be redeemed or punished.

No such arc or vector is apparent for Cisco. This world is this world, and all the more terrifying for it. The work of Stephen King, or Peter Straub's *Ghost Story*, or Clive Barker's horrible little wanderings in wartime Warsaw in *The Damnation Game*, all of them seem to posit some kind of escape, some kind of exit.

In the heart-rendingly gorgeous *Rings if Saturn* by W.G. Sebald, the narrator, while overcome by many instances of cruelty and confusion and mystery, and reduced to a horrifying loneliness sadly indicative of Sebald's own mental state not long before he took his own life—even in *Rings* there is a kind of hope that we find absent from the work of Cisco, for Cisco does not see the universe as in any way benevolent, he does not see the consciousnesses and living forms that are our neighbors as friendly.



I'm sure there are many writers and works I have forgotten in this brief comparison, and many of course with whom I am not familiar. But I still estimate I'm widely read enough to venture that Cisco is about as cruel as they come, in a fascinating way.

His first novel, *The Divinity Student*, even though it posits a kind of Gnostic layered universe through which there are many escape hatches and degrees of permeability (ghosts and entities of all sorts are regular visitors to his city San Veneficio), still his universe is not assuaged by the common associated logics of such Gnostic layerings: that is, the world beyond is not better, only different.

In Philip K Dick's worlds, hugely Gnostic, there is, one feels, still the very distant hope that the "true god" in typical Gnostic fashion, will finally come, and tear away the lies of the false one, and thereby deliver us from the evils of this Earth.

Still, *The Divinity Student* is ultimately a relatively warm and hopeful work in a number of ways, in that The Divinity

Student (the main character's only name) and his lover are young and in love (though they do very little about their feelings), and they are full of a naïve hunger for answers to the Ultimate Questions, a hunger which in the woman's case results in the break-up of their not-quite-love-affair, and which in his results in his ejection from this universe.

But, even though obviously *The Divinity Student* resembles Faust in his quest for knowledge and he pays the price—even though this is the case, Cisco's universe is crueler than Faust's. Because Faust goes to Hell. He pays. There is no Hell in Cisco's landscape, not in the sense of a divine realm where crimes are paid for, no, only other dimensions more foreign and more frightening than our own.

In *The Tyrant*, Cisco opens on Ella, whose spirit is significantly more beaten than *The Divinity Student*—lacking the use of both her legs and being inured to the cruelties of others, Ella is a kind of horrible punching bag for the warm and

cutting mind of the inter-dimensional human-shaped specimen of Air Male, whom Ella meets at Dr. Belhoria's lab.

This specimen is a man (Cisco has a bit too much fun running between Err Male, Air Mail, Heir Male, etc, as his name) but he is also clearly a kind of avatar. Perhaps a Gnostic lens is again helpful here, as Air Male's avatar-ness (he has a body but clearly is part of some large organized structure that affects the physical reality of our world) is queer in the same way that some of the Gnostic gospels present very strange pictures of Christ (one has Jesus as an evil little baby magician, kind of like a kindergarten version of Voldemort, who kills his play dates by the river with magic, and then lies to the other villagers about his crime).

Obviously this Jesus was, as represented in an old Dead Sea Scroll, clearly not quite of this universe, clearly divine in the sense of having supernatural powers, and clearly quite *cruel*. But unlike that Jesus, Air Male's cruelty is mixed with an

adult's ability to misdirect, to manipulate, to attack through dialogue, to seek sympathy in his victim, as he destroys him.

Even Macbeth, being human, feels remorse at Banquo's death, and even the crocodile tears of Richard III may lead us to suspect that he remembers at least what it *feels like* to feel remorse, even if only in *schein*, and even Cormac McCarthy's hard-luck cruel-as-hell Judge-gunslinger character in *Blood Meridian* has a limited range and a limited scope in his desires to enact his cruelties and his revenges.

But Air Male is horrible because he is human and because he is divine, because he is adult and because he is childlike, because he is omnipotent and because he is a helpless child, vulnerable to the ministrations of the deliberately distant and clinical Dr. Belhoria.

There is something very peculiar at operation in Cisco's mind as he paints this for us, because unlike Dr. Frankenstein's monster, we are not invited to feel much sympathy with Air Male. He is a prisoner (perhaps against his will, though we are

not sure), and he is subject to the clinical and impersonal lens of science via Dr. Belhoria, but his mind is so alien, and his curses so profound, that I, a secular American citizen and proud product of the Enlightenment, feel some sympathy with my forebears who might have burned witches, because Air Male's sentences are so creepy (sentences not spoken aloud, but rendered as text on screen via Dr. Belhoria's devices):

Air Male describes his "youth" (though we do not know if any of his stories are in any way "his" . . . he asserts baldly early on that "all stories belong to him"), describes growing up in the Home for Epileptic Boys, and how he and the other boys discover a robot of sorts who is used by the care staff to practice dealing with seizures.

The boys, bored, love winding the robot up and watching it flail and flail away, until they discover that it is slowly becoming conscious:

" \* It cried once, from behind the rubber face, its clothes stripped away showing its lungless works, the shrill went on and on while we were already flying from there \*

\*I hear it now.\*

. . .

\* Do you hear it?\*

Ella says no.

\* You will, all will—I haven't forgotten it, I don't remember it—it is *there*, like my skull is there, in my mind but it has nothing to do with my mind or my thoughts."

Again I am reminded of Sebald or of Borges' *Tlon*, in that this creepy logic and the calm sensible delivery are very affecting for the reader, but still I find Cisco's the crueler: there is still something of *deliverance* in the horrifying assertion that *all becomes Tlon*, even as there is something somehow warm and inviting in the strangeness Sebald describes in various overlapping logics of coincidences of the unraveling of the Enlightenment, 1600 to present. But in Cisco we find Air

Male and consciousness, thrust upon the unfeeling robot, inexplicable to Air Male and his own proto-guilt at causing the robot to become alive, and his assertion as this kind of evil child Jesus-god that *all will hear it*, that necessarily Air Male's suffering will become *all our suffering*, a vicious and subtle solipsism that invites our sympathy even as it triggers our horror.

It is fitting that *Tyrant* came out in 2003, as we invaded Iraq, as the death throes of our republic became fatally apparent, as the higher educational institutions that, in 2003, sheltered both myself and Cisco (and in whose prose the nightmarish echoes of institutional life are ever-present), came to be seen, rightly so, as just as corrupt as the "outside world" the academy studied.

Why do I love Cisco's cruelty? It is not that I agree with what we might call his unspoken presumption that the universe is cruel by nature. Werner Herzog in his film *Grizzly Man* once lamented that while the bear-man imagined he saw

in the eyes of the bears a commonality, Herzog saw was only a hungry animal in search for food, and this fundamentally cruel universe was the one in which the filmmaker believed.

I believe Cisco sees the world this way too, and yet I do not quite share it. I believe the universe, and other universes, vast beyond imagining and full of many horrors, still have some sympathy and empathy with us.

But in divorcing our humanity from this horrifying vastness and cruelty of the universe (rather than *sharing* in it and seeking our, God-help-us, "always-already interpenetrated" consciences by the gray areas of the world), in divorcing his heroes from that universe, and painting a paranoid world (more paranoid even than Thomas Pynchon!) where *all is somehow against us*, in doing this Cisco strengthens us, even as he gives us shivers.

He exaggerates to show us the danger.

# HALL OF MIRRORS

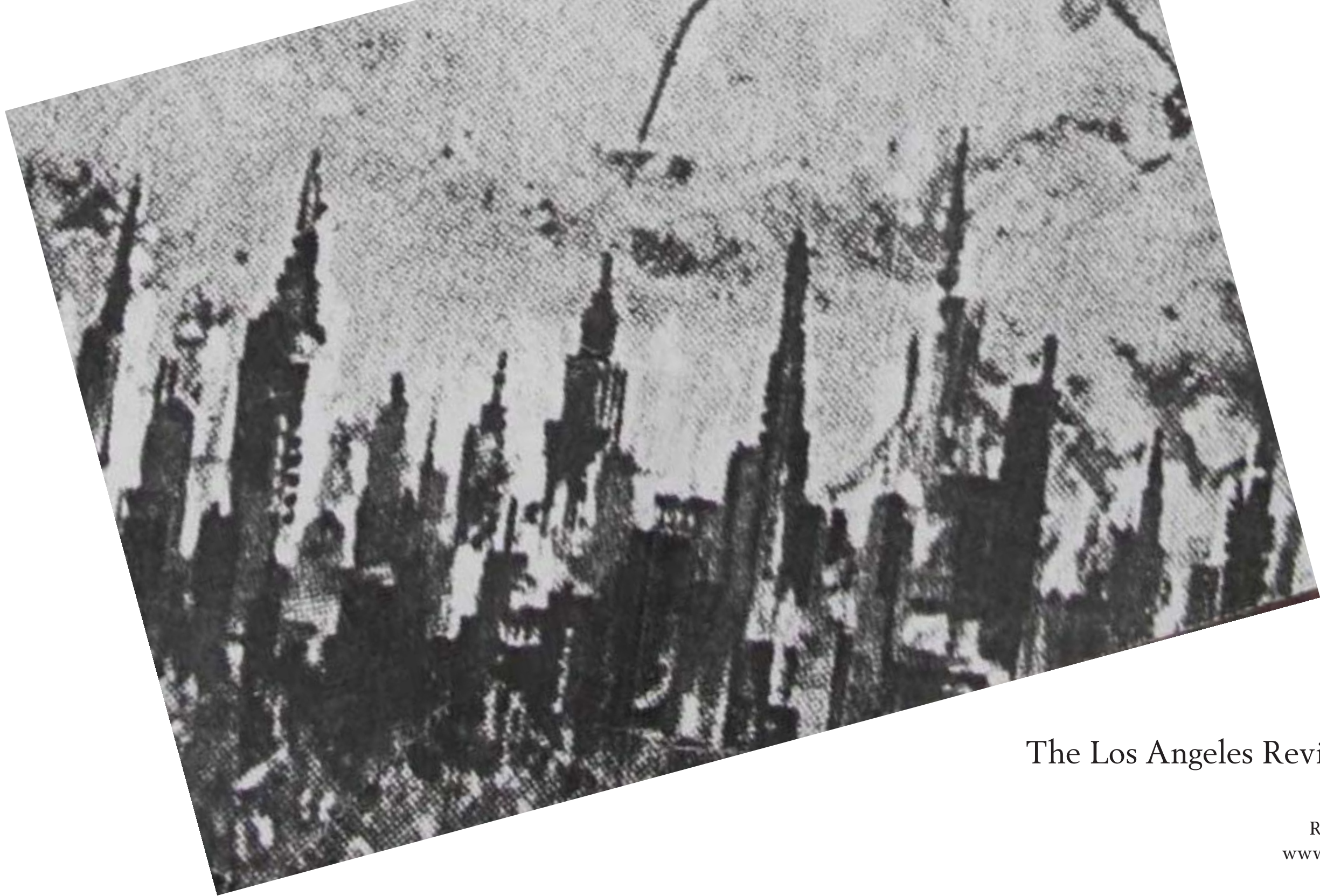
by CHRISTOPHER MULROONEY

always a pair of everything  
no just a pair  
not receding into infinity  
or advancing if you prefer it that way  
just this and that at one and the same time  
your head turns like a spectator  
the other thing

# THE MÖBIUS STRIP

by CHRISTOPHER MULROONEY

it comes out anywhere  
that there Conestogie is a Celtic tiger  
the spicy bit is a nun from some order  
the literary magazine's a bric-à-brac shelf  
and the hack doesn't go anywhere



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