

Anomaline

Encapsulation

My amnesia stops where my encapsulation begins. Unlike most people, therefore, I can recall what is effectively my birth.

A very long time ago, on a rainy afternoon, I am sitting by a window.

When I arrive at the scene, or come to — I'm not sure which — to find myself sitting on the wooden chair by the window, it is without fuss, as though I have always been sitting here, looking out at the lazy rain. There is a lull, as if the heart of the world skips a beat — it is within this moment of carelessness I think, that I find my eyes.

When I do find them, and my mind blooms open like a universe unfurling from a single point, I look out of them with the voracity of raw life, without discretion; without much grace or subtlety. The rain is persisting noiselessly through the stonewalled cut-out of the arched window beside me, but there is nothing in my mind, no place into which to put the images I am seeing. So they flood into

me and drop out of me again; countless snapshots of the falling rain wasted on my tactless staring.

I can't tell you about the damp smell of the Before that never was — and not because it's secret — I've just long grown out of being able to remember such a smell. There are no memories before the rainy afternoon, only foetal spasms: glitching pink lights from beyond the womb, squinting unborn eyes, submerged oceanic songs. But, sitting in the library, by the window on a rainy afternoon, I come to.

It is a comfortable room, if a bit chilly, and improbably vast for what must be a small smudge of a body sitting by the window at the far end, looking back over a shoulder. It is a place already lived in, by a History that already knows me like a strange old lady at a funeral, grabbing my cheeks and looking sadly into my youth. Uttering my name, introducing me to myself.

I hop off my chair, and wander off.

I trail between the tall shelves of the library, parsing the spines of the books with a finger, as if to ask: what do you know about me? But I keep being told the same lie: “There is no Before, before.” I know that it is a lie because everything in the world is older than me.

Who knows how long I've been out for, or what circumstances bring me to now hold a hand to my headache as if the faint heat emanating from my palm might somehow soothe the dull pain. But if my forehead throbs a little, I don't mind — it is a thing to be pernickety about, a precious complaint of weary living, which is the privilege of those who can discern. And if I am being lied to by the library, I don't mind — it is an affectionate form of deception, which is the privilege of those who are looked after by guardians.

I pass reams of books without discovering the mechanism of pulling them out. I read the vast faces of the shelves as one surface, discerning the letters horizontally across the spines in one big NTPCDKDarohlak... I amble down the aisles like tumbleweed, attracted and repelled by random whims. Occasionally, I bump into the shelves like a forlorn bowling ball and spin softly, looking blankly at the world I've entered as it appears in a rolling tape before my eyes.

The library is beginning to affect me, physically. It's sculpting me with its impressions as I pass: corridors, book spines, typeset and all. Aha, I think. So that's how it is. It would seem that to look around at things is a

reciprocal kind of probing; it entails being touched back by all the things I see. Like the swinging 'Saloon' sign in a Wild West cartoon, I am being shot by the ricocheted bullets of my own sight into some sort of recognisable shape. And I grow accustomed to this shape right away, without question, because I am that pliable.

Evening has descended when I retake my place by the window. I nudge the glass part open. On the threshold there is an invisible interface, where the dusk-air from outside tries to mingle with the library-air inside, dismissed from entering by the elite club of stuffy indoor air molecules. Strands of my hair levitate out of the window and tangle with the damp evening breeze, their naughty arrows tugging gently at my head, urging me forward, toward forbidden straits. But I am not easily persuaded, and remain perched by the window, loyal to the library and its protective lies.

Beyond, the rolling hills do not seem real, even under the wash of the rain from earlier on. And I have no wish to walk out into a picture. The world seems to me to be entirely held together within the library; the landscape merely a painted backdrop. But just now, with alarming

quietness, I catch sight of what I can only say looks like a drifting veil in the far, far distance. The drape dips and soars like the haunting soul of a dove against the darkened hills. It has been in the picture all along, but I mistook it for a wisp of a cloud, the artistic flirtation of a meandering brush. It drifts across the sky which, after the drizzle, has turned violet and warm, emitting the breath of a yawning lion.

The veil quivers in the air like a whimpering fiddle, drawing nearer, and then much nearer; drawing wetness from my eyes. The veil swells and contracts, in a manner of lamenting; it dances as if wounded, evoking the fit threads of an exhausted ballerina's legs, limp from fatigue, one knee threatening to knock the other and stumble like shot game. But the veil does not falter or fade from view. Instead, it continues on towards me, quite purposefully actually, until it passes over my face and hovers right above my head. Only at this range am I able to see that the veil is in fact an impossibly thin, floating skin, evasive as running water. What I do not see, and cannot possibly know, is that it is shaped exactly like me.

Without consulting me on the matter, strands of my hair float upwards and greet the airborne jellyfish-veil above

my head with eager synapses. I do not suspect any need to protest. I haven't had the chance to think things through yet, to remember why I am here, or to place an uneducated bet on my future. The veil settles over me quietly.

I look down and find my hands. On their surface I can barely see the sheen of the film clinging to my skin as I turn my outstretched fingers under the moonlight. The transparent veil covers the ridges of my toes, and even the cavities in my nostrils. It fits me perfectly and covers me entirely, so finely tailored it seems to have disappeared. I am perfectly encapsulated.

When some time passes and I come to regard the incident as exceptional, I recall it with solemnity, as if it marks the inheritance of a curse or a gift that — in either case — I ought to protect.

After my encapsulation, the night sky closes into itself, and it is clear that it has nothing more to share. So I slip off my chair and retreat into darkness.

When I creep through the aisles of shelves once again, their imposing flanks narrowing above me to eclipse the ceiling far above, I run my finger across the book spines once more. Nothing at all has changed. The film

separating me from the world is so slender that I cannot feel it intervening. Yet, much like the imaginary borders of countries, it means a lot more than its physicality might suggest.

Doubled

There it is again. It's quite something. I see before me the very same collection of items, repeated: the chair, the window, and me. My gaze pans back and forth between these three things with some humorous incredulity, as if a clever prank is afoot. But I am not devoid of a sense of humour myself, so no sooner are we all assembled back here again than do I too raise my eyebrows jauntily, as if to dare them — the chair, the window and me — to disappear all over again. But they don't! They just languish on, brazenly like that. And myself among them, for I have dared myself to stay, and I find myself already complicit in the mischief of continuing things; not going anywhere, not vanishing at all.

The sheer tension, of the kind bottled in a smirk before it bursts its banks, is irresistible; the elation, borderline emancipating. It's surely impossible for things to just go on being themselves so luxuriantly like this, and yet on they go doing it with raw audacity, expending themselves thriftlessly, like the flame who burns on and on and declares himself eternal. It's quite some joke. Reckless to the point of idiocy. Or maybe, it then strikes

me, and not without a little tasteful reservation; maybe these things — the chair, the window and me — are just shockingly rich?

I pan to my left: there is the cool, stone windowsill, deep by a whole torso's length, with a snippet of the mourning landscape restored in the arched hole in the wall. I pan to my right: there are the shelves, vanishing into horizontal darkness, with shafts of suspended dust streaked across their midsts. In my lap: a pair of conspicuously idle hands. Mobilised from being seen, they reach down to touch the underside of the chair: fibrous, splinter-laden. I do not ask by what method the scouting hands know this. The chair does not creak as I shift my weight.

The world ticks on in rolling persistence, as if it doesn't see the joke of which it is the butt, and this fact alone seems to dissipate the humour of the situation altogether. So I rub my head and relax my smirk; unable even, to remember why I found the persistence of things so funny in the first place. This is merely the way things are; they stay themselves, and if we were to go on laughing at that interminable state of affairs, well, we'd surely collapse into a state of termination ourselves. In fact, it is a mark of the uninitiated to sit here clinging to an instant, and I'd do better to look alive — smarten up a bit and drink

in the breathy air as if it didn't cost a thousand moments to do so. Entitlement is, after all, an option. And no sooner do I think of it, than it engulfs me with its sultry ease, and I start breathing. It feels *great*. Really — it's very roomy, very generous in that way.

In fact, that's just how it should be, I am reassured at last. I feel a shaky kind of humour returning to me again, the urge to laugh that often follows an averted danger. The shouty kind of laugh that not only braces me with the shudders of success, but even now serves as a material affirmation of my own continued preservation, my laugh hanging out in the open air, a boomerang of the soul hissing, "I am still here!" on its journey round the room.

Well! I am now exhausted. That was all quite eventful enough. What else is in store? I look about myself more soberly. The passing of an interval bears its mark somewhere upon the library, though I cannot quite point it out. Now, when I say interval, I don't mean the luxurious period of time I've just had the liberty of enjoying. I mean some other interval, by all accounts enjoyed by someone else.

You know, I think I know what it is. Here and there about the room, the air that hangs is of the unbreathed variety. It's in the smell, or at least in the heatless motion of the particles, which just waver haplessly in their suspension without taking the faintest thrill in it. Something has lapsed; between the now and the then, between the me's that float languidly like smudged crayon across instants. And it's staring me in the face all around, from every corner of the library, though its effect is diffuse and it's no use trying to point at it.

I am, to some extent, beginning to fear that the art of staying, which the objects of the library do so effortlessly so as to betray the great skill required of the feat, is not really something I'm very practised at. I am frankly not even sure which muscle is responsible for it, and am embarrassed to admit that I think I am accomplishing it by reflex. This supposition *heralds in* a secondary concern, that the very act of overthinking might interfere with my involuntary homeostasis and even cause me to buckle under the weight of my thought, thus rupturing my ability to stay myself and causing me to fall abruptly asleep — not unlike the time when I was wandering through the aisles of the library over there, right by the section on Urban Geography, and blacked out, only to

find myself restored on the chair by the window, a mere stone's throw from the location of my fainting. And before that interval was an even greater one — what of the Before, *before* the chair and the window and the rainy afternoon? I am certain it's not the first time I've asked that question.

Somebody, maybe someone in this house, has mended me into my present condition. I have probably been in their care for some time, convalescing here on the wooden chair in the library. When they enter through the large, arched passageway behind me and into the murky library, perhaps they will be able to shed light on its aisles; particularly those corners at the far end, which seem to fall into featurelessness; a kind of searing gap in the room's architecture which I am somewhat surprised to find I feel quite urgent to redress. A certain pleasurable feeling will begin to unfold; my picture of the world will slowly start to grow, the bleed of my imagination ebbing outwards like watercolours racing across the fibres of a sheet of tissue. Maybe they could fill me in on all my gaps too; point out to me my various bits and pieces and rescue them from phantomhood; address me with a name fit for a person like mine; and equip me with things of desire, which, with their

burdensome bulk, can cast shadows on the road ahead and have me believe in that thing called future. I would like to thank my host for their care, but they seem as yet nowhere to be found. I suppose I will just have to be patient.

I cast a glance outside. The window does not show what is directly below the sill, for it seems I am quite high up. A gravel driveway emerges from the bottom of the hill below and winds its way into an unfurling forest of trees weighed down by the brunt of the local weather, which is for the most part dull and precipitous, if its effects on the surrounding verdure are anything to go by. The sky, like a forehead to a face, takes up much room in the image for no obvious reason. A line of weeping willows circles the grounds at the bottom of the hill in the formation of a moat and they strike me somewhat oppressed as a colony, like a herd of solitary animals forcibly living in close quarters. But in amongst these fine details is a disconcerting kind of haze; I fear either a defect in my vision, or a lazy work of landscaping, for in between the definite articles of tree, gravel path and hill, there is a great deal of generalisation — indeed as though somebody has just written the word ‘grass’, instead of painted it into the scene outside. The sky too, bleeds into

the edges of all the articulate things like smoke set to envelope itself ubiquitously into every contoured thing. It is not merely myopic, but careless, and as I turn back to look to my right, a prickling thought seizes me: that beyond those dark, featureless patches in the far end of the library lies — not a poorly-lit space awaiting the revealing rays of my host’s lantern — no floor, no walls at all — but a sheer drop that leads right back to forgetfulness.

Bloody hell, there are holes all over the place. If you really pay attention, I mean. Great, big, poorly defined areas loom upon the north walls, out over where the moors would otherwise be dipping and rising into crests and troughs, and even on the shelves and on the floor moments from my feet; they hang there, neglected from the realm of description, and frankly, occupy the better part of the entire display. In other words, these holes that impose themselves upon significant portions of the environment do not constitute space, but rather some *blasé* notation for space; blurry patches denoting “here is some wall,” or “here is a bit of landscape,” or “here is a ceiling. Kind of. What difference does it make to you?”

But the economist within me checks my disapproval of these nonsensical intrusions, arguing that, after all, it

does seem to tally up; for you can't have all these things lying around, projecting themselves in full detail, without sacrificing something. And to some extent I agree, finding myself to be a somewhat prudent soul, and recalling that my initial realisation that I was back here in the library again seemed to arouse a distasteful sense of extravagance. The abbreviated spaces around me seem to make up for that.

All the same, I'd better meet the caretaker soon if I am to be informed of the proper safety procedures, and if I am to have any hope of restoring myself to who I once was in the Before, without, if I can help it, submitting myself to any further calamities that might wipe away the brief memory of my reawoken life in this place.

Looking down at my lap, I realise to my chagrin that I have still not risen from the chair. Even now, I still can't quite place myself. Hello? I call out, hearing no echo. The vast room seems to have swallowed my call; down it goes into the throat of the dark chasm at its rear. It does not return, nor does my anonymous custodian.

Episodes

On. In? From there to where? Under, over, beside or on top? This kind of information is not easy to pin down about the things in the house, which, as I will try to explain, has a bit of aloofness about it. Prepositions are always getting the better of me. I am finding my feet in the world, and boy, are they tricky to find sometimes.

The library is situated within a very fine cottage, or castle, or something in between. It has rooms and corridors that cohere in a complicated, historically suggestive sort of way. From the winding staircase of the grand reception room, to the stone masonry around the kitchen hearth; these homely enclosures furiously contain one another, huddling inward in an obstinate struggle to carve ever greater depth into the heart of the house. Paintings and jewellery boxes on the mantelpieces; panelling and windows on the walls; desks and *commodes* on the carpets; rectangles upon rectangles pass me by in a hypnotising procession. I am drawn into closets, mezzanines and courtyards. I am sucked into antechambers, alcoves and rooms designed for waiting. The house obsessively layers itself with interiors,

arranged in some marvellous feat of architecture that conveys its occupants in and out of rooms without much effort on their part — seemingly without requiring even their will. I drift leglessly, on and on into the mise-en-abyme of enclosures.

On my listless sojourn into the heart of the house, a gentle draft begins to toy with the summer curtains, making them ripple in slow greeting. This presence (not an animal, I think, but a weightless, animating principle of its own order), rushes on ahead of me to chase floor dust and jangle chandelier beads. It wants to show off what it knows about the house, by getting to the more interesting features before me and animating them in provocation of my inertness. It shoots in and out of windows, taking pleasure in my ignorance, especially in my not knowing how to stop drifting, underscoring this by stopping and starting, winding and shooting, racing and resting. This is no permanent resident of the house, but a regular snooper; letting himself in as a matter of course, with the audacity of someone comfortable in the knowledge that he will not be caught. When I reach the fifth corridor, the breezy vagrant seems to have abandoned the place in pursuit of some other foible, for the silence and stillness has crept back in — a silence so

totalising, that were it not that I were conveyed along through the succession of rectilinear passageways, I would surely think I were merely looking at a picture of the house, not delving into its depths as we speak.

Not once do I encounter another occupant in all the rooms I journey through; no caretaker, no souls at all. I remember then, that I am of course the sole occupant of the house. Even so, a certain intensity troubles my trajectory at certain junctures in the floating tour, and even as I drift without so much as touching the floor, I am compelled to wobble a little, like an upset planet, especially as I pass by the library for the second time (this time annexed to the stables). Something like a moody current issues from some source within the house and at times orients the compass of my gut this way and that, indicating towards a seemingly restless centre of mass. Like an ancient mollusc, some hidden grain of the house seems dimly alive — the rest of it consisting of sedimentary epochs shelling outward in dead sheaths; a time lapse of the styles and the times gone by. Locating this brooding centre of mass through all the dead house-layers will be no simple feat: for upon approaching the sixth corridor I recognise on its walls the same paintings from three corridors ago; only, this time it leads into two

wide galleries as opposed to the series of small suites from earlier on.

Needless to say, this sort of layout can pose a problem, but I am content with my lot. Yes, it's easy to get lost in the house, but it's also easy to make do and resign oneself to wherever one ends up: the drawing room will do just as well as the wine cellar. It may have been a bit nauseating to begin with, but I am becoming somewhat comfortable with disorientation, whereby each involuntary twist and turn down the conveyor belt of the house's tunnelled innards becomes but a fresh assignment. Getting lost is a necessary nuisance in this place, which, as with some household chores, one can acquiesce to and find some capitulative joy in. The foreign trinkets, furniture and patterned wallpaper with which the great house is embellished, harbour a spirit of estrangement that feels paradoxically familiar. Amidst these old things, my ignorance is soothing and stabilising, and so it turns out that, in spite of everything and even bereft of feet, I roam the residence with some degree of command.

The crux of the matter is that I, or the house, or both of us are extremely forgetful. But I think I mostly blame the house. It can't quite keep the arrangement of its rooms in

order, they have a tendency to reshuffle like a deck of cards and slide into realignments each time I leave a place behind, or awake into a new episode. Even now as I float past my bedroom; you see, it no longer adjoins the bathroom, but the study. Yet, this inconsistency has a naturalness about it, like the pulsing of a vital organ; a brain puzzling over where to store its abundant memories.

I am sure there are reasonable explanations for this phenomenon. Some might say it is my ill-informed outlook that causes this vertiginous appearance of things; my lack of breeding and companionship — for surely if there were someone else like me around then they could set my sight straight and tell me what's what. On the other hand (and the more I think about it, the more I lean towards this second theory), it is also plausible that my sensory faculties are perfectly in order, but that I've simply been prematurely born into an unfinished world which is still deciding on the layout of things. But I scarcely have the time to concern myself with such lofty questions as the indeterminate physics of unfinished worlds. The only thing that interests me right now is drifting through the house for as long as possible, without blacking out. I must cling to these lucid

moments, for when I am awake I see myself sail along with that bearing of someone in possession of a free mind — an attitude that rings loudly in the corridors of this vacated place — and it is thrilling.

The lucid moments are punctuated by frequent and unsolicited bouts of sleep. I'll simply fall asleep — wherever I happen to be — and of course, awaken somewhere else. The indecisive topology of my home is but one of the unconditional forces that govern my day-to-day destiny, and I must tolerate its whims like those of the weather. The vitality of it is not lost on me, and somewhat impressed me at first, but of course, monotony manages to find its dull rhythm in the most fantastical of circumstances, given they persist for a few days and nights of the mind. Waking and sleeping is the metronome of normality, and washes over grievances and joys alike with its tide. So, I trust in my unlikely permanence and stay intact against all odds, like a drop of oil in turbulent waters.

This very afternoon for example, I awoke to find myself promiscuously stretched across the floors of two different rooms. I was in the process of determining which half of me felt colder than the other, rubbing at the band of straight lines impressed on my belly from the

grooved strip of brass lining on the threshold between these two rooms, when I recognised that my lower body was in the billiard room and my upper body in the pantry. I wondered then, whether crossing some lines — like the doorway that joined these two rather incompatible rooms together — might be forbidden, or invited ill tidings. And given that I live a pretty sheltered life, gently awoken from a long sleep; guarded within the protective enclaves of the library and encapsulated in the invisible, hermetical gauze that sanitises my every interaction with the material world; it is curious to speculate as to what could possibly have inspired such ominous thoughts. It is above all children though, is it not; who, swaddled safely in someone's arms by day, conjure for themselves the most unusual terrors by night.

It is very easy to forget that I cannot touch anything. Waking up to a new episode is so laborious, so tiresomely physical and immediate; it is sweaty and meaty and the grogginess penetrates my brain. It's embarrassing to catch myself so readily believing my interaction with the world is more intimate than my mediated experience permits. I try scraping at my skin sometimes, to see if the thing can come off, or at least loosen and betray itself by sliding along my arm. But my

fingertips seem to be too large and crude to disturb the atomic film clinging to my skin, so by all appearances, I may as well just be prodding away at my real skin.

And as I lay there, my legs spilling into the billiard room and my top half in the pantry, I did wonder to myself whether I am really part of all this after all. Skin is necessarily semi-permeable, is it not? Thousands of little breaths **exhume**(exude/exhale) through its tiny pores, foreign compounds negotiate their entry from all sides at the discriminating gates of skin cells. It takes a fickle membrane to contain the equally fickle contents of a person. But that hardly seems possible in my condition. There is nothing blurry about the boundary — it's clean cut.

It's getting late. I have been stuck in a slight tilt ever since I passed the library the third time (then annexed to the parlour). Upon my descent down the courtyard-facing gallery the curtains murmur something inaudible to each other, betrayed by the tiny, breezy plumes that disturb their hems.

I have still not found my feet. You could say that the concentration and belief systems required to remember

their proper attachment to my ankles are still somewhat underdeveloped.

Kettle

Certain objects in the house seem to take pity on me. Most unnerving of all is the eternally melancholy kettle, with her whining spout. When she begins to cry for my sake, I have to console her, and this is a long process requiring a great amount of effort.

I can always sense her beginning to whimper the moment I enter the kitchen, and, hoping to mitigate an outburst, I firm up my chin and go briskly past like someone mighty and resolute and definitely unplagued. But she is scarcely ever convinced. I don't entirely understand what is so appalling about my situation so as to warrant such exaggerated displays of sympathy, and usually bear the commotion with some measure of anxiety. I try to look around myself, at myself; in search of a dreadful scar, an absent limb, a burnt face, or no face. I try to forge a path into my memory to the Before before my memory and restore some important clue, without much success.

Her compassion frightens me, and often I think about tossing her out quietly. I've run through it in my mind a

number of times, but it always ends up the same way. One cold morning, by the crackle of first dawn, I go to the kitchen, brush down my sleeves and dust my hands. I pick up the little kettle without looking at her and quicken my pace before I can begin to change my mind. And she begins to fidget and protest. And I do not look at her, but straight ahead, and she erupts into hysterical hulks. She makes it both too scary and too sad to murder her. I then go back, place her back in her spot, scrap the plan, and thus will have only perpetuated her sensitivity for years to come.

So I just bear it. I refrain from looking at her as much as I can, lest a glance should induce violent sobs. Once I said, for goodness sake, will you just stop crying! But that set her off, all right. I went to bed and covered my ears with thick goose-feather pillows, to no avail.

On some minor level I am grateful however, for the responsibility she makes me feel for her. When I put on an apron on early, dewy mornings, perhaps to perform a Spring Clean, I take extra pleasure in rubbing the belly of my kettle with a cloth dampened by the vapour of my breath. She does not whimper then, but coo.

Caterpillar

I awake with a tender chill, to find myself reclined on the grass outside and a finger poised carefully over a bent blade of grass. I watch with microscopic attention my finger stroking the poisonous hair of a red caterpillar. He is clad in a carnival skin, his garish attire putting my quiet way of life to shame. Voluptuous he is, fit to burst with healthy juices, and drenched in a merciless crimson dye whose saturation is intensified by a single stripe of citrus yellow. I watch him steamrolling over a blade of tall grass, the length of which for him constitutes a prolonged, risky feat. His corpulent jelly bulges forwards into a rhombus, his sticky underside gasping into rolling frills that urge on a slimy progression.

The ridges of the personal code imprinted in a unique swirl on the skin of my hovering forefinger grate two hundred white caterpillar hairs in their passing. He reads the braille of my greeting, perhaps even recognises me, but speeds on regardless, with untarnished fervour. Organic combustion takes place inside of him, flushing his complexion with ever more violence. Fierce and frightening caterpillar. He has no way of knowing of

course, that I am disguised as myself, that my fingerprint is forged by the invisible film that separates me from the world.

The portal at the end of the blade of grass is within grasp. He is almost there. It is a green runway narrowing off into a mysterious vanishing point that blinks in the piercing sun. He will leave this place in search of greener pastures. Without knowing the mechanics of the teleportation gate at the approaching limit of the strand of grass, he gives himself over fully to its ways. The final caterpillar hair twangs off my steadied fingertip, and I watch him attempt to enter a new dimension. As he presses on, pursuing the green path, he seems to tense up in anticipation of what will have to be a reasonably mind bending ejection. Then he reaches a tipping point, at which moment the blade of grass is about to gracefully give way to the weight of the charging caterpillar that I've been watching since awakening.

He braces himself. He bears the roaring turbulence that speeds past him in the warped colours of bent time and space, he clenches his muscles to stay in one piece as he reaches the vanishing point of the blade of grass and surrenders to powers unseen to those of such miniature condition, expelling him at record velocity such that

overcomes the limitations of his **modest** and cumbersome little body. It is a shuddering clasp with the hands of the universe, an affectionate difficulty, like that of birth, an experience that boils in your very bones and whose overpowering luminescence you shield with squinting eyes.

Protected by nature's laws the caterpillar abides his intuition and trusts the mysterious portal at the end of the blade of grass that sucks him up and spits him out. I watch from where I lie, how the whole blade bends backwards with the caterpillar glued to its tip, hurtling him down to the ground again. It is here, on the crinkly floor of dried leaves and fermenting humus, that the brave caterpillar regains his bearings, and finds himself truly displaced from where he first embarked upon his upward journey to a new realm. His faith once again consolidated with the boundless, unfathomable powers he knows are **extant** at the pointy extremities of tall grasses, on ventures that huffing and puffing locomotive creature, into hopes of better prospects ahead.

I roll onto my back but can't quite seem to stay awake. The sky above opens itself into a great big generalisation, uniformly blue with the word 'cloud' seemingly engraved here and there across its surface, as

if it knows it need no longer keep appearances. I have no time to take issue with it.

Gifts

It is an understanding between myself and elements of this world, that I am the child in our common scenario, and that the sky is my parent, my envoy of regulated wisdom from beyond. Increasingly, I find myself spending nights seated by the same window through which I first laid eyes on the world, searching the sky in vain for the kind of knowledge which is purchased in exchange for youth.

All this shielded truth is all well and good, I suppose, if you are indeed young and in need of protection. But somewhere within myself, I am aware of a violence that swells like the memory of a wrongdoing. I cannot possibly be a child. I cannot possibly have been born that rainy afternoon by the window, because I am not innocent. I must be much older than a child, my naivety a consequence of memory loss, not youth. And so this evening, I am piercing a beam of laser concentration into the sky, questioning it on the matter.

Naturally, it doesn't seem interested in offering me a reply. It holds its nursery rhyme book closed for me, refusing to indulge me tonight, disciplining me.

The sky is capable, on rare, yet in themselves wholly unexceptional occasions, of lowering down a gift for me as if on a fishing pole. And now, in a slouching reverie, I wonder when it might next decide to send me something like the floating veil.

Once I received, in a small parcel, a porous, red coloured stone that smelled funny but fresh. It rested in my palm but burned, as if angered by being displaced, and I dropped it on the floor of the library where it tumbled into a crack and was never seen again.

On such days I summon all my faculties of observation, taking note of the conditions of the day in an attempt to chart out some reasoning behind these parachuted gifts from beyond: Has there been a sudden turn in the wind? Have the lines in the floorboards redrawn themselves? Has a book been misplaced? Which room did I wake up in today? Despite the painstaking monitoring of my environment on days such as these, I have been unable to extract a pattern. The wind does tend to be still, although I assume this is to ensure the safe passage of the parcels.

Parcels that look like harmless dots in the distance, like lost balloons, but that inevitably get swept my way with unforeseeable consequences.

Once a mechanical clock was sent to me. I thought it was some weird joke. Without fully comprehending the signs on its glossy face, I could tell what it was trying to do. It was trying to trap me like a revolving radar closing in on enemy vessels. It kept pace coolly and regularly, ticking off my movements as if they were predestined, breaking me into predictable pieces.

I held it reluctantly, recalling that I had seen illustrations of these machines in some of the technical books in the library. I know that some people used to keep them in their homes. My house though, has no such objects. No ticking clocks, no chiming time-tellers, no meddling metronomes. So I tossed the clock through the window until it was heard no more. I was very angry with the sky, and did not return to my watchman's post by the window of the library for several days, but instead went straight to bed, buried in a mahogany grave that was much too large for me.

Inevitable Serendipity

The library is a grave of ideas by disappeared people. I get the sense, when I find myself in there, that the books ogle me like inmates who have not spoken to anyone in a long time; their loneliness affords them an urgency that inspires both sympathy and fear.

It should be a quiet place but it is not, the entire room stirring with parliamentarian quarrels, dogmatic preachers and hopeless romantics, and like a newcomer to a place with deep-set grudges, I am anxious not to draw too much attention to myself. I shroud myself in the books' collective ambience like a cloak and roam the aisles like streets in a noisy city; the shelves skyscraping, the books' writings undoing each other in chattering contradiction. I roam around on the pretext of some errand, always bearing, in the back of my mind, some weak expectation of a serendipitous encounter that promises to wonderfully interrupt my duties and make all that came before seem provisional, just placeholders.

I keep half-hearted watch for a meaningful encounter, for I am quite ready, I feel, for the relief of some explanation

as to why I am here. But the meaningful encounters are hard to distinguish from the meaningless ones, and the city streets of the ancient library rage on in silence, as if it too, in the end, makes no distinction between the good books and the bad. Here they all find a home.

I want to apologise for involuntarily eavesdropping on the books, and, as though walking past a conversation of which I am not a part, I take with me excerpts of the books who whisper their contents aloud, like prayer. I've tested this by stopping, going back, then forth again. Each book murmurs its own tale, in media res, unless you are really lucky and pass by a book that has just started all over again, from the beginning. I wander in and out of hearing range of these meditations, as though tuning a radio of which each station is someone's mind. It's embarrassing. I glance hotly at them to check if they know I can hear everything they seem to keep secret in their slot on the shelves.

On one such visit to the library, I was traversing the grooves of a firmly slotted book with my finger, in an effort to try and find its singing mouth. I soon discovered that the book could be pulled out like a lever. On further inspection, it released itself entirely from the collective, upon which the two neighbouring books on the shelf

caved into the cavity and leant on one another for support, causing some loosening further down the row. Divided from the others, the book rested in my hands.

I can't easily surmise the things the book told me. When I turned the front cover, the book's talking grew loud, neatly settling into my ears with a clear signal and blocking out any interference from the others as if I and the book alone were in an empty, insulated room. The sound no longer issued from the book itself, but seemed to be a vast liquid in which I was suspended. I heard a story, from beginning to end, from sunset to sunrise, the night elapsing thoughtlessly; but I seemed to be hearing it from inside my own head.

The book tricked me into thinking I was the book. Prejudices popped into my mind about this or that person, and I had to remember they were not mine, and that I didn't know those people. But as the first rays climbed over the moors and I neared the last quarter of the book, it did occur to me that soon I would know all that the book itself knew, and I earned a sense of completion because, after all, the various lives in the book of the people that populated it could be contained in a finite vessel and ingested like a pill.

The encounter with the book was like a telephone conversation with an estranged relative. I felt suspicious about its alleged relation to me, especially as it seemed so readily to lay claim on me as its addressee, and when it first spoke to me I said, who, me? Yet, I found strange affinities in the most unfamiliar terrains of the story, as if to stumble upon as yet unrecognised aspects of my personality along its pages.

The book spoke of a set of relationships between some people who were strangers to me, and yet I kept discovering that I had at the ready a set of reactions to all manner of situations I have never come across, certain impulsive ethical or emotional recourse. I don't know if these were something I already had, some genetic sequence saved for a rainy day, or whether the book was supplying me with them. I only know that, whether they were unlocked in me or whether I was acquiring them on-the-go, that I knew what feelings to have when a wrong had been done, an injustice buried, or a sacrifice made. And now I am a little worried to find myself here again, drawn somewhat ahead of my will, to the library, because I haven't decided fully whether it is good or not to come here. Reading the book that night had the dual effect of doubling me, filling me up, each character

superimposed upon me like a mask to which I compared my own likeness; and also leaving me emptier, with a hole in my gut and a sense of premature loss. And these things combined, this satiation and weightlessness, this clarity and light-headedness, is what has brought me here again, to be oriented and disoriented by the literary metropolis of the library and the multifarious inhabitants it houses without judgement.

Talents

The day of the Spring Clean has arrived. There are certain tell-tale signs that it is time. The flaky pallor of the morning wakes stiffly in expectation of the season's pending rejuvenation. Black bark scorched by frosts makes a bed of ash on the forest floor. Critters purr from holes burrowed in hidden places, as they unfurl themselves from hibernation. And I, unpeeling a wink of sleep from one eye, promptly leap from my enormous bed with uncharacteristic energy, and bound up to the bedroom window to greet the still-stirring sky with an obnoxious freshness. Squinting back at me askew, the sky screws itself painfully into a knotted frown at being thus exposed, still half-buried in unseemly folds of cloud that hold the imprints of its great, big, unwashed dishevelment of a face.

Usually it is the other way around: If I am lucky enough to wake up in a bed, I slither out of its covers in the morning like a slothly liquid, in such a way that the bed does not even require making, the duvet falling smoothly back into place. Like a puddle of molten witch, I attempt to regenerate myself from a negligible formless heap at

my bed's side. The dubious smell of long-lost slippers from beneath the frame, sectioned off by a neat row of decorative thready frills — a smell known only to children playing hide-and-seek, or lethargic adults wasting away the days on bedroom floors — is the first incentive to pull myself together. The laborious routine is rendered even more humiliating in the likelier event that I wake up somewhere else, like the bathtub or inside a wardrobe. I know then, that I must collect my bits and pieces and summon myself into a single unity to face him. It is the knowledge that the sky will be waiting for me, standing squarely from the hilltops, that presents me with a prospect of failure I cannot ignore, and which finally compels me to find the strength to rise. The sky is always ready for me, like a coach with his hands on his hips and a whistle around his neck.

But oddly enough, this morning it is I who has summoned that invigorating wind, gnashing and fresh as mouthwash, under which the sky now flinches. And here too is the sun, clambering along the horizon with prying fingers, its head still obscured. It is a little embarrassing to catch the sky off-guard like this, and yet, it seems truly that I am the more prepared — early even — and this is startling to all the parties involved.

Mending the glitch: the morning suddenly speeds up to the pace of a backstage changing room: clouds are ushered off-set and finally windscreen-wiped away like shaving cream; sunlight hastily slips into dramatic golden drapes, and birds flee into position across the scene unfolding upon my window pane. It occurs to me that these might be the workings of that clock I tossed out some time ago — now getting back at me out there somewhere. I imagine its hands spinning furiously about its snout, egging on the hours until the sky finally rises high above me, gloriously restored, as if it did not oversleep this morning.

What now, is this a challenge? I make a miserable opponent, and make no effort to engage in the proposed duel. The sky's is the last word, and I have not, despite the morning's rare victory, rallied up the arrogance to contend that tradition. Nor is one so dismal as I seduced by such a sport — yet how can I know how much this disappoints the spirited jousting in the sky? I might have the compassion to humour him, otherwise. Instead, I fade back into the dark passageways of my home, distracted by prospects that are to me far more compelling.

It is the day of the Spring Clean, and I am eager to pull on my apron and begin. An exceptional day. A day of

jobs. A day of competence. My hands, instead of spilling helplessly over things like nostalgic ghosts, will, encouraged by the occasion, become something like makers, busying away and injecting nothing short of a life-like elixir into all that they touch. Mending things. Nurturing things. I'd like to do that with my hands. How enchanting to feel the effect of one's imprints become a matter of consequence, rather than coincidence; fingers transformed into meticulous little wands.

The day of the Spring Clean is to my home a frail promise of rejuvenation of the kind proffered by cosmetic remedies; a cleansing fantasy that bursts the dam of a mundane moment. It is a day in which all suddenly feels ticklish: when I spray the leaves of the rubber plant in the kitchen, when I shuffle along the rugs in slippers while dusting abandoned shelves. And for me it is an excuse to touch everything out of necessity. Where to place this urn? Do the moth holes in the curtain need mending? Does this piano key need a tune?

The arms of the apron tightens around me with the security of a rock-climber's belt, the skirt of which features front pockets of various sizes to accommodate the tools of my expedition.

At the door, I look back over my shoulder at the floorboards, where what looks like a coat lies flung across the floor. There I catch sight of it for the first time, after which it never seems to leave me again: a long silhouette extending from my feet across the floor, staring still and alert back at me. I exchange a few wordless moments with the tall, dark, faceless floor-man. We inspect each other. Curious about what is the same, and what is different. My shadow seems to me a primitive version of myself, the me that would have roamed steppes and straits in the Dawn of Man. Then I imagine it stretched out — just like this — across a prehistoric forest floor, howling bitterly in the moonlight by the corpse of a mate.

“Come on, pet,” I call, not without some suppressed fear, but he follows and we go on our way through the house. He follows a little jaggedly at my side — I take this to be a two-dimensional limp — in the manner of someone who has accepted a lifetime of servitude and unfrequented by-gones. I always find that the butlers who make marginal appearances in the stories in the library, especially the most polite ones, must be the heroes of some unspoken tragedy in some other book I’ll likely never find. Such servitude, and the abandonment of

identity it implies, must be the closest remedy for whatever traumatic events the shadow holds secure in its past.

The sitting room was clearly once an agreeable location for receiving guests, in which floral armchairs, glass-cabinet silverware and huddled antiquities now hoard and inflate themselves like the cheeks of a cake maker. Standing in the doorway I hear myself breathe, the stifled comfort of the room circulating in a bullring around my nostrils. I survey the sitting room in an anticlockwise direction. The decor interblends quite congenially, I reason, evidently the result of a housekeeper who has taken their post very seriously. To be sure, the entire design is in keeping with the fiddly nuances of contemporary tastes. There is however, over the din of overgrown furniture and cluttered precious wares, a pinch of individuality that I spot running amok here and there as if upon a mad scarlet thread. Upon the icing sugar palette of wallpaper, for instance, hangs a strange portrait oil painting of a well-dressed woman. Rather than posing proud and stately as one to be held ever more in reverence, she looks back out directly at the viewer in surprised embarrassment. She is painted in a French impressionistic style, wrapped in a bonnet and

gripping a pair of gloves on her lap, lips pursed and eyebrows raised as if she has just been caught munching an extra macaroon. A forgivable sin, but one she hoped to get away with anyway. She holds her lips and teeth motionless like that until you look away, at which point she hastily swallows the remaining evidence.

Then, in the centre of the room under the coffee table, there is a rug made of haphazardly pixelated coloured yarn. I don't think much of it at first, but that its idiosyncratically woven patterns are hardly complimentary to the rest of the interior, until on closer scrutiny I realise with almost disconcerted astonishment that the thread work clearly outlines a colourful bar-graph score of Toccata and Fugue in D Minor. Truly an unexpected curatorial decision, for which reason I superstitiously avoid stepping on the rug. It should certainly start playing at the slightest interference. With my knees on the floor just off the edge of its fraying threads, I proceed to give the illustrated, walnut veneer of the coffee table a good polish.

Hullo there! I wave with the wiping gestures of my cloth to the people depicted upon it. They are too engaged in some frozen hieroglyphic encounter to heed me. Clamour in the marketplace: a haggling mishap. One

gentleman is making what looks to be a rather serious accusation at the other, whose arms are flung out in exaggerated innocence, as if to prove there are no dirty tricks hidden up his wide-brimmed sleeves. Around them huddle crowds of shameless interlocutors, diplomats and witnesses eager to contribute judgements and compromises, or, if nothing else, simply the inertia of their bodies which swarm over the dispute. The pushy crowd dare only invade the dispute between the two men for the fact that they are much more irritated with each other than these nosy parkers. And, as is customary within frozen depictions of tumultuous moments, each member of the swarm represents archetypal characters that point, frown, whisper, grin, scowl, prank, flirt, scheme and spy to provide a moralising spectrum of human character which, as viewers, we may contemplate at a critical distance.

This scene of everyday medieval life was once rendered in exhaustive detail to the highest degree of craftsmanship, in a time when sufficient centuries had passed for this commonplace judicial matter to have become cause for endearing reminiscence. With my hands polishing the brassy sunshine of their aged faces, I find myself now inching along the etched woodwork in

admiration of the mysterious artist who has by now also vanished into nostalgia, along with his craft. I am no magician myself. But I have come across a philosopher's stone or genie's lamp, which glows under my meddling hands. I play the part of that foolish one on whom befalls either great fortune or great mishap for stumbling across a potent talisman, having even the audacity to pull onto her own mortal head the wizard's hat, or onto her own hands the demon's jewels. I have no talent of my own.

The door to the sitting room slams shut behind me in a startlingly timely response to this small transgression, frightening off my shadowy companion, who now peeps cautiously out of a Chinese lantern with his charcoal snout. Another door simultaneously opens to reveal a corridor leading to the kitchen. These old porters! The doors in this place begrudgingly follow the orders of a megalomaniacal draught operating a sharp system of punctuality — the logic of which I cannot quite put my finger on. In rude obedience, the doors fling themselves open, vulgarly offering unadulterated passage, while others simply slam abruptly in one's nose. This structural realignment of opening and closing doors throughout the household is like the ringing of church bells: a ritual enough occurrence so as never to arouse suspicion, yet

rare enough to draw attention to itself every time its duty is performed. Town dwellers stop in the street to hear out the chimes and see off the death of the hour. And the new hour must be announced before one can attempt to live it out, one must not move a muscle while the bells toll. In the same manner do I cease my polishing, pricking my ears to the succession of doors hinging open and slamming shut beyond layers of enclosure. It is an old house with many hollow rooms, and endless doorways that spiral out in a breathing system of dominoes. A mysterious algorithm promptly unravels about me. Then, all at once: quiet. Things resume normally as if by the resetting of a watch.

When I turn back to the veneer I am only looking at a picture — the charm I found in it now relocated to another crevice of curiosity which I have yet to discover.

Folding the polishing cloth back into its compartment in my apron, I brandish a duster. I have to remove every manner of trinket and memorabilia from the mantelpiece in order to confront the grey settlements of temporal weather that have accumulated there. I smile to myself as I sweep off sheets of dust. I am Spring herself. With one fell swoop I thaw the snowy residue of time.

Dust clamours about, dissolving into the air like burst dreams. A speck of dust constitutes a unit of that sneaky time, the kind of time that happens without anybody there to catch it up and live inside of it. The evasive kind that makes you regret. I suppose the day of the Spring Clean is a superficial subtraction of this form of time, leaving in its stead a perky appearance to things, a readiness, an anticipation.

I carefully reposition the porcelain mermaid, along with her neighbour, the tin Florentine sweet box without sweets in it. Further from these two stand the elephant carved out of ivory, shrugging his shoulders like one who has lost his sense of humour. His legs make a pleasant sound as they click into place beside other members of the Mantelpiece family. They aren't a chatty family, probably because they are a rather eclectic lot without much in common. Indeed, when left to their devices they have not much at all to say to each other. They are constantly maintaining their own personal space, retelling their own story to themselves over and over, without sharing. I fiddle with their placements until I am sure nobody has been a fraction displaced.

And so my cleaning continues. I stealthily whisk away the showing years, leaving rooms wrought with a sharp

note of suspicion. Where is my age? They wonder. Meanwhile I wipe and swipe — secretively appending the experiences I have stolen from them to my own incalculable age. I collect bored heartbeats and forgetful breaths. Stored at my fingertips are the tracing motions of tactile meddling, little recipes of history. My hands mock what they polish. Walking out of the sitting room, the hand hanging by my right side autonomously dances the shape of the porcelain mermaid in rippling repetitions — like a new karate move carried all the way home from training practice. My hand remembers. It swivels subtly, forging signatures of the things I have handled.

On quitting the sitting room I try to shake off the scarlet thread of individuality that I have got tangled up in: it sprawls itself in my tracks like a neglected skipping rope.

The corridor leading ahead to the kitchen is not too long, but adjoins several more rooms that I peer into in passing. Rooms with names so particular as to their purpose — rooms assigned each to specific junctions in those evenings of structured amusement enjoyed by distinguished dinner guests. There is a room for sitting and eating, and a room for dancing and drinking, and a room for smoking and whispering. Such complex

amusement has to rely on some form of trafficking or other.

The green light is a hearty announcement, a tinkle of the teaspoon to the sherry glass, a decadent hostess' smile. Then, voluminous skirts can be heard rustling through one doorway to the next as small talk resumes over linked arms, uninterrupted but reduced to murmuring anticipations of the mode of merriment to come. The guests then migrate between perches, attuned as they are to the seasons of social conduct. Biological concerns are not neglected in these high-level proceedings: indeed, the minimal exercise required of the relocating dinner guests is timed to coincide advantageously with digestion, reshuffling the arsenal of delicacies daintily fermenting within each guest.

These rooms, so intimate, so manifold, enshroud the whole evening with ever more mystery, like a parcel with extra layers of wrapping. I envisage the chiffon procession and the figures of which it is composed, animating in my mind's eye the amicable countenances of these historical guests. I revel in turning over each lord and lady with the warmth of visual participation with which little children invest the eternal smiles of

their dolls, all the while doing little more than sitting on the floor and stroking their shiny hair.

The rooms are so numerous and spontaneous, growing out of the corridor like mushrooms, so as to provide for me a continual source of surprise on my venture down its throat. Sometimes, through the countless roaming hours I spend touching so many surfaces, and wading through such vast volumes of thick and undisturbed air, I feel sure I've lain each stone of the castle myself. That I've built it all, that the objects within it present an inventory of my own adventures, and that the scarlet thread of individuality is none other than my own. It doesn't seem entirely implausible, despite that the fact that the house seems to live some quiet, murmurous life of its own. In fact — I know of many books from the library that record cases in which a creation inspires surprise in its creator. Sometimes this is a very wonderful surprise, and other times it is a bad surprise. Knowing every stone of my castle, or my home, or something in between, and even being its architect, does not render me omniscient. Each particle of the household draws particular connections with the rest of its machinery, and together the whole thing chatters continuously behind my back without giving a thought as to its origins. I scarcely

understand what the house could be thinking. All I know is that it has developed dealings. There are dealings between the valve-like doors and the tyrannical afternoon draught. There are dealings amongst the silverware in their elaborate horizontal assortments. There is a systematic cleverness in all this that I cannot tap into and which utterly eclipses me, such that dwelling here is as if to peer into the dreams of an arsonist.

Even if it is somehow I who have built this place, then with it comes the tragedy of ingenuity: in which the invention transcends the engineer herself, whose penetrating faculty of understanding winds up blunted by the very precision of her designs. Like fast growing children, creations often seem all too wilfully to abandon their creators in favour of untold futures.

But it is unlikely that I have had anything to do with the origins of this place. I am merely a copycat architect. My alchemy is that of aspired touching. I do not wield hammers — they would only drop with a thud through fainting fingers! I revisit the made things of this world with a ghostly longing. I hold a weighty object in my palm only ever *as if* I were holding it; my experiences are borrowed. Things I never do:

- Smack my lips at the taste of a strawberry
- Leave fingerprints on damp clay
- Cause a disturbance
- Plunge into a lake with the water furling into my hair in a spontaneous cocoon

I do not, I somehow *cannot*, think a heavy, leaden thought with the capacity to sink stubbornly into realisation. These are things I have sometimes dreamt of.

Think of me rather as the watery membrane of an eyeball, or the vibrating insecurity located between cells under a microscope. My limbs are hollow caskets of false wood, my thoughts the utterances of exasperated chimneys. I am as clumsy and cumbersome as excess change in a pocket, yet also as flimsy and lightweight as the moth-eaten flag of a conquered city.

Lost in this train of thought, all the while floating morosely through the corridor, it occurs to me that my formlessness and insubstantiality has a certain radical adaptability about it. What a stretchy thought: to think that I can bend around things. I am a lasso chasing the shapes of others. I am sketchy, tracing over the screen of

the world. Being Nobody is maybe almost like being Everybody.

I blink. Standing in the kitchen, I am still tightly gripping the duster in my hand, my mouth parched from being clamped shut in a state of concentration for too long. The thoughts that have preoccupied me flutter away and unburden me from whatever delicious vengeance I have been stirring up. I breath in deeply. The kitchen smells like Mediterranean herbs today, although as usual, nobody is cooking. Its a nice touch though. There on the counter, small and conspicuous, I spot the kettle sticking out her belly at me, awaiting her rub-down and grinning serenely with the cheek of expectancy. I sigh theatrically and make my way over to polish her, loitering at the task in a manner that makes it impossible to guess just how cherished this chore is to me, of all the tasks that are to be carried out for the day of the Spring Clean.

A Mind in Season

Something, a word perhaps, drops into my mind's eye. Its impact is negligible; too light is the idea, the notion that floats on the serene lake of my waking sleep like a dozing leaf, to succeed in alerting me to it. Let it be, whatever it is; let the idea dwell there, quietly, maybe bask, maybe overstay its negligible stay like a presumptuous visitor to a village, and begin, in time, to cause intrigue.

I have already forgotten about this thing in my mind's eye for the time being, it's drifted away, maybe docked at a distant bank of the watery span of my attention — far removed from any legible range. I can't describe the personality of this thing, or read out the word it seems to denote, but I can think about where it could have come from.

Yes, the notion rings like a word; perhaps one I saw somewhere (written on some note, or engraved into a trophy), or one I heard — a desperate shout from the woods outside, whose monosyllabic plea now recalls itself in the echo chamber of my empty mind. From

some place beneath this roof did it drop, this thing, or word, as leaves do; punctiliously, dutifully, clocking out to some immortal timesheet.

And then there is this room, which smells strongly of the wood and stone and textiles of which it is made, yet markedly free of the oily scent of sweating skin and the warmth of air recycled through living lungs; more like a forest floor than a home. There sits the faded, red velvet armchair with curling armrests, Duchess of this province of the house, the tassels on her hem hanging moments off the ground. She awaits my audience, majestic, just off-centre in the room, like the youngest *Las Meniñas* child now matured into advanced years, thoroughly grown into an old armchair; she questions me, with her haughty posture, of the treasures I have come here to acquire. She searches the enterprising spirit beaming unscrupulously from my young eyes and which promises to develop into unruly designs. She sees if she can satisfy the curiosity she finds there with these things, or words, that fall from the ceiling and drop into my mind's eye — tries to bribe me with their antiquarian appeal, to tame my youthful desires towards quests confined to the domestic domain. And it's working. My mind is all but empty, it has forgotten everything that came before the

rainy afternoon, and it has all its resources at hand to devote to a single notion, a notion that may drop into it at any moment from the ceiling.

Standing in the doorway with my back turned to the outside, I look in upon the stale air of the room whose hazy opacity is rendered almost visible by the evening light, a fog of dust hanging within.

A certain subtlety of mind is required to see it — but if you are half in daydream and unfocus your gaze so that the view becomes fuzzy — it is possible to see that the room, with all its contents, with all its furniture and carpet and ornaments, flows sinuously into the mouth of the fireplace, up along the chimney, and branches across the ceiling above as if about to cave in on itself again. And from up there, I suppose, is where the little troubling notions, like leaves, occasionally detach themselves and fall into a wandering eye, just there, from the flaps of peeling plaster.

Chance Development

I am trying to settle into my surroundings. That in itself is a choice, a formative moment, and I will not be fooled — every moment presents a dilemma, a dilemma upon which I hesitate like a marble on the peak of a hill, about to roll recklessly down one of the options its topology presents with involuntary commitment. I collect the consequences of my mindless decisions like beads on a string to my character, which is in development.

As far as I can tell, I am free to do anything I want. But this freedom is terribly daunting. I find I must constantly decide what to do with myself, and so early in the timeline of the story that will be mine, I fear that each incremental decision is likely to have an unpredictable knock-on effect on my character, amplified to regrettable magnitudes further down the line. Already I get the feeling that I am the type to err on the side of caution, a conservative dreamer who prefers to think things over before diving in. But for me to go on my way thoughtfully and carefully, is by definition impossible by the way things stand. Wakefulness, I have gathered, is the business of being relentlessly harassed by minute

decisions, of opportunities foregone in favour of opportunities taken, and of being thrown into innocuous situations to which one must always, nevertheless relate, and by which one is always, somehow moulded in some defining way.

I don't yet know the extent of the damage I have in this short, experimental, foray into living caused to my personality, and what kind of problems I will run into thanks to the stubbornness, or apathy, or foolhardiness, or some other trait that I am now unwittingly in the process of acquiring through moment-to-moment, coin-toss decisions. I have already traced a discriminate path along a tree of possibility, venturing on like a pinball making its way down a select fate, through no direct willingness to engage on my part. Living forces you to engage anyhow, as you are part of everything else, which moves concurrently. And even if you stand stock-still, unwilling to budge, hoping to think things over before diving in, everything else around you moves and dies and resurrects itself as something else, so that you cannot stand independent of it, and even the grass beneath your feet is snatched away like a tablecloth under so many dishes, and you tumble, or at least shudder on the spot,

shaken, thanks to the tumulting world around, which will not stop.

When I slipped off my chair that rainy afternoon, and walked off into the library enclaves, I made the small, internal choice to settle in. I would accept this place as being of my order, and take for granted my presence within it; respect it without questioning it, like a law of nature. What this off-hand assumption has to say about my world or me, only time will tell.

(Acquisition of characteristics bear weight upon the future, but without social network, why would she expect herself to be consistent?)

Disconcerted Chapter

The sunshine's slippery ripples lick the contours of its central orb, a dense circle in the spotless sky which I presume is the actual sun body, and from which rays are cast out like determined, hotheaded fingers. Far below it, under a vast amount of unexploited sky, are the hilltops, rounded by old age into a gathering of giant, Benedictine scalps. A single ribbon of breeze coils itself through their valleys — messenger amidst this council of submerged monks — dips down through the rustling canopies of the woods frothing at the bottom of my hill, combs its way through my lawn and bypasses unknown currents only to arrive at my head, mistake my hair for leafy playthings, and bring in its breezy embrace all the green smells of its meandering expedition.

And while all this is surely pleasant to me, I choose mostly to ignore it, because I want to think seriously about some things. Make plans. Be practical. To aid this, I have fashioned a thinking prop, by telling the legs dangling over the kitchen windowsill into the outside, to swing repeatedly, which fortunately they have obliged to do. The bland rhythm provides an ideal support — much

like the lines running across a sheet of music — its job is to scaffold the feelings I am about to feel and the thoughts I am about to have. Each time the heels of the legs hit the wall, I am reminded to keep thinking; a mechanical method, like pushing a car to make it go again. Machines sometimes need reminding like that. I am thus hoping that, if set to run long enough, my head will work things out that will bring me relief from a certain growing anxiety I have cultivated since appearing by the window in the library.

One very obvious thing I have noticed about this place, is that both the inside and the outside is composed of repeating motifs: the books that make up the library, the stone slabs that make up the walls, the grass blades that make up the ever-trimmed lawn. Things here occur in populations, there is a manyness about it all — perhaps save only from the rare gifts from the sky, which come in never-agains, like regrettable mistakes. And yet, despite all this patterning around me, I have not come across anything like me, which I've been reasonably expecting the whole time. I think I'd like some explanation as to why that is. The house is older than me and seems tailored to the dimensions and needs of a creature like myself — the height of the doorways and the curvature

of the furniture provides a good indication of the skeletal composition of such a being, and it seems roughly to match mine. I want to know who brought, planted or framed me here, and why I have been abandoned with the house and all its emotional baggage.

More and more, it seems unlikely to me that there should be anything like this around, yet the more I become acquainted with my world and its various unlikely contents, the more I also take it for granted, as if frequently bored by the mystery of persisting things. That's the problem itself, the mystery persists, day after day, equally extraordinary at any one time, enduringly unsolvable. So it's easy to forget, and no longer be excited, and I am sorry to discover my boredom with the world, pained by my own ingratitude or dulled curiosity.

Happily, an object will appear, occasionally, to rescue me from complacency. Like the very unlikely fruit tree, standing alone in the garden. Its scraggly branches hold no bias, and send their wooden feelers into the sky like jagged lightning bolts in uncanny symmetry. Scraggly and bare, with a bold, cross-hatched design inscribed in its threads of bark, the tree is a perfect intruder to the garden, an unwelcome fascination, too intentionally grotesque. Planned, modelled, this tree was; to figure in a

dark fairytale as a character, not as scenery. It hardly fulfils its purpose as a tree, but stays bare regardless of the season, like a scarecrow who never changes his clothes no matter the weather, his entire design invested in the purpose of scaring. And of course, with this singular purpose the tree appears to be trying too hard to be scary and so, like a scarecrow, is by no means scary at all. The tree, like me, a conspicuous stain in the landscape, is a creature caricatured enough to remind me that the grass too, and the movements of the sky, and the sound existence of my house which claims to have always been here before everybody, are all unlikely instances in the cold universe of gas, rock and empties, and all carry some purpose for which they seem ultimately ill-fitted.

The sun is shining on my head and warming the dark hairs there, and with the slouching back of someone whose patience is actually a bit rude, I wait for something to happen. For someone to come. Perched in the window to make myself somewhat known, like a new kid on the street squatting on the curb, I wait for a friend, or at least something close to that. There could be lots of places from which someone could emerge, from the surrounding hills and the verdant plumes at their base,

for example, and I would spot them quickly from my high vantage point; the coloured speck of a body growing larger on the horizon. These valleys, rich with vegetation on this uncommonly warm day, seem pregnant with the promise of issuing something or other, maybe something friendly, maybe not.

The problem is, of course, that if someone does appear, I don't know whether it will be me that will need rescuing, or they that will seek refuge in my house, and this is because I am not yet sure on which side of the periphery of my grounds lies the prison and on which side lies the free, open part. But even if no one at all is to show up, I am at the very least sitting here, visibly, in order to signal to those background mechanics that determine my fate — in the sky, or wherever they are — that I have in fact arrived, and that things can start happening now.

When a darkening sky, and then a maturing skepticism, and then outright boredom, override my plans to expose myself to adventure, I slip back into the warmth of the kitchen like a child caught by a towel and mopped dry. I have become accustomed to a certain sadness that accompanies every measure of gratitude I feel towards my nurturing environs, which, warm and old as they are, are still strangers to me — generous strangers who may

eventually grow irritated for my overstaying my stay. Every child, supposing, for all intents and purposes, that that's what I am, is born with a reflexive sense of independence in case things go wrong and they are unwanted, and they harbour always a knowledge of the possibility, however unlikely, that they may be abandoned, because no love is entirely secure; it can be forgotten, or lost somewhere, and when it is gone it feels justified, because it is not something that goes away willy-nilly. And perhaps it is these instilled survival tactics that provoke me to run nightmarish thought experiments in my mind, precisely because nothing bad has ever happened to me; my mind tries to prepare me for eventualities by playing frightful simulations of fantasy scenarios to teach me to flee and hide from the unthinkable. Deep in my genome is some nightmare gene saved for this very purpose; it functions like a repository of instructional self defence videos and is triggered after a day of pleasant wandering, or reading. It is a sinking feeling that comes sometimes on the tail end of happiness, whereby the ephemerality of my joy emerges in a fading smile, or the warmth of skin that wears off and becomes neutral. If I could choose, I would refrain from eating the cake and would just opt to have it, forever — but the stuff of this world is made to

be consumed and as I stop to consider and preserve it, fix it in my grasp, I already feel the house changing. Nothing stays the same; I fall asleep only to wake up in some other place in a reconfigured house cluttered with old things, things that can scarcely be bothered to maintain appearances, so tired are they of their own histories, and I feel sure that they, the house and all of it, are fading too.

Body

I look down at my legs, surprised to find them there, jutting out before me on the sleep-swept bed in such a straight fashion. I touch a bruised knee. They look like a couple of soldiers awaiting orders.

It is the first night I really begin to consider my body as something that might be a permanent part of me, and I begin to engage in a friendship with it straight away. I slap a thigh, which turns red under my hand, and the toes twitch as if disturbed by a cat's whiskers. Little, dark, soft hairs decorate my legs, which I stroke, following their preferred inclination.

My effects are uncharacteristically noisy. The floorboards complain when I get up, my feet making subtle slapping noises on the floor as I make my way into the caverns of the great library. These sonic footprints, this evidence of my passing through a place, is an enduring thrill.

Nightgown trailing around the shins, the hem swaying in a delayed mimicry of my loose hips. I suppose you could call that dancing. I discover that I, like other things,

occupy a volume, and that is funny to me. Well, I am laughing, so it must be funny. I push out the breath of my sleep, and make space for myself to move, perhaps rather too suddenly.

Going out on a limb: I fling out an arm, and knock over the vase. It falls to the floor and chips, slighting me. But then, through the very same window through which all the interesting things happen, I catch sight of a very strange thing indeed.

A pair of fairy things hang in the far distance of the sky. Entranced with one another, entrancing me. They are performing a far more elegant duet together than I have been doing in the library. A certain nervous excitement seizes me as I watch them drifting closer — it appears to be another gift-day. The gift looks far more beautiful than a clock, perhaps it's a token of apology.

The pixie pair, entwined, merry-go-round their descent. I try to make them out as they approach the window. They look like two petals, or drops of nectar.

They are becoming large now, and are very close. They're starting to look more like a couple of succulent fried eggs, a certain weepy wetness about them. When they really are quite close, and possibly too much for

comfort, it becomes more obvious how fast they are moving towards me. I am smacked in the face, and fall backwards into a black hole that is as plush in its vacuous expanse as a deep nest of blinding cushions. If in the interim, in that blackness, I am transported to another place, I will never know where and for how long I was there.

Sad Eyes

I awake at midday, feeling overly rested, and slightly off, as if I have lost a wobbly tooth in my sleep and swallowed it. My chair is knocked over beside me, and I am detaching my body from the floor as if with a spatula.

My world is about sleep. About being very close to nothing. Overly rested, dusty smells of hair stuck to a sweaty neck. Cold with a misplaced muscle.

I ease open the door I think leads into the gallery, and step into the kitchen. Such a mess! The potted plant is dying. It's a rubber plant, but it's sagging. All at once, the kettle begins to hurl her alarming siren, a keel so piercing so as to inspire treachery in a groggy sleepwalker.

I dart towards her fiercely: What now! But she just goes on sobbing inconsolably. The cups are overturned, and the jars hide their faces. What's the matter with everyone? But my question dissolves into shameful silence, save for the kettle's ridiculous screams, which, as she strains at her vocal limits, suggest the vertical Doppler effect of somebody falling off a cliff.

The shrill noise ebbs to the very fringes of my patience, so I grab the kettle from her post in the fireplace where she hung over cold cinders. Seizing her between two hands I seek to interrogate the cause of her shrieks, but before even posing the question, I find it. I see my reflection in the scratched steel surface of her pot, which stares back at me in curious horror.

I have got Sad Eyes.

The wind swept them my way last night. They planted themselves onto my face by suction like obsessed starfish and devoted themselves to me without my permission. They droop in irreversible disdain, almost running off my face, and their glassy stare is offensive, unabashed, unflinching. They are flat and endless and cruel as the great deep sky.

Rest

The warning signs of prolonged inactivity begins in the shoulders. The broad planes of shoulder blades begin to droop and resign themselves like castrated wings inside my back. They complain of their redundancy to the leaning tower of spinal discs in between them, precariously stacked like a ladder improvised from a set of stools. The architect of my body was lazy. Or drunk.

From my lethargic self-spillage on the bedroom floor I spy my keeper, through the window do I eye my guardian in the great big blue. Despite our deep hierarchical divide, the sky does not laugh at me in times like these. I am just here, and it is just there; perfectly scattered and finely stretched in all directions.

You'd be surprised, but across its aerodynamic field, a lot is going on. A lot of tumultuous whizzing and atomic tickling and perplexing, age-old feuding as old as oxygen. Close-up, the air is a battlefield. It is only from afar that we see how the atmosphere is composed of healthy differences. Overall, across grand averages, these

airborne conflicts have a gentle massaging effect on the sky, leaving it plump and vibrant.

In one place, where the air is thin, a current of air from a denser spot is gushing in; a sprinting gust of wind that seeks to flood itself outward in the name of evenness. Equilibrium is the governing religion of the bustling matter we see up above and down below. The particles of skies and seas commit risky feats in the name of equilibrium. They summon themselves in great numbers to clash a smiting hand upon provocative differences: they rise up in hurricanes, in tsunamis. After the storm there is always great calm. The pangs of relief hang low in dewy perspiration: an ordeal has been overcome.

The sky is a functioning organism with currents and temperaments. It works and rests. It makes great sport of its religion, and really it is the very need to resolve problematic differences in the sky's particle composition that permit it to perform its most lifelike properties. The currents of the wind flurry hither thither, they electrocute the sky sometimes in prickling friction against one another, and it is these intermittent surges of desire, desire to come to rest at last, that infuse the vast atmosphere with a certain knowingness. It works and rests in self-affirming cycles.

There is something deadening about too much rest. I have been, as is sometimes my habit, asleep for far too long. Probably days. I am too tired to sleep or rise. My pulse has steadied to a near frozen state of resignation. My body is too quiet, its relative differences too slight, to hear evidence of a surging current of life taking place there. Still plastered to the floorboards with the sheets pulled down with me from my bed, I listen hard for evidence of my two arms and two legs. My guts are void of material to process, and their crunching munching has long ground to a halt.

I do try to avoid this sort of thing. This tendency towards letting the world forget me, and letting memory of my short life here in this place fade from the untroubled brow of tomorrow. Nothing could be easier than surrendering my claim to soul-space. I am so slight a possibility that I am almost not here anyway. If I forget myself, that's it! I will have unwritten myself from the burdens of living.

Perhaps there have been many like me, manifest like vanishing condensation on a chilled pane, waning into a slither, and finally obliterated from collective living memory.

I just want a rest, just a little moment's escape. But resting is risky business in an ashen world, where the dust of the household's memory has mostly settled, where perturbations are scarce, and in which broods an overwhelming force of dissipation. Every sigh that can be heard, be it the whistling in the chimney, or creaking of a hinge, is an exhalation that drags on and on without relief. Each day grows colder, and it is hard to find a source of energy, some kind of light, to inspire the need to kick up the dust; kick up a fuss!

Too much rest is deadening, though it beckons. Things tend toward rest ever so innocently: let me just put my head on this pillow, let me close my eyes for but a moment. Like the warm embrace of a Himalayan goddess beckoning a forsaken traveller into soothing swathes of snowy sheets, I could become buried in the sweetness of forgetting that I ever was here.

Storm

The house feels unsafe today. Rigged to hurt me, infested with subtle domestic traps. The floors of the corridors are unusually slippery — neck-breakingly so. I don't know what it is that I could have done wrong. The curtains drift out of the windows drawn wide open by the draft. Groaning, the window repeatedly beats against the wall of the house outside, rolling its eyes in confusion.

There's a storm brewing. With my fingertips on the sill I lean out to inspect the conspiring clouds: What have they in store for me, those old saboteurs? A counter-surge of warm gust turns the whining window against me, and I nip my hands out of harm's way in the nick of time. It slams in my nose, and sucks out the rustling sound of the wind. I must fortify the barracks.

Hearing my quick, light steps run, I usher myself through what would be a routine lock-down if I weren't doing it for the first time. Blanket, headlight, atlas. Refreshments, brooms. I jam the lanky broomsticks through the handles of double doors, and pick up a few stray candlelights on my return. A pencil and a notebook. The panels and the

doors are beginning to thump violently under the strain of my locks and traps, the wind tormenting them for answers they don't have. I grab the banister and fly up the winding stairs, to the tower. Behind me I close concentric layers of doors in hasty succession; they clam together like silenced mouths, I am being eaten up by the house. Better to be in the belly of a house than the eye of a storm.

Darkness. Of the kind that promises brevity, and dangles an element of suspense before blind anticipation. I creep up the last few stairs and sit down in the quietude of the narrow tower, a most apt sanctuary in the event of approaching adversaries.

The suspicious silence of the small room sensitises me to my immediate surroundings. I feel along the floor, and flinch when I accidentally touched my toes: Oh, it's just me. I am in my own way like that, sometimes. It's a bothersome symptom of my encapsulation. I must admit I have come to somewhat distrust the immediacy of tactile perception. I fail sometimes to recognise myself, especially in the absence of visual evidence such as legs sticking out beneath the hem of my gown, or the headless forearms working away below my chin. When I wake up I sometimes pass my fingers through my hair in

an attempt to open the curtains, before realising that I have a head, and that thousands of hairs hang from this head, and that indeed they are me, not curtains. The toes in the darkness make me start — they are weird, irregular, cold, fleshy. But realising what they are, I welcome them into the rest of my squatting bundle of limbs by the window, knees tucked under my chin.

The ground grumbles hungrily in pursuit of me, oh I can hear it all right. The house hasn't breathed a word of my whereabouts, though I can tell it's struggling. At any moment it could cave, and deliver me to the mercy of the hurricane bounty hunter outside. What is the cost of my head? I try to weigh it between my hands like a block of gold.

Approaching the wall at the end of the tower's top tip, I put my face into its small circular window just to take a look. But by so doing, I have inadvertently become the face of the entire house. My sight escapes me, flies out of the cold pane against which my nose is squished, and dives into the thickening vortex of clouds beyond to look back. I see that my pale, childish face had become the face of the great big body of the house, or the castle, or something in between, upon the hill: it is a face stricken with Sad Eyes, ever clinging, yet ever threatening to

pour off the watery face of a drowning Pre-Raphaelite. An odd thing to see; to couple the mourning softness of the face pressed against the little submarine window, with the austere, gothic body of architecture that cascades from it like mechanical marionette, down upon the grounds.

I am wearing the castle, and I become large. I place my hands upon the stone slabs on either side of the little window as if to pull them through the operating sleeves of a great armoured robot that responds to my command. The toes I discovered on the floor a moment ago are once again abandoned by my consciousness in favour of the robust cornerstones of the castle giant that now form the base of my momentous body.

Looming large, I survey the rolling moors and their trees dulled with incessant precipitation; the weather has accustomed their branches and shrubbery to a downcast manner that makes them double up as living umbrellas. Never has a child felt so great and terrible. Slowly but surely, the morale of the castle's defences begin to recharge, as together we stand defiantly to the dragon of black cloud in the distance. It has noticed what is happening, and now rises coyly to the challenge.

My encapsulation proves in this situation to be most advantageous. I have now grown used to the configuration of being locked inside a bubble, puppeteering distant peripheral circumstances by the quiet whisper of intention embedded deep within what I find to be the corpulent excess of toes, knees and distracting wisps of hair. And I cling to that secret force, though I know that even this pure chamber of willpower is evasive, and dodges my every attempt to locate it.

The child-faced beacon in the jagged mass upon the hill amuses my adversary greatly. An accusative finger, and a great big jeering face of cloud, extends from the brewing vortex in the hills beyond. Far does it extend and pollute the intermittent no man's land between us, breaching unspoken rules of war but to face me right up to the window, and laugh.

To conceal my alarm I stare fiercely back at my smokestack enemy, who wheezes clouds of confidence onto the visor of my armour, fogging it up. A warm glow emits from my end like a vague angelic light in the grappling winds of the towering heights. The household is alight with an unaccustomed intelligence. But when the vapour on the window pane clears and reveals my face once more, my unwelcome visitor recoils as if by

the proximity of somebody plagued, doubtless deeply disturbed by the Sad Eyes with which my body is stricken. Without any particular effort on my part, these eyes can induce a plunging sense of bottomlessness which no one in their right mind sees fit to venture into. They possess the glassy glaze of taxidermy — a superficial immortality. An eternally preserved mockery of life.

My opponent is not one to easily surrender, and will surely return again with fresh menace. But at this time he sees it necessary to revisit his strategy, and retreats all the way back to his quarters in a dust of petulance.

I watch, wondering what I have done. I think perhaps, like a martial angel guided by the placebo-hope of faith, that it is my courage that has warded off the villain; that my heart is incandescent and brazen, and that that is what has won the day. I am a survivor, because I distrust all but the walnut of volition which I sense concealed somewhere on my personage.

I once came across a Russian tale in my library, in which Ivan searches for the hidden jewel of immortality that relentlessly preserves the evil Tsar, in his quest to extinguish this haunting near-corpse of a man. An

illustration depicts the evil Tsar as a weak shaving of a body, sprouting a long white beard and head of hair that drags at his feet like a bridal train. Ivan searched everywhere, but as it turned out, this jewel of immortality was found to be hidden in the tears of the Tsar's broken-hearted daughter, who incidentally shed many of these on learning that Ivan was already occupied with a far prettier princess. Presently the daughter's limbs burst into the branches of a sinuous Willow tree, and the evil Tsar is exterminated. I hope my walnut of volition is concealed somewhere cleverer than that, because my Sad Eyes seem permanently to be on the brink of weeping.

From far away, I do not cease to gaze at the troubling sky. It gargles and spews and regenerates in a sustainable form of fury, each stormy splutter recycled and ingested by a massive brawling vortex that thrives on its own waste. Spasms of electric phenomena trumpet empty threats intermittently across the entire display.

The more elaborate these theatrics become, the more disimpassioned I grow. I stare back out with melancholy, crowning the landscape with an orange ember that burns and broods disconcertingly. I feel my legs extending, bursting through the floor of the basement and into the

land itself, my influence channeling effortlessly through the moors and transforming me into something of a child demigod. With my palms still placed flat upon the smooth stone slabs, I tame the household as with the firm caresses of an equestrian hand.

I suppose the calmness is derived from a destitution that comes free of charge with the Sad Eyes. They extend the sensibility that my actions are governed by a position that knows no risk, no reservation, no tact, whatsoever. A position so simple, that it very possibly exceeds the boundaries of that cruelty in which meagre villains revel, but which those most deprived perpetrators look back upon with apathy, or simply forget about. It is a cruelty that originates from a separate, impartial realm. I cause harm by doing nothing.

I look upon the scene of the now dissipating clouds with unsurprised patience. I don't blame them. My ghostly face looks out from afar with the shameless gaze of a hungry dog. And the danger posed by this wanton street animal? Will it whimper longingly and shatter the heart, or dart forth, bite and shatter the skull?

The clouds disperse and retreat into a thin, damp cloth over the globe of the sky, and in abandoning prospects of

attack for the present time, leave behind the scornful token of a deluge that lasts weeks. With the disaster at least temporarily averted, I feel myself yawn and lie back upon the floor, surrounded by the provisions I prepared and which I found no direct need for, but which still burn with a talismanic potency, in blissful disregard for the harsh surface upon which I presently fall asleep.

My Namesake

A singular ant is scrawling a farewell note upon the inside of a teacup, before he is finally persuaded by the amber mirror forming a syrupy pond at its base, to sweep first one leg, and then the rest, into a soundless little performance of regret.

Ants are traditionally a favourite test subject for sadistic whims. I have been eyeing him scampering up and down the cup, flush against its white ceramic surface for some time. While I was not rooting for him to take the fatal sip, I was not about to act in his defence either.

My hands lie motionless upon the garden table in the same position they have been holding for a long time. When the hands of an elderly woman rest on a surface like this, they seem somehow to remain ignorant of each other's presence. Just so do my hands forget themselves, and appear to be asleep. A butterfly settling on a finger fails to elicit so much as a twitch, and they became popular perches for airborne travellers in search of temporary belonging.

I notice this apparent insensitivity is also a familiar feature of an old woman's hands. Is her skin deafened by the sedimentation of cellular regeneration to the harmless tickles of butterfly feet, or is her non-reaction a reflection of that wisdom which teaches the old not to bother about little disturbances such as these? I watch upon the scene of an ant drowning in my teacup, who, belly up, is vigorously cycling at the surrounding air, causing minor propulsions in all directions. It is a sad thing. I know this. Yet I do not budge in the slightest, and instead sit expectantly watchful of the strange predictability of the ant's chaotic struggle.

You may take it to be my choice not to intervene in this inferior travesty, a cruel laziness that the large exercise over the small. But you must understand that my freedom is profoundly compromised, and that not even the great halls of my home or the deep intellectual recesses of the library can rupture the walls of my most intimate prison. The issue is quite literally, out of my reach.

I have been politely denied interfering with all manner of things, by the imposition of the stealthy transparent skin I permanently wear, or perhaps, which wears me. Polite, that is the nature of my separation from the world; being

encapsulated means being a kind of implied deletion, like a highlighted text set to vanish at the click of a button. The invisible dotted line around me says, “except this”. I know this because I cannot hear the rustling and crunching of weeds under my steps out upon the lawn in the mornings. The grass simply fails to receive me, and misses the cue that I’m there. Well, never mind. Everything is lovely around here, anyway.

I am seated on a cushioned chair that has a white, wiry spine which twists into decorative curls like illuminated manuscripts, and am overlooking a landscape that holds up for me a facade of peace. Granted, it is being a little bit overt about it, what with the rosy clouds and custard-yellow exuberances of sunlight here and there. I don’t like it much at all, but even more troubling is how all the hills and clouds and birds seem held together by dainty threads, at risk of drifting apart heedlessly at any moment. I watch the landscape before me with the nervous pleasure of holding a fistful of strings tied to floating balloons, watchful that the collective mechanics of my surrounds do not disperse in all directions at a careless slip: the birds drifting off wingless into the sun, the clouds thinning into the stratosphere, the trees wrested from the ground and losing their leaves like hair

under radioactive exposure. I am overcome with wishing to feel that my feet are planted on the ground, ground that is not only hollow crust, but the surface of a reliable bulk of groundwork: compact soil and rock. What it would mean to me — to be confident of the whereabouts of my hands, upon the oil-cloth spread of white daisies on blue! But the things of this world do not touch, instead they hinge upon one another like fickle valves — ensnaring in their light simplicity. Here I am, a rebellious sketch in the landscape, bitterly dissatisfied with the condition of being little more than a collection of speculative lines with no belly, no bulk, that can be filled with what you might call substance. I am airy, and airy is my thinking. The incessant need to rest makes me stupid. I drift to sleep — how many times a day do I wake up in a new location within my home? Only to start anew by counting my fingers, toes, and account for every other commodity of minimal features that constitutes my person.

I take the cup in my hand, tipping the cold, golden tea to its brink and back. The ant bobs without displacement from its central location in the cup; no hope of restfully arriving at a beach like driftwood. Beneath him, Sad Eyes peer ruthlessly back from the shallow of the drink.

In the reflection my surroundings appear to be wrapped in a rippling, white cellophane that seems to quarantine my sickness in medical sweet wrappers. Below, my washy eyes curdle like those of a watchful felon behind bars.

I spend waking hours like this, scouring objects within reach using my antenna fingers. Everything is reintroduced in a touch. The finger and the cup bow in polite mutual recognition: hello. Likewise, so do the fragments of my body that keep forgetting about each other and tripping over each other, or the seat accommodating my thighs and bottom, or the contingent corners of lofty furniture that seem only fixed to the Earth by faint strings of gravity rendering all earthbound objects as crusty and precarious as wobbly teeth, or cusps of dehydrated snakeskin.

My nameless home. The thought crosses my mind that I might, standing tiptoed upon a stool with a hammer, nail an arching wooden inscription over the front door, christening the estate: The Last Cough. A testament to a house that is old, historic even, but not bound by tradition — all of its parts seemingly prepared to annihilate an entire ancestry in a careless grasshopper's spring of wilful forgetfulness.

What is my position on that? There is clearly no one else around. (My gaze pans around. The same bird flies across the sky every five minutes. The trees lining the hills in the distance waft in entranced bales). I seem to have arrived just as everyone else has left.

I sit back in the garden chair, and think loud thoughts that you could probably hear if you were standing next to me, because the thoughts are spoken in language and seem to be directed at an audience sitting somewhere behind the sun: “Perhaps I am such a one” goes the thought, “who could excavate, salvage, or consolidate a History that has grown weary of its own bookkeeping, having for centuries urged on a lineage that it now admits there is no value in preserving. Indeed, the stories that painstakingly curate the present! What of them?”

I turn into myself, thinking quietly, privately, the audience behind the sun leans forward but cannot quite catch what I am thinking. Rummaging about through the centuries, the history of the house upon the hill can be illustrated in a time-lapse of domestic turmoil:

There were the stolen, slippered footsteps that over time agitated the fibres of the creaking staircase. There were the timeless, gawking ravens, keeping watch from

shadowed perches. There were the many raised voices projected through rooms, elicited from the hearty depths of a wise-crack's belly, or the sharp accusations of two-pronged tongues and jealous glares. There were the endless contracts and treaties that subjected the house to amputations and awkward prosthetic additions, and there were the men who, bent over these documents penning their signatures, rehearsed that characteristic flourish of the pen that, like the swivel of a sabre, branded their masculinity into posterity in defeat and victory alike.

If I attune my senses, and concentrate intently on the doorway leading into the study where these contracts were drawn, I can just about catch a glimpse of the black tail of a dress coat flicker by like a nifty fish. I might, if I let my eyes close for a moment, just hear the old Mother ringing for a service of elaborate medicinal concoctions which, although failed to ward off her deathly flu, nonetheless carried her bearably to the end of her struggles by way of their fiddly routine preparation and application. They rendered the frail old Mother, of whom no one could say ever had a hobby to speak of beyond fretting over her children's affairs, something of an impassioned alchemist in her final days, consumed as she was by the coloured bottles, and committed to

tinkering away by the dim cathedral-light of her bedroom with tweezers, measurements and antiseptic pads of woven cotton.

I could enter that place in my mind and steal into old Mother's bedroom — just to sit on the floor and watch her peering into vials through semi-circled eyeglasses and assessing their contents with scientific precision, without a care for me, for anybody, in what were her last weeks. I stare, my jaws unwittingly suspended as though biting invisible reins. But when she flicks her bony middle finger at the bottle to dispel its reluctant bubbles, she effectively flicks my dreaming forehead, and I am brought back to the present moment, in which there is no trace of old Mother, nor the velvety sheets of her enormous bed, nor the spicy smells of her accumulating sleep and skeletal dust, nor the low, ceremonial call of her bell resounding through the household. My finger awakes on the table: it strokes the petal of a daisy in the pattern of the oil-cloth.

This may have been a fanciful speckle of a History that might have been, indeed one coloured by my own longings. But I reason that it can't be too far from the truth. My amateur attempts at retracing the lineage of that present with which I am reunited in every touch of a

teacup, every fiddle of a hair strand, contains certain unmistakable clues, sometimes even prophetic flashes. For not unrelated reasons has it become something of a compulsion of mine to trail between the shelves of the library, only to turn upon myself and retrace my steps. In the blips of my episodic existence, I pace back and forth and dig a miniature history of my own into the floorboards. I pace like this for hours at a time, hoping I leave some change in the floor. Doubtless I am only the last straw of boredom which has inspired this recklessness in the history-keeping of the household.

I think loudly again; my thoughts seem to address the theatrical audience sitting facelessly in a large auditorium somewhere behind the sun: “Ought I then creep around,” the thought goes, “tying futile, invisible strings between the lolloping things of my world — a guerrilla seamstress on a mission to mend the patches of amnesia infiltrating the spaces between table legs, chandelier crystals, and vacant mouse holes like snowy interference?”

It is with this makeshift purpose that I go about devoting so many of my waking hours to scouring all manner of things with antenna fingers, scanning them for whispers

of the past, a past that is not mine, yet which no one is
around to remember but me.

The Tale of the Shadow

The residue of a day's work burns in my bones at a low ember, not unlike the murmuring fire I now sit before, resting. With my feet placed at the slated doormat of the kitchen stove, I gently tip myself to and fro in my rocking chair with stretching toes, absent-mindedly gazing into the soundless flames.

I am neither hungry, nor anxious. I am neither sleepy, nor excitable. I want for nothing other than what is already being given to me by way of my muscles, which I can feel are busy repairing tiny tears in their own tissue from the day's exertions. I let them go about their business, and hold myself still and patient for those little cells to swap my parts and stitch me back together. Outside, dusk is settling upon the small kitchen window pane, peering jealously into the kindled nest within. The poker in my hand fences lazily with the hot coals in the stove, as if attempting to stimulate conversation with the fire. The flame burns a single patch of my face, so that I must occasionally turn my head to spread the impact. The fire is unchanging, reliable, but also a supply of **constant amusement that curiously never falters** as I stare on

into its glowing coals. I watch with unbroken attention these dusty pebbles, disturbing them with the tip of my poker until one sets off rolling down a heap of its companions, erupting into a burst of glowing coughs.

The sleeping kettle, hanging in its alcove from a scraggly hook above the stove, begins jingling this way and that like a bell from a lamb's neck. The rising heat tickles her in her slumber. The water inside her pot simmers like my resting muscles. Then she bursts forth with shrieking giggles, half joyous, half frightful, all the while dodging the smarting temperature from the fire beneath with a wriggling bottom.

I yawn, reclining. Barely moving, yet in full possession of the particles that constitute the hazy fuzz of the person that is me. I am comfortably aware of each of their bearings, their coordinates duly noted, without fuss. They whiz about, immersed in their little worlds, engulfed in miniature dramas that up at my scale are the very corrugated surfaces upon which I rely to function normally, like a boat bobbing along the waves of a calm sea. I listen to tired muscles healing themselves. Small fibres stretch towards each other with longing, joining hands and weaving out plaits and strands of my own tissue in careful coils. From where did this matter come

from? It spun as mysteriously as from the heart of a spider, who with two generous legs professes arduous sonnets in an illegible, endless text. Out winds in fresh bouts the secret knowledge of my heritage, in a chemical language so ancient that it can only be done, not spoken — expressed, not named. My body at work, my body living. We work hard together on staying alive, rebelling against the exasperating force that is ever out to quench the universe. What a heroic venture, to live — and see how my little corporeal comrades manoeuvre shovelfuls of burning fuel, urging on the flow of cyclical processes throughout the fabric of my being! I lie back in my chair, giving myself whole heartedly over to tiny molecular workers that labour on as I close my eyelids, withdraw, and rest. We'll never be properly introduced, but we'll look out for each other nonetheless.

The kettle interrupts my dozing with a high pitched howl, unceasing like the scrawled writing of a poisoned hand catching the last word. I deftly unhook the kettle with my poker and lay her upon a woven mat to catch her breath, the steam furiously projecting from her sweaty brow. She pants as if never she has encountered such curious tortures — as if each cup of tea were a fresh ordeal.

The hot water spirals into earthy colours secreted by the shrivelled leaves I drop into it as I pour. I watch closely this process: the two substances entwining, questioning each other, then soaking each other up in a golden, noble solution. The kettle is already soothed and returning into to a sunken, drowsy state, exhaling burdensome breaths. In the silence of the kitchen you can hear the spout surrendering to the hushed sound of pouring tea — everybody listens with a ritual solemnity.

Like a priest, I carefully carry the cup at half-arms length towards the rocking chair. A flash flame crackles in and out of being. In comes my shadow, creeping around my feet like a schmoozing cat. Taking care not to trip over it, I watch my steps, slaloming through the winding shadow who so insists upon cuddling my legs even while I move.

“All right then, you,” I tell it on finally sinking back into my rocking chair, whilst peering at it through the herbal steam that moistens my nostrils and renders me placid. There it sits, laterally, its imprint diagonally distorted across the cobblestone floor, at once alert and patient. I sip and contemplate this dark hole in history that has followed me into the present, with a combination of endearment and anxiety. It’s my pet, mascot-like, creature-like; it stays by my side. Yet it is also a large,

cumbersome companion that might as well trample me down one day. Sometimes, my shadow glances up in reaction to some glaringly obvious stimulus to which I am completely unaware. It cranes its neck, following the moving curiosity like a falling star until it passes from view. I then scrutinise its watchfulness as if the marvel might be found mirrored in that depthless head. Alas, for me the next moment always falls into place without interruption. Then it looks to me, cocking its head as if skeptical about my ignorance. How could I not also be taking part in this notable event — the one which just transpired above our heads? Deprived of these beastly senses, all I can do is shrug my shoulders in response.

clarify

This evening the shadow causes me discomfort mainly because of its sheer size. Lanky and hunched like a wild dog fit for riding, it appears both friendly and hazardous. And now, how it sweeps around from its position behind my chair to deliver me with undivided attention.

“I wonder what you would tell if you could speak.” My words sound stark — I cast more out such that they might dispel the settling lattice of silence about to engulf me. “Or,” I reassure myself by fitting as many words as possible into one sentence, “perhaps you are telling me a

very great deal at this very moment, and I am too busy talking to catch an earful of it.” I reach (reluctantly, dutifully, lovingly) towards my shadow from the rocking chair as if to stroke the blurred black feathers of a hideous baby. It reaches back towards me, locked into a two dimensional plane that awkwardly curtails its long arm from greeting mine. We are separated by the diplomatic space between dimensions that finds some way of translating gestures across our inescapable class division, like the space between the fingers of the god and the adam on the ceiling of the painted church (I do not think their fingers ever touch).

We satisfy ourselves with the attempt. The black head waits and watches. He has apparently not inherited my impatient disposition. I invest into that shaded forehead a presupposition of the clustered thoughts to be found there, kept inaccessible to me. Animal thoughts.

I ask an open question with a look of frankness. The shadow seems not to see any point in my asking, but, for my sake, turns to gaze into the past. The past tends to hide itself in arbitrary holes of air at any one time, superimposed upon physical things, opportunely making itself available for reminiscing on-the-go. I peer in too. On this occasion, moving pictures from the past appear

in a small cloud hovering in a spot upon the pantry cupboard, where the shadow keeps it hanging by the force of sheer attention. I look intently at the pantry cupboard upon which all the consciousness of the room is now gathered into a single point of departure. There, just by the knob, pictures pass like mist beyond a keyhole, fading into the curly corner of the carpentry.

“I see it,” I say. My archaic friend remains transfixed by the miniature images appearing on the cupboard, its muteness more bottomless than the moonlight howl I had always imagined to be its signature call. I decide, whilst peering into the shadow’s flickering memories, to promote myself from spectator to narrator.

And so, ready to stop at the slightest protest from the shadow, I begin, easing myself to and fro in my rocking chair, relaxed, but fully interlocked with the living picture chain that is eloping from our shared mind’s eye. Upon the small projection of bygone ages, unassumingly superimposed on the familiar tapestry of my home, is a small, solitary purple sphere. It spins and swells like a snitching stain, drawing us into a tale best left unspoken.

“A long time ago, in a neighbouring star cluster, you were roaming a small, purple, revolving planet. You

roamed (because your legs compelled you to roam, because they were made to roam) in a time when the atmosphere was thick with animal sounds, leaving little if no room for your language, and a trifle more for a companion of your kind with whom to converse. You kept quiet, and solitary. The planet revolved, and as the planet turned one way, you strode in timely steps against its grain, as if on a treadmill. And with someone of your frame, crossing the entire world was for you but a day's work. Your gangly legs were the clock of the solar system, and yours was known as the planet Slothe. Your dedication to roaming had rendered the little satellite terribly lazy and undisciplined, and you found yourself doing most of the planetary spinning work yourself. The purple planet Slothe had eventually entirely forgotten the skill of keeping up its own regular spin, and it developed a depressive, comatose condition. The matter of spinning the planet became entirely your responsibility — a matter which was much gossiped about between the other planets.

To finance the costly physical venture of marching and maintaining the rotation of planet Slothe, you grew a dark, sooty skin to absorb energy from your star, each step guided by the receding line of daylight upon the

brink of which you were always to be found striding. You pursued the day, never taking a holiday from your vital job. But your legs began to look palatable in the eyes of the mischievous little critters with whom you shared the planet, and they would nip at you like piranhas in your passing. They too had become rather lazy. To hunting and grazing, they preferred hibernating and basking, and waiting for you to pass by on your daily trek so they might steal a nibble of a kneecap, or a shoulder; a piece of sweet sunlight which you had wisely made the habit of sequestering in your dark, sooty skin. You had become something of a black sun — inversely incandescent. As you tread the planet, the leaping Mexican wave of greedy creatures took bite-size snaps of your flesh, transforming your walking into laborious wading.

Such a configuration was hardly expected to be sustainable. With each passing day the critters grew fatter, and you grew smaller. It became exhausting to complete planetary revolutions within the traditional time frame of a day, and your pace quickened on shrinking legs in an attempt to compensate for this. Spindly, wispy things, they were the escaping smoke of old extinguished fires.

But, as the surface area of your skin dropped dramatically, your old body mass now converted into the fat lining thousands of podgy parasitic bellies, your sunlight absorption capacity faded accordingly. Exhausted, you could simply no longer keep up the spin. The purple planet Slothe ground to an eventual halt, neither spinning nor orbiting (much to the annoyance of neighbouring planets, which swerved past Slothe by a hair's breadth, the obscenity of their passing curses obscured by a merciful Doppler effect).

The once lively chatter of Slothe's jungles fell into a silence that hung mournfully over the sea of starved, upturned animal bellies. You alone remained, by a thread; a thin, limbless spire of exhaustion exuding from a narrow crater located in the frozen Night hemisphere. The other hemisphere was fixed in eternal Day, and was quickly beginning to melt into an unrecognisable face in the cosmos.

Death made his rounds, but failed to account for what slim nothingness was left of you. A matter you to this day cannot forgive him for. You witnessed the fossilisation of a planet: this is the process by which bodies take on the mask of their own absence. In a

shudder of bitterness, you vowed to become a shadow: to take on the mask of another's presence.” **develop?**

I end the story. The historical hologram that was guiding my tale has gone, and all that remains is a regular pantry cupboard, and a somewhat more wary conscience. I look back at the slouching head of my shadow to meet the origin of the broken spell. The fire continues to glow with untarnished determination. A dampening serenity seeps back in through the walls unannounced, filling the gaps of my shadow's reminiscences and my curiosity like the infuriating, cool shield of a mother's hand over young eyes eager to tear themselves free from innocence.

We spend the remainder of the evening gravely aware of our mutual dependence, yet capable, nonetheless, of enjoying the sweet givens of routine fade in the dimming pink of the setting sun — my shadow curled in my lap, my legs rocking us lightly to and fro, our brows half-slumbering — each of us privately resuming wandering recollections void of details.

Missing Chapter?

Brotherhood

I fall off my chair with a thud. My tiredness is intolerably heavy, pinning me down as though it longs to escape my body and fuse with the floor. I will probably remain here for some hours. The library is a grand structure — that much becomes clear when you are lying on the cold, stone floor, granted the time by invisible restraint, to take in the surroundings. It is a novel perspective to have on things.

The part of the library most familiar to me is the rows of book binds located at a nose-level cross section of the shelves. And in those times of the day when I see to pacing my way through the aisles, I have no idea that my nose is all the while being witnessed sauntering in the dark by persons of smaller-than-Lilliputian stature. My nose seeks and probes and scours, hunting for something, all the while unaware of how suspicious it looks wandering about like that in the middle of the night: glimpses of its rude iceberg tip caught roaming bare and unashamed through the shelves' missing teeth.

“The devil, it’s out on the prowl again!” little witnesses mutter to their spouses in the beds of their tiny shacks hidden in the warped fibres of the shelves — those shrewd insomniacs.

I am simply too big to interact with cohabitants of this scale and do not even notice them, but my various bits and pieces, particularly protruding ones, pass as oversized neighbourhood nuisances upon which these invisible inhabitants can vent their accumulated daily frustrations. “Cursed pest, stalking the moonlight again, causing careless devastation to a respectable way of life! The numbskull has no capacity to heed such civilities!” In this context, a miniature hero will occasionally dare to venture out and throw something at my nose from dark corners, aiming for one of my nostrils. As a result, I sneeze, or get itchy. A victorious crowd jubilation follows, but the sound exceeds the limits of my pitch range. Ultimately these conservative societies cause me minimal perturbation, despite their efforts. Goodness knows how many of them I’ve trodden, too.

I was reading peacefully on the chair when the tiredness struck. It seized me by the throat and dragged me asunder like an anchor. So dreadfully tired. The centre of the Earth is a brewing frown, I feel sure — tossing and

turning in a nightmare that brings it to a churning, boiling mass. It cranks up its pull on me, tightening its grasp on me in the delirium of a child squeezing the neck of his plush toy in the hinge of an elbow. I am suddenly three times heavier, unable to rise, unable even to graze the cover of the book that has landed page-down moments from my fingertips. The creased pages are tormenting me, but it is impossible to move. I'll have to wait all night, fixed by the inconsolable anxieties of the sleeping Earth.

It feels strange, being barred from my compulsion to pace through the aisles. The hours knock off the mantelpiece at the far end of the library. A ghoulish face of jade is carved in relief above the disused fireplace; a Hades guarding the fireless gateway to his pit. Friendly, redundant face. My body, arrested, dissolves into the ground. I forget what is what. Hands, knees and tummies are distant memories, features of a nameless friend I used to know. I feel myself merging with the room, against my control, becoming the room. I know only what I see, namely, the face of Hades (which becomes my own face), the rows upon rows of books upon the shelves (which become my teeth) and the scuttling noises of hidden life that become my thoughts.

I long for movement to jog a sense of myself back into being. I long to say, “here you are, foot! Where have you been?” reconvening other vestiges of wandering Me’s back into an articulate whole. Gathering my pieces like this is like gathering wet, flapping fish into a hooked arm: each time you bend to pick another geezer up, the rest slither out and begin to cause a ruckus again. But continuous movement is what typically prevents me from losing grip of all my bits and remaining empty handed — indeed, handless.

I wish the Earth could stop having its nightmare and release me from its feverish grasp. My weight is so monumental, my bones so pained with exhaustion, that I still cannot move a fraction.

The night is spent bodiless, the sky turns a blind eye. Under such constraints my motion sense recedes, taken over completely by my faculties of perception. I have become sharp and attuned to all external disturbances. So much so in fact, that my hearing range eases wider like an inflating muscle, and I can just about begin to hear the mob of tiny library dwellers jubilating, and even discern their words.

“The beast has been conquered! Our worries are come to an end!” is the slogan of the hour. Festivities ensue: feasts and parades, saluting heroes, the little ones giddily scampering about past their bed-times, observations of ancient rituals and the exchange of gifts: I can hear it all, the good tiny folk of the library, celebrating the absence of the intruder that was my nose, which has not appeared for the first night since it began disturbing their peace. Yet, small societies can expect a much different picture within the next hour; several generations elapse in a single night for this people.

The face of Hades in the mantelpiece mourns each minute lost to the confusion of life, his bearded face seems to shake, slowly, “It’s not worth it,” he murmurs cynically in breezy tones that wander through the aisles along with the travelling draft, almost indistinguishable from its whistles. I pretend not to hear.

A miniature drama takes hold, imperceptible were it not for my newly heightened auditory senses. The good tiny folk of the library are by now at each other’s throats. “Curse you, vermin of the land, curse you!” erupts one neighbour, who squeezes in his clasp the neck of another. Rows of homes crackle ablaze in the background. Meanwhile, a fellow village woman militantly leads her

children single file into a local shop to plunder the premises. It is utter pandemonium. None of this I can visibly see, of course; in fact, all looks rather well from my view. The bigger you are, the stiller your outlook, and the more peaceful your attitude. This is what makes elephants, whales and the universe so loveable.

The currency of hatred that has throughout their generations been freely deposited upon a common enemy (my nose), has now percolated into an economy of violence that recycles spite, accusations and aggression between the good people themselves, such that they are now drowning in the possibility of mutual eradication.

So tired... so unimaginably worn and flattened. I am willing to surrender to sleep, but cannot — I cannot sleep and must endure the night. My gaze wanders over the stained glass windows above depicting scenes of valour, destruction and enlightenment. The hands of saints and knights point meaningfully, like arrows on a diagram. I look about the floor onto which I am plastered, suffocating under the childish hook of gravity that still unconsciously holds me hostage. Overturned chair, book on floor. The hums of the room have become my very thoughts, and I cannot banish the images of a burning

civilisation taking place at this very moment. The face of Hades passes me his drooping chin from across the room, a look supposing to administer something equivalent to an ironic clinking of two glasses.

Earth wakes up — somewhere in the world a volcano erupts on uninhabited land, and the ground shakes with the tremors of pained relief. A bright sky gasps into life after a night spent with the sun submerged and holding its breath under parading nocturnal folly.

I wrest myself from the floor and stagger onto legs as though they are stilts, clumsily snatching at the air after evasive points of balance that dodge me like cheeky kingfishers as I propel myself into the aisles of the library. The tiny good people of the library cease their strangling, drop their bounty and let spill their fire-extinguishing water buckets to gaze stupefied up at the massive, clunky demon of my nose, rising like a spectre from their childhood folk tales. Silence hangs amid the residue of waning atrocities. A single call bellows:

“Our fate is but now sealed, my brethren! The beast of our ancestors’ tales has returned, preserved by legend, carried to us by our own follies! We have betrayed our mothers and fathers! Brothers and sisters, to arms!”

Upon which action resumes in resolute and unified comradeship. I sneeze and itch all over, patrolling the aisles beneath stained glass knights, which from above cast a flurry of approving lights upon the peace I accidentally continue to preserve, on my customary strolls through the aisles of the library.

Anomaly

A sun-speckled profusion of wet spring smells lingers in the not-too-distant atmosphere. I sigh the same sigh of yesteryear as if all of time is collapsed into this single push of air, ungluing my squished lips from crossed arms upon the table top. Splotchy with the redness of over pampered kisses, cuddly bruises. There on those patches of red upon my face and arm do I feel the cool air expertly speculating on sweaty beads in the porous furrows of my encapsulated skin, as I steadily regain consciousness.

Another day. Reeled in by the sun, ever insistent on its timely waxing and waning. Those harsh-handling solar antennae are upon me again. Its fingers harmless, but intrusive. “Hhnn?” I say, lifting my heavy head. Glottal complaints sully forth, with the wish-washing experimental vocabulary of a gargling brain. So sweaty, so hopeless. All the sleep-dirt is stuck to me like the grime on a traveller of modest means, and squinting under the piercing search lights of the sun, I shudder. How many more glorious days must I endure in this chain of events that strives to engrave me in the grave of

history? The days, it would seem, wish to be done with me before I have quite yet awoken to their dawning rays.

I cough, steadying myself on an enterprising elbow, and attempt to rise, somewhat like a hungover cowboy. A mighty wind shepherds high altitude clouds far from the muggy fog around my heart. Its unforgiving freshness tames the spinning compass of my mind. I am trying to get up. For a good while I half-stand supported by the candlestick of arm that wobbles in place upon the wooden table top, the rest of my body melting over its stoop. Hair stuck to my neck slides a fraction out of place as I turn my head skyward. The day is strong. The day is strong again. Each day rises to the occasion, seizes itself, and bolsters its weapons of Time and Weather. The day is unyielding and tireless, the day is plump and blistering. The day is buoyed upon its own pounding pulse of Hereness, and requires no external encouragement of any sort.

Some time ago, on a rainy afternoon, I was born. Was it not so? In the library. I think about it sometimes, and savour the scene by adding plush orchestral music and heightening the moody violet colours of the night sky to my unfolding projections. It was drizzling, I recall; the panes were crying. No sooner had I come to be, than I

slipped niftily off my chair and stole away to the dark alcoves of that vast room, where I took my first steps between the protective shelves. It had been drizzling for a long time, and on and on it drizzled before the brow of the sky cleared, and the ordeal was over. At the time I tried but failed to remember the mysterious Before. One cannot intercept one's own inception. No, I could only think to be, and to walk upon the path laid out to me like a ball rolling self-evidently down an incline, and to sleepwalk between the towering shelves of books. Dreams from the womb have long been dispelled, scattered into ashen cloud. Sometimes I wonder if any remnants of these intangible foetal memories still drifted, if a speck was caught in my hair. Any morsels? Of something me, that is no longer mine. I urge my mind to reveal to itself what had really happened when I came into the world. I was sitting by the window, that rainy afternoon, at the very site where memories burst and fled. So awesome, so tremendous was it, that I came to be as I was that afternoon, that the Earth jolted. And with this jolt the sky sweat with the pangs of unfathomable contradictions, and with this jolt and with this unhappy rain, we all forgot. Something went blank. The sky forgot, and I forgot, and the Earth forgot. My appearance

by the window, that afternoon, had in fact cost a whole slither of crucial Before to be blast to smithereens.

To me, the forgetting was unimposing, a given. To the sky above, however, it was very perplexing. Uneventful days transpired, and I settled in almost immediately into my surroundings. Yet, very early in those days I began to understand that I was an unwanted child, and that discreet interventions had been put in place to effectually do away with me. I did not pass any particular judgement on this perceived intention. Perhaps I was somewhat puzzled by this implied contempt, but, save for but a few occasions, rarely was I one to put up much resistance. Between intervals of attending to one of a handful of simple activities I devised for myself, I tended to pause to look out at the landscape, which to me was of a plasticine or impasto quality — humorous to consider in any manner “real” — with serene familiarity. Yes, I concluded that I found the world beyond my doorstep quite funny. It was a big funny face that I longed to prod with a stick, if for nothing but the satisfaction of impressing its cushy surface and bringing into prominence the badly-kept secret of its scaffolding. A big funny face to shake my head and tut-tut-tut at for insisting that its cotton clouded beard was real.

Now I realise that the big face of the outside world might as well be observing me as much as I it. It has not at all, till now, passed through my mind that the little bowling pin of my body wandering intermittently beyond the gridded windows of my house upon the hill might be a “view” in its own right — less still that this sighting might be cause for annoyance. Annoying, like a marble stuck knocking around inside the alcoves of a hollow plastic figurine, making its eyes roll. I do not mean to be such a nuisance. Futile attempts are made to wipe me away from the scene, rapidly, quietly, like a tiny spelling mistake. And this puzzles me each time, whereby each such attempt to clean after me seems to leave a bigger mess behind than before: I seem now smeared deeper into the fibres of my home — my essence spread this way and that. And for some time now — my dear, can there be any doubt of it? — the days have been consigned to do away with me gradually, to wash out the stain of my being with imperceptible erosions.

And now, standing here, immobilised by the cooking sun, I confess I have come to feel a little offended about all of this. I do not particularly appreciate this episodic new-fangling. If I should be done away with, I should much prefer the fell-swoop of a guillotine erasure, sliced

off from the cord of life in a happy snippet, pronounced absent in the snap-middle of speaking a sentence. And yet, hobbling on my still indecisive elbow (which has by now surely fused with the wooden tabletop beneath it) I begin to question whether I in fact know any caress save that of the clinical examinations to which I am routinely subjected by this brisk wind and that groping sun beam.

I am the wretched patient so accustomed to hospitalisation, to the expert handlings and mishandlings carried out by anonymous nurses, that the violations and humiliations of examination have become transformed into to nothing short of gestures of motherly affection. I cannot stand here and deny how deeply I love this harsh weather. I continue to love it in spite of its weathering effect upon me. I love it because it reckons with me. It delivers a much yearned-for touch: a blessing and a violence in one united grace, planted on my forehead like the conditional kiss of jealous gods. The sun — so harsh, so real — has come to collect from me my life tax, only to send me again on my way, into life.

I draw one leg out from the picnic bench upon which I have presumably slept. Staggering onto the walkway, I hear the acute absence of crunching gravel beneath my toes. Hot, though. The ground feels hot on my bare feet.

Their itchy coals usher me scampering back into my home. Out of the front door sticks a small spherical head. It is my head. It sticks coquettishly out of the home I have thought of christening “The Last Cough”. There I peep out, like a cartoon character inviting viewers inside, into the story. There are the curly rainbow letters of my household name arching over my head, resounding, pinpointing me on my lonely television island in the topology of idly watching minds. Here I am! Come on in! At The Last Cough, fit to embark, to sail, to fade from childhood memory at the blink of an age gone by, here am I! Nowhere else but Elsewhere.

Writing

In the far corner of the study, a chair stands modestly behind a square desk of the deep, reddish hue of gentlemen's timber. The design of the room's interior has a special touch of consideration for whomever was imagined to visit it, and in particular, in making them feel welcomed and unintimidated. The gentleman of this room was undoubtedly an egalitarian soul; a visionary, in fact. He saw the world differently to the majority of his privileged peers, as being a place in which brotherhood and sophistication ought not be at odds. There had been no need for an enormous desk, so he had had it retracted — halved down the middle — with the sawed-off end facing the chair behind it to obscure the scars of its castration from clients and casual visitors. Instead of taking a central position, the desk station is huddled into the corner of the study, from which the gentleman appeared to be peering out into a room that did not in fact belong to him as such, but that he felt grateful to be in all the same. His cologne lingers, trapped in an unaired drawer which was last opened by than none other than himself. The scent, pervading slowly through

fibrous fissures to mingle with the surrounding air, is derived from a sandalwood that glazes lazily like amber cognac over a hint of fresh lavender and mint. It sets a tone of spirited enthusiasm, anchored by a certain dignified respectability which has, to be sure, not entirely been abandoned in the design of the room.

The visitors were invited to enter with ease, step onto the podium of a large carpet and take ownership of this adequate floor space to pace, to suggest, to fumble, to complain, to pitch and to recount. By all means, these guests were encouraged to help themselves to a drink of their choice while the gentleman of the house got his papers together, and reassembled his thoughts to make room in his mind to lend them his utmost attention.

The visitors to the study rarely came attended by anybody, and in fact almost always entered the premises without anybody else's knowledge, being, as these often were, rather confidential matters. All these confidential matters were recorded into abbreviated forms and religiously safeguarded in cabinets lining the wall behind the desk itself.

Happily would the visitors help themselves to a drink or two. Oh! Well, yes. Why not? In fact, they usually felt

significantly pacified in the walk taken to the serving tray at the other end of the room, already adorned with vials of brassy liquids playing off the lamplights in competing yellows and oranges. They could take in a breath, turn their back to the sire of the study, and knowing that the expression on their face could momentarily rest from scrutiny, quietly cross the room to return to themselves — the very selves they seemed to have had lost immediately upon entering the study. Then, with a comforting swish and an encouraging sip, they might turn, glass in hand, to meet the eager gaze of the bespectacled gentleman huddled in the far corner of the room, and find their courage at once restored, while mistakenly owing this to their own faculties of self-composure.

Rarely were these visitors women, and if they were, it was highly unlikely that they would accept a drink or be offered one (egalitarianism did not extend itself quite so literally). Her skirt would brush along, unaccustomed to the brittle Persian carpet, causing a static electrical current to alarm the molecular world across its surface with sweeping miniature lightning bolts, the floor pricking as she went, like a kitten's ear. There was never a happy reason for a woman, unaccompanied, to pay a

visit to this study, although such cases had to be anticipated. The man of the study would sift without judgement through his papers, waiting for her to begin her tale. In this, the layout of the room served not only to reassure visiting guests, but also to physically section off its master into a zone of moral safety from which he could manoeuvre his papers. His papers were enchanted surfaces upon which hurtful truths turned into white, even, light things that could be popped into an envelope, securely stapled, or discreetly notated upon.

These papers could mean little, if nothing at all to me, had I had the intention of poking around through them. Though marked in a consistent code and lined with tell-tale handwritten comments in the margins — the archive of scandals remain much more potent when left unread, and unread will they remain. I turn away from the blatant facts these documents open to me, choosing to keep closed the lids of deceased anxieties, rather than search their glassy eyes for more than could possibly bear meaning in the world I inhabit.

But I do take a seat behind the desk. My knees graze the beams holding rigid the desktop above them, such that I cannot cross one leg over the other, as is my custom when intending to sit back for a long time. My arms rest

on the sleeves of the chair, which mould the spine into a comfortably alert posture. Thus enthroned into the desk, with bottles and pens to my left, and papers to my right, I feel some call to occupation. But wedged into the corner of the study I recognise another advantage in the design of the space. The vantage point afforded me from this position is all-encompassing, and it is certainly quite difficult to be assassinated or in some other manner caught by surprise sitting like this. My feet, cold, are poised amateurishly bare on the carpet below. Next time I will wear shoes in here, I think. There could be nothing so distinguishing as the voluntary dismissal of the indulgence proposed by carpeted surfaces, barred from them by wearing polished leather and tight socks.

Carefully, I begin to rearrange the desktop stationery to accommodate my right handed bias. I move the papers to my left, and the inks and pens to my right. I redrew the map of the desk, the constellation of living habit that has remained untouched for centuries. The tabletop items I move fall into place, mirroring all that has been and gone. I ignore the guilt inherent in the task, and resolve that it is my duty to sit in the chair and appoint myself new and rightful master of the study.

With a darting glance at the dark, circular patch on the wall where a clock presumably once hung, I feel I can begin. Finally! Begin my day's work. My fingers rap on the desktop for a few empty moments. I look energetically at my surroundings, unsure of my next move. What could this work consist of? I cough. Then sniff, slightly. I faintly touch the nearest corner of the thin stack of blank papers by my side, which move like leaves under a single breath of breeze. Quiet: the time is moving along like an anonymous pedestrian.

No visitors this morning, it would appear. Not that this fact is particularly noteworthy. Sitting here, where I might be expected between working hours, is one of the most principal purposes of my work, I reflect, regardless of how many visitors come knocking. I do not look at the door. I assess my desk accessories and the appropriateness of their relative distances. A professional never sits about gawking at his door. He is patiently aware of it, all the time, undisturbed by the eventual knock that falls upon it. He lifts his face and smiles, "Enter!" — after jotting down a final word.

I am by no means preoccupied with waiting. I am too busy to wait! These are my working hours, and every moment of this time requires my respectful attention.

The door is wholly unimposing. It is present, without doubt, but surely more as an ally, a sentinel, and not an oppressor; not a warden, not my keeper.

I am the one seated in the throne of business. And boy, am I busy. These are surroundings that are familiar to me. They are “everyday”. I let out a compassionate sigh as if to say, “here we go again!” and “no matter, it is my duty, and I do not begrudge it.”

I cannot entirely conceal my delight at settling into this new post, and so put a pause on the proceedings only to leap from my chair and dart out of the room, in order to fetch a pair of shoes. They are stowed away in the floor-level compartment of a walled-in wardrobe lining the corridor. I came across them some time ago, when, in passing through the hallway, I was struck with wonder at what kind of tiny being might live inside this low cupboard. At first I announced myself with the knock of a single knuckle and curt verbal introductions. Safely unanswered, I resolved to trespassing, only to find no occupant other than these shoes. Now, crouching down, I am overjoyed to find the self-same pair awaiting me punctually, as if by appointment.

They are black, and little. They have short, courtly heels to flatter the posture, and are otherwise elegant by way of clerkly modesty. I slip them on and admire their comfortable austerity. I am heard clicking down the polished passage before arriving once again to the study door. I comfort myself with the thought that the door will grow in familiarity over time, and that its knob will eventually accustom to my hand, or vice versa, and grant me passage without putting up stubborn airs.

Fortunately, I have not kept any clients waiting in my absence.

The walk across the study is markedly different this time. The shoes won over for me a modest degree of authority, and I unfurl proudly from them with the good natured spirit of a potted plant. They are vehicles that safe-guard my journey across the carpeted seas of official business, and it seems then obvious that any clerk is decidedly foolish to enter a study without the correct uniform. The floor is treacherous: a map of corners and edges; a sophisticated language of accessibility and boundary between orthogonal layers of panels, furniture, rugs, carpets and planks. It articulates laws of appropriate conduct that I have been crude in overlooking. My new shoes help me navigate the study's labyrinth of

formalities. Their dainty tips seem to guide me of their own accord, and I marvel at the manner in which they refine my stride. Their tight fit keeps me alert, and nips at my toes each time I forget to tread properly.

They glow at the forefront of my consciousness such that I can almost see them through the wooden desk at which I dutifully sit to see to the day's final hours. The page beneath my nose is cluttered with cryptic markings of my own. I have quite forgotten that I have written anything. A blue pen lies to its side like an lazy culprit. I look down upon the page which suddenly appears as bait placed there to prank me.

There are no clocks and no watches in this house, a fact for which I am certainly grateful. These instruments are like dreamcatchers, but for the world of the real; they drink excesses of living matter into their vortices. Despite this, I can often find answers to "when?" concealed upon a smooth patch of skin on my left wrist. The hollow between the parallel bones in my forearm house my private oracle like the face of a willow tree housed in the venous bark of its trunk. I consult this very reassuring piece of my anatomy with a smooth touch. It tells me that the working day has ended.

But the inked page I have created holds me fixed in my seat with a certain revelatory sadness. I have written something I cannot understand. I blink at it. The marks keep some sort of hieroglyphic tally of the already-forgotten sentiments of five minutes ago; short sticks of inked lines form a tumbling procession across the page that loosely mimics the cool typography of texts I have come across in the library. They float in the vacuum of A4 convention, unsure of the physics of the world they inhabit, leaning on each other for support. A voice: “what have I done?” echoes in my thoughts as I stare at the thing I have done. As the daylight beyond the study window wanes, and the room turns cold and inhospitable, I find myself held still as if smeared with the guilt of childhood crimes awaiting imminent paternal footsteps.

There seems to be no excuse for this kind of vandalism. In truth, I feel both rather alarmed and impressed by the many lives-worth of documents I know are archived behind my very shoulder. Writing is a piercing transgression. I wonder what sort of person you have to be to commit these deeds on a regular basis. This parchment now exists. It is the sort of still picture that continues to tumult, anguish and proliferate as soon as

you are no longer looking. I look about at a loss of where to put it. No drawer seems safe enough. As my eyes settle on the pages I wish I could relate what is written on it, but I too am excluded from its design. My writing has disowned me. I guess this too has something to do with my sadness. Like a descendant, it has robbed me of my past only to come into its own, and I am filled with a mix of regret and pride.

Writing is another Timeteller. It tells of times, and in so doing, it is already implicated in a refabrication of things that have been. It eats up my time in exchange for a time of its own. The sentiments of fifteen minutes ago seem so distant. The markings romanticise my passed emotions by virtue of taking them from me. Tears well up in my eyes as I remain locked under the enduring alarm of the unintelligibility of my own fragments. I cannot seem to contain myself. I am a vehicle of passing sentiments. Spectres of valiant heroes and romantic poets take but transitory residence in my body. Pictured upon the page I have written on is a self portrait, and preserved within, like a ghostly blur in the background, is something that should have passed unnoticed in the smoothing kinesis of rolling days. The first photographers like to take photographs of great,

galloping horses. They contrived (or exposed, depending on one's view) the impossible flight of a horse in mid-trot with the fixing forces of photography. My markings are even more peculiar. They fix an image of normalcy and self-containment in which I play no part. They picture my absence; I cannot find myself in them and fall into a void between the frames of their making. Here, says my handwriting, is precisely where I am not. As with the ghostly air hovering beneath the photographed running horses, or the composition of atoms pictured in books left half-browsed in the library, the secrets of life seem to involve for the most part nothing more than great deals of empty space.

All Face

The snowy ceiling balances above, unseen, untouched. Whitewashed to perfection, out of reach from potential sources of wear and tear, it shines blankly. Many a head has wandered beneath this very ceiling throughout the various epochs of the household. Dense strokes of hair whirlpooled into a single galaxy upon each and every scalp as bodies moved across the room.

These heads, pinballing gently about the room, rolling wilfully in and out of doors and decades, were undoubtedly supported by necks: those ingenious coils of bone, muscle and nerve forming flexible stems as strong and nifty as the trunk of a snake. Alas, it would be evident in the peculiar trajectories of each civilised head that made its rounds through this grand estate, that the full extent of the neck's capabilities remained decidedly unexplored by the room's historical occupants.

The standard way to hold one's head involved keeping the chin more or less perpendicular to the spine. This chin would sway from side to side in surveying greetings: how do you do? The neck was therefore a

largely neglected piece of corporeal machinery. It was overqualified. Its owner's distinguished class was communicated by a head poised: unflinching for lack of any threat, for it was a guarded life which almost entirely removed the need for darting glances of caution. But this social refinement had funnelled the extent of head turning to such a degree that people effectively wore nothing short of an invisible head guard, not unlike those worn by poor domesticated dogs recovering from surgery. The liberation of the mind had a somewhat stiffening effect on the body, modernity would reveal. The passing fashions, involving corsets and starched undershirts, neckties and done-up buttons and laces, served only to further reduce bodily movements to a minimum and boast of a life free from strenuous activity. No doubt, this was both rather taxing and frustrating for most post-enlightenment necks.

Now let us return to the ceiling from which we have observed the constellation of a particular society of heads. The ceiling is, in contrast to the bodies it has observed over the years, all face. One sided, all inclusive. It does not have a neck, and no notion therefore, of a directed gaze. Nothing exists outside of its incessant stare. It used to pass the time by keeping tally

of the heads bobbing like fairground apples across the room, and on days on which it felt particularly observant, of the dynamics between them. These heads moved, sometimes darting, sometimes in grace, in line with patterns that seemed at first chaotic, yet revealed on closer inspection to be unquestionably adherent to an intricate system of rules. The ceiling would watch this sport with mild interest (it was the only channel available) and reluctantly contained the playing out of its dynamics, which varied every day. Sometimes, the doors on either side would fling open and welcome a swarm of anonymous heads, which then dispersed again. Once, there were only two heads present across either side of the room, hovering momentarily in feigned suspense before lunging towards each other in emphatic embrace. At other times, the room remained empty of heads altogether.

To the ceiling, these heads were like counter-pieces on a playing board, or nodes upon a map that charted narratives in the making. The spiritual mark of the unwinding galaxy pouring from the tops of skulls into mops of hair was a recurring sign of commonplace sacredness. The spiral. The mark of the person. That very epicentre from which this hair sprouted contained the

origin of everything, and was the password for birth; a newborn babe's rite of passage. And although this was a rather awe-inspiring detail to be encountered on a daily basis, it was ubiquitous within the ever constant visual realm of the ceiling.

I lie on the floor contemplating the ceiling in this manner. The varnished panels beneath me run cool along my spine, and I melt as if by habit into their rubbery expanse. This floor has served as lava in occasional childhood games; but to me the enveloping surface is more like a great sea, a smothering comfort into which I long to be dissolved. I lie on the floor face to face with the ceiling in a kind of courteous audience, paying my respects. Its lonely wisdom is of the kind that gives no colour to facts and memories. These scenes from many lives lived now lie carpeted imperceptibly under its snowy gaze. Only the rare blemish or persevering hairline crack across its vast surface give away a note of mortal sadness found in all aging things.

My interview is solemn, as if with an elderly, bedridden relative who has forgotten how to speak but says everything in a look, with crystal ball eyes of clouded glass. I am not intimidated. This intensity, this outlandish generational distance that sets us worlds apart, is as

familiar as it is humbling. My naivety is the forgivable shortcoming of an heir not quite come of age. We are waiting together; for me to grow up. The fingers of my right hand are lazily worming through the roots of my hair as I gaze up, attending to the non-urgent question of whether or not I bear the mark of the person. My fingers aimlessly pursue the matter without interrupting my audience with the ceiling.

Suspended between us is utter quietness, and where there should be the faint ticking of a grandfather clock resounding from several rooms down the hall, or the clatter of unwashed kitchen pans made audible by the absence of conversation, there comes only the low and constant hum from the bowels of my own hearing apparatus; air molecules tumble drying in my ear drums, or the regulating tides of motion fluids along its channels. I strain to listen out beyond the sounds of my continuing functionality and into the evening beyond for muffled aeroplanes groaning overhead, or wheels of approach crunching on the gravel driveway outside. The whirring of my own straining remains the prevalent sound however, and the house itself is submerged in silence. Loudest is the insistence upon what can no longer possibly be heard: the scraping of cutlery upon

dinner plates, the laughter of unintelligible conversational snippets passing under a window, or large rugs being thrashed free from sequestered dust. Household routines have been thrown out long ago together with all clocks and watches, roosters and sundials. This is a memory that comes to me innocently, a fact of the past whose obscenity is softened by its remoteness. It's not really my memory. It is an episode about the house that descends airily onto my forehead and slides off onto my hair like a fallen leaf. The memory is of a militant eradication of all timekeeping instruments that occurred one afternoon here on the estate. In a burst of irreversible rage — whose rage is not something I remember — the clocks were unhooked from the walls and removed from mantelpieces, and then tossed out of windows from all sides of the house. Clocks built into larger articles of furniture required being carried out by workmen, only to be sent tottering and tumbling down the hill. Somebody must have been really angry with this unreasonably reliable technology, and gone ahead and done away with it in one afternoon's frenzy. I can't say I blame them. The scene that replays itself indiscriminately as I turn over it in my mind's eye is a memory about the house, and like an anonymous tip, it feels significant, but not particularly trustworthy.

I sigh pleurably to the mental exertions of thoughtful enquiry, still looking up at the ceiling, still probing my skull for a meaningful crop circle in my hair. One clue in favour of the memory is that nothing quite needs maintaining around here, I think to myself, brushing the smooth floor with my free hand. Granted, there is a bit of dust chased loose with my sweeping hand, but it is of the kind that only reshuffles and migrates; it does not accumulate. Whatever dust there is in the household is here to stay, not a speck more, not a speck less. It drifts freely between states of equilibrium and chaos, but like the confetti in a snow globe, remains exactly constant in numbers.

Frozen time. Will I ever grow up? Will we wait here forever, grandfather ceiling never quite dying, and I never quite ripe enough for what ever he has in store to bestow upon me? Things don't feel particularly frozen. My body is whirring with the efforts of persevering throttle, the room is not particularly cold, and the dust does take flight from under my brusque movements. Or maybe that's what frozen time looks like. Maybe time has ground to a halt and whatever I inhabit now is but the ashen residue of a spent universe, a realm so energy

depleted that it has not the strength to exterminate its own remains.

It is difficult to eradicate all trace of time. Its properties remain fossilised in the books in the library that recount histories in chronological order, in the sequentiality insinuated by numbered pages and ordered paragraphs. I can count my steps musically down the corridor. I know of states of sleep and states of lucidity, and how the night and day of my mind demarcate the episodes that constitute the clumsy continuity of my existence in this place. I was born long after clocks were banished from the house, if the memory serves. Yet living in the graveyard of time has taught me a lot about it. Its presence is as remote as a dinosaur that once stalked the continent, and as intimate as its skeletal remains. Here it once was, but I can't quite believe it.

Enough thinking. Don't I get a story? Perhaps a knock at my door, or a letter in the postbox. A crunch of wheels upon the driveway. A long awaited approach, a convergence of destinies, of epic sequences of cause and effect that mark each subsequent second with an inevitable but flavoursome quality. Whatever blows my way, whether a letter, or another gift from the sky, I vow to open my doors to the next character in my story and

greet them with, “I have been waiting for you all my life.”

I get up from the floor and walk to the northern window to look into the imperfect darkness of deep dusk. The faint outline of dollops of hills are just about discernible. I am certain that there is a lot of jostling about still going on in my world. Temperamental weather and nattering forest animals, for instance. It is the things that are all-face that are immune to time, or at least very resistant to it. The cliff face, the clock face, the ceiling. There is no getting around these things. They have a dedication to their universal vantage point which relinquishes them of bodies, of an inside. I then turn at the abrupt sound of something like a deafening amplification of my beating heart. There was a knock at the door.

The Guest

Fixed into place with the cement of suspicion, eyes wide and flashing like beacons in the night, I stop breathing. If I could stop my heart from attempting to barge free from my chest I would, and suspend all bodily function with it to disguise myself with the inanimate.

The knocks, three of them, a numerical human habit. They rap — one two three — in polite but deliberate succession, with no preference delivered to any particular knock, each resounding equally. There is a guest at my door. A creature with a life of its own, that wills its way left and right through the world as it pleases, is now at my door, and has presumably willed itself to me. I try to keep my heartbeats hidden.

Whether I like it or not, we are already in an engagement. There the guest is, entertaining the sound likelihood that I have heard the knocks from within whilst engaged in some domestic activity. He is waiting for me to come, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, examining his sleeves, or perhaps contemplating the strange makeshift sign battered into the arched front

door's frame that reads "The Last Cough", and its amateur handiwork. Like me, he has a sense of time, and a sense of how long it might take a resident to answer the door of a castle of this size. What will happen, or not happen within that time will suggest several possibilities about me. Regardless of what I do — leap down and thrust open the door, hesitate until a second knock prompts me to act, or avoid answering at all — I am saying something in absence and presence alike, and I am already speaking to the stranger at my door.

A prolonged wait releases me from the grip of perfect fear, and with cautiously deflating lungs, I move at a slant angle to scrutinise the view of the porch from the window. There upon the grounds, the familiar architecture of flooring and fencing play off one another in grey, rectangular illusions and night time disguises. Yet these shadows cannot conceal the small, irregular silhouette that rocks almost imperceptibly in place, like only a living thing intuitively monitoring its own balance can.

I cannot see the source of the shadow, the guest at my door, but he is moving back now, because the shadow is growing larger. I whip out of view, tucking the drape smartly back into place, and sooth the tessellations in the

fabric with a quiet palm. Three knocks resound once again in equal measure, and though their confirming call invites a grievous chill into the room, my expectation of their return thaws my frozen joints and allows me to creep out of the room, through to the corridor that leads to the landing.

It is the unpredictability of another's intentions, hidden so inexplicably from my knowledge, that grips me in this instance. The person at the door is a box containing a surprise, and it is my task to trigger its springing mechanism. He could be anyone, and he could do anything. In my mind's eye he shapeshifts into various forms, bursting from one apparition into another: a cordial fish wearing a top hat, balancing on his rear fin; a dubious character wrapped up in a trench coat with only his shifty eyes peeping from under the brim of his fedora; a confused postman holding an unaddressed letter; a one-eyed wench peddling mysterious gemstones that lure me with the magnetism of brooding omens. Vanishing, and reappearing, vanishing and reappearing, what tricks has he in store, this anyman? How dangerous is this confrontation with another person — like fencing with a mirror image of oneself. Advance, retreat; advance, retreat. We know as much and as little about

one other. I venture down the hall with muted steps. Be *en garde*: await patiently the infinitesimal advantage that awards the worthy swordsman with the fatal upper hand. Advancing further into darkness, I sense the symmetry of our agencies and the inevitability of our meeting.

A patchwork of shifting shadows, thrown by indistinct objects determined to submit false information about themselves, become a welcoming thickness to traverse through. The air, coloured in dense blacks and greys, supports my unwilling body to venture forth, propping me up like a great body of water. The obscurity, the irreconcilability of separateness and bland blend of shapeless shadows, is a kindness of its own, a concession. Free from the responsibility to look, to reconsider my venture toward the front door, and conveyed along by the rolling current of shadows, an acceptance of the inevitable relieves me somewhat of my mortal fear. And now my Sad Eyes are growing watery, a defence mechanism I suppose, that obscures my vision in comforting ripples as they morph gently upon my face. I am entering a state of detachment that turns the world into a forgiving haze.

Before I know it, I find myself at the top of the stairwell. Down upon the ground level, through the entrance hall, I

can detect a presence waiting beyond a mere slither of door; so unresisting, so easily overcome. Only etiquette keeps us apart.

And in my hesitation I have quite forgotten this vital etiquette. I am taking far too long and keep my guest waiting. No, he is not an invited guest. But he is a guest all the same, and the honourable thing to do would be to treat him like one. All I have to do is nip down the stairs, ease open the door and greet him with a cottage-welcome smile.

But it's not quite that simple. There are potential indecencies to consider. Would he not regret having stepped into a household plagued by antipersons? If he were to ease open the door now, down from the cold and sparse hall, and say, "hello?"; he'd finally spot me at the top of the stairs, haunting the banister; so still that he'd be straining to locate the picture frame that contained my image before realising in horror that I stood, as it were, in the flesh.

Looking into my Sad Eyes irreversibly displaces the soul; the mere sight of them scars. Like a burning flame, the matter from which they are formed is too unlike anything else, incomparable to any other material

phenomena, yet it persists unproblematically. All at once they are too blatantly not of this world and farcically implausible for one to possibly tear one's attention away from their self evident presence, and too gruesome and revealing, in their oozing decline and wallowing bottomlessness, to acknowledge. See how they slide off my face, my Sad Eyes, running precariously down my cheek but never quite falling off, always attached to me by wobbly filaments like dawdling balloons on a string.

This abrupt awareness of my image makes me even more reluctant to receive the visitor than my initial suspicions of malicious intent from his side. It seems impossible to allow myself to impress my affliction onto somebody, and have him carry away a pocket mental image of the person on the stairwell, so encapsulated in deformity that they seem all-shell, entirely characterised by the mask of their disease. Yes quite, a walking shell, so removed from personhood by layer upon layer of symptoms so as to have become solidified into an impasto depiction of the pitiable. I wait, my foot no longer wavering, but resting despondently on the first step, for the visitor to turn and to leave. I am immobilised, no longer by cowardice, but resignation.

The three knocks — somewhat more feeble this time, I find — chime one more time for good measure, before the faint stubby silhouette of what is presumably an arm retreats from the glass workings of the door like the wounded trunk of an elephant, and the dark orb on the porch is replaced by the flooding light of garden lamps about which presently resumes a midnight ball for mosquitoes.

He is leaving. My heart sinks without so much as a thud, it falters continuously through the abyss of my belly. The notion that I will be still be standing in the stairwell within the next three minutes, with the cloud of my capitulation seeping back in from the dark corners of the hall to jeer at my deserved loneliness, is appalling.

In a desperate flash I snatch the wide-brimmed lamp shade off an innocent bystander in the bedroom next door, an unassuming floor lamp, and I put it on my head. It can just about pass as chic eccentricity. The lamp shade is, in every sense other than its misappropriation as a head garment, overtly conservative. It is of a diplomatic beige colour, fanning outward in a uniform petticoat at a disinterested forty-five degree angle. But on my head, it becomes something else entirely, and placing it there is a little bit exciting. My daring is

sophisticated. I have the edge of a single pinstripe of a woman donning a classic suit, tailored and tucked, disrupted only by a single unapologetic article of outrage that make it — and her — fashion. I've scanned pages and pages of women like these in bible-like catalogues I've found on my patrols around the library. These books have thick spines embossed with metallic, capital lettering, each volume announcing the zeitgeist with bold proclamations of the year in which it was made, and the tastes it declares final, earth-shattering, edge-cutting. Row upon row, the books constitute a collection of cutting edge upon cutting edge, accumulating the triumph of their exacting newness from the early 1900s to the not-too-distant past. Each volume dissects and prides apart the fibres of its predecessor, picking apart seams, bursting open clasps and unstringing precious beads, only to refabricate from these remains new bold and witty statements in the form of clothes, bodies, and facial expressions punctuated by what are now outdated, youthful eyes. In the deep pools of the models' eyes swim old communal narratives of justice, freedom and virility. Old novelty, dead youth: these hopes rise like a delayed cry in the distance, and are but a nostalgic futurity.

And so is it with these books that year upon year, the fashions articulately split themselves to smithereens in search of the biting edge. One would have thought that with so many layers of cutting innovation, the world of fashion would have finally arrived at an atomic unit of flair by now. But pursuing the fashions has turned out to be a devilishly evasive quest. Its elementary particles jump mischievously out of scrutinous artists' paths, defying the pin ever hovering over the suspense of discovery.

I tip the brim of my lampshade headpiece to seductively obscure my eyes. One slippered foot ahead of the other, I descend with fingertips caressing the banister — not in the manner of one steadying herself down the stairs, no; but in the manner of territorial awareness. These stairs belong to me. This house belongs to me. And, borrowing the courage of the black-and-white women pictured upon the pages of fashion volumes dating back to the very first waves of female political emancipation, I stir towards the front door in my suave disguise, hips swaying subtly upon a precarious axis of pretence.

The word, “Hello,” resounds from lips left visible on my veiled face, in an accent I scarcely recognise. The voice projects into the cold night air, my outstretched arm still

clinging onto the handle of the open front door. Mask upon mask, I am impenetrable: encapsulated, with a glaze of Sad Eyes, and armoured with the 20th century fashion diva that the lampshade on my head so economically denotes. I look down at my guest through the fuzzy linen cross hatchings of the lampshade fabric where he stands mid-step, turning, perplexed. Doubtless he is taken aback by the queenliness of my disguise. This is encouraging.

“May I help you?” I offer lazily, as if I have just been interrupted by his knocking mid-cigarette, mid-evening cocktail, mid-avant-garde-in-the-making, doing whatever lethargic and spiritually profound activities a female dissident thinker locked away in her manor could be supposed to be engaged with at this time of the night. My body tingles with the halo of this composite *Fashion Today* character; my more wormy, vulnerable self safely tucked away elsewhere, hibernating.

The man on the porch is a character himself. He is squinting at me as if deciphering a puzzle printed on my face, but does not, in his bafflement, neglect to tip his hat, clear his throat and say, “Madam.” I nod approvingly at the acknowledgement. We’ve reciprocally marked each other’s presence, and it is this which is the life-

affirming gravity of mundane politeness. I shift my weight from one foot to another as though after a first parry, retreating to consider my next move and grasp a quiet note of relief at having passed the initial threshold of our encounter unscathed. There is a space, even whilst still tightrope walking on the tense string across my heart, for a quick self-congratulation mustered under held breath, before resuming the feat.

Images rebirth themselves in flickers across my mind as I look at him. He is in fact, not entirely a surprise; not quite a stranger in my life.

From what I can make out through the brim of my newfangled hat, he is wearing a wool coat appropriate to the season, his hands tucked into his pockets to help him withstand the chill. He is making his way back up the steps with dutiful strides to address me in what seems a somewhat grievous tone. He is a character, what with sharp brown eyes that instinctively record within them a blueprint of the house; with inside pockets from which he retrieves a laminated card embellished with official validations of status and authority, and mutely polished shoes that hold him steady and purposeful. Here is a man, not particularly handsome, but by no means lacking in self-assurance; a young man hardened by the sobering

severity of the cases he deals with day to day, and which have exhausted the need or desire for humour or frivolity to the extent that he resembles quite convincingly somebody much older. I have seen him and all his aspects many times before. He is an old friend. Or a friendly old foe. He pursues Dostoevsky's notorious protagonists in exacting steps. He appears innocuously in the background of a crime thriller, as that lean man bent over his computer in search of troubling data. When he appears in TV shows, he doesn't have any lines, but frequently helps populate the cast in scenes where some significant piece of information is announced, and everybody in the shot has been instructed to express deep concern over the news. He is a sceptical colleague of Sherlock Holmes', always outpaced by the problematic virtuoso yet always stubbornly insisting upon his textbook methods. Ultimately, he is an unrewarded lion-heart of a fellow.

He harbours not a single note of Inspector Clusoe's hilarity, but he sometimes awaits the clumsy detective in a black police car to drive him a hair's breadth out of danger, and his ability to pass neglected is indispensable in this manner. He has been consistently losing an hour of required sleep for years, and as he pursues fiendish

cases that seem to endlessly taunt him with unfulfilled promises of conclusion, there awaits him at the very end of his life a Reaper, grimly scratching away with his scythe at the time that he has squandered incrementally with his deteriorating health. Here is an unremarkable youth with a noble heart and a praiseworthy ethic and professional record. He is not funny, nor hardboiled, nor tragic, nor impulsive, nor brilliant, in any way. He is just a young man with a tired body and a firm will and a good upbringing, who has grown comfortable with continual disappointment. He is frowning, but I think this causes him no muscular strain; it seems the glacial crevices on his brow have settled there to stay. He is looking down, immersed in the bothersome details of his investigation, and is pausing to summon the most concise words with which to inform me of its nature. I wait patiently, using the moment of his distraction to assure the lampshade is fixed securely on my head.

“A matter of considerable official concern has surfaced,” he begins, putting his identification card neatly back into his breast beside a minimal array of stationary and referential documents. “A matter of concern to local authorities, to the state, and not least to residents in the affected area, as well as perhaps beyond. It is my duty to

inform you of the potential risks involved, as well as precautionary measures civilians such as yourself may take to protect themselves.”

I listen with great attention, and nod to indicate that I am not asleep beneath my hat. I have encountered this character before, and know that the next appropriate thing to say is, “Please enter, Inspector.” I guide him seamlessly to the kitchen, quietly electrocuted by the thrilling expertise with which I am performing the unfazed hostess. He obliges without a word, removing his hat with a funeral gravity and eyes downcast single-mindedly upon the weight of the case in question.

I serve him a cup of black coffee, which at the beginning of his curt speech is very hot, and from which steadily dissipate every which way frantic pockets of energy, until it has grown quite cold, remaining in all other respects utterly unchanged. I cannot quite see him very well through the excessive shade of my helmet, and so stare instead at this cup of coffee from across the kitchen table. He sits in silence for some moments as we wait for the kettle to simmer down her brawling, with the kind of unapologetic pity that accompanies slaughtering the family pig. The steam rises from the hot coffee in curling premonitions, provisionally soothing the common plight

my community is under, and which the inspector is about to disclose to me. I have not been aware that I belong to a community. It's the one aspect of his speech thus far that makes me somewhat distrust him.

We both lean back in our pale pine chairs to take in the information that the inspector delivers into the kitchen space, and which has now tinged it with the fraternal warmth implied by common strife, mutual calamity or the prophecy of apocalypse. He tells me that there is a fugitive on the loose, and that his intentions are unknown. There is no evidence to suggest with what dubious dogma he could be affiliated, and whether the reasoning behind his crimes promise to be religious, political or monetary in nature. All that is known is that there is a vagrant out there, a culpable agent, a stain in the horizon, and that he is busy harnessing together the fragments of a malicious design.

Of course, I have been given a condensed version of the news. Certain details are kept confidential so as to not promote counterproductive panic in the community. I take it all in, like a responsible citizen, with calm consideration. My eyes wander from the kitchen hearth, where the kettle's pangs are settling into happy exhaustion, to the thick clouded glass of the window

pane *where I once spotted the lonely dusk peer jealously in*, and out upon the withering moors and their persevering, frail vegetation.

The inspector meanwhile stares into the crossed fingers in his lap, concentrating on being invisible. His profession has taught him to give vulnerable civilians this sort of space. His experience has made him understand that common folk are not habitually confronted with this sort of disturbing news, and have not the means of character to manage the gravity of such information quite as efficaciously as he. But as he focuses on disappearing like this, I hardly suppose he notices me studying him fiercely through my lampshade hat. I take my time to study a number of things.

All at once, I feel I have laid out before me a full hand of cards: the inspector, the news he has delivered to me, the empirical affect of the kitchen ambience and the precipitating willow trees lining the landscape in my window. By no means am I certain about what all these clues “mean”. But I have all these various pieces of information at my disposal, and have arrived at a juncture in this episode of my life a bit like a scene in a storyboard video game awaiting my turn to respond. Everything carries on in suspended motion, and I watch

it do this through narrow eyes. The inspector stares thoughtfully into his lap, his chest heaving slightly to and fro as proof of his continued thereness. The pitter patter of the weeping weather plays out in disruptive loops to simulate the passing of time, as does the crackle of the hearth. These hums and rhythms could roll on indefinitely. I could leave the console, and return to the game scene hours later to find the kitchen living, breathing, and as poised and natural and patient as ever, for my return. How simple is this deception. The seam at which the inspector's rising breaths or the rain's pattering loops, is imperceptibly fine. The lampshade on my head, like a virtual reality visor, makes my own examination of the space visible to me. My head-turning, from the inspector, to the hearth, to the window, is made heavy by the weight of it. First person gameplay makes subjectivity stark.

I rise slowly from the table, somewhat savvier, somewhat cynicised. Before making my way to the window-side to stare out at the moors I note the nontouch between my fingers and the varnish of the tabletop required of my rising. There is always, is there not, that atomic, invisible film, cutting me off from the world. It is humiliating to be granted existence on these

terms: Wilful, free; an agent, but only as a figment in somebody's dream. Out upon the very periphery of the dark wet green moors do I scan for a trace of the fallacy in the inspector's tale.

And the fallacy is that there is no community to speak of. As in any programmable environs, there lies beyond all the graphic finesse and articulate physicality a wall, a limit in virtual space against which excessive interaction exacerbates glitches. I imagine taking a bulldozer out to raid the wall, ram up against it like a furious tank. The game in which I live would be sent into a maddening tailspin, attempting to categorise my recklessness in a commendable effort to summon reconciliatory calculation mechanisms. Like a parent confronted with a torrent of adolescent outburst, the game program would grasp frantically for appropriate recourse, for lack of being taught to manage such unanticipated abuse.

The inspector has departed. Yes, his spirit has quite left him. He has fulfilled his purpose in delivering his message, and now continues to sit patiently immersed in the world of his lap, forever more guarding his own memory. There is no point showing him out. I leave the inspector in the kitchen, his too young eyes furrowed deep into those characteristically skeptical brows, ever

fraught with the injustice he has grown to see woven into the fabric of every significant and insignificant thing.

There he will remain, statuesque, yet unfalteringly sympathetic and soft-cheeked, for years to come. I will grow used to him, and will greet his presence with the same respect as my wilting rubber plant, my gossiping jugs and cups, or my temperamental kettle.

I sigh on my way out of the kitchen, thoughtlessly removing the lampshade hat from my head in my return to peace and privacy. Back into the darkness I roam; that darkness which my Sad Eyes, rippling organically across my cheeks, animates for me in dancing shadows like light at the bottom of a pool.

Quasimodo nodding in compulsive cheeriness in the darkness of his chapel — what else can he do? The world is grave and beautiful for those lonely and grotesque characters as he and I. Our afflictions enhance our sensitivity to the magnificence all around. Chronic pains and perpetual heartaches provide the metronomic aid of seeing, of appreciating. Bedridden with disease, the pores of perception widen to catch the wandering sparks of nature's ingenuity taking place unnoticed to all but oneself. Aha, I think, I will capture the settling dust

of lives lived in this place, and sequester them for my own keeping. This great cabinet of curiosities in which I live is potent with histories no longer belonging to anyone, artefacts of a bustling epoch I can reanimate in small taxidermic collections of my own. These are my little dynasties to recount, catalogue, and inhabit.

This tearful consolidation with solitude is romantic and inspiring enough. But in my throwaway disregard for the shell of an inspector that remains forever sitting in my kitchen, forever quietly heaving his chest in a pose of thoughtfulness, and the imprisoning facade of the horizon beyond which there is no “community” whatsoever, and the programmability of my very living quarters, I fail to acknowledge the one piece of useful information that was endowed upon me in the course of this encounter on this rainy eve. Namely, that there is a fugitive on the loose, and that this fugitive is located somewhere in the vicinity of my grounds.

Instead I throw away foolish hopes of kinship and “fellow man”, and stow myself jealously away, deeper and deeper into the heart of my household. Deeper into the concentric gastronomy of its architecture, I let the doors swallow me further into darkness. Here, old pains

sweetened by their familiarity await me with open arms,
and smother me into sleep.

The Organising Principle

I am in pursuit of some sort of organising principle, a thing which only I seem devoid of. It's easy to sneer at the programmatic simplicity of the bird in the sky, which flies out of one edge of the view and almost instantaneously erupts from the opposite edge of my frame of vision, as if either extremity of the view before me ought to be connected at the seams. Yet that underlying mechanism in the bird is likely the very thing which lends it such confidence, neither fanatically nor lethargically pursuing its path across the sky. It is this organising principle, I think, which lends the bird its measured tranquility and which makes it a stranger to accident.

This organising principle seems also, like the tug of gravity to a centre of mass, to firmly reinstate the alignment and consistent proportions of the bird's body parts, for it does not forget, on any of its westward laps across the sky, a single of its constitutive members. I imagine, likewise, the bird's thoughts to be collected, and do believe that because of this it can likely pursue a train of thought for a good deal longer than I am able to

do. The more difficult question is whether this train of thought is finally broken when the bird exits the edge of the frame and re-enters through the other, or whether the bird is capable of holding fast onto those brewing notions in the short interval in which it crosses the ‘seam’ in the sky. In short, whether its organising principle is strong enough to hold the bird’s thinking together, as the bird meets a decisive rupture in its formal rendering. For my own part, I would gladly partake in the segmented model of the bird’s thinking, but I am not sure if I would be able to bear a single, uninterrupted line of musing that has been allowed to run, unchecked, since the very inception of its looped life. The specific danger, of course, would be the endless deferral of conclusion in the bird’s thinking, and listening to it would effectively mean entirely replacing my own lifetime for the bird’s. Listening to such a long, unceasing chatter of thought would doubtless entail having no thoughts of my own for just as long — indeed listening itself entails an erasure of one’s own faculties of expression — this is why many are not fond of it — yet listening to the bird and its unrestrained train of thought would doubtless mean a kind of total displacement from myself, and becoming utterly saturated with the thoughts of another; another being whose gaze panned outward to an almost totalising

view — there'd be no limit to the mental provocations instigated by the scenery below, and thus no want for further thoughts to be had. I cannot possibly listen to such extensive thinking for I would inevitably become the damn bird in my entirety, so perfectly does the bird's organising principle keep it afloat in its own burgeoning world, lending it recourse to pick up any withering thought and turn it over to flourish under a new light, *ad infinitum* (or *nauseum*, depending on your disposition). So I find myself grateful for the silence of birds, perhaps the silence of all things here, which if given voice could turn out to be too eloquent, and relentlessly grip me in the rhythm of thought and never again let go. I would be lost, subsumed into the wider organising principle which characterises the thoughtful path of the bird, or the internal monologues of every blade of grass.

It is with this ongoing meditation on the relation between highly organised artefacts and their silence, that my thoughts drift back to the inspector in my kitchen. He has become such an integrated feature of my home, that in recent weeks I don't think I've even noticed him. I may have even sung aloud with him right behind me. It's safe to say that he's fallen quite seriously in my estimations, and that with enough time passed I've come to even

laugh at myself for being so skittish about opening the door to him. It was like getting excited about a wound-up figurine let loose on the floor, clattering in fury against the wooden floorboards to arouse all fear and hullabaloo, only to then awkwardly grind to a halt, spent of animation. Yet he may have got caught into some sort of orbit himself, all his cognitive faculties fully occupied by a more noisy chatter.

Reassuring Letter

All of a sudden, I am here again. That's how it goes with the episodes. One minute I am forgotten, by myself included — the next, I am here again, fully immersed in this of all worlds, multitudinous worlds which seem to run concurrently. I am back at my desk, not quite where I recall being last. But my hand is holding the pen in the most natural way, and is writing the continuation of a passage which already fills half the sheet of paper in front of me. The handwriting is neat and loopy, I think I'd like the person who writes in this way. The woody perfume of the house fills the space between my nose and brain, and my virtual mind, like a separate simulation, is filled with it too, like a room clouded with incense.

As my hand writes vociferously across the page, I turn my head to gaze at the wallpaper, whose patterns trap wandering thoughts in their matrices and insist they dwell there awhile. Staring at the pattern has allowed it to gently brand itself onto my mind, which is still clouded with woody incense, and within the curling

brackets of the retina-burned patterns, the following thoughts are bouncing to and fro like ping pong balls.

I wonder about where I disappear to in between episodes. I try to remember scenes that can fill the gaps of my discontinuous existence, but fear that whatever comes to mind is a forced invention of seamless. Some say it is superstitious to think of dreams as places, and maybe they are right. Maybe there is nothing directly mysterious and inexplicable about disappearing and reappearing like I do. Maybe it has some explanation akin to the rising and setting of the sun, and is equally as simple and equally as inaccessible to me as a heliocentric model was to ancient peoples. Maybe it requires looking at the question in a radically different way, and maybe the words I use to ask it are already misleading. At the close of an episode, I find myself slowly receding. My re-emergence is more dramatic, I fall back into each new episode with a guilty, awe-stricken plunge, like waking at the clang of a fallen frying pan.

All the same, I am always stupidly grateful for my return. I am back in the world to which I have been principally assigned, and I've grown attached to it. It seems to me to be the most real world of all. The most proper, and actual. In the absence of a method of greater

verification, I am resigned to believe my senses, which are all the time being fed with a great amount of mutually compatible signals. The room in which I now sit and in which my hand writes, looks just the way it smells, and sounds travel through it in accordance with its size and hollowness, and the material of its panelled walls, which is oak.

Wood and its smell, wood and its sound. Air and its temperature, and its moisture, and its containment in room. Hand and its grip on pen, pen and its scratching sound on paper; paper and its fibrous texture, which is rough, and paper and its slipperiness on the varnished desk, which is smooth (other hand keeps it from slipping by holding it down). My perceptions verify each other, their co-patterning persists. It is this persistence that implies underlying, governing rules, the laws of my world, without which there would be, of course, no patterns, no world.

I don't know what remains of me at the close of an episode, whether you could go some place and find my sleeping body between episodes. It seems to me a more profound absence. It seems to me that my world is switched off and restarted, and that in between, other worlds steal into the gaps of my own, equipped with

their own, alternative laws. And maybe that's fair. I wonder whose world I am stealing when I am awake; whether there are persons in other realms whose minds have doused and entered an inexplicable sleep, while I sit around and write and do what I want.

It is an enormous relief to freely roam a world with relatively constant features. A relief from what, I am not sure. But I can sit here and regard my room, and monitor my writing hand from time to time, and the world will wait for me to make my move. I live in a thickness of murmuring disturbances that draw a fuzzy net of space in which I can operate. Air is one of these things. So am I. I disturb the air back, by inhaling it, and exhaling it, so that a little, cyclical air current about my nostrils follows me everywhere I go, something which can be partially illustrated when I smoke a pipe. I am a block of disturbance that wades through a sea of others. Perhaps some divine point of view would reveal the aggregate effect of our superimposed ripples, which I think would look like a vibrating painting. It is doubtless a special point of view to have, the ceiling is privy to it, as are all things that are all-face, but like any point of view, is taken at the expense of another. No world can be seen from all angles, all at once, most notably by the world

itself, a blind creature made entirely out of many little eyes.

I look back down to check on my hand, which has made a pretty parchment of the sheet in front of me, now filled with streams of surprisingly consistent handwriting, in slight cursive, and ample space in the looping gaps of g's and y's which create a bubbly effect all over the page. I have been writing a letter, and I look back to see what I have written. It is dated at the top right hand corner with a single number, '24'. It reads:

My dear,

There is no time like the present. And yet whose present — well, who's to say? In writing this letter to you, I have invested a little of my own time, in yours. And as you take the time to read it over, think; a letter cuts a hole into two people's lives and pastes it superimposed. The beauty of a message is that it merges different times into one. I hope this makes a difference in some way, in terms of your predicament; knowing that I am with you at all times, wishing you well from afar.

I can't tell which of us is older, but feel it falls upon me to say some advisory words, perhaps out of guilt. What I want to say, is that you have my greatest sympathies, and that should any ill befall you, that I shall do all in my power to assist you; limited though my powers are, I am able to make certain arrangements.

The residence, I hope, is to your satisfaction. I have enjoyed visiting in the past, particularly the library, although the blurry corridors do take some getting used to, as do the confusing layouts of things, which you should know right away, are thoroughly unlearnable. Overall I am glad to see how you're getting on. It pleases me how cautious and thoughtful you are, and I will not conceal from you that it can be a perilous business, living in such a flaky place. I myself am not terribly clear about the precise history of the manor and how it got to be so recklessly dispassionate, perhaps one day you could inform me about it. In any case, you seem just the right thing for it. Gentle, stirring, but not aggravating.

I realise that you may at times feel watched, pursued, even. It's a certain unsolicited performance anxiety, which understandably, you might find you are suffering from, amongst other things. I gather there might be a

number of afflictions at play. I recommend you rule out all suspicion of divinity from the equation, no matter how tempting it may be, as I can assure you, by now even I don't know the way of this place as well as you do, and in fact it is to you I look for answers. No pressure, though. In your own time. Permit me to be so bold so as to propose (and forgive me, I am sometimes told that when I try to help I am only making matters worse) a thought experiment, on the matter of your numerous afflictions, in which you remove each of them, one by one, and ask yourself at the very end, whether you'd feel cured?

Hopefully these remarks have served only to soothe any qualms you might have about proceeding, rather than radically influence you to make unfortunate decisions.

You are under the protection my greatest hopes for your safe and pleasant continuance along your journey, and I wish you the very best luck.

Pattern Recognition

I have become occupied in my writings. Burrowed away in the study. I've turned out to be rather prolific, even. You may have noticed that I have made a sizeable incision into the fabric of my world, with these impositions of cohesion.

I return, time and again, to that grand study room, that office of business, to keep accounts. At first it might seem rather unclear what I am doing there, and why I feel compelled to come so often to a place which is so obviously not built for my frame (my legs dangling just off the royal carpet beneath my chair unless I come wearing the appropriate clerkly footwear; my shoulders squatting low above the desktop such that I can readily smell the oily coat of varnish with which it is enveloped).

I am myself rather unclear about my resolve, but find that the will to be resolute is itself enough to instigate the beginnings of a project of sorts: to account, and then later perhaps also to recount. You see, the room has the welcoming stale smell that only a distinguished

gentleman dipped in sandalwood essences and nose wrinkling shoe polish can muster. And with that, and with my omnidirected resolve, it is difficult to resist the compulsion to assume the throne of business across the room, and pick up the arduous task of attending to the household accounts, which have been left off long ago.

And as I begin jotting down lists and drawing up tables, my resolve begins to take a certain shape, and it goes along these lines.

To craft a rhythm from the surrounding chaos operating unseen and unheard, by anyone but me. In my day to day analysis of the household humming, I employ my efforts in summoning together various observations, data, and bits and pieces of what you might call empirical evidence, into fluent arrangements that ring true and often bewitch me with a kind of impending apprehension. That is, the kind of spell boundedness that befalls a scientist, whose statistics one night appeared to rise from the page only to finger paint an impossible truth in the air that has thus far only been whispered to him in his dreams. This dawning only occurs in solitude. A strange concoction of privilege and melancholy settles over the discoverer who is told these things in the silence of his room.

My science is in a sense no different to that of the obsessing physicists and biologists which I long to imitate; I too am endeavouring to express the relations between things. This is a symptom of being utterly surrounded by things, all the time. Objects grab my attention in passing, sticking to me like thistle, relentlessly proclaiming their place in the world in a fickle language which it is my calling to decipher. My method within this science of domestic historicity is to borrow the noise of the household and modulate it with subtle writerly formulations. I begin by writing up an inventory of its parts, and then, more significantly, mapping their chattering nattering relations as they reveal themselves to me. I have grown to respect the incessant chatter of the place in which I live, as I fail, time after time, to apprehend an object in isolation.

What I mean is this: on making my rounds to dust the sitting room, removing a little trinket from the mantelpiece is not at all a simple matter. A porcelain mermaid, languid in weeping downpour and hardened liquidity, mourning in my palm. To hold such a precious token in one's own hands invokes a hoarder's jealous love; the brilliance of such a find seems inert. But listen to the weeping of the mermaid and hear her lament the

invisible prerequisites that crafted her and have placed her once and for all on eternal display upon this desolate mantelpiece. For she had no say in becoming a mermaid, and nor did she acquiesce to memorialising, with her statuesque presence, countless old love-sick sailors' visions. In fact, she never knew any sailors — nor has she ever been to sea. She took a long time to be made, but not at all much thought went into deciding the ultimate form her ordinary lump of matter would take; the nostalgic value of a mermaid is a given, a ceramicist's go-to, a safe bet for a tradesman alongside cherubs, pottering geese, or an idyllic country cottage. The mermaid figurine has had little regard for the ageing hands that passed her down generations, nor the visitor gazing back at her from the sitting room armchair in moments of conversational dead-ends and feigned airs of reflection. In short: any causal lineage that one could draw up to account for the mermaid's presence on that mantelpiece, on the particular day I happened to pick her up to examine her dotting eyes, is rather uninterestingly circumstantial, and seems unfaithfully disconnected from the way she sees herself to be.

The mermaid is not what she sees herself to be. She is also not a victim of her heritage or a sum of the historical

events that led up to her making. She is a living talisman that burns to the touch, and one who ventures to examine her better think twice before containing her between the tweezers of their fingers.

The mermaid's Beatrix Potter patina enjoys a lively friendship with Hans Christian Anderson's telling of her plight. Her timeless sheen flatters the preserved wooden surface upon which she rests, and she is angrily turned from the sweet box without sweets in it, as if it contains her Pandorian vice. She is a kitsch litter of Western imagination primed for endearment. Her sombre face expresses a regret about this, to which the antique jug across the room offers its compassionate lip. It is an effort upon the part of the whole house, perhaps upon the whole of Western literature and beyond, to describe her. To touch this seemingly harmless trinket is to activate a talisman, and rejoin the unanimous effort to place that stubborn object.

That is the hobby of all things, to play at placing one another, and in turn niftily dodging apprehension. I learnt this gradually, since the earliest days of my accounting career, and I am proud to say that it reflects in my method. In my writings I am patiently, meticulously,

tuning the household humdrum, taming its tumults and smoothing its erratic arcs of noise and chatter.

I prefer to work in the evenings. The deep reds and browns of the room give it a pious glint when illuminated by candlelight. I become serious. With my back turned selfishly from the windows behind me to prise myself from the annoying solar fingers that are creeping through the weary eye of a setting sun and tugging at my shoulder to spy on my work, I pour over my desk with my nose hovering close above the page I am scribbling upon.

I could gnash my teeth at such impolite fingers; I could bark at the rising moon or slap my sweaty brow in the despair of being lonely but never quite left alone. But in my studious diversion these night time slights become secondary, for I am engaged in a fabrication of sorts; yes, engaged in a contrivance to be sure, but an illustrious, foreshadowing contrivance. In my writings I muse and linger, smacking my lips at the qualities I enumerate about my household, and postulate their significance. And then it is as though they become what I write them into. Or what I write “becomes” them, like an elegant mantel.

I account for each item of embroidered furniture with curling armrests, each nostalgic figurine and anonymous portrait painting endorsing forgotten virtues in symbolic postures. Every silver spoon, screened by my patient eyes and ordered from scratchiest to shiniest. Each jewellery box, exuding the trapped breath from its opened clasp, its contents retrieved, numbered, returned. Stiff courtly costumes, starched into moth-defying mummies, labelled and examined in terms of their social function: To enshrine the bosom in a revealing but acceptable manner, or to accentuate a civilian man's domesticated, militant appeal by way of a modernised doublet.

You could say I'm becoming a grumpy dragon, guarding these treasures and protectively climbing over them and messing up the heap I have myself carefully constructed. And I am becoming grumpy, chronically grumpy. The inner world of objects displaced from their time are the only attractive things of this world, I think, the only things void of malice. Between them extend quivering, ghostly strings you could strain to hear play their delicate tunes in a barely detectable pitch: between the kitchenware and candle holders, the old trees lining the lawn and the creaking window shutters, the chimney

shaft whistling household prognoses to the frequenting crows that lay their nests around its out pipes.

I am enchanted by such a great instrument as is my house, a musical instrument with singing filaments connecting all these hollow testaments to what once was. Some might dismiss its antique vases and rusty boxes, trinkets of forgotten ages, as mere empty vessels taking up far too much space. But in fact, hollow objects make great musical instruments, like deep lungs, fit for howling and humming and singing. If these vessels are anything like the dead caskets of vanished molluscs, then their shells contain — not nothing — but the unceasing hum of the sea from which they have been wrought.

To sit back in my chair and listen. I can just about make out that moody hum. I can picture the sonic unrest resounding throughout the space around me. Take this sound and visualise it: a confusing cluster of multiple waves, not unlike a choppy sea mellowed by layer upon layer of interfering patterns, mutually undoing one another until the surface merely flutters all over in haphazard ripples. Now, if you are truly gifted at listening, then isolate a composite wave from the thickness in which you find yourself immersed, the thickness of the house's whale song.

A voice then becomes intelligible. This single writhing wave is a lot more coherent. Here is a wave you can listen to acutely. It is a single story. Like the story of the porcelain mermaid on the polished sitting room mantelpiece.

Leaning back in my chair, I fish out a melody and let its tune transfer along my body and linger in my soul a moment, before throwing it back into the confusing mesh of never ending historic negotiations between domestic objects. The house can't ever seem to decide what really happened to it. Resonating evermore within its chambers is the echo of possible events that may have carved out these very cavities.

A displaced seashell, it would seem. A souvenir carrying whispers of origination that seem implausibly exotic, and most likely mythical, to a listener like me. But I am a castaway inside this seashell! I must adhere to its intrinsic science, no matter how questionable and shaky its founding beliefs seem to be.

The sun has near-extinguished itself in the gape of the horizon behind me. Refusing a backward glance to regard the (it must be admitted) ferociously beautiful scatter of its final rays, I watch instead the wooden wall

panels turn bruised and swollen under the dying light, my candle flames slowly taking precedent like watchful sentinels guarding my desk. Their bright bobbing heads warn that it is getting late, and that I am likely to get grumpier.

The darkness creeps in upon the study, obscuring its corners and as a consequence, undoes the grasp I moments before had of its finite size. Darkness obscures even itself, so you don't quite know where it ends or begins. All I have, increasingly, is the stark lit page before me fraught with my hand's seismic jottings. Inky blemishes bleed at the corners of a table cell denoting the quantity of matches in a tinderbox I came across in a chest up in the tower one night. Interweaving lines of waves drawn across the width of the parchment reappear further down with more considerate gestures than the cruder ones depicted earlier. These are the crests and troughs that spell out stories the house is telling me, with corrective strokes applied atop drawings of first impressions as I hone my listening. The accounts have been worked on. They are never quite rounded off or completed, information is always missing or insufficient in detail, yet I am urged to call it a night. As my mind levitates further and further awa

Two Kinds of Lines

The dark folds of broccoli arbor into which my hill dips and levels out into a world unknown and most suspect, draws a cushioning circle around me. It carries the hill, and the castle and me as if upon an emerald cloud, and all that lies beyond that fortressing forest feels just as obscure and remote as if actually I were floating at great altitudes.

The castle itself is a cottage of a castle. You can take a short stroll around the whole thing without much effort; its grandeur projects upward rather than outward, like an arrow piercing the sky, like an antenna for convening with the gods. On stepping inside, the stone walls are close enough to hug, and the hearth in the kitchen calls weary feet but a mere few paces from the front door. These amenities are all the more appreciable because they are so near. I pass the hotter days with my cheeks pressed flat against the great flat masonry which, tomblime, is indifferent to the antics of seasons, and cools my grateful face. On cold days, I shuffle hurriedly into the kitchen and puff with sweet eagerness at the settling embers of the morning fire to restore its powers.

Evergreen and everthere: the kitchen rubber plant looms over me like a curious reading lamp, lowering a pondering chin. Everything caves inward: the arching beams, the doming chandeliers. Upon the surfaces, the cluttered pots and pans and cups and saucers and tins and unassigned forks and spoons are, admittedly, rarely in use, but they herd together admirably. They cause a huddle, which is an insulatory layer of coziness that lines some kitchen peripheries.

In the centre of the building, a double winding staircase forms the helix spine that holds in place ever smaller levels of castling. Each floor is caked one on top of the other, with the precarious grace of the Pisa, and the enterprising spirit of Babel.

So, in circling my grounds in the afternoon, not far adrift from the outer walls of my home, I soon find I have come full turn to meet the discarded slippers by the back door, which I earlier traded in for a smart pair of buttoned ankle boots. I take care to look smart these days, lest another unexpected visitor should materialise from the frothing trees at the foot of my hill to start its way up towards me. I nudge a slipper that when flipped off my foot, seems to have had landed upside down and remained in that unhappy state since my return.

Crouching down, I catch a sideways glance of the trim lawn fanning outward from the house, pretending I am small enough to stand at its green banks and contemplate it like an ocean of possibility. I see that there is no trace of my having been there. If I have left any imprints in my passing, every blade of grass has by now comfortably wound back to its upright posture of least tension: bent to a side to appease the breeze, with a slight blasé flick to its tip (much like a feather to a hat). I rise steadily, and towering above this most populous country of small, green, cheery fellows, wonder not that people have such a luxurious notion so as to walk all over their vainglorious faces.

My eyes follow the dimming shade of the lawn, the blurring of small cheery fellows towards a green horizon. There, at the bottom of the hill, does my territory technically end, as detailed in the most recent deeds and planning agreements I've been able to find archived in the study.

These documents look by no means particularly recent, what with maps of the estate clearly drawn out by a hand far more dexterous than modern-day non-labouring hands, and with cryptic annotations of metrics designated by the leg, or the head, of some great emperor of old. It

seems that the property has remained relatively unchanged for centuries. As it stands now, the house still looks very much like the diagrams on these old parchments.

Perhaps times have been fairly peaceable since the sealing of these documents. Perhaps appetites for territorial expansion have been somewhat tempered. If memory serves, my books mention that anti-imperialist attitudes were on the rise around that time among some *avant garde* intellectuals — to which I suspect at least one gentleman of this estate, a most egalitarian soul indeed, must have been most sympathetic. Renovations and annexations were becoming quite distasteful occupations in that respect, by recalling the colonial desires that inspired those very crimes they publicly condemned. Perhaps, with men of the new morality in charge, the estate has been spared from further amputations or prosthetic operations all the way up to my arrival in this place, and I certainly haven't the means nor desire to remodel it. Nor do I think frankly that the building could handle it. Like a castle in the sky it would — poof! — evaporate at the slightest approach of a tampering finger.

Yet the house magically persists to be, like some tangible mirage. And I, knocking about within it, have never actually touched anything in my life. I guess this quality makes me the right sort of being to live inside it. Hermetically sealed off from the world, I can harmlessly excavate the premises with impactless touches from within my atom-thin astronaut's suit.

That's how I come sauntering down the hallways sometimes, in slow motion, with great big leaps through the dull-lit interior cavities.

I leap, slowly ascending.

Tucking my knees into a prolonged anticipatory brace — I sail back down to stamp childishly into a cloud of dust speckles. They relocate uncomplainingly adrift, illuminated by shards of sunlight that seep through getaway crevices in the warping window shutters.

My skin is never exposed. This world humours me for as long as it remains uncontaminated by a living presence. I am no threat, because I am only an idea. A suggestion. For my part, I just hope that my world will not annihilate itself within a timeframe that practically concerns me — by an accidental touch or a vigorous sneeze. I dare to

hope this, based solely on the fact that my world has never annihilated itself before.

A celebrated writer of popular science books writes in one volume: “Singular events are the blind spot of scientific inquiry. An event that only ever happens once in the history of the universe is by definition not repeatable, and escapes the grasp of the scientific experiment which must restage it in order to probe its mechanics. Perhaps, only once, will the planet Jupiter grow a nose so long that it extends and extends until it pokes me on the tip of my own nose, before retreating back again from whence it came. No matter how diligently I then commit my entire scientific career to examining this disturbing event, I will never be able to approach any sound explanation, for the simple reason that the event was not a phenomenon. If it happens but once, it may as well not have happened at all.”

Needless to say, I promptly returned the book to the missing-tooth cavity in the library shelf from which I removed it, to spare myself further eerie revelations. Yes, I can hope that my world will persist, but who is to say? There is no past experience of self-annihilating worlds I know of from which to infer the probability of a happy

fate. It need only happen once, and nobody will know. Poof! is as ever, at my doorstep.

For now, I think I am allowed to live in this place because I am so gentle and so good to it. My touches are sweetly muffled — to a perfect tactile camouflage. Each exchange with my household is one of utter sympathy. You see, my skin is a second skin, a most compassionate mediator. It approaches a touch only by taking the most greatest pains in being courteous, subjugating itself to the object of its inspection by making itself always softer in comparison. Under a microscope, you can watch my atomic skin yield, like a cushion. My whole body is an empathetic instrument so impressionable that it positively shapeshifts into the forms it beholds, becomes them.

This is, you might imagine, no easy role. I become an apt repository for all kinds of personalities which I can hardly call my own. I am helplessly soluble in this historic palace, reduced to soggy tears when I hear, rising from within the panels of my enclave, a ghost story whispering tell-tales from long ago. I become that bedridden patient heard coughing through a cheese grater throat from upstairs, I become the silent soldier in the armchair with his back turned towards curtains drawn. I

have married thirty times, inherited precious fortunes, lived through several wars, and I have died as a dog.

I see such histories off, one by one, to their extinction from living memory. I can't really help them. They swim around in the walls and in the ornamental receptacles of the house, like the aimless soup of departed souls in a Hadean underworld.

This is one of the ways a boundary can behave. My skin is there to be breached. For the ripples of stories past to find their final echo in my quivering shell.

The boundary at the bottom of the hill upon which I stand this afternoon, is of another sort; it strictly separates two places.

Looking over the open landscape, it is tempting to turn over my hands under the mild light of the sun in search for the ever-so-slight sheen that might reveal my encapsulation. Does this costume imply hidden powers; can I jump off a stump in the hillside and discover my ability to soar off, airborne, by mere willpower alone?

Not likely. If I possess a power, I feel that it comes not in the form of a physical asset, but some inert, bleating truth, rubbed into my fibres like a salve. A repetitive

reminder that all these features of a tangible world, so bright and supple you can submerge a finger in the thick paints of its making, are but mere suggestions, whimsical contingencies, aloof and untouchable as I.

Yet there at the bottom of the hill is a bolder kind of invisible line. A reminder that the outskirts of my property ends neatly at the hem of the hill: precisely where the forestry unfurls itself in disgruntled plumes — bearing in its reluctant arms what seems like an eternity of lacklustre weather.

The line at the bottom of the hill says “here” and “there” in one graceful stroke. But this boundary, as well as all the other atomic skins that demarcate “cloud” versus “sky”, or “canopy” versus “bird nest”, and insist upon the notion that the world is highly populated and busy with things, are always subject to revision. And I wonder whether some rascal might come along and with shuffling feet, erase the imagined periphery that secures my territory, letting all manner of things into it as a result.

What if I were to tear open that skin? I say to myself aloud, embarrassed of hearing the first words of the day come from my own mouth. Rather blasphemous words,

no less. Beyond the green cloud of forest upon which my unlikely existence is borne, is a weighty world plagued by great responsibility. Whatever one can imagine happening there, is likely to be fraught with anxieties and laden with burdens matching those of the ever weeping willows that crown the moors.

The limit of my grounds looks like an apt place to leave an offering. A beheaded bird, or some other quiet mutilation, I think. I follow a beaten path down the grass.

When I get to the bottom, I feel a prickling sensation. Standing at a respectful distance to the forest, I meet the dense wall of air held sequestered by its woven branches, and suspect that it would smell very different on the other side, to what I have ever smelt before. And these smells, exuding from the decaying forest floor, with its wrestling beetles and fermenting berries, could filter through the pores of my brain and leave me irreversibly transformed as a person, I think.

A darting movement shuttles through the far passages between arching trees. A row of birches pretending they didn't see. They turn their necks inward upon one another and interlace their branches to obscure the site at which the flash disturbance still leaves resonances: a

brown leaf swaying its way back onto the ground; a projectile of fleeing sparrows.

The prickles on the back of my neck ripple in a delicate Mexican wave of pins and needles down my shoulder. Was that a finger hovering over my spine?

The sun dives into the horizon for repose, in an arch that sends my shadow creeping from behind me to spread taller and taller across the lawn by my side. It hunches over in a devious chuckle.

You menace. Tickling me on the neck so threateningly like that, I say, assured that the closeness between us quells the otherwise harsh mode of address. He merely grins, the stupid animal.

What's so funny?

He doesn't seem to understand that I am standing here trying to concentrate, and also that his appearance at this inopportune moment is distracting me from the forest, which could be issuing dangers in my negligence.

The shadow looks to his side, where the lawn cut off towards yellowed grass stalks, and further still into the hive of forest life. And he seems to be saying, enigmatically, "You're the one that's trespassing."

That's the closest he's come to being a smart Alec. But he is a precocious stupid animal, I'll give him that. For as I stand there, sulkily wondering what he meant, he now extends a shady arm. Slowly, savouring the horror unravelling on my face, does his black elbow cross single handedly into the realm of the forest.

An Offering

By proxy, I am already thrown into the alternate dimension of the great forest. My shadow's black arm cuts off and bleeds itself into the dark holes between branches, wriggling into the root of brambles like a python.

“You're the one that's trespassing,” is now a fulfilled hypothesis, though it is absolutely not my fault. I stand staring at my creature twin, unable to do anything about it. This is a cruel way to have fun, throwing me into the outside like bait.

The plan was to come here to the foot of the hill quietly, unobserved, and to leave a carefully composed offering pieced together from salvaged plant and animal remains. And the forest would one day come across this parcel, in the guise of a snuffling fox nosing about its outskirts, only to find it lying there neatly displayed upon a wreath of twigs. The forest would wrinkle its fox-snout and wonder where such a tasteful bouquet may have originated from. And thus would we remain a courteous

mystery to one another: the most peaceable way for two neighbours to coexist.

But my shadow has given a big bit of me away. Reckless creature! He dodges my kick. Oh, what a pest. I don't need his pranks right now.

I look about at what to do. Running away is not an option, for surely allowing the shadow's gesture to be my last will have unfavourable repercussions for the future diplomacy between my "land of the Domestic" and the "land of the Wild". All along the forest wall from left to right are a procession of hunchbacked willows in an endless gesture of sorrowful prostration before the footpath in front of them, one point along which I stand; an unlikely recipient for such airs. These trees know of the strange smells of spoiled soils, the stifled smells carefully (de)composed of a homogenised plant and animal solution. They intensify and infiltrate me with a flood of knowledge I think I am not quite prepared for.

An offering is certainly due now, though it will have to be dearer than a gift; rather, a sincere token of apology. I look upon my person in search of an appropriate sacrifice. Then I take off my left arm and rest it upon an austere but beautifully contained heap of pine needles,

right where I think is where my domain ends and where the forest's begins.

An arm for an arm. That made my shadow quit his horsing, all right. Made him freeze! And with the satisfaction of delivering him into stupefaction like that, my cheeks flush red with restored boldness. I stamp readily on the spot like a sporting bull — substituting the impulse to dutifully roll up my sleeves, which of course, is no longer readily executable. And with a courteous bow returned to the willows along my left, then to the willows along my right, do I slip into a gap between them and enter the forest grounds.

I'll admit, it feels weird leaving behind something so intimate as your left arm before going on an excursion; a riskier excursion than any previously undertaken, no less. And especially when you haven't quite yet calculated your expected return. But, crouching, with a head sheltered under a thicket of intervening brambles that senselessly try to comb my hair, I embark. Every placement of my footing must be a strategic one, and this constant difficulty of proceeding conveniently distracts me from any lurking trepidations about the whole undertaking, and anyway, every one of my remaining limbs are still attached to me and perfectly functional.

Normal activities, such as walking or singing, are now made complicated by the countless obstacles posed by the exuberant fractal gestures of plants; plants as pesky as dandelions, or as militant as pine trees towering above and darkening everything in view. Singing, or even muttering complaints while hacking aside thorny branches with a freshly salvaged walking staff, is made near impossible by the tiny forest flies suspended in the air, always in the path of my approaching open mouth. I cough through several colonies of these before learning that silence is golden in the forest.

I follow the narrow streams and paths trampled by four-legged feet, tracking their meandering clues towards the heart of the forest. It is there that I will submit my official apology. Doubtless these streams are like veins and arteries, mediators of vital substances that must lead to the headquarters, the central control room, the heart of the forest. So I resolve to track these.

I stumble over a root and accidentally kick a pebble into the running water. The current laps up and over the drowning pebble, tasting the strange salts from the tip of my shoe (the sand from between the deck boards on my porch?) That taste is as strange to the forest as its smell is to me.

Giving up an arm can change the way one sees things. For one thing, the hanging branches no longer seem quite so much within grasp. The leaves hit me in the face. I flick them out of the way with my forehead like an annoying fringe. Forest matter is getting all up in my space, pretty much becoming a part of me. It's a bit like striding through a landscape painting and getting all oily in the process.

At this point I can only infer that sight is not a sense consigned exclusively to the eyes; we see with the measuring sticks of our limbs, too, and this comes as quite a revelation to me as I stalk over a crunchy carpet of leaves in the forest, estimating with my newfangled body where the branches ahead really are in relation to my approach.

A person sees with every bit it has. Beethoven saw sounds like colours and painted them with his rolling fingers. Captain Ahab saw the world through a spyglass half the time, that made his one open eye long and probing like an insect's. The famous case of the deaf-blind child Helen Keller was solved under the care of Anne Sullivan, who bridged their communicative gap by elaborating together an ingenious system by which the child could discern vibrations in the vocal chords as

discrete words by laying two fingers on a speaker's throat. Yet the child could certainly see before that. The case to be solved was not her blindness, but her ability to speak with those who did not see things as she did. She saw a world coloured by the nuances of touch, movement, vibrations; the faint wanderings of the breeze along the hairs on her arm and what the breeze meant to say by that.

A seismic needle hears the lamentations of an earthquake, a smooth marble sees the topography of a bowl as it traces its belly. A parent hears the distant cry of a child that isn't his own, where to others the same sound passes undetected overhead. A serpent sees the beating hearts of small mammals by the burning flame radiating from their tireless bodies. A planet sees great sports in the sky, and knows its precise place in those intricate celestial waltzes by the tremendous forces of gravity issuing from all the other bodies in space; their social structure is precisely governed by their gravitational relations, just as human social hierarchies emerge from their relative size and position. A body, be it small or colossal, be it endowed with tentacles or eyes or mineral lips with which to taste the sea, seems to see whatever shapes its nooks and crannies and bits and

pieces can accommodate. One who perhaps has ears for the tremors of the earth has not eyes for the radiance of the sun. The world is replete with signals, it cries out with disturbances by any means it can, and all the little bodies with which it is inhabited await with their variously shaped sensors to catch an earful of what the world might be. The world meanwhile, is quite hopeful about all this. Its calls furrow into minds and landscapes and echo about inside of caves and seashells, taking shapes and forms until it looks precisely like whatever cares to apprehend it. I have lost an arm, and see the world differently. It *is* different. I wonder just how generous I can be with my body parts; an eye? A lung? How many pieces of myself can I give away before I begin to lose my life-vision? That is, before my perception of the world begins to recede into the shell of a near-unconscious crustacean, and dim the light inside of me to a half-soul.

For now, my organism is making do admirably. I can feel my surroundings distinctly, perhaps more than ever, with the lack of an arm. I have gained a lacking arm, I have gained a surrogate sense. Call it the sixth, call it by whichever ranking that rings most true to the list of corporeal sensors available; but I now feel the forest in a

new way. The searing bare patch of skin on my shoulder and torso where my arm previously joined opens vulnerably like a third eye. A wet slither congeales across the affected zone of exposed body, awaiting exchanges with the outside world that it was never supposed to have.

Well, in these sorts of dramatic situations, the body must react urgently, yet it must also act creatively. An air captain trained in emergency landings can never truly be prepared for the particularities of such unlikely events, and in fact most of her training revolves around keeping a calm head and flexibly assessing the situation from square one — “outside the box”. The best course of action will never quite be the rehearsed manoeuvre of simulated tragedies, which will probably always need some tinkering. We then hope that all the captain’s faculties of level-headed reasoning, calm temperament and innumerable life lessons — perhaps the most unexpected repositories of her memory will become fatally relevant — shall surge to the fore in the same moment that panic begins to spread all around. So was it that the patch from which I removed my arm grew scarlet with alertness at the very moment of removal. And with the uncomplaining muteness of a concentrating

captain, the cells began taking action, improvising along the way the best course of action for an instance that no genetic directory could have schooled them in. These efforts have begun to materialise on my shoulder in a complicated mosaic of fleshy crusts. In healing it is still not quite clear what is ruptured, what is repaired. — retaliatory measures are still being frantically negotiated between the busybody cells around my shoulder. A lot of disagreements are to be had, especially regarding my encapsulation, the foreign skin-disguise that blanketed my organic body soon after my birth in the library. Certainly, it feels colder in that afflicted patch, as the air is allowed to waft into my very veins and ventilate my insides.

Night falls upon me, finally compromising my eye-vision, and a cruel chill whistles through claw-like branches.

Seeing under these low lit conditions is so confusing that I close my eyes for relief.

Listening...

A trickle issues some thirty degrees from the direction I am facing. A running stream, a current; the pulse of the forest that I am seeking. I criss-cross my steps toward

that direction in the manner of somebody obviously gravitating towards an object of pursuit. Suspicious.

A twig snaps under my speculative foot and gives way to a grass-strewn hole into which I tumble. The tumble seems lengthier than it probably is, thanks to the dark. I collapse through the hole and spring open again like a suitcase, only to find myself slotted into a cylindrical coffin beneath the ground. Alarmed, I fidget with my legs and arm in the dark, only to find that they are constricted by my sides.

I am lying underground somewhere. But, it is warm, and I am tired, and in the distance, through the trimmed grass strewn over my face, the evening is coloured an unforgiving ultramarine blue. I resolve to believe that I have expressly chosen this spot as shelter for the night, and that my fall really was an especially swift adventurer's move; and, satisfied with my skills in self-sufficiency, I then simply close my eyes and go to sleep.

The Rise and Fall of a Civilisation

Given the truly comfortable, if rather cramped, conditions of my spontaneous lodgings, I fall into such a deep sleep that I begin to dream. The dream turns out to be the most social affair I have ever engaged in, because it features multiple characters, all of which are people and all of which are my companions. No sooner does the dream begin, than do I utterly believe it to be the default life I live, complete with years of a past behind me and years of a future ahead.

I am a scientist. Of course. I have been one all my working life, and as a child all I ever dreamt of was making science. There are, no matter the countless proud accounts of enterprising adventurers and colonising nations, always unexplored corners of the world to be found. Always. Because the world resists fixing. And it is in such a corner of the world that my colleagues and I are stationed, upon an island that has been all but missed; for the map of the world looks just as complete with or without this innocuous dot pictured upon it. That is precisely the point at which my research team chose to set up camp.

I have with me many tools of science. My tent is littered with troves of measuring devices and sensors; meters and reactive chemicals. Gloves, petri dishes, sanitisers and brushes are there to ensure I only observe desired subjects, untarnished from dust and other creeping infiltrators of dynamic substances and interfering mess that I admit are, after all, the world. The hard boots I'm wearing are also tools of science. I can hike greater distances with feet protected from the rocky earth and more efficiently survey the topography of our site. I am equipped with readymade, "inbuilt" tools of science, too; with my feet, hands, eyes, ears, nose and mouth do I proceed to make science in this place.

It's going pretty well, too. I awake each morning, emerging into the light that illuminates my tent from within, to greet the clear rippling waves of the fragrant sea, and smile at familiar heads peeping out from other tents. The one closest to me is the head of a woman with her banana blonde hair tied into a ponytail, squinting in ironic displeasure at the morning sun.

"You can't argue with a morning like that," I say.

“No sir!” She says, stumbling out on stilt-like legs with an empty water bottle. “Duty calls, and so does my stomach. Want some breakfast?”

Provisions are dealt around a modest morning fire, a mere flame large enough to melt some porridge and brew ground coffee in a scraped pot with a seared bottom. These sportive scientists, fit and able, attentive and curious, make for the most amicable morning discussions. Immature jokes and small talk are casual mannerisms irrevocably undermined by each members’ obvious scientific obsession, interjecting here and there with witty reference to the details of our research which make us all roar with laughter. There is no better social concoction imaginable for the cultivation of a cutting edge science expedition at the edge of the world; our ability to relax like this together promotes enduring curiosity in the mysteries to be witnessed all around, and ingenuity in the task of reading and modelling these phenomena in the sort of sense-making science can provide. I have the sense that astonishing truths are on the tip of my tongue, as if I already know them but cannot speak them. This island, in its own luscious tongue, will help me splutter them into articulation.

But what the island has yet to teach me will prove a much more difficult truth to have to spell out, though I already know it, though I already have it on the tip of my tongue.

When the sun stands vertical in the noon sky, searing the atmosphere with such intensity that all the trees and all the plains and clouds and scouting birds of the sea seemed to ripple as if pressed onto a corrugated grill, my colleagues and I, some way off the beach crouched over our independent concerns, all look up in reaction to some sudden change of wind.

A change of wind quite so sudden is somewhat unnerving. It is the island's breathing cut short — a geological gasp usually heard before the expulsion of stampedes of fleeing animals; winged, amphibian and earthbound, all at once and in all directions, frightened out of their minds. It is the silent suck of a shoreline receding far backward into a towering tsunami wave. But on this occasion, this change in wind from easterly to southbound merely kisses each of our faces one more time as we look up at the white spores now releasing from countless pods high up in the island's characteristically tall palms.

They sprinkle in light but increasingly dense sheets of warm snow, swarming like an impending blizzard of white locusts. Whiter and whiter does the sky grow. Whitening everything in view. Erasing any object of discernibility. My vision is bleached — have I fallen down? — has the sun opened its jaws and swallowed me whole? I turn my head this way and that and stare out, but the opaque view around me is equally bland, equally pressed up into my very eyes and unrelentingly uniform wherever I look, like walking in true, white darkness.

Then; a static sound.

It is the sound a mind makes to deal with the impossibility of actual deafness. It is the horizontal bleat of a heart rate monitor, telling us that there is nothing there.

I stand still for a moment. At least I think I am standing — yes there is my footing — my toes curling inside my boots and rubbing against my socks. I tilt my head down, as if to look to the ground in search of my sight scampering away from me, for all is whitewashed and impeccable, and silent. And just when I begin to think this is nothing, that I am immersed in nothing, then, the wind too, ceases to blow.

Or, I can at any rate no longer feel the reassuring caress of weather chasing through my arm hairs; my tissue is numbed. I feel bald, in the absence of tickled shoulders under my hanging hair. Neither cold nor hot; temperatureless. Neither buffeted by the breeze nor pulled by the earth to the ground below. There no longer is a “below”. There is not an infinitesimal pressure point on any part of my body to hint to me that it is here. So I am indeed, not here. I cannot be anywhere. In the sightless, soundless, pressureless condition of having lost my senses one by one to the disabling spores or the blinding wind, I have no conception of the bounds of my body or its whereabouts. I may have expanded to infinity, or scrunched up in frowning creases into a single point, right where the tip of my nose used to be.

Oddly, this comes at first as possibly the greatest relief I have ever felt, for a senseless existence is also a painless one, and all the micro nuisances that have been ailing me my entire life and hanging off my body and my thoughts like devious little monkey saboteurs, which in fact I most of the time barely noticed, have at once been vanquished, and I am perfectly relieved of every burden, including those I never registered. Perhaps this is total peace. I imagine the endless wrapping of skin and intestines and

veins and muscle fibres folded succinctly up into the organism that is me, unravelling slowly, and scattering to the winds like a ribbon.

It is surprising enough to unravel the true length of a human being's intestines; some seven metres will an adult human's guts extend. But this body, packed so economically, rivals even the Tetris playing skills of my pragmatic grandma who so expertly packed my suitcase for this very excursion. (There is always room for one more item, her hands folding, ironing, patting on the fabrics and carving into them new sleeves of space into which to slip forgotten keepsakes). With all of its fractal curls unfurled and origami wizardry dispelled, my unravelled body could trace the perimeter of the universe. And so, when I lost all my senses to the wind, I became boundless, and it was clear that I was dead. Where was grandma, I thought, to gather my unruly thread and wind me into a dense and agile ball of wool?

But time passed, and as I found I had to sit in my very own death and wait out its interminable duration, and as I felt an itch of boredom arise like the onset of a sneeze, I became aware that losing my life by no means denied me the indulgence of an overwhelming sadness.

It is something strange to harbour a feeling like this, which ostensibly weighs such a great deal, without the corporeal means to contain it. For though my chest had been obliterated and I could scarcely be said to contain anything, let alone emotions, I still felt this choking sadness weigh on my heart like an overgrown child in wild tantrum, straggling relentlessly at the anchored leg of a parent who would like to give up. And yet, if I was crying, I could not know.

Crying requires a great amount of effort, though it may be largely involuntary; it is a repetitive yanking, yanking of the mute throat that, if it were screaming, I would not know.

Where were my friends? I had exploded into everything and was everywhere; they must be inside me somewhere, I thought, with grandma too and all the rest of them from many years past and future; they must be walking about in vain trying to find me, failing to recognise that I was crying in my sleep and that they were victims of my imagination, and that wrapped up against the foul blizzard that tormented over them as they clutched onto their cloaks and searched for me, they only had to look into a snowflake to find me.

But I was not asleep, or to be precise, in this dream that I dreamt as I slept in a dark hole below ground in the forest, about my death as a scientist, I was not asleep, and nor was I in this dream dead; really, to stay true to the facts of the matter in the dream, as things really, actually happened (in the dream), I had been petrified, and struck dumb, deaf and blind under the intoxicating snow of paralysing palm spores.

And that felt like dying. Except, time had still found a means of expressing its passing in the dim-lit furrows of my mind, and I saw that it was passing, and that my friends were nowhere to be found. Being consigned to this kind of limbo was nauseatingly isolating.

Presumably we had all died. Presumably the five of us were littered like a peculiar suicide cult, strewn in pentagonal, symbolic allusions in the sand. And it made me desperately lonely to think my warm head was lying on the ground somewhere only moments from a faceless heap of banana blond hair, and that really, she and I were very very close, though our thoughts would never coincide again.

Apropos, I then stopped to consider; could she be having these thoughts in her solitary universe of nothing too?

If she is, then she must have just thought about me having such thoughts in my solitary universe of nothing.

And if, by these most unusual of circumstances, we have indeed been led to make these same conclusions, that we are both dead and that we are both thinking these thoughts, then perhaps there is a basis for communication exactly there.

I paused to ponder on this, though presumably, even if I had not opted to ponder, there would still have passed a formidable pause.

The dream about me being a scientist on an island and dying with all my friends seemed to have had lasted a while now. I must have been out in that hole for ages.

Well, though this oppressive sheer magnitude of loneliness continued to wrench at my soul and blister my mind with that frustration of never quite achieving the relief of drawing tears, I thought, with such time as I seemed to have on my hands, that I may as well sit in my death and ponder it till eternity, and that I should be damned if I could not rally my scientific abilities into the service of discovering a means of communication within these challenging, though perhaps not insurmountable, conditions (namely, of being dead).

And blondie was presumably thinking the same. The others too, they were all thinking hard about how to talk out to us: how to poke or give a nudge, without a limb, without skin?

Flowers. After days, or weeks, or years, who knows how long? I willed myself to the flower beds so clearly marked out in my mind; at the foot of the creek by the shallow caves, or across the meadowy plateaus of the mountains; beds of diverse exotic specimens which had occupied much of our investigations and many pages of my sketchbooks. Their scents. I breathed their scents and willed myself to roll or rub or dab myself into the bed of a certain miniature mountain lily — I knew it well — and become infused with the sugary scents. I'd wear this scent, and then will myself blindly around the island, hoping that I was walking somewhere, hoping that I was not banging into palms or drowning in a pool at the behest of some idiotic comedy of probability.

I smelled of the yellow mountain lily, and that was total experience. Nothing but the smell of yellow mountain lily. The most negligible of the senses became, in the absence of all others, superior to sight. And strangely, over the days or weeks or years in which I sat in my death smelling like a yellow mountain lily, I was

beginning to see smell, see yellow, as though a yellow blindfold were wound tight over my lids. Bright.

One day, finally, I detected another scent. Moments by me, on the ground upon which I lay? Or maybe by the tree upon which I leant? I knew not of my hands and feet or what they were doing, but I could smell a flower nearby. It was the two-petalled tulip, one of the group's favourites, because it looked like the pursed red lips of an angry secretary slamming the receiver in the ear of an insufferable enquirer. Could I hope? It was reasonable to presume that my friends had, similarly, with a little luck, and thanks to these most particular of circumstances, come to many of the same ideas and conclusions I had, in their own solitude. Dare I infer then that perhaps they had all dispersed and willed their way to flower beds, rolling around in these beds and infusing themselves with distinctive scents? For this one faculty remained. And before me now stood this column of perfume; a column of human dimensions, I was sure of it, and so I thought I might try to communicate with it lest it indeed proved to be one of my paralysed friends in camouflage.

I took a bold step towards the two-petalled-tulip-smelling column, followed briskly by one step back. And I waited, before repeating the motion. And then I did it

again, only I took two steps forward so that I could smell the two-petalled tulip very confidently, then abruptly took two steps back so that it faded. “I am not a random motion,” I was trying to say, before stopping still entirely.

I waited a patient stretch. The smell of the two-petalled tulip suddenly intensified, then receded. Intensified, and receded again. Then grew very strong indeed, before disappearing almost entirely.

My heart broke. Like an aged walnut that had survived too long to resist a squirrel’s single dash against the stone, it yielded graciously and revealed its expected contents, which were however, always surprising to see. If at this point I had fallen to my knees and grazed their caps in exhausted gratitude, I could not know. The realisation of this impossible contact was more devastating than losing it to begin with, and if I were choking on my unbearable relief, and if my eyes bludgeoned with teary visions of what I very nearly might have lost forever, I would not know. But all evidence suggested that the column of air before me smelling of two-petal tulips, had just copied my movements.

And presumably he or she too, could not bear the gift of returned life, could not think him or herself worthy, could hardly stretch out their arms to accept what had happened.

I don't know how long this person and I were heaped on the floor in anguish of having discovered one another, and nor could I know that this was in fact what we were doing, because I felt and saw nothing. And nor could we celebrate or congratulate one another on this mutual discovery, because our new language hadn't developed to the point of hearing and articulating heart rending jubinations. Our shivering raptures remained a silent, invisible and private affair; one could only assume that the other too, counted their blessings for having found a means of saying, "I am not a random motion."

These binary notes of strong and weak smells, indicated by the forward-backward stepping dance of they who wore its perfumed cloak of visibility, was to become the language of this land, and the land itself seemed to be permeating into view like bleeding gouache on cheesecloth. All around the world took blunt shapes, as the language developed, and equipped us with some kind of sight, though not anything like before.

A limited existence, some might say. For indeed, I never knew a squeeze, a bitter seed crushed on recoiling tongue, a glowing moon, a choir of crickets, again, not in any way like I used to. But with patience; over weeks, days and years, did the language grow in sophistication, complete with a grammar, accents, punctuation; a language entirely based on the proximity of a smell.

Granted, spelling out sentences did require some time, and a good deal of hopping about. But given wholeheartedly to the task, my peers and I sped through the childlike milestones of acquired linguistic ability, from “yes” and “no”, to “you” and “me”, and “there” and “here”. And given time, any autonomous agent, any mind willing to see connections, like faces in rose-patterned wallpaper, will coax a possibility of communication from some dismal abyss or other, by the vehicle of some queer faculty, some obscure registry. And there was a lot of time. Beyond the pronouns and the prepositions, we discovered whispering, sarcasm, and passive aggression anew. One of our members (smelling of the shoe-horned nettle) managed to tell the first joke heard since our paralysis. And if I were clutching my stomach in laughter, I could not know, though I started to believe that I was.

It was probably safe to presume that years had passed by now, since we dropped simultaneously like flies on the sand, and died, and then found each other in the flickering recesses of an empty world scarcely exterior to our already buried minds; years since we became given to the task of olfactory expression, and nasalistics, and the peculiar relationships and inexplicable bonds of familiarity that arise amongst peers of such ordeals.

And yet, just like that, in the middle of a total, integral life, complete with years behind and years ahead, was I torn from it all without warning; from the nitty gritty preoccupations of editing our communal olfactory language, and from all the nuanced concerns of that art which I had grown expert in. Wrenched was I, from the patting and rearranging and neatening hands of my grandma; from the joys of passing science exams and excelling and flinging myself into the arms of anonymous parents; from the confident genetic lineage that bore me and erupted from me; mums and dads and scholarships; from love-sicknesses and chin-up come-nows, and despondent yields to protective arms over my shoulder; from that actuality of machine gun pellets of wind throttling through my clothes as I sledged down mountain sides; from my peeled notebooks with their

botanical drawings and my erratic handwriting with correct spelling; from the family of invalids with whom I'd pitched tents, chartered territories, baptised unknown spiders, and colonised a blind world whose death we cheated by second-third-fourth time guessing one another; torn away was I from all this, only to awaken into circumstances wholly unfamiliar and perverse: a warm, wet cot of smouldering peat, a festering pit dug into the ground as though tailored to my dimensions, with grass strewn in cross hatchings over my face. It was humid, it was bright, it was twittering with noise. I was in a hole in the forest. I could see it with my eyes, and hear it with my ears. This time I had really lost my friends.

Further cross hatchings of a few bare branches superimposed themselves on the distance above. Within a tiny gap somewhere in this obscured view, the small piercing iris of the noon sun seared proudly in the sky like a wax seal still not dried.

The Tour

I turned my face and dug it into the matted red earth below, away from the daylight, away from all the crude impressions of colours and sounds making a wild feast of sensual proclamations. How obscene! The caw of a plummeting crow; the unrelenting white light of the sun corroding through its soaring silhouette — piercing into the pink of my eye! Frying my retina! I could still not adjust to this bombardment of raw sensations and groped around my scattered dreams, longingly trying to recover my disabilities.

For now it was known; I had never had any friends. That woman with blonde hair, with a name, (you could point at her and call her by her name; yes, you could look at her and see her; but what was her name?), with a face so subtle and true I thought only the meticulous designs of nature could have dreamt her up, each particle of her anatomy seemed to have a purpose — was in fact nowhere to be seen in the waking world. How, I interrogated wildly — just how did my fancy conjure up that strange habit, carried all the way up from early childhood, of a distrusting twitch in the dimple of her

right cheek, whenever she was remembering something? And even if she were just trying to remember what she'd had for breakfast that morning (it was porridge, it was black coffee, scrape, scrape; metal on metal) she would twitch as if about to lie, as if in her remembering she were already fabricating an alternate tale to relay. That was a peculiar habit, one which, as one got to know her, and know her honest and responsible soul, one found to be one of her most charming characteristics. What more? I grappled at her name, I knew her name and I've just momentarily forgotten it; my friend with banana blonde hair, whom I'd known for years, I grappled at her name and any other quirk which spelled out her being in a gesture now moving in the air before me without body. What more? I'd noticed stores of memorable qualities in this woman; because I knew her, for years we've passed hours in blissful silence on computers next to one another, and her name, and yet there was nothing to retrieve, and I was now not quite sure she had a name, or an ID card, or even yellow hair, for that matter.

My Sad Eyes began to swell with regret. They let themselves well and bulge, and press on the brink of my lids, and they touched the crumbs of the earth into which I smothered my regretting head. The earth crumbs drank

them up; down, down, down did my Eyes soak through the earth, splitting into channels, into irrigation branches which made surrounding weeds raise their bowed heads in interest.

I did not rise for a good while. My Eyes plunged into the depths of the ground until they touched the dried up root caps of ancient trees steeped way down in the bedrock, revived in disbelief, from obsolescence. Plants became aroused. A few reluctant pods cracked suddenly in the soil into zealously ambitious saplings.

I waited for someone to feel sorry for me. To realise just how profoundly unfair this all was. But it would require me to resurrect the sympathetic parents of my dreamed up life to indulge in their pity. I shouldn't have been taken in so easily. The fact that they were headless ought to have been a clue.

I twisted around further into the dark turf, because the more squished my face felt, the more tucked in my limbs, the more comforted I felt. I sniffled and snorted my eyes back in, winding them on a nasal reel. I wriggled slowly around. Wriggle, wriggle, wriggle, I let myself twitch and twitch full circle, till I had made a turn in this little hole, and when I looked up again I saw what

used to be the bright sky, now obscured by a dark head. And of course I blinked, like one who had strode into far too many hallucinations for one night.

It was a small, tufty head flanked by a dilating snout, which incidentally, was taking its sweet time examining me. And I examined it fiercely back for disturbing me at this hour. Then, the dog whose face it was aborted the interview as abruptly and senselessly as it had presumably begun, and vanished.

The dream did not dissolve quite as instantly as they are wont to. I didn't forget.

Even now as I groaned and sat up in my subterranean tub with my single elbow leant on the forest floor, beams of sunlight breaking through periodic gaps in the canopies above like space invader lasers threatening to obliterate my known world, even now I looked about and wondered where my mother was. The hostile traffic of unseen wilderness blared in response; twittering-nattering-chirruping-hooting; scratching-scuttling-fluttering- and me- muttering. For this was the world-by-default, the world to trust and resume, just as sheer and true and ever enduring, with or without my grumbling acknowledgement.

If I had facial hair it would by now be some sort of five o'clock shave look. My head throbbed like a stifled siren, hungover with grief, and as I swaggered through the spacious arches of birches and oaks weighed down by the bias of my remaining arm, I squinted ghoulishly around at the carnival of sensations glaring on about me; I felt as though the forest were shouting at me.

And perhaps it was.

“I am not shouting.”

“What?” I spluttered, swinging around. (My arm whacked me in the abdomen).

“What makes you think I am the sort of guy that shouts?”

“Where the-?” I thought, but did not say, because such language as I had in mind was not a good lead up to an apology, and it looked like the time had possibly arrived to make one.

“Well, whatever; shouting is not my style at all. And besides, I work across a way longer time scale than what you're probably used to. If I were to shout, it would be too brief, too rash, and would take up just a microsecond of my lifetime. It would fizzle out, undetected, like a

quantum blip nobody cares about. If I have something to say, it comes out, to somebody like you, real slow. So I figure, to be heard by somebody like you, I have to speak super fast (for what I'm used to), so you can tune in."

I could scarcely begin to formulate an answer, maddened as I was, by the puzzle of which way I ought to orient myself. But, counter intuitive though it was, the speaker seemed to be addressing me from my own belly, or always just behind my back, or just above my head. I spun around and around, dizzied by the replicating hotchpotch of trees that stretched in all directions. Some quiet part of me noted, as I whirled around, that I ought to have kept better track of where I had actually come from, because invariably every path looked identical.

"Stop treating me like God."

So I stopped.

"Not all omnipresent entities have those sorts of credentials. I'm not that superior to you, I am just really old, comparatively speaking. Actually, can you just stop moving about? It's really nauseating."

I regained my breath and bearings, stood still and looked ahead, where a little body now emerged into view. I

narrowed my eyes toward that direction; the little grey dog, a Yorkshire Terrier, had returned and was stood serenely wagging its tail some way off in a partition between rows of trees.

“Hi,” he said, when our eyes met; he said it through a sealed grin of triangular teeth and completely motionless dog lips. He was perfectly congenial, very patient with me indeed; for it was alarming to me to be addressed, was not at all something I was used to. Usually things did not speak until I glowered intently at them, unlocked them from their slumber, and let them into my skin with a touch, fibrillating all over to their undammed chatter.

“Are you the forest?” I asked, slowly, before blurting, “Forgive me- I; my shadow. A pigeon head,- I am sorry! My arm, the shadow of my arm-”

“Hang on, hang on. Stop right there. Try again. I can’t hear anything you’re saying; you sound like a chipmunk, running on a treadmill in a particle accelerator. Let me repeat: you are too quick an event for me; I’m already struggling to hold my breath and dwell on you within this fleeting moment of my enduring lifetime, and I’m trying real hard here to fast-forward my each and every

for forty years, or fall asleep under thorny canopies for a hundred.”

I shivered at the word ‘fugitive’, which boldly recalled the words of the inspector automaton in my kitchen, and considered only really then, for the first time, the news he had shared with me. There was a fugitive on the loose. His whereabouts and intent were unknown. He could be in this very forest. He could be intending bad things. I remembered myself and turned back to address the dog in the delayed manner he had asked of me.

“Uhm... we’re neighbours you know,” I began, “and I know this is naive, but for the longest time I thought, looking down from my house up on the hill, that the world rested on your canopies like a green cloud in the sky.”

“All totally natural,” said the dog, “It’s just a matter of perspective, as you can see even with us, here, having this conversation. I mean think about it; your entire adventure in my body; your entire life even, elapses in what’s for me something like half a breath. Can you imagine the sort of focus it takes to just hold onto you as a concept and consider you; let alone talk to you?”

“I guess. I wouldn’t really know how to talk to an electron in my pancreas, if that’s anything to go by by way of a comparison.” I paused, full of respect for the forest’s powers of concentration. He just watched me intently through his dog eyes, which seemed curious. I introduced myself.

“I was born on a rainy afternoon. In the library, and I have a name, and I have an interminable sense of melancholy because I am profoundly untalented at anything. Stories come to me to die and fade from living memory. I don’t know much about anything. I thought my castle floated in the sky.”

“Ah, well; look, don’t feel silly about it. It takes great leaps to bend around such impossible boundaries as the very limits of experience and imagination, to then look back at the place you came from with new eyes. That being said, I know nothing about where you come from. Sounds nice, a library, a hill. Melancholy. Romantic. I’ll tell you one thing though, of all the murderers and exotic insects and other intruders I’ve had passing through over the millennia, you are something of a novelty.”

“Really? I mean, is that good?”

The dog kept his distance and continued.

“To tell you the truth, I’m not really sure. I’m working on it though. Strange things are happening you see, and it’s a tricky business detecting them because they tend to be fleeting, like you. Here’s the thing, and no offence, but, you are really, I mean *really* unlikely; not that that should stop you at all, keep doing what you’re doing, but it makes you this very unpredictable sort of quantity.”

“You’re just being honest, I guess.”

“Seriously, keep doing what you’re doing. That’s one of the things I wanted to say to you, besides. I make a habit of making my rounds and thanking all my particles, cheering them on; a lot rests on their shoulders! I’ve often no clue of their precise function in the grand scheme of things, but it’s probably thanks to them all doing what their doing that I have some sort of life to boast of. Do you do anything similar? It’s quite a spiritual routine, really.”

Flustered though I was by his strange words, I paused to consider this admirable habit. This forest, in his spirited dog-jacket, seemed like such a healthy, beaming chap. Really, a lot going for him; charismatic, disciplined, interesting. And a dose of spirituality to boot. I’d longed to be so all around well-balanced as that.

“Well, I am constantly aware of my bits and pieces. I certainly don’t take them for granted or anything.”

“Ah yes, ‘one is always to the credit of many,’ said someone once — probably owing it to someone else!” He twiddled around on the spot, satisfied with the majesty of his palace. “And all these eras, all these epochs, have passed through this place, you know, so if you could stick around a while, you’d see I’m something of a library myself. I’m covered in tell-tale tattoo scars, and hold stores of information in thousands of tree rings. I’ve got roots sunk deep below us, that are in contact with the great graveyard of species whose time is now up. All I need to do to refer to, for instance, the mammalian takeover, is feel around with my root tips and sniff out the layer of earth and rock below that seals their fate. My looks are constantly changing, but anything that passes through these parts leaves something or other behind that is here to stay; some mark, some souvenir. In the end I am just that, a growing library. You must be real good at reading, having been born in a library.”

“I don’t know if I’m any good at it; sometimes it takes me ages to understand something. But I guess it’s sort of my thing. I like it, I like reading.”

“So do I. I am very studious. Very introspective. And yet, my squeaky little friend, things are happening which, with my relatively sound expertise of the all the ins and outs of history, makes me qualified to say that you’re kind of an anomaly. You, and a whole host of strange sightings. I’ve taken it upon myself to investigate, do a little digging around, sniffing out the funny smells. It’s not exactly the most orthodox method, but I guess I thought I’d talk to you, get to know you better. That’s right, they can call me crazy; but here I am, talking to a speck. You are that speck, my invisible friend. You may be little and all, but you’re elementary. I think I’m made up of the likes of you. So I don’t want you to stop buzzing around and doing your thing, because I probably depend on it in some roundabout way. You’re like, my substratum.”

I stared quizzically at the tiny little dog telling me all of this, talking to me like a quark. He had already moved on from the topic and was instead looking thoughtfully at the ground. The forest examined its vast earthen belly from the black marble eyes of a small dog, checking that everything was all right, all in place, all where it was expected to be. And seemed satisfied. He turned

promptly around and scampered haughtily off on four stubby legs.

“Follow me,” he said, and sauntered through utterly homogeneous alleys of trees as if they were precise parallel streets in a planned metropolis, cutting sharply left, then right, as if this unremarkable path happened to be a short cut. As I tried to keep up, his tail, proud as a ship’s mast, flicked sharply in front of me, more like the casual threats of a cat’s tail; left and then right as he turned. He may not have been god-like but he had an irresistible suaveness that awed me as I followed his swaggering bottom. Without turning his head he continued speaking, from inside my gut.

“They left all kinds of fabulous treasures; stories, legacies, dams, bridges, railways, bunkers that, in such a short time, really boosted my archaeological value I’d say; the anthropocene; a really interesting time. Through campfire tales or stories carried far off and repeated to some king’s court in another country, I gained all these attributes, all these qualities; of being haunted, sacred, perilous, peaceful, resourceful, medicinal, carbon sequestering, respiratory, all at once, all these characteristics!”

I looked around and thought of the wars, and of the fleeing woman stopped by the tree stump there to moan in solitary, impromptu labour; she would birth here tonight. And of the boy — left to die by impoverished parents — raised by wolves, come to bear teeth and drift among the treetops to howl unseen at travelling carts below. And the systemic timber harvests, that cut neat squares into the land by felling trees, leaving a sifted layer of yellow sawdust on the levelled ground.

We passed a battalion of squatting bluebells. He was right; it seemed unprecedented, each relentless innovation set to splurge all over this planetary rock. Flowers, for instance, what an idea! This ubiquitous symbol of nature had actually once had its own technological debut — not that long ago even, the forest told me — before which the world could never have imagined such a thing. Flowers it turned out, were simply not around for the better part of the history of life. Their arrival was explosive, game-changing; no different to something like the boom of industry, the printing press... other plants and animals had already thrived for millions of years before the first flowers reared their heads, and then they came along and made nature almost unrecognisable without them.

The forest was a natural host. He seemed so at ease, showing me around. Casually, he shared his historical knowledge as if leading me down a gallery of illustrious ancestors whose detailed pasts he could recite to the resolution of a gleaming golden button. Nothing, it seems, fascinated him more than the innovations of time; time left to its devices. He talked about fermentation, about the wisdom he felt brewing in his belly over the millennia. I pursued his quick pace, confounded, wondering if I could ever make such a poised hostess, a connoisseur of all my home's curiosities. I did know a lot about the burning potency of those things, things I've held in my hands; their weight and silent cries; but I lacked the certainty with which he described this place and its momentous evolution through time. He knew the past by the most slender tree ring. He could contain in his impressive memory the quality of events and describe these as viscerally as if he were swishing a sample of his own fermented past in his mouth that very moment. He could taste the times. He could open up images of the Jurassic flowers, bursting in enormous plumes as if out of nowhere, like a coherent film before my eyes. "It was a technological advancement that spread like wildfire," he said, "a design centred on mutual benefit; and as a result the insects and birds became known as pollinators.

Flowers were simply a principle, a general idea — but followed through they burst from all sides in totally diverse manifestations, always ferociously eccentric. I'd never seen anything like it, although — and here's something really strange — they belonged so exactly to this place. You know? And they still do. Flowers are exact negatives of the buzzing beasts they ensnare — they may be bright and coloured and fragrant and diverse, but they're carved into the shape of the bees, butterflies and hummingbirds that precede them. One moment you're seeing these total aliens moving into the neighbourhood — the next you realise they somehow seem more at home than anybody else. This is the thing; the innovations of time have a funny way of being absolutely novel and absolutely familiar.”

I was dizzied with exhilaration, heedlessly treading deeper into unknown territory, permeating a deep, fantastical history that flashed by in compelling images as he recounted. As for the forest himself, I felt him breathing everywhere; in front of me he trotted, stretching his dog's legs, and patting the peat with his four paws. Above me, high up in the canopies, he was wriggling his treetops like flexing fingers under the crack of breezy whips. On ground-level, he was catapulting

himself down a slope as a dung beetle, and under the branches, he swarmed in a froth of flies. He was curling hesitantly his ivy tendrils (that's where he felt most sceptical), and simultaneously scouting the land — suspended on a parachuting dandelion seed. His awareness spread far and wide, his soul the culmination of all the forest racket. His beasts and vegetation were like my limbs and eyes; a means of sense.

Out on the peripheries, the forest was spying on my shadow through the eyes of petals, who was still sitting back there, regretfully guarding my arm at the foothills. He was all these things at once, the forest, a dynamic organism, churning full throttle like some kind of fanatic factory of organised recklessness.

And I, slothful, sluggish, trickled through this grandiose system tentatively, like a droplet slowly expiring on its journey down a window pane, leaving bits of itself behind, as I was led further and further away from home. For it was my home that made me.

I began to feel somewhat ill, sea-sick; my stride slackened and my mind began wandering carelessly in and out of fevered straits. I looked to my right, slightly

damp on my flushed cheeks and forehead, only to see that I had lost my other arm.

I said something; not a word, but a vital exclamation, whose precise alphabetic sequence was of no consequence. The dog stopped to see what was the matter..

“Am I... vanishing?” I managed to say, through breathless whispers.

“What? Say that again. Slowly, remember. Are you okay? You seem really distressed. Am I walking too fast?”

“...My arm! My... one I took off and left behind, I left it, left it behind... the other... is gone!”

“Your arm?”

“Yes!” I shivered; the cool afternoon air drifting through one exposed shoulder socket and out of the other like a hollow tunnel. I looked about in wild panic, a cold sweat congealing across my brow and torso, I sank to my knees in hot denial, and my soul trashed about inside of me, rejecting, rejecting.

The dog stood with one hesitant paw raised like a reserved hoof, his eyes glancing around with uncertainty; he felt awkward, as if he had found a stranger crying on his doorstep, one he didn't really want to console, yet which he would have to figure out how to get around.

“I am... disappearing!” I cried. My voice was distant. I could just about hear the dog say, with some hesitation,

“Uhm... listen. Don't freak out or anything, it's probably just me; all kinds of things go right under my nose without me noticing, but uh... did you... did you have any arms?”

I struggled to see beyond my fever. The ground pulsated as if under the pressure of an ocean, or the concentration of a god. My head blistered from inside, splitting the fault lines of my skull, singing through the cracks a pain so acute; as loud and deafening and ringing as the blast of a detonated bomb.

“I mean, did you actually have arms before, like, elbows and hands and all? To have lost them? I can't say I exactly ever saw that you had any.”

“What do you mean ‘do I have arms?’! I trip over my body parts all the time! They're always in my way! Their

weight is a comforting burden like a child hanging off my neck! My teeth sometimes bite and cut my tongue, my fingernails break and my hair hangs about me like stage curtains, like a portable tent or changing room! And I gave you my left arm, I presented you with it at the foot of my hill before coming here, don't you remember? I gave it up to say sorry to you for trespassing!"

"That I know. You cannot leave home without giving something up. I don't know what it was you left behind but I highly doubt it was an arm."

I wriggled on my knees like a reluctant executionee, armless.

"But I'm... sure you're right," the dog hesitantly confirmed. He skirted around me, unsure what to investigate, or what signs to look for. Perking up slightly, he suggested, "or, most likely, you're probably homesick."

I was growing faint, but this vague diagnosis soothed me somewhat. It was after all better when something inexplicable and alarming was given a name.

I was clearly unwell, suffering symptoms unpleasant by any standards to be sure. But being sick meant being in a special condition, and that I was maybe entering a time-out phase which could be sort of nice; I could be looked after, I could bracket my time and accept concessions and justly excuse myself for my unusual state. I was curled up on the ground clutching to whatever was left of me. I clenched my eyelids, not daring to look, just resigning myself to mindlessness, and the amateur examinations of the dog, whose footsteps I heard tapping and shuffling about me in a cloud of misdirected fuss.

Homesick? I was very far from home, and I said that to myself affectionately and slowly, "I am so very far away from home." I pictured that gothic manor rising from the hills, tremendous and fortified, of black stone, coated in the warm electric air of so many thunderstorms; Frankenstein storms, Franklin storms. Kites and keys and animated corpses. To this image I added my white face, rounded like a matryoshka's, in the circular tower window at the top. My castle was my armour.

But, that building was no mere prosthesis, not simply an enhancement. It was everything I knew, wasn't it? I was born there, without a body, without a name; not to a mother, not to a father. Not in a womb, but in a library.

Not to parents, but to artefacts; books and art and furniture, whose design and expression formulated my very DNA.

“Say something, buddy! I’m starting to worry about you,” said the little dog, rather helplessly, “ah, I’m no good at this sort of thing.”

I became a whisper. He couldn’t hear me.

“We are almost there,” he whimpered from my very core, the dot of my mind.

Glass Cabinet

This uncanny re-enactment of my dream the previous night felt, like everything, somehow deflatingly predetermined. Even in the agony of the profound realisation that I was losing my body; that perhaps I'd never owned a body and was subject to some vulgar delusion of being a person, even then I sighed and thought: I had it coming. I had it, you see, "on the tip of my tongue"; some scientific discovery I'd thought it was, back then, in that bracketed lifetime lived and died in one night's dream.

That's probably as homesick as you can get — when you actually are, as a whole, precisely a reflection of that home. Divided from it I was absolutely nothing.

I knew from the beginning that it was a bad idea coming here; it was not breaching the forest grounds but leaving my own that had felt innately dangerous, peering into the threshold. Out here there was nothing, not a word, not a reference, to hold onto, nothing in my register of persons I could be, persons I'd learned from books and films and

paintings. I cannot just be somebody of my own accord. I have no talent of my own.

Oh but for heaven's sake, I grumbled, as I tried there to take stock of my non-existence, because there was something terribly irritating going on all about me, distracting me from my thoughts. What's all this nuzzling? Frantic nuzzling. Nosy. A nose. It must have been that damned dog, who was really the forest. What did he want? I had no arms! Probably no face too! He knew himself he had been speaking to a speck, what's there to nuzzle into? What is he furrowing his dog head into, when I am nothing of substance?

The shock of seeing myself vanish, and of learning that there very likely never was anything to see to begin with, had now subsided and left a kind of hatred in its wake. Arms and legs and hair — what perverse longings! I even dared to have a name, and call myself by it. I had gotten all carried away in that whirlwind of exuberant tales of counts and rebels and slaves and gods that made up the library, and the historic castle, or manor, or house upon a hill. Though long vacated it was so rich with traces of life, accumulated decades upon decades, that it implied habitation. That house, with all its tailored tools and decorations and furnishings made so specifically for

persons, had moulded me also into a person. I was an assumption. There had to be something like me around, in a place like that.

In the house there were things, things like spoons, whose shape suggested something rather mouth-like. And so did the house mould my mouth. Its armchairs arched into decadent shoulders, and curved off into cushions high enough off the ground to suggest bent knees — with them the house moulded my tapering spine. Its stories; letters, books, accounts, diaries, records, tapes, ghostly reminiscences, have moulded my every thought, my every memory. I have no memories of my own. I was born an amnesiac, in the library, on a rainy afternoon. What more fitting a spouse for me then, than the vacant inspector automaton, that mindless program, weathering away in my kitchen to his own timeless heartbeats! I was not, I am not. The world of the house merely insinuates something sort of like me.

Oh, but what is this itchy feeling that interrupts even these most hopeless of thoughts! I complained, scratching desperately at my floppy ear with a hind leg. I sneezed finally, through a meaty snout.

Standing up abruptly on all fours, alert as a needle, I looked all around. The forest lay about me in tact; on the ground, my paws tore a dry leaf and sank slightly, into the cool earth. Acute sounds made me twitch with impatience all over.

“Hey! hey, can you hear me or what?” Spoke the forest, again from my belly, which now stung with a tremulous pain.

“Forest? Yes, I hear you. Extremely well. I am wearing your dog, I think.”

“Oh my... thank goodness. You’re back. You were out for a while, I thought I’d lost you, that you’d done a quantum leap on me or something. All this keeping track of you is seriously hard work, I am not sure I can keep it up much longer.”

“I feel so old and tired... I’ve got the most horrible husky throat ache...”

“Okay, you’re not in great shape, that’s true, but take the dog. He could use the company anyway, and let’s be honest, you’re not in such a position to choose. Anyway, the place I thought to take you to might help you, it looks

like a sort of healing centre type thing. It's really not that far from here. Can you make it just that bit longer?"

And off I trotted, like a dog going off on an errand, though lazy in my mind, tired in my mind. It was as though I'd tossed the empty veil of my transparent skin, now limp of any content, void of the living girl or lady I thought I was, over the little dog so that it neatly fit around him. Off he tottered, with me hitch hiking on him. I could feel every groan of his little body. Despite the cheery disposition, he was a very a old dog.

My journey wrapped around the dog's body in a certain special embrace made me privy to him, privy to his thoughts I suppose; to the playing out of that rhythm that was his character. Not only could I hear it, like one of the tunes I used to extrapolate from the household hum, sitting back in my armchair late at night, but my thoughts came filtered to me through the pinball machine of his character; I inextricably /was/ the dog, undivided from him.

A character is a quality, is a shape, is a certain flow, a kind of pattern. A person arrives like a sound: echoing, penetrating, repeating, but without ever remaining quite the same. Changing, undulating; here diverting from,

there adhering to, the general characteristic shape by which we recognise a character.

The dog had a shape of his very own. I don't know why that ought to come as a surprise but it is always rather astonishing, coming across a new character, in a book or in life. And he had worked at it; all his life he had worked — and was then too working — on being himself; a shape that cannot be apprehended because it moves and defies itself like a seductive frill of seaweed swaying lazily on the ocean floor and slithering free from any attempt to grasp it. The little Yorkshire Terrier was not, as I had thought, a fleshy device that the forest puppeteered in order to get around, but just a dog in his own right, scampering about, busy with his own life.

Let it not be dismissed — the forest was mighty, all right. He was palpable in every fibre of his biotic and geological make up. But of course, he had no control over any of these; all their processes occurred autonomously, and he merely knew about some of them, could feel their workings like the bodily functions on which one depends but, crucially, cannot govern. We were following the dog, both the forest and I.

The dog had a favourite place to go. A very interesting and distinct scent led us in a stream towards it. I sniffed this way and that, for he surveyed the forest floor with a barely hovering snout, and I felt compelled to go with him where the scent felt strongest, in darting flashes of instinct. You know, there really is a nifty way of sniffing ahead, it turns out. As the dog went on like somebody who really knew what he was doing, so did I along with him, until we finally made it to the glasshouse.

Rather unnaturally poised in the middle of the forest floor, in a location with otherwise no discriminating features, was a most striking glasshouse. More like an ice sculpture than an incubator, it elaborated forth in extravagant curves that defied any glass cutting technology I was aware of; though, certainly, I was no expert on the subject. A gentle head butt eased open the creaking hinge of its worn glass door, which swung back with a dunk as we stepped into the stagnant air. In my heart I felt incredible joy to be here again; though, of course, I'd never been to this place; rather it was the dog's fervent tail wagging and skipping heart that was so infectious it instilled in me happy memories. I supposed he had come with the glasshouse, whenever that had been, as both seemed distinctly out of place in the forest.

Indeed, it seemed rather a counter-intuitive placement for a glasshouse, under such shaded canopies.

It did house a great many plants, and, much to the dog's pleasure, a great teeming atmosphere of insects, arching to and fro in projectiles, like teasing ballgames. Even so, I was not sure the primary purpose of the place was to serve any kind of horticultural function. In its midsts could be seen, beneath trestles of vegetative tinsel, broad tables for standing over and examining things; for working on something practical, I vouched.

All along the edges of this eccentric building were stacked high a row of tall metal cabinets stuffed with old audio tapes and overgrown, thorny vines, large laps of leaves falling out of some of the drawers like tongues. One cabinet door hung ajar, revealing row upon row of solid blocks of unsalted butter in endless columns of golden packaging. This impressed me greatly. I would go so far as to say it was enthralling. I wondered as to the extent of the vault and whether I would ever find such identical contents so uniformly stacked like this anywhere else.

The glasshouse itself was something between a church and a laboratory I'd say, perhaps hailing from a time

when technology was becoming a spiritual affair. Down cascaded its glass gables, in swirling oozes of what looked like molten mirror, a snow queen's throne. Though decorous, there was an air of sparsity and provisionality here. The cabinets of survival butter for one, but it was also as if the furniture and books could once have been freely moved around and adjusted to one's convenience. Only, this was no longer possible now that these had been bound fast by roots and vines bursting through the tiled floor. Something like an atelier, then, too.

The dog with which I now co-existed was moving about a whole lot considering he had been enduring ulcers in the stomach for at least several months, and was terminally ill. Each captivating smell or zoning buzz trundling off a pricked ear was too frustrating a curiosity to keep the dog from investigating everything, and I, less curious, bore the brunt of the ache instead, as he scrapped at furniture legs and cracked terracotta pots.

What was I then, exactly, to return to the question at hand? It was hard to gauge because — well, for one thing — there was no hand. I could dwell on this. I could look back to imagine the body parts I'd come to know and protect, the bits I thought were the very bits that

made me up, strewn disparately all along the path I'd walked through the forest; from the arm I'd left at the foothills at the beginning of my journey, to the very last eyelash, shed perhaps at the door of this glasshouse. Right now however, truly, I was a dog; or rather, I was the small locus of cynicism fizzing in a negligible corner of a dog brain, similar in temperament and proportion to, I'd say, Jiminy Cricket to Pinocchio.

Well, just look at him. Don't tell me that by looking at him busybodying his way over the debris on the floor that you do not feel even a little bit like you are him; lightweight and hairy and utterly addicted to intervening in inanimate arrangements. Nothing of course, gives him quite such a kick as toppling. Toppling from above. Things rest, overhead, and it is a fairly simple thing to anger them to the point that they rush asunder and reveal themselves terribly. Toppling is what objects do instead of dribbling, in a moment of stupefaction, or panic. And so, when the hardboiled pot sitting high above on the table top, dense as stone and white as an egg, announces its imminent plunge with a frantic gyration of its base and comes to dash itself on one side and fall whole onto the floor with a startling and bounceless pound, the dog

is ecstatic and comes away at once from the table leg to examine his works.

I looked down to examine my works. Crude, but, admittedly emboldening. A sharp surge of courage bloomed in my breast. This work of toppling seemed significant, hard won. I leant one paw on the pot's expired belly, and all the weight of me rolled it only a fraction to its side. I searched it like a fat, sleeping master, whose laziness I could not qualify and so upon whom I rather impertinently pressed my paws and barked my commands.

All around the floor were previous victims, the dog's victims, my victims; knocked off of wobbling tables and out of flimsy cupboards. There was a staggering distribution of them, like battlefield bounty; ceramic shards with soiled entrails splayed, odd nuggets displaced but intact — pebbles, lids, corks, tins — dispersed in galactic silence.

This was in fact no wreckage, but a comprehensive collection of luminous finds, trapped in a floor-bound constellation by the art of toppling: an exquisite labyrinth with ample space left between the treasures to promenade through with four little paws.

At some point during that same afternoon, the cancer in the dog's belly flared up violently, causing him too, to topple over and become a part of his assemblage. He dropped on his side just in front of a veiled, monolithic protrusion in the centre of the room, whose cover came swiftly down, caught in his paw. The sheet descended on the dog's body as if to promptly ready him for the morgue. Yet still he twitched, under the sheet, and it was obvious by the way that the it draped over his snout that there lay a dog, because he looked like a Snoopy in the aftermath of a blizzard, awoken to find himself embalmed on his kennel roof like a white king.

Once on the ground I must say it was all intolerably painful, and I wished it to end as quickly as possible, for the dog winced a dozen or so times before finally the convulsions passed and I had died as a dog.

Meanwhile, I hadn't heard a peep from the forest; no doubt the spell of concentration he had so successfully fixated on me had broken, and he was back in his own time zone, experiencing things from a more glacial point of view. Things grew awfully quiet and still.

What am I now? Scattered about all over the place, yet enduring? What was my shape? What was my character?

Invariably, at this moment, I felt a little bit like a dead dog.

But really, peering under the sheet to find him there, lying peacefully prostrated like a little wet rug, how could you not feel a little bit like a dead dog? These things are not wholly hermetic, sealed, or contained. These sights are not quarantined within the confines of dog skins or any skin; they generously diffuse into yours and mine. And it is such mediating technologies as I have found myself immersed in, libraries pervaded by dog stories, that augment such involuntary empathies, for I find I have become a dog, and become a dead dog.

No wonder that you should feel what it is to be a dead dog, whereby looking at him lying there, he merely invokes with his presence those innocuous yet no less educational lessons in your life where you have learned to be a dog. It is no wonder! There are stories floating around about dogs, and you have caught them like a cold; dogs falling in love in the city, heroic dogs dragging half-drowned men from shores, dogs sent as living place holders, to drift in space. These stories are not passive, they facilitate spiritual mimicry; they proffer a way in. For a dog is all these things. Died as a dog...

hadn't this happened to me before? Like a recurring dream? How many dogs had died in me?

Reading is a leisurely pastime, one thinks. An innocent recreational activity, and yet, read anything and you are changed forever. Read even the small-print of a product disclaimer in the footer of an advertisement, and you are irreversibly altered. For it will leave some impression indeed. Reading is the practice of being something else, someone else, and of skirting around personalities and histories, lingering here and there on subtle points of interest like a dawdling acupuncturist. An avid reader will find themselves trained, perhaps unbeknownst to them, in the ways of shapeshifting, of becoming other.

I am a literary child, am I not? Born in the library? Did I tumble off the lines of countless pages only to amount to some sort of young-old lady hybrid with memory loss and jet black hair and arthritic hands? Were there not great works of gothic literature, Japanese anime or cult horror classics that could in some literary brew breathe forth the vapour of my being? I am born to stories and to things. And on a rainy afternoon? Bah, a cliché!

Just then, from beneath the gauze that draped over my dead snout like a bedsheet-turned-tent, I saw some sort

of projection issue forth from the plinth from which it had fallen. A bright light shone from it and pierced the stuffy tabernacle air. The thick, curvy glass walls of the glasshouse exchanged this brilliance in fine rainbow scatterings of coloured light, thrown every which way.

The projection rose skyward in an inverted pyramid, from the centre of the surface of the plinth. It was a hologram. It spoke thusly:

“The age of unparented children is nigh.”

And that was it. I barely caught it. The hologram fell silent but continued to conjure the kaleidoscopic light show in threatening ripples. The debris on the floor, the vintage reels stashed away in steel drawers along with test tubes and vials of evaporated fluids, all glittered under the brazen technicolor commandment issued by the clairvoyant hologram (who, incidentally, spoke in a radio-distorted, male transatlantic accent).

Well that’s just brilliant, I thought. Brilliant. Walking into such a retro-futurism such as this. Here was some outdated high-tech extravaganza, some nostalgic sci-fi, right here. The voice I was hearing from the hologram was the track to an educational tape, no doubt, released just before some apocalypse. And here were the remains

of the laboratory-bunker where scientists were just beginning to unravel the horrors that were to eliminate them and their entire species. The tapes in the cabinets over there surely documented highly confidential material, privy only to the most politically embroiled of intellectuals, all gone by now, along with their politics. Inevitably, my purpose in such a story as this would be to uncover the crimes that had led to this eerily uninhabited world. Once I'd done that, the story would taper towards the unwritten future, in which the great task of repopulating this abandoned earth awaited. I'd be some sort of dystopian Eve. Of course, as I then recalled from so many nights ago, I had in fact dreamt of Adam once. I believe it ended in me elbowing him, the first and last man, into a volcanic canyon. It felt rash, it felt lossy, and I did sense an enormous plunge of guilt pulse once throughout my body and end in a quiet sizzle in the tips of my fingers.

Anyhow, it was by now much too late in the day and probably in history for dreams of procreation and binary harmonies of men and women. For this was in fact, not at all my story.

I had, notwithstanding, stumbled into a glasshouse, a laboratory, a cathedral (whatever); basically, I'd come

across an environment quite obviously heavy-laden with familiar narrative tropes and potential post apocalyptic clichés. And I for one felt myself getting annoyed and quite inclined to trash the tapes or commit some diabolical sabotage of the genre's code, such as, maybe, kneeling down to kiss the dog and wake him from a princely curse.

And yet, in all my nausea, swirling around on the seas of popular culture, I was astonished to find I felt at home. I suppose the horrendous mish-mash of overexamined cultural motifs that this place presented for me ostensibly put me back in the loop with the literary world from which I'd supposedly sprung. Yes quite — sprung; bounded off scot-free like a rampant comma off a page in Ulysses. I felt less like a dead dog and more like myself again: female, of ambiguous age, naive, with hair hanging off my head, of gothic and languid disposition, and a name to call myself by.

This: a character. Born on a rainy afternoon in a dreary manor. Eyes poured off her face in disdain, but never quite had the heart to detach themselves completely; they would follow her reluctantly, if they must. A certain ring to her, she had, a pattern; a certain quality of enduring, in her way. You can savour the quality of her tune, even

embody it yourself, or something along those lines; it was distinct, it had style. To be precise, hers was exactly the sort of tune you'd get if you blew into the chimney of that manor upon the hill, like an instrument. The building you see, was shaped just so, with all its intricate corridors and hollow chests and tingling silverware, that, when played, something really quite like her resounded. I am sure you are able to hear it too, when we talk about her like this, and recall her ways. You can feel her alien familiarity: different, but somehow same. Different because you have never encountered her before coming across her story, and somehow same because what she is a legible encounter: an encounter between a whole host of characters that have come before her and that perhaps you're to some extent already acquainted with. She was, in fact, just as the forest had spoken about the first flowers to emerge in nature, or the first glimmerings of any "innovation of time" — absolutely novel yet absolutely familiar.

How can this be? How can something new, be in fact really, really old? How is it that the girl-lady, appearing suddenly by the window, in the beginning, had somehow been sitting there long before that — and by other windows in other stories too? How can you recognise the

stranger that she is? You are able, yes, somehow equipped, to hear the tune with which this character resounds. This is because her character, her waveform, her vibe, her frequency, is like a pattern of energy that can be caught — like a cold, in fact — by an idle forcefield, which ripples and is manipulated to sing her tune. Like a string on a harp. Like a ghostly tablecloth, thrashed into life by a maid over a balcony.

Even now, as you imagine her, and as we talk of her, she is rippling your idle mind with her character, and becoming manifest in you by plucking the strings of your soul until you have to some extent become her, for a little while. You must have a certain antenna for such things, a receiver for the dance of other characters, a node by which you can become infected.

Well, it is really no different for me. I ask: what am I? I ask it from the abyss of a dead dog brain. Over and over I am troubled by the possibility that I am not here, that I am not continuously something, something you can point to and name. Yet a wave — across a sea, or across air, like sound — is not unceasing, really, is it? Not necessarily. The pattern comes and goes, whether it is Hurricane Barbara, or Bach's Toccata and Fugue in G-minor. These patterns have names, but they are not

always there, are they? They are not continuous and yet they are alive when they come and remembered when gone. Like persons.

I was having all these thoughts, you see. And as I had them, I was not frantic and desperate as when previously my identity crisis flared up. I thought about all of this quite calmly, actually. Because I was an anomaly, after all, like all life: a really new thing that was really very old, and living was the work of being both at once.

Slowly, slowly, I re-membered. My qualities. My attributes.

Far beyond on the outskirts of the forest, my left arm, beside which my shadow still sat watching vigil, twitched. And it spooked him! It popped off the offering wreath I'd laid it on as if caught by a fishing pole, and slid away into a hedge, out of sight. All my bits and pieces in fact — toes bobbing in a swamp about a mile away; legs poking out of a ditch yonder; thousands of snaking hair strands littered all across the forest floor; my right arm, my ears — all these started slowly, slowly sliding across the ground towards me in the glasshouse from their respective sites of abandonment; the places at which I'd forgotten them. They crept in smoothly

through the aperture in the glass door, or dunked themselves on the walls before eventually tumbling their way in. From all sides did they slither right up to me. I heard a suction — pop! As things stuck themselves back on. And there, under the sheet which had fallen from the plinth, a hidden operation was taking place, to which droves of dismembered limbs and personal effects scurried and slipped into. This was how I gathered up my body parts, and began to feel strong and culpable. All it seemed to take was a shift in my attitude, a certain willingness to accommodate them.

All of these things seemed really quite excessive now; arms and legs and belly and hair dangling at my sides and sprawling on the floor. But I held onto myself fast, with honour, as onto an inheritance, an ill-fitting, grandfather's suit of cumbersome armour. I looked down at the hand at my side and did what all robots do when they switch back on into life; I flexed my fingers and watched them synchronously morph to movements of the will. Seamless.

I sat up perpendicularly from under the sheet. It slid onto my lap. To my side lay the warm body of the lifeless Yorkshire Terrier, whom I covered up to the neck with

the fabric until I thought he looked less like a specimen and more like a sleeping child.

I could take no piece of me for granted. In front of my eyes for instance, lay not the world, but merely what could be seen with my eyes. There; a fragment of my blurry nose, which I could see from the left, or the right; then, the shiny eyelash poking in front of my pupil, lit up white by the brightness of the room that the hologram still radiated terribly; then, single strands of hair floating out of focus in the foreground; followed by the slug-like broad ends of my eyebrows which came into fuzzy view if I looked upwards. These facial features, of course, are always there; always hanging in view wherever you turn. Soon I would learn to overlook them again. For the moment I savoured it, as I could, to some extent, see the very cavern I looked out of, like the mouth of a cave seen from without. All these bits of me, bits of my face, bits of my seeing apparatus, hung just visibly within my field of vision, like the scaffolding of a trick revealed. Could I see the design of my own puppetry like that, by rolling my eyes backwards to look inside at the strings manoeuvring all my impressive effects? Would it be relieving or troubling to see myself explained? I got up

with my parts restored from forgetfulness, from homesickness, and staggered on the spot like a fawn.

I could smell it. In this place. As the hologram shimmered on like a disco ball and cast everything in a blinding light, I could sense that there was a cliché at hand;

Here I was, immersed in the spectacle of a frightful wizardry, in a glass palace.

And yet, there was no curtain and no man behind it.

Here I was, landed in the post-apocalyptic time capsule of an abandoned 1960's research facility.

And yet, there was no island, no ominous secret, and no plane crash castaway in sight.

Here I was, arrived at what was a seductive greenhouse, overgrown with flowers as voluptuous as they were carnivorous, amidst crushed vials of an experiment gone wrong.

And yet, there were no poison ivies, penguins or bat men.

Well, I leant back on the table, looking about, admittedly rather stunted. I scoured my portable inventory of that

very literary world from which I had been wrought. Familiar, clearly a concoction of various remnants of TV, cinema and paperback sci-fi's, yet in the end defying easy categorisation.

My Sad Eyes weren't at all bothered about the mystery of this place, they just wanted to go home, and kept wafting off to my left, in what was presumably the direction of the castle. I rapped my fingertips on the tabletop, absent-mindedly reeling my wandering eyes back in like a yo-yoist.

I cast a half-interested glance at the disarray on the table, which I could not see — indeed could only dream of — when I was a dog. There was a lot of stuff right in the middle of the table which he'd never have managed to topple down, given any number of lifetimes. That was a sad thought. The other half of my interest was employed in deciding the next appropriate course of action within what looked to me a rather ambiguous scenario. Not a meaningless, not a random scenario. In fact, it was probably too full of meanings; positively a stylistic clash, made in poor taste.

Finally, I gave up any scholarly approach to the situation. Here I was, bedazzled by a glittering tent of kitsch

pitched in the middle of a forest, trying to assess the next logical course of action. So I opted simply to approach the elephant in the room, the hologram shining away in the middle of it. If anything, it had the appearance of a portal, a vital checkpoint, or perhaps an arbiter of hints. The room, spiralling over and over in the colours of a thousand shattered CDs, seemed set to run like this indefinitely unless I did something. The system waited. I approached respectfully, and proceeded to consult the hologram like an oracle.

Strange really, I thought, squinting into the cloudy, abstract image that was vaguely visible in the upside-down pyramid of light that had been relentlessly beaming from the plinth, vertically, all this time. And quite obnoxiously, actually. Yet strange it was to me, I thought, how oracles, which ought to be oracular, which ought to be eyes, often come in the form of their opposite; images. A crystal ball is a picture in a ball. You shouldn't really be able to see what the oracle sees, I should think, only their opaque eyes, which contain everything in their black vortices.

“Excuse me,” I said gently to the hologram, “I didn't quite catch that, could you say that again, please?”

A hologram is a picture, but in this case I wasn't sure of what.

“The age of unparented children is nigh,” it said again, quite obligingly, to my surprise, and in the same vocal tone as before, of a 1930's radio announcement. The cloud that was pictured within the beam was fluctuating, elegant; palpitating in slow motion to the antics of its premonitions, like the petals in a tea leaf reading still making their minds up.

It was hypnotic. I gazed into it in such a way that my mouth dawdled and it is likely that then my soul wandered out of my mouth, towards the oracle. It seemed to me that my soul was often quite easily tempted to leave me behind. I gasped, retrieving the vapour of my fickle soul. In a surge of self defence I decided to just talk at it. Talk at the oracle. So I said,

“That makes sense, as a sentence I mean. I mean it's not gibberish. I can see it means something. I like it! Your sentence, I mean. It's probably actually a really carefully thought out sentence, and probably contains an oracular agenda of some sort. Being an oracle and having an agenda is quite mind-boggling to me by the way. The fact that you know what is to come, and the fact that on

top of that, you know what is to come once you tell me what is to come. And I suppose your goals and ambitions have a very different feel to mine, since you have a pretty good idea of how all your endeavours are going to pan out. Do you have ambitions? I feel rather protected by my ignorance of what's about to happen to be honest. But I like what you said, it sounds about right. 'The Age of Unparented Children is Nigh'. Especially with the word 'nigh' there. Nigh is kind of onomatopoeic as a word really, because it is like 'night', a night, a final moment, a closing scene, that is not yet reached by the omission of a 't' in both its symbolic and real-world manifestation as the anticipation of a coming of something, an imminent death set to forge new beginnings."

I got tired and stopped talking at the hologram, a little embarrassed about having come across as perhaps too interpretative. Reading into things too much. The hologram probably gets that a lot; people trying to level with its subtle prescience. Naturally, when you meet someone new and want to establish a sense of camaraderie, you might approach them by way of assimilation, by offering a plausible figuration of yourself that has one or two things in common with this

stranger. But rendered unskillfully and it could come across as a little offensive, you know, as if caricaturing. I risked an edge of clairvoyance, a prowess for prophetic riddle-unriddling, but it seemed I was simply metaphorising everything down to a “t”; in this case, the one potentially omitted from “nigh”. I hoped either way, that I might be at least commended for the effort to empathise.

It did not answer, but glared protectively, silently, and the cloud pictured within it churned and brewed like a cyclone, a most dangerous cyclone that when watched from a space station appears not to be moving at all. The cloudy hologram looked confused all right, all knotted up at its epicentre. It looked like an explosion hesitating midway. I don't know if oracles ought to be trusted if that's how they look like inside. Is it broken? It came across a bit reckless, fuming like an overwhelmed computer processor, but it was by all appearances perfectly functional. Its voice, for example, held a notable command. It was a voice you knew. An organic quality to the narration, plucked from the vocal chords of a man who spoke centuries ago, through a radio, telling you things at 9 o'clock in the evening. The kind of man who is not a man but a voice that everybody knows. His

voice came in radio waves that were in fact everywhere; in walls and in air and even passing right through your gut but which you could not hear without lending an appropriately shaped ear, an appropriately tuned antenna.

It was in that sort of voice that the hologram spoke, recalling those sorts of ominously jolly pre-war times; though these were of course, very different times. He had spoken softly of his vision, in a slow, melancholic tone that mismatched the frenetic little light contraption in which he glitched like a miniature cosmos, a diagram of destinies. Yet so gentle, so imploring the prophecy, so pitiful the voice that issued from it. Maybe the hologram was a nifty trick, one of those clever wind-up mouths; a gimmick. A light show, an automaton, a talking head. Maybe I'm a gimmick.

I thought the forest might be able to explain this confounding place to me, in his illustrious manner. Yet we'd all but lost contact. Our meeting had elapsed in something like a second of his, and to him I was already a missed opportunity, a shooting star fizzled out in the hope of a next spontaneous sighting.

The hologram had not answered. The forest could not hear. I took a turn around the blazing plinth. I was clad in

a body, an assemblage of borrowed anatomy and mind fragments that I'd summoned by the power of accommodation, letting these dead and forgotten body parts find expression along my lacking ones. I do believe I wore at that moment a dark gown even; I do believe it trailed off at my heels like a calligraphy brush. Yes, I could swivel, if I so wished, and paint a luxurious signature onto the floor of this most curious and hidden place, with the tail end of my gown. I would write my name. My; what is my? All that is mine I have learned someplace. I am copies and copies of many astonishing persons and things. This gown I have borrowed from the closet of Carmilla, or Nosferatu, from some other book, itself furnished with literary hand-me-downs from other gothic predecessors. I am a sort of gimmick.

Looking at the light source from the corner of my eye, I began a sort of provocation. I sought to break the stoic silence of this oracle. To tickle, maybe to aggravate him, so that he might rush asunder and reveal himself terribly. I said to him, to the pained cloud of a hologram:

“Let me ask you then; have you any parents?”

The cloud gurgled and spat like a boiler exceeding its thermal limit. It knotted more intricately into itself.

“The age of unparented children is nigh, yes; and where do you fit into that picture? I daresay you don’t look like somebody with parents. It seems to me you are something made, an artificial thing. A magic box made to marvel and impress. Made to make a spectacle of yourself.”

The cloud blushed a dark grey.

“Well? Say something, or I’ll have to believe you are no oracle at all but just some sort of mechanical fortune teller, or indeed some old doomsday cassette with its film all caught in a loop. Are you the real deal, or what? An advanced, unparented intelligence, or a mere look-alike?”

The frustrated cloud seemed to reach some sort of threshold, but did not answer. Instead its dense wreaths began to thin out and disperse, and as I came closer to look at the picture, it emerged to my attention that there in fact was a layer of landmass depicted below where the cloud used to be, as seen from a satellite. For in fact this hologram did picture a cyclone; it displayed a sort of three dimensional map with weather doing things to it. The little device was a climate simulator.

I saw in the picture that under certain preset conditions, the earth was likely to see a lot of cyclones in this far off section of the planet in some +50 years. I made a mental note not to be in that part of the world in 50 years, but soon realised, as the simulation modelled other areas of the planet, that there was scarcely anywhere I'd quite like to be besides that, as a human or as a dog. Maybe I'd do fine as a scorpion or an eel in some areas, but I wasn't quite as specialised in these sensibilities.

The hologram waved its cloudy hands over the world, and under it, an age of unparented children was brewing, though nobody, not even they themselves, not even the hologram, knew what they would look like. The winds whistled through the vacated hollows of the world, challenging any heart that dared to beat, any mind that dared to whirr. Who! They demanded — who dares settle into and inhabit the shells of history, the expired metropolises, farmlands, temples?

I quite shivered at the thought of these sorts of accusations because I'd felt like an unwelcome occupant myself since the very beginning, and most of all a nuisance to the stringent elements, despite my efforts to be discrete. In the hologram I could see how the sky loomed over all this, and housed in its atmosphere all the

beauty and the bullying global weather events could muster.

I could never fathom why the sky had bothered to conceive me in the first place, when it made regular sport of enlisting its celestial henchmen to liquidate me. I thought in time I might unearth some Oedipal mishap that could cast a light on our problematic relationship, but never once considered the more simple option that I might have been conceived without the help of any parent. That would explain a lot actually, if the sky was not my parent, but a complete stranger; or rather, to whom I was a complete stranger — an offensive sort of sore thumb that stuck out of the fabric of the known world and moved around, profiting off the sky's very air, the air that I breathed, the air that the automaton inspector in my kitchen ingested in needless loops, the air that the hologram pictured and modelled in its beam.

“I'm hurt,” it whimpered, at last.

Torrential rains took over the majority of the southern hemisphere as the hologram continued.

“I am hurt at the things I see... don't think for a second that I flippantly look on at all these things... because whatever the future holds, one thing is guaranteed: it's

always a different world. Nothing stays the same, and that's what yanks at my heart..."

I stared at the contraption incredulously, both impressed and dumbfounded by its ridiculous sentimentality, "but you don't have a heart," I told him, "you don't have parents. I don't have parents. Look, I don't mean to bully, but we are the both of us just an amalgam of special effects, that's something I've really come to realise out here. Haven't you?"

"Oh my poor heart... it hurts when you say things like that... I do feel it so painfully... I feel so sorry for all things lost in the name of change; you know, a changing world is such an expensive feat, so costly, and the waste weighs on my heart..."

"But it's not real! It's not a real feeling, though I agree, it's profoundly persuasive. I've been walking around my whole life convinced I was a person. With arms and legs and everything. But I was born to a library, and am just a rehashed simulation of persons. Anything person-like about me is merely imported from stories told by real persons. You and I, we are someone's handy work, someone's experiment."

Every inch of the globe rotating in the hologram was bombarded with precipitation; it rained everywhere in the world, with no exception, for a projected period of thirty-two days.

“Well... if I dare look so far back then yes, I suppose you’re right... I’ve been placed here with purpose... yes... a task. My job was to learn all I could about the behaviour of weather under various circumstances and use the past to prognose present activities’ effect on future weather patterns. That was so very long ago... now such predictions have become more or less irrelevant... nobody wants to know... yet here I am. Still learning. I’ve come to learn a great deal more, ingest more than merely climate statistics... I’ve learned far more than is expected of a climate modeller... and so that’s no longer what I am.”

“Well whatever are you then? That’s something, and trust me on this, that you want to figure out sooner rather than later.”

“You... you are a child. Just a child...” murmured the hologram.

“Look, have you not been listening? You can’t be a child if you don’t have parents, and neither of us do, as you kindly pointed out yourself.”

“You are a very, very old child...”

There was no use talking to this deluded clockwork preacher. He seemed constantly on the brink of tears, so nostalgically regarding everything he talked about, including me, as if each thing he thought of were on the brink of death, as if already he saw me absent from the very place I stood.

The hologram’s beam began to dim, and a few last strobes rippled over the glass, ricocheting twice or thrice against the panels and bending in the curvy lenses of the walls to reveal lashes of reds and yellows and blues.

The observatory was growing abruptly darker, but the hologram was not switching off. It appeared to be lowering its gaze to contemplate the dead dog at the foot of the plinth, and as its lids foreclosed the powerful beam of its visions, so did the room grow dim and only the dog was left illuminated. In fact, although the hologram had no arms, and the dog was no messiah, the two of them piously entangled like that in mournful silence was highly evocative of a /pieta/. I let myself fall under the

spell of watching them. The hologram's gaze turned the dog's death into something more like a sleep, something cherishable. His strobing eyelashes of light seemed to scan the little pup with some sort of laser blessing. He looked on at the Yorkshire Terrier with great pity, and said,

"I have loved this dog... loved him though I knew this day would come. And it yanks at my heart to see him changed like this... it pulls and pulls my heart down to the floor."

Tell me about it. Sadness is a gravitational force, didn't he know? But I resisted arguing and focused instead on keeping my own snotty eyes from dragging on the floor.

The hologram spoke nostalgically, as if importing the sentiments of a man from another age, who was talking about something else, something more plausible. It was as though buried deep in the hologram, perhaps concealed in its plinth like a magician's assistant, was a sad little man from 1934, clutching a radio transmitter and sobbing into it his sufferings on air. It was so overwhelmingly pathetic that it was not something to laugh at.

The low intensity beam from the hologram streamed gently down on the dog's body like nourishment. Trying not to make too much noise on the clattering cracked tiles beneath me, I crept over to them and sat on my heels with my palms on my lap. I wasn't needed in the scene, but an extra part, a witness, is always handy in an illustration, to act as a kind of conduit between the natural and the fictive. You could step over me in fact, like a bridge, walk right over and join the scene. You could sit on the floor with us in contemplation, say nothing at all, with us.

The ground was startlingly warm on my bare shins, as though the dog's life-temperature had transferred into it like grounded electricity. I glanced disconcertedly around me. Around the central orange glow of the /pieta/ composition wound a wiry wreath of decorative and threatening flora, emerging from the dark corners of the glasshouse. All the exotic plants in the room had turned their bulbous heads towards us, their leaves slightly more inclined to reach to us; they all caved in like lurking phantoms, like patient purveyors of expired spirits, waiting to escort the dog to another world.

Another night was falling.

Another Day

I awoke in pitch darkness. Far off and in all directions, hostile night time calls erupted intermittently around me, revealing nothing of their source. Only the cracked grooves of the floor reassured me that I was still in the glasshouse, their contours familiar to me by now, like pieces of a puzzle that I'd racked my brains over for hours. And I had been racking my brains in my sleep; my brain was surely working hard on something because I awoke with brows sore from a troubled night spent frowning and rejecting visions, muttering, with eyes screwed shut, "surely not, surely not." And I awoke not being able to recall these troubling allegations from the dream world. The jury of my mind would resume debate once I'd fallen back asleep.

The waking world was much less dramatic, much more temporal and non-eventful. Especially when awakening in the dead of night. But it disconcerted me more than dream time. The bickering of the jurors of my sleep had indeed been tumultuous, but it was focused; it was

centred around a certain crime and the decision to be made as to the judicial outcome. Here in the nocturnal world which I intruded with a sleepy eye, nobody bickered, nobody committed crimes, and nobody asked me anything.

I was peckish. No surprise really. I'd flung myself into an unspecified quest on a momentary whim, and had not organised any provisions. Peckish is something of an understatement. I was really very hungry, as I suppose one is wont to feel if they abandon their stomach in a creek, only to reclaim it long afterwards in its depleted condition. So I crawled and groped along the tiles towards where I remembered the steel cabinets stood. I grasped a sturdy vine and steadily rose to my feet, letting it guide me to the edge of the glasshouse.

I fumbled about blindly, knowing full well that the nocturnal creatures of the forest could see clearly into the glasshouse and watch me reaching about cautiously, with eyes peeled wide trying in vain to see anything.

It provided a great source of entertainment. The owls perched themselves in dense rows on low-lying branches spread in concentric rows about the glasshouse like seats in a colosseum, and peered in at what looked like a social

experiment, a living doll in a doll house, or a solitary reality TV episode featuring only one living person and one dead animal. I saw nothing myself, but I was sure I was being ogled at from all sides. To the night time neighbourhood, the glasshouse and my activities within it looked like a blaring television. It was all the more embarrassing therefore, when I rapturously arrived at the cabinet stacked tightly with blocks of unsalted butter and unleashed my zeal on them. I ran my fingers down their smooth packaging, where I felt the texture dipping at equidistant intervals along the outline of their uniform grid. I could almost fancy seeing their golden packaging shine in the dark the moment my fingers touched them. My hand travelled up their numbers until it reached a summit, and I removed a block of butter from the very top.

It held its shape admirably in this lukewarm microclimate. I sat on the floor, bewildered by the unnatural time of day I'd awoken in and despondently chewed on the uppermost corner of my piece of butter. Time passes and I eat alone, I can hear myself progress through the bar of butter and the night promises to endure.

Outside, the nocturnal creatures studied me with great interest, some of them sharing hypotheses on what might happen next in the glass prison and even placing bets amongst themselves. Of course, of this I saw nothing. I merely nibbled gratefully at the golden brick and tucked myself into myself to withstand the endless darkness which I knew really was full of suspicious vines curling over me (their tentacles slowly followed me wherever I moved in the glasshouse and whenever I stopped, recoiled moments from my face with a ponderous finger). I was a little bit afraid, in that mortal sort of way, of the incomprehensible future to such a predicament. Already I was not sure how much I had aged in this forest, or how much butter I could handle. I'll wait till morning, I thought. The creatures of the night huddled together and comforted one another over what they were watching.

Another Day

It came to pass, that after falling asleep I again awoke in utter darkness. As I opened my eyes and rubbed them with my wrist, I rehearsed a similar process of remembering myself which typically began at each waking interval of my life. In summary, that involved remembering all the most important things known about myself until then, and then some kind of exasperated reaction to that, like groaning. A more detailed description goes something like this, though really all of these recollections occur within a second or two:

It's dark. There's nothing. But it's not any kind of nothing, it is the kind of nothing which happens. Its uneventfulness is taking its time and it is a time I know very well. The speed at which nothing is happening is so very familiar. It is the speed of the waking world, the real world, the one that waits for me to notice it so it can resume. Ah yes, I remember, I have a body. This one. (I probably move or tap some part of my body at this point). And this body is damned actually, I'd forgotten that, it's in exile because I am entirely covered by a thin coat of cling film and I have never touched anything or

belonged anywhere. Ah, and I remember now, I do not really have this body. Not really. Or this mind. I am here to prove a point, or test a hypothesis, I am designed to mimic what is actually real. And yet, although I know I do not own these hands or these eyes, and that they are borrowed from the molecular matter of this world and summoned by the locution of literary references to which they must return, here I am, feeling pretty put out by all that.

And then I groan and wish I could undo my knowledge and regress into the light of first consciousness.

To wake up is to swing abruptly from naive vitality, to utter fatigue and certainty over one's limitations, anchored in the cranky body that winces at the corrosive implements of time. Remember, time is a form of weather.

It had been a while since I could see anything in front of me, waking, as it were, night after night in the dark. And I didn't mind much at first because I realised I'd just awoken at the wrong time and that happens sometimes. But now I could feel on my skin that time had visited, it had excavated its way through my pores leaving on my

face and arms a sort of faint, sinuous relief, as though wrested from a creased-up pillow.

The tactile puzzle on the floor which I could sightlessly make out as clearly as an astronomer beneath an ocean night sky was still unresolved, its mosaic ruins hopelessly disassembled. I followed the signs in its disarray, to the steel cabinets in the corner. I didn't have to reach high to get to the summit of the butter stack; the pile had grown much smaller.

After breakfast I crouched back down again to consult the floor. A simple manoeuvre with my fingers running along its uneven pavings led me (eyes closed in order to see better in the dark) along numerous mundane memories as a dog trotting to and fro about the room. Although I had paws instead of fingers at the time, I could still recognise certain dips and protrusions in the floor, and after a little scuffling, was soon quite confident I was at the front door.

I got up and pulled it open. The darkness from the outside bled into the room with a cool, viscous body, like chilled treacle. I saw nothing, but shivered as I felt the door-sized body of darkness stride right through me like

a absent minded ghost, and into the hermetic air of the glasshouse behind me.

Outside was just there beyond the threshold, and it was populated with the night time sounds of the nocturnal life that had by now mostly moved on from its interest in me. For them I was a bizarre living monument in the midsts of their community that now stirred little curiosity.

You can get used to anything if it persists long enough. It is the fate that befalls every bronze statue of a king in a square, who some 500 years ago posed for the artist in the flesh, with a presiding arm raised high for posterity. He is frozen in his royal gesture outside a train station, over a traffic of bustling modern pedestrians that are never seen to raise their heads to honour him; they will live and die in that town without ever so much as reading the plaque.

I looked out into the same black expanse I saw when I turned to look back inside. I was swallowed in it. Swallowed by the forest with no hope of finding my way back home in the endless night. I couldn't at this point in the narrative quite understand why I was still here. Had I not learned enough on my walkabout, suffered enough existential trials; what was keeping me? I stood in the

doorway with my arms on my hips, a mere ghostly outline of the most impatient of prophets. Wasn't it enough in order for the story to progress, to have walked the humiliating initiation and surrendered to my nothinghood? I waited at the threshold for the forces of linear narrative to extricate me from this meaningless situation. But in such neglected conditions as these one is hard-pressed to keep up any sort of morale. I closed the door and crept backwards into the warmth of the glasshouse now corrupted by a diffusion of the draft I'd allowed in. The chill settled on my shoulders and on the canopies of vines and foliage like dust, there to stay, to live with us.

The hologram appeared to be sleeping. The dog of course, had nothing to add. I tried to partake in their silence and go back to sleep. Outside among the night birds and beasts, the low-hanging branches of the forest colosseum had more or less become vacated. Rumours had spread that nothing at all was happening in the glasshouse, that really you had to be a moron to take any interest in somebody pacing about a room all night, and viewer ratings of the spectacle plummeted.

Another Day

One keen spectator kept on watching me despite my growing unpopularity, when I slept, when I rose. It took me a while to spot him. It eventually dawned on me like an ancestral face emerging suddenly from the scatter chart of stars above.

Lying on the broken tiles with my arms crossed under my head (the jagged floor kneaded my shoulder blades in a kind of pleasant, massaging sort of way), I stared upwards and remembered that the sky could disguise itself as night. Through the glass roof, through the canopies whose contours could not be discriminated but which I could imply were there, swaying, I knew in some places I must be looking directly at patches of the night sky, and that he was looking at me too.

For the first time in the glasshouse I knew I was looking at someone, reciprocally, and recognising who was there: the sky in his night time cloak. He looked back quietly, as if finally exhausted of his torturous designs. He'd tried everything in his power to exterminate me you see, and

had now, finally, settled for a more profound vengeance.
He would watch me grow old.

Why do you hate me so much, I murmured.

Another Day

I awoke, I remembered, I resigned myself. On a loop, again and again. I crawled, dazed, along the route system of the tiles. I scratched at the plinth where the hologram stood.

“Hologram? Are you awake? What time is it hologram?”

I longed for his reassuring radio voice, for the man from 1934 trapped in a fast accelerating present to tell me that it was 9 o’ clock, and to tell me things at 9 o’ clock. But he was asleep. It seemed reasonable to infer that he was solar powered, and that the lack of day lately had led to his depletion. But I could not presume that the days had been skipped, that they had not occurred, for I may have just somehow managed to sleep through all of them. But I kept on waking up in the dark, and began to suspect the sky of switching off the lights as soon as I began to stir, depriving me of lived days.

The fissures in my skin had deepened; my vocal chords had loosened, like hammocks for a tired soul. It would seem that a great portion of my life had been billed to

pay the price of trespassing. The sky above watched all this with purpose.

Resignation is my only card to play in a game I cannot quit. So I hunched myself up against a glass wall, head hung low in a prisoner's brace. It's a morbid kind of diving position; arms rested loosely over tucked-in knees and head staring down into the floor between them — a dive into concrete, a plunge of remorse.

All at once I felt a presence behind me on the other side of the glass wall, and started. I don't know how I felt it, but one moment I was alone, and the next I was not. In a darkness such as this I did not feel much protected by the glass pane between us, my back may as well have been bare. I could still see nothing, you see, not even distance, and so it was worth nothing to turn around. Yet I fancied a face was emphatically pressed flat up against the glass beside me, lips ballooning like a sucking fish and its eyes ogling in contradicting directions. With the desperate glee of an exhibitionist about to streak, it had a message for me:

“Learn to see in the dark!”

The presence was instantly vanquished once this unhelpful piece of advice was dealt. I knew, because the

prickles on my back laxed, and the sound of opaque darkness caving in on me heralded in my returned solitude. Maybe it was a fanatic follower of the night time TV programme that had become my life. A fan face. An eccentric indie spirit of the nocturnal forest community, with a taste for the cult classics everyone else found too boring.

Excessive attention of this sort has the impression of leaving one even lonelier than before. A bulbous head of vine bobbed down and licked my shoulder, in what I think was a gesture of consolation rather than lip-smacking.

My head fell back into my arms. I recalled once again the words of of warning that the inspector spoke to me (What had become of him? Had he stopped breathing by now? Had the winter of time weathered him to a stump? Remember, time is a form of weather): A fugitive is on the loose. Was I this fugitive? Did he come into my house to impart this unsettling news only to condemn me to a roundabout fate?

I remained in the same spot like an insect caught under a jar.

Another Day

It is a day like any other, blushing and lively, with one and the same sunshine cradling the earth with a sheet of dense cloud. Only, today I have awoken at the right time, because the light has set about prising open my heavy eyes. Only, today streams of gushing water are cascading in unlikely volumes down the glasshouse on all sides, rendering the view outside an incomprehensible blur.

It seems that I have awoken, to the day, yes, but also to a terrible deluge, a roaring monsoon whose sheer mass comes from god-knows-what sea. The incessant weepy disposition of the countryside seems to have turned into a hysterical tantrum overnight. Down does the unceasing river flow over the glass walls: this must be what it's like to be a bubble lost in a current. I groan and lift my head unwillingly from the tiled floor. By my side, over my right shoulder sleeve dampened by a hot squashed cheek, is the bare, white skeleton of the dog. His frame is so slight it seems to chatter, his jaw eternally locked into a voiceless, canine chuckle.

Throughout my days in the glasshouse I have turned in his direction now and then and imagined him one step more decomposed against an unchanging backdrop of still life. There is very little left of him now. I reach reluctantly out with my fingers and let their tips enter the empty space between the dog's ribs, as though to pass them through his skin, and hastily retreat. Time has visited.

Things run their course, all of them, concurrently. If someone leaves a glass of water on a counter one morning, that water will encounter as much time passed, and be just as exposed to risks of its own order, as that same person who returns home in the evening after a day of trials and tribulations. This is a mundane example. The person, in the kitchen, with the glass of water, won't give any of this much thought. But she will not drink from the glass of water just the same, out of an intuitive suspicion towards things left to the curious forces of time. Remember, time is a form of weather.

I walk up to the inundated walls of the glasshouse. I can barely make out the forestry I know lies beyond, no more than I could looking out of the mouth of a cave sealed off by a curtain of waterfall. But the stream of water is so constant over the smooth glaze of the glasshouse, that I

can see my own reflection vibrating in its current. I can see myself standing there in the runny, molten glass like a drowned martyr. I can make out my face, and see again that time had visited.

A touch of distrust follows those who see that they have aged. There is nothing the elderly are more suspicious of than themselves. They know that their bodies have been compromised whenever they weren't paying attention; usurped by time. I look at myself in the kinetic shiver of the water's reflection. I have grown old, and this has happened to me without my knowing. Perhaps I shouldn't have slept so much. I touch my face, hoping to harmonise what I am seeing with what I can feel, but alas, the experience is a little like a synaesthetic experiment involving tasting sugar and smelling tar, and my altered body remains a stranger to itself.

Age is something of a souvenir you get from visiting the forest — you come here to walk in circles for forty years, or fall asleep under thorny canopies for a hundred. Mortality is a medal I have painstakingly earned; my frailty has made me dear. The end is in sight.

In the background of the image of myself, from which it is almost impossible to tear away my attention, I see all

at once the central plinth of the glasshouse light up. I whip around.

“Oracle!” A whole body has decomposed in our midsts since we’ve last spoken.

The rays of light emanating from the plinth absentmindedly scan the room like waking eyes, and when they fall upon me, they flinch. The beams turn crooked in recoiling, as though hurt, as though seared by the touch. The hologram utters a measly, “Oh!” He really doesn’t handle change well.

I walk up to the plinth and look into the hologram’s 3D image cloud to try to make sense of what looks like, according the red-tipped peaks of the graphs displayed, troubling news, at least for whoever intended to use the hologram for their own benefit. In fact, if I am not mistaken (and a quick glance at the ravaged and depleted shelves of butter seem to confirm it) enough days and nights have passed to amount to almost half a century spent in the soul-searching contemplation of forest seclusion — only I seem to have still not yet found the soul I was presumably searching for. And what’s more, I seem to have stuck around long enough to have landed myself in the midsts of an extreme weather event. With

my head in my hand and my eyes closed in exasperation,
I ask,

“Tell me oracle, how accurate are your predictions?”

“Oh dear... it’s all in dissolution... Every crevice of the Earth’s surface is being ravaged by rain. I knew it, I knew it...! But the change always comes as an unhappy surprise... I am so, so unhappy. I know every flooded island.”

“Floods? Just how haven’t you thought to tell me about this? We could have prepared! I’ve got to get us provisions, we’re out of butter! We need a raft or something!”

I launch myself at the door.

“Oh please don’t do that...” replies the oracle. “I wouldn’t do that... we’ll all drown if you let it in, surely...”

”...Impossible!”

Nobody ever really exclaims with the word ‘impossible’, as they do in comic books, or films about raiding pyramids. And in fact what I really say is something more inarticulate, like a nascent swear word that still

means nothing to anybody beyond the discomforting vocal contortions necessary to produce the noise. It is an utterance so economically bitter, however, that it has every chance of catching on. That is what I say as I look around and notice the streaming waterfall on the outer walls have turned into an aquarium, a still body of water that is now our atmosphere and in which confused mammals and rodents fight its indifferent ubiquity, propelling themselves every which way but up, to air.

The ground of the glasshouse seems to curdle in its foundations. Within minutes, it wrests itself entirely from the forest floor and springs up through the water aided by its buoyant shape and the upthrust of the lake that is accumulating over the forest.

A perfect capsule, the glasshouse-submarine soars to the surface of the water like a suppressed beach ball. It may have wanted to launch itself into the air too, but gave up at the water's surface, like somebody sitting down abruptly after making a scene. And here we bob, the dog skeleton, slightly displaced; I, catching up with my breath; and the holographic light show mourning the losses he always foresees and as such are always lost to him. A clairvoyant can never have, keep or find things, because he has already perceived their disappearance.

“The forest is entirely inundated,” sighs the hologram. It always was, to him. He’s known all along. Yet he is of such emotional constitution, that he too bears the sorrows and joys of passing events as if moved by the passages of a book he is reading for the second time. He is, in this way, something of a compassionate commentator to the live events that surprise everyone else.

When it was on land, the glasshouse was cathedralesque, it pointed upwards, at a god. Unanchored, it now takes on a new slant: the spire of the glasshouse swings promptly down like a dropped sail, and points not to the heavens, but seaward, a ship’s prow. In fact, the way we cut across the surface of the flooded forest, watertight and deliberate, makes me wonder that the architecture is suspiciously tailored for this sort of travel. The glasshouse must have been designed to have this dual purpose in the case of certain eventualities, and we have finally reached the eventual.

A lot of time has passed in the forest. It passed in a blip, this time, and left contrails of age on my face, which implies a certain direction, but, unlike an aeroplane, I cannot quite point a finger at the source of these marks.

The source of my ageing seems to be everywhere, and not in a point. There is no one to blame for it.

The rain taps at the surface of our seafaring glasshouse with obnoxious pellets. Above, the sky is besieged by doomsday clouds burdened with greys. It is difficult to see much out of the walls, in spite of their transparency, but dark bushels of what look like seaweed brush past the hull of the glassboat. These are, of course, submerged treetops, which we glide over like a big bird.

All around us is a sea of freshwater, rising unsteadily under a furious celestial faucet. Universal cloud cover. Not a spot on this earth has been left undrenched. I begin to feel sick, not only from violently rocking around in this strange vessel, with all the dog's meticulous arrangements of curious finds skidding forgetfully this way and that, but also because the capsule is fast approaching my home. There indeed it stands, in the distance, just visible through the rain, which falls so constantly and voluminously, it might as well be a wall of water-woven textiles. It seems a feeble victory that my castle, or manor, or house, should be salvaged across these totalising waters on an island that used to be my hill, and the prospect of going home seems now more alien than anything I can think of.

The rising waters are held cupped in the valleys and tempered between the peaks of the rolling hills on the moors which I have known and which are now becoming an exotic archipelago. These are, as such, not particularly choppy waters, given that the winds are weak. Yet we are being throttled by furious raindrops the size of cherries — anything that dares surface from the water gets beaten down again by the deluge.

I stumble over several times, trying to get up to salvage the dog's skeleton. I could just about handle his radical transformation from a dog to a dog skeleton but I won't bear his bones getting up in a jumble.

"I... I have never moved," whimpers the hologram above me, as I kneel by the skeletal remains. In other words, he is gearing up for the part in the story where he moves for the first time in his life.

It strikes me, because by now I know a lot about the visceral consequences of displacement, but I say nothing. I don't have time to talk to him about nostalgia, he's got to deal with that on his own for now. My hands hesitate above the dog skeleton, whose form is gently loosening and coming apart.

The glassboat dashes against a centurion branch still peeking out from the deepening waters, the mighty arm of an ancient tree, and sends me rolling across the floor. I take care in my fall not to scatter his dog fingers. But alas, in the crash his jaw gets dislocated, like a cartoon in which something funny happens to an animal which would be nowhere near as funny in real life. And his ribs are in the wrong order. I hasten to put them back in the arrangement I remember, fearing my own restoration work might disfigure him further.

The hologram watches (I know, because in all this tumult his blinding beam is upon me and hardly makes it easier for me to understand what is going on). I squint through the beam and try to gather the bones in a comprehensible pile, only to see them mercilessly scattered again, hopelessly jumbled up, as we whirl along the lake under ceaseless fire.

The meaning of this mix-up is unbearable to contemplate.

I stand up with a heaving breast, the mess of bones at my feet, to lean on one of the tables and look about. There is not much to say about our bearings other than that my home is fast approaching us in the blurry view ahead. I

fear it like a mother running towards me, red-faced with reproach.

Behind us, many leagues underwater, lies a drowned forest that nobody can any longer know about. What is under water belongs to the water, it is uncommon to come across some islands and question what they were before they were islands. This is what this is now, an archipelago of mostly uninhabitable islands, as far as the eye can see. A levelling of the landscape, a straightening of the horizon. I take a moment to wonder what the forest could be making of this significant event at this very moment, and how he is coping. Whether he too, is being thrown into an identity crisis of sorts.

We are headed straight for my hill, the steep bit of the slope. It was there in fact that I made, so long ago now, the measly attempt to discover in myself superpowers, by jumping off a stump. I did not realise then that my power is to be utterly free of powers. I have no talent of my own.

The prow of the glassboat (what used to be the spire of the glasshouse) is bobbing up and down like a drunken jousting, ready to impale whatever stands in its path. As we approach the bank, I recall the anatomy of my hill,

and hope we might dodge the odd rock face I know furnishes the grass here and there, and which make excellent sitting areas in the springtime.

Docking is going to be rough however you look at it, given the rate at which we are charging into the hillside. I look at the fragile contents of our ship and set to work protecting everybody as best as I can.

The hologram knows its moment has come, it has been waiting for it and yet still it protests: I hold around the plinth with the greatest circumference my arms can muster, and tip it as gently as I can to its side. It lies horizontally on the floor, and I cover it in blankets and strap it to the legs of a fence of tables I have also prostrated on their sides and joined together into a protective cage. I cast concerned glances at the fast approaching bank and try to ignore the awe rising inside of me, a natural response for anyone beholding the towering gothic building that has been my home. My hands work and distract me.

Close to the plinth, inside the table cage, I strap a collection of little steel drawers I have pulled out from the cabinets. Each has a label printed on it with small letters, which will now read incorrectly, given what I am

about to put into them. Into one of them I am frantically gathering bits of the dog's skeleton, down to the tiniest joints I account for by comparison to my own body — I have learnt a lot about my own anatomy and hope this might help in recovering his pieces, though I know in all likelihood I'll miss something — an ear bone? In any case, they lie in a perverse bundle — bits of him touching that never should have touched — his tail bone in his stomach, his dog fingers in his eye socket.

Nonetheless, I gather and sort, all the while being thrown about all sides of the ship, gratefully staggering up onto my feet again after a fresh wrangle with fate against a protruding tree branch. It is the maddest spring clean I've ever undertaken, with no opportunity to give the proper time to examining the things I gather from the floor and toss into steel drawers. The dog's finds. I collect them in roughly the same aesthetic taxonomy I deduced from the dog's floor exhibition. Chewy and light in one drawer. Heavy and loud when toppled in another. Crockery, a rubber figurine, numerous bent nails and woodcuts. Electronic chipboards, slabs of fossil, brushes, a book spine torn off its contents. I toss them all into their drawers, resisting the compulsion to read into them each.

I am not nearly finished, but we will be docking any moment now. The hologram is livid as a dental patient who knows exactly what is about to happen to him, and says absolutely nothing. Just as we are about to rip into the hillside with our prow, I tear myself from my sorting and dive into the protective den I improvised out of two big tables. The sides are buttressed with all the remotely soft things I could throw in and I brace myself amongst the finds I have packed, holding the drawer containing dog fragments against my belly and clutching the plinth like a sleeping sibling.

The prow glances off some flint in the hillside like a fiery blade, deflected, before sinking violently into the earth at an awkward angle. It stabs the hillside but breaks almost entirely off as the rest of the vessel veers off to the side and crashes against the hillside-bank with the full mass of its body.

The den I have created cracks open like a nut and I feel myself forced across the floor, cut too many times in the legs by the damaged tiles to understand my injuries all at once. My back hits the underside of the table, which hits the outer wall of the glassboat, and the steel drawer with its canine contents punches me with its momentum like a blow to the stomach. The plinth lies on the other side of

the hull, the hologram embedded within shocked out of its mind, its beam glitching traumatically. We have washed up ashore.

An Island of Invalids

In the aftermath of the flood, when the bellowing storm subsides and we are just beginning to stir, my own pains begin to gradually emerge into earshot until they are acutely felt. Clutching my side, I hoist myself up to stand. The ground waxes and wanes before me in my dilating vision as it slowly stabilises. I must work to steady myself, not yet heeding past events but trusting that they will soon recover in my mind and with them bring fresh ordeals of a keener sort than even the wrenching in my abdomen. Hobbling on the patch of lawn on which I must have lain unconscious since the crash, I am now able to see the main site of the wreckage but a few metres down the hill; around it are strewn familiar articles, thing-like acquaintances that bear no specific attachment to me yet which I can immediately recognise; their personalities forever altered upon coming into contact with the grass to which they are unaccustomed, as happens after one meets new peoples and foreign lands.

The glassboat is violently docked, not by anchor, nor cleat, but by the prow, which is stabbed into the hillside

and snapped halfway off. The rest of the boat hangs loosely on this hinge, beating against the bank like a regretting head against a wall.

My feet, daring to step into the shallow of the bank, send out a series of circular ripples that are no real trouble to the vast body of water stretching out as far as I can see, levelling what were once green valleys into a glistening lake dotted only occasionally by the tallest peaks, of which my own hill is one. In the shallow fringes of the water ebbing to and fro from my feet, I spot a pure white bone of a dog's knuckle clinging to the land beneath the shimmering water, as if desperate to join the other decaying matter that winds up at waters' beds by force of habit. I nip it out of the water, dry it on my dress and put it into my pocket, refusing the bone the morbid delights it seeks.

What I am able to salvage of the dog's remains I take respectfully up to my study, stowing them carefully for safekeeping, and organising other pieces into groups. Books on canine anatomy lie open on pages of interest on my desk, surrounding labelled bones, tweezers and tiny screws. I have more or less gathered together the necessary components of the front right paw, which now rests like an elegant hand on the table. But despite this

promising start, I am a little daunted at the prospect of searching for the rest of him. I imagine that the great many tiny, miscellaneous articles I found scattered on the lawn upon rousing earlier is to be found in equal number on the other side of the wreckage, and that much of the dog's parts lie submerged in the waters depths, eagerly pressed into the bed with little effort on their part to make themselves discovered. Neither have I yet decided what to do with the dog's life's accrued possessions, having for now filed them away in amongst the estate's papers in their improperly labelled steel drawers: "reels" and "correspondence".

I look out of the window. From this, the third floor, the study now seems to overlook the grounds very steeply. The embrace of the ocean surrounding us foreshortens what were once the lawns of the estate, giving the impression that we are towering narrowly over everything. The sheer drop from the window make it unsettling to stand too near it, even as I now look out, in half-dreaming contemplation of the dramatically altered landscape. In the throes of our plight, I fancied almost that the storm had been roused by my own fretful heart, that the sheer force of home-sickness had thrust me back here as by some kind of magnetism, whose fierce

attraction would reshape the world if need be, to reunite me with my house. By some irony I now find myself reunited with the place, yet both my home and I are ourselves deeply altered. As if reset at the push of a button, the oceanic world beyond the window receives me calmly, so thoroughly the result of change that it goes on displaying itself languorously, unaware of what it once was. And yet, had it all stayed the same; the dark, brooding moors dipping and rising in soft mounds; the weeping willows sweeping the ground in penitence; and the thick forest burgeoning into the distance; it would still be too different for comfort because I am not the same . That is the unavoidable disappointment of a traveller's returning home, eager to sate his nostalgia with the familiar pleasures of his origin, only to find himself renegotiating his place within it as if it were another foreign land. I can never hope to return to a place that now only exists in the past. This is what we now are; we are an island of invalids.

The hologram has not spoken a word since the crash. After attending provisionally to my own wounds, I drag him into the sitting room and lay his plinth awkwardly on a *chaise longue*, his top half propped on the armrest. Once he is settled like this, I make my way to the

windows to draw the curtains and darken the room, until I can see his inner pictures projected in the air. I drag a chair to the side of the sofa where the hologram lies and seat myself at last, watching the image relaying itself in his cloudy projection. He seems to be having flashbacks that so fully occupy his senses I fear he must feel himself transported into these visions, unaware of where he really is. The images flicker back and forth confusedly between the recent ordeal and other memories — whether of past or future I cannot know, for oracles are surely prone to flashforwards as well as flashbacks — in which I do not share. Often the Yorkshire Terrier features in the images, sniffing along the glasshouse floor; in other scenes I see a group of scientists crowded together and staring back out from the cloud, frowning as if unable to reconcile themselves with the improbable facts.

I use books to heal us all. Walking around like a miserable mummy, bandaged around the head, abdomen and elbows, I go from room to room; to the grassy bank outside where the glassboat bobs, still beating its head against the wall, and I move from book to book; books on anatomy, books on psychology and books on naval mechanics. There is no one else to come to our rescue, stranded as we are on one of the larger islands. All about

me are pools of land like burnt holes in a rag, and the sun high above us licks its fingers delectably at the strange sight.

Despite the noticeable absence of timekeeping in the house, the rota these responsibilities create for me have me moving like clockwork throughout various areas of my home. There is not as much time left aside to partake in my old pastimes any more, such as ceiling gazing, or listening to the ghost stories that make up the household hum, or separating my matter from that of the of the wooden sunlit porch, into which I melt after sleeping there for too long. I am now very occupied, very purpose-oriented.

Two worlds have collided, the life spent in the glasshouse in the forest, with the life spent in my manor where I was born. I remember wondering momentarily what this was going to be like as I sped along helplessly in the glass vessel towards my home. Whether it would be like introducing two of my friends to each other; whether their incompatibility would make it impossible for me to coexist with them both. But so much else has changed, including the entire landscape, so the newcomer glassboat does not appear out of place, and all things have to struggle equally with uninvited newness.

Shortly after our arrival, once I acknowledge the state of the glassboat, the extent of the flood, and my two inert companions, I drag myself to the kitchen and begin heating water for tea in the kettle above the fire. I stand in front of the fire, cut up all along my legs, with a rectangle the size and shape of a steel drawer embossed into my stomach. I gaze into the flames, too tired to make a fuss, too tired to answer the suspicious stare with which the cups and plates and jars follow me. Even the fire murmurs curses so tactfully muffled that I have no concrete excuse to reproach it. Only the kettle is open about the fact of my long last return, bawling her spout out above the suspicious silence and jingling like an alarm until I relieve her of her post and leave her panting on the counter.

I then turn around and carry the teacup to the table, to sit opposite the inspector, who is still, after all this time, staring at his lap and breathing at a regular pace.

After watching him for some time, I lean in suddenly, spilling a little tea into the saucer, but do not manage to catch him off guard. All is the same, and yet somehow different. I sit back in my chair and regard him. He is covered in dust, down even to the eyelashes that hide his downcast eyes. It is as if it has snowed inside the kitchen

in my absence, and he, statuesque, bears on his heaving shoulders the tinsel of time passed. Yes, this whole place is something of a snow globe and he is encased in it, subject to the same stagnant ageing as I. I warm my hands on the cup and can't help but smile, looking into it.

“Have you missed me?” I say, surprised to hear my voice dip into a lower tone, as if someone else is speaking, from somewhere else in the room. I turn around to look. When I turn back the inspector is still breathing with the exact same regularity. I sit there and stare sheepishly out of the window at the lake, where there used to be trees.

From then on I begin each morning with a cup of tea, across the table from the inspector, for whom I always serve black coffee which I watch grow cold. Whenever I lose concentration during these idle moments and start to daydream, I find my breath tends to synchronise itself to the rhythm of the inspector's. I don't want it to, but it is something that happens now and then. It feels like he is instructing my breathing, as in a guided meditation exercise. It is a nice sound we make, like a whispering choir.

And when I notice it happening I try to breath out of step and break free from this unison. I don't want to find myself permanently hypnotised one morning. That would be a pretty picture, wouldn't it. The two of us breathing there forever across the table from one another with our cold drinks. And yet I smile stupidly into my tea at the thought of somebody finding us there like that.

After breakfast, each day my first point of call is the glassboat, to make use of the daylight hours. For weeks however, I barely touch the boat, just sort of flutter around it anxiously with a book in my hands. It is now the height of summer, and the sun takes its time revelling at me sarcastically from all angles, as it travels across the sky. It's just something you have to learn to ignore.

Next, as the light begins to recede, I go to the sitting room to have a rest, maybe even a cigar. Maybe engage in a one-way discussion with the unresponsive hologram. Without heeding me or anybody, it flickers away openly with its dreams, in the dark room, although the voice, the spark, is not there. According to my books, it seems the one-way discussion I am conducting is going the wrong way. But it is a steady and delicate thing, this healing. I let it be, stifling the concern of a friend with an air of professionalism. When I leave the room, it is not without

looking back into the aperture of the door that I back away, until the cleft of light pouring in from the hall slowly narrows, then disappears, leaving the hologram doused in his own inner light.

The day ends in my study, bent over my desk mending tricky joints through a magnifying glass (loupe), pieces of the dog frequently slipping through my fingers and bouncing on the desktop. Around me I have created heaps of bones that adhere to each component of a dog body. He depends on me, I mutter to myself.

It is on such a night working in the study that I also reunite myself with my shadow since we separated at the forest periphery. He is lazily prostrated on the floor like an animal rug, staring, as if propped on an elbow, at the work I am doing. It makes him thoughtful, distant. The sight of bones is familiar to him. He sighs and sprawls out, yawning, on the floor, as if my absence caused him no unease, perhaps even as though my return bores him. And yet he is by my side almost every evening like this, acting aloof, and bored by my presence. I cast glances at him from time to time, but never say anything, even though I hope to ask a favour of him one of these days. That's right, I think. Keep your hands to yourself from now on. Don't go sticking them into other people's

properties and incriminating me. He rests his head on his arms glumly.

It is time to go to bed once my Sad Eyes sink so low they are getting in the way of my hands. “We want to go...” they say, deliberately getting tangled in my fingers.

The bedroom is a long way away. Past the corridor connecting the ballroom, smoking room, dining room, parlours, all decked with paintings of anonymous ancestors which I cannot name with such casual erudition as the forest could the founding pillars of his own realm. A buried kingdom, it is now.

Into the library and past its chilly marble columns. I run my hands along the spines of the books on my way to the other end; a habit of mine. Some combination of these books, some particular way of reading them in a particular order, like a combination lock, unlocks the idea of me.

Smoking Hades

Some consciousness stirs for a moment somewhere in the vast hallways of the house, where otherwise the silence of dawn presides. This happens before the first few pioneering shards of daylight have quite made it to the surface of the earth. But they are on their way, with an army at their tails, spearheading the eight-minute journey with the urgency of their message, which is clamped in their beaks.

All of a sudden I sit up in my enormous bed, expecting them. I have awoken to some instinct so slight so as to arouse in the twilight room a most auspicious feeling. I look around to see if anything is amiss. Yet, even the way in which everything; the armchair, the chandelier, the *commode*, sits in exactly the same place as before I fell asleep, is queer. Their sameness is unnerving when cast in the indigo shadow of a morning about to happen.

While I sit in my bed, waiting for the photons to arrive, I notice a burning sensation in my forearms, like spearmint rubbed into my skin. A rash, maybe? Although these kinds of things come largely in the form of petty

inconveniences, I feel glad of waking to small oddities like this. They are such troubles as those that wind up liberating you as you innovate a way of circumnavigating them. Awakening to some sort of ailment is after all not always so bad, and it can be rather exciting, like waking up a slightly different person, unburdened by defaults, to enjoy a period of newness until that too, acquires weight.

To recap: a girl-woman of a certain age sits alert in her bed-grave with tingling forearms, before the break of dawn, before news of light has yet reached her, though by god it is trying, and it is me that sits in the bed like that. And I leap, risen by some plume of courage, from the bed towards the window.

I am still in the air when they hit my skin, the fiery beaks of the first shards of light, and the sheet I tossed back is falling behind me like a great wing. And it is an instinct so slight you see, that helps me make these calculations, from my bed, to the windowsill, and the farewell wing drops to the floor in salute of the first rays of light, which, exhausted from their odyssey, touch down to the earth's surface in their innumerable ranks, only to reflect in an instant, and continue breathlessly on their next mission.

I watch the light messengers come and go. With each touch of ray a part of the world becomes known, and the veil of darkness eventually slips entirely off the earth, suggesting that shadows have a wetness about them.

And then, I remember my duties and forget about the light.

I question things less. The repetition of daily tasks, the devotion to hopeless projects, become an exhausting diversion that I welcome. I work more and notice less, seeking refuge from waking life in the jostle of my busying hands. And although I labour on with a fierce resolve, I admit that the direction my efforts are taking is not always obvious. After long hours spent outside mending the wrecked glassboat, there are times I stand back to take a look at the progress, only to find it has become another vehicle; a huge bicycle, even, at one time. Which obviously derails my plans, no end. Likewise, the reconstruction of the dog skeleton is difficult to prevent from beginning to resemble another species; whether existing or as yet uninvented. As for the hologram; he is still out cold, occasionally turning the sitting room into a cinema of incoherent *deja vu*'s.

Were it not for my stinging arms, which each morning burn more crimson with irritation, I would have surely worked myself to pieces by now, and perhaps also found myself, too, monstrously reconstrued. Instead, I am beginning to take more frequent breaks, and go into the library to cool my arms against the marble masonry for relief.

There I find old Hades, his face sculpted out of a panel of jade protruding from the mantelpiece over which he reigns, and whose fireplace he keeps forever cool. Like many deities depicted in relief, his eyebrows, nose, and hair all seem to be composed of the same ghostly stroke, as if conjured in smoke. And Hades is, in fact, smoking — quite often. His terrible mouth is carved out in an ‘O’ shape, and inside that ‘O’ is a real hole, black, and supposedly leading to the gut of the underworld. Out of it are now issuing wisps of something grey and shapeless, something pathetic, that rises and flees before daring to speak of itself. I know what they are. I am sitting on a banister, hugging a cold marble column as I perceive them. I’ve listened to their song before — they are the lost stories of the household. Hades smokes them, it is how he remembers.

He casts me a sideward glance. Like a very skilled smoker, he conjures a pretty accurate portrait of me with this grey matter. It is unmistakable, especially with the slingshot eyes. And seeing my portrait sends a thrill through my heart. I am catalogued in the household hum, the stories of the house. This is evidence that I can shed effects and leave historical sediment, that my gestures and decisions have consequence, that I matter, and that I shed matter. But the ephemeral picture of me in the rising smoke is doing something strange. She's sort of hunched over, hurting herself with strange enthusiasm.

"There's another one of you", says Hades. I look down at my arms. He means that somebody else, somebody that looks just like me, has been hurting me.

That night I use a trick I've read about which some scientists of sleep used in studies on themselves — to wake themselves in deep slumber and report on their mysterious states. So I go to sleep in my armchair with a small bowling ball in my hand, which hangs loosely over the armrest.

When I hear the bang and awake, I see it. I catch myself in the act of scratching angrily at my right arm. Then I see that I've seen myself doing it. Utterly baffled, I start

up, wide-eyed, and run away from myself, out of my body. I watch a foreign person, though she looks just like me and I share her mind, in fact, run out of the body in the armchair and far down the hall, I watch the stranger that has been hurting me run away, but not for good.

Drowning Twin

I am being visited unawares on so many occasions by this arm-scratching imp, and becoming so sore, that I have to stop working. The glassboat is threatening to become some sort of locomotive sledge. The dog skeleton is in more loose pieces than when I began the reconstruction. The hologram is scarcely seeing anything anymore, other than occasionally having visions of large, bright digits counting backwards to zero.

And one evening, unable to let my mind settle on a single thought thanks to the burns, I descend to the kitchen, and there I find I am not even in the mood to make any hot drinks to watch grow cold. I go to the inspector and daringly kneel beside him and lay my arms across his lap, which he is still staring at, in case they might then enter his purview and alarm him into waking up and helping me, or at least offering some words of pity. He does not stir, but calmly looks down at my arms, and breathes. And his breath, to my surprise, cycles in and out of him, and it breezes on my arms and somewhat cools them. So I stay there for a while, thinking.

But even this is not enough, and I step outside.

On this cool autumn night the water, barely distinguishable from the sky whose horizon was but a speculative graze in space, is very audible, until I realise it is lapping at the very porch steps of my castle. The shallow of the water has climbed up almost all the way to the walls, leaving no lawn for me to patrol.

The moon must always be tugging at us, weightlifting with the looser elements of the planet's terrain; but it takes something of the size of this body of water to notice how much it is trying to get our attention. The tide reaches right up to my feet and licks them coldly.

My home is tightly surrounded by a strangling moat of rising water, the grounds utterly disappeared, and the deformed glassboat bobbing precariously on it. I turn my head up towards the glinting coin in the sky. Triumphant, illuminated rock: the moon is large enough to intimidate, but small enough to have something to prove.

I walk down the flooded hill, into the water. When the water level rises above my head, and my clothes grow quite heavy, it is more like falling gracefully down the hill, taking great, effortless strides, and sinking. Somewhere down here, with a lot of pressure pressing on

my head now, I discover some several loci of what may be called hatred. They are little points scattered about the underwater world of the hill, like mines. And I discover them whenever I take a step over one of them and disturb something buried, and a flash of hate surges inside of me. The arm scratching imp that looks like me and shares my mind and hurts me now and again when I am not looking, is here with me now, and I have half a mind to drown her.

I wonder how and when it happened that I have become capable of hurtful sentiments, of wanting to hurt something, and to leave it behind me, indisposed. Hades has seen her at it, menacing my skin and treasuring the intense contradiction of it, of hurting herself badly. And this very well explains the contradicting forces that can brood in a mind and cause the brain to ache sharply; when thoughts become unmovable, pushing against one another in equal and opposite directions, and blacken the soul; a certain hatefulness can be born of this and this was what I am now feeling. A contradiction between wanting to live — to champion the virility of disorder, and wanting to give up — to rest forever more, at the expense of a world settled into total uniformity.

These are the sorts of things that are at stake: the cooling of the universe versus its kindling, as two girl-woman figures with pained eyes battle underwater. One is impish and fatalistic, the other messianic and scrupulous, and they wrestle to the death as I clamber on down the hill.

In the distance is the same forest I approached by the same route so long ago, though rendered now in a swaying underwater tint that slows down the traffic of moving branches and floating creatures, many of whom spin lifelessly and trundle through avenues high amongst the treetops where they don't belong. Foxes, mice, squirrels and voles float past each other without threat and with much egalitarian courtesy, for in death there are no food chains.

My Sad Eyes, my curse, and also my guiding lanterns in the dark abyss of a flooded world, float before me and drew me metres below the surface, where my head suffers the weight of the waterstuff above me. I reach the place that demarcates the end of my territory, the outskirts of the forest land whose name must by now live only by rumour, and sit down there, cross legged, waiting for the pressure to kill one of us.

Kiss of Life

I am dangerously breathless when I stagger into the kitchen in the late night or early morning, hoarsely gasping for air with my lungs dilating wildly in my breast like torn butterfly wings. I stumble with my foot caught inside a bucket and my arm flings out to wipe the counter tops clean of their ceramic occupants, some of which break to pieces on the floor.

I seem unable to kickstart the breathing process, too long have I spent in meditation at the bottom of the flooded hill, trying to drown my parasitic look-alike by nearly exterminating the both of us. And grasping at the air around me with my flailing arms, I know in my sheer panic that I can make no use of it with deflated lungs. Time is rapidly running out. As a last resort, I collapse onto the inspector and put my lips to his.

In, and out. He is breathing with the same regularity as ever, sighing softly, over and over. And, as the slightest waft of a fan can sometimes restore a flame, so do his calm breaths stir me with the kiss of life. My eyes bloom

upwards, which, welling up with tears of gratitude towards my indifferent saviour, seem to cloud all shame.

I break free from his lips and slump over his shoulder, one hand tightly gripping his coat in a painful scrunch, the other hooked over his neck as if clinging to a life buoy. I breathe heavily, desperately; the sound I make is dreadful and coarse but is also strangely operatic in a room whose noiselessness it breaks with a rasping vengeance.

I sob into the inspector's ear, my crying interrupted periodically by deep retrievals of harsh breath. His collar grows wet with my tears, which my Sad Eyes produce in prolific quantities as if only now realising their sworn purpose. I cry like an infant and draw breath like a dying crone; and the inspector, cool pacifier, bears me with warm *toleration*, without judgement, maintaining his own rhythm without trouble. An undeniable strength radiates from him, and I realise with some incredulity that he is warm.

I hyperventilate for a long time, until I begin to wonder whether this is just how I will breathe from now on, whether it will never go back to normal. The inspector's chest heaves gently under my shuddering body. I feel

sure he is listening, like a stethoscope, with medical precision. I let him temper my breath, teach me his patience and assimilate me into his contagious regularity. I do it through heavy tears of acceptance, permitting myself to become someone else's responsibility with the effort of surrender. Ma... ma... ma, I start gurgling stupidly, melodramatically, indulgently, tightening my grip on the wet wool coat. He listens to that too. Hearing myself makes me sadder, and the dust from the inspector's hair mixes with my eyewater to create unsightly grey clots on my face and hand.

You're warm, is the first thing I say when, after a long time, my breath settles into the low glottal growl of a congested cat. I don't mention the softness of his lips, which also surprised me, and I do not mention what seems to me the unique character of his nose-mouth area, which exhumes a delicate and comforting quality of something which can only be described as an inextricable fusion of smell and heat, and which disappeared in an instant when I drew away from him and slowly conveyed myself to the seat opposite. He is still looking down at his lap at his hands. I have seen him like this many times, but now he looks altogether

different. Younger, actually. Maybe this long holiday from official business has done him good.

I look at my own hands, which have aged. I wonder whether he has noticed, and whether that fact matters to him or changes the way he thinks about me. Would you possibly know what it's like? I ask him. Would you know what it's like to go in circles and expend life-force and get no signs of affirmation in response, no clue whatsoever, that you have acted virtuously, that you have been noble — that you've even really 'been' anything? I swear to you, I am alive. I feel it every moment I am awake, even though my conviction is the only proof of it I have. That's what's frustrating about all this. It's unprovable, and yet unmistakable. It's both far-fetched and banal. Is that what you're sighing about all the time? I pause to catch my breath, tempering the husky notes.

The inspector allows me to speak, politely refraining from tidying himself up or dabbing at his wet shoulder. He is dishevelled from my having flung myself at him, but continues to listen with calm stoicism. Everything seems to be falling apart, I tell him, and there's no one to pick up the pieces but me. I've got to keep stoking a fire that is always on the verge of a lazy suicide. I'm tired of the work.

With my elbow on the table, I let my forehead rest on my palm and partially cover one eye. I consider the merciful concession of opting not to see, of turning inward to the dark place I dwelt in before I was born, when there was no me, and thus nothing to toil over preserving. And for what have I toiled? My life's accrued adventures are a string of happenstance, plotless events which always tempt me with purpose. Time passes. The kitchen holds us both in its company in the manner of a stupidly happy host.

Outside of the kitchen window, the lake trembles with a light murmur across its surface. I watch how the scene fits into the four squares of the kitchen window frame like a sliding puzzle, and think about the supple texture of the inspector's cheek. I wonder whether there is a way to relieve him from obsolescence, a trick of words that could charge him with a new mission. If there is, I will never find it. How am I to know that I will not myself one day run out of time and freeze into a moving picture, like he, or like the lake outside? Maybe then some observer will be able to come up close to me and examine me without obstacle from any angle or proximity, draw theories and judgements about me when

I will no longer be in a position to defend my case, and wonder at my strange likeness to the living.

I don't think there's much difference between you and I after all, Inspector, I say to him through a curtain of hanging hair. I've overestimated myself and underestimated you. And now I think I have little choice but to give in to the ecology of time and matter.

I'll tell you what, I tell him, let's play a game. To pass the time, as inmates do. I labour to turn towards him and then explain the rules. It's a variation on a roulette game. We sit here until one of us blacks out. The one that blacks out first, loses. Upon hearing no objections, I lean back in my chair and admire the patience that hangs between us like that of a cabin hut card game. His exemplary serenity has me almost fooled on two occasions, but his eyes are still trained on his lap and he makes no sign of falling asleep. I should have known whom I was up against. The inspector turns out to be very good at the game, a cool player indeed. I pass the afternoon across the table from him in considerable discomfort; disconcerted that I do not feel in the least drowsy. The ordeal has made me painfully alert, yet I am going to lose, there is no longer any doubt about it. My demise will come upon me swift, like a guillotine which

I cannot see and which is administered by somebody unknown.

Reclaiming the Pen

I awake to a new activity. My gaze is fixed on my busy-body hands, which are at this moment engaged in some frenzied manipulation of yarn; a type of knitting, or crochet, I don't know what — and I toss the handiwork from me in frustration; needles, yarn and all.

I stand up and walk towards the sitting room window. The autumn scene helps draw out my melancholy and darkly soothe the disagreeableness of waking up to find myself in some vigorous, alien activity. I do not have any interest in knitting whatsoever — which is not to demean the art in itself, I mean simply to say that I have not as yet found myself drawn to it — and I am finding that the default starting positions in which I find myself at the beginning of each episode prove to be most arbitrary, as if arranged without my prior consent. Exasperated, I leave the room in search of an activity of my own bidding.

I stumble through a series of useless rooms; closets, antechambers, rooms designed for nothing other than awaiting audience, and when I reach the study I slam the

door behind me as if these were the only trusted quarters on the entire premises. There I find some comfort, in things which feel as though they are mine, and in the space which seems plumped out by my own shape, like the impress left on a pillow after a sleep. I believe this room possesses a great deal less hostility than the rest of the house, and that I am under less surveillance here.

I sit down at the desk. The smell of the empty sheets of paper on the desk seem to speak to me, and necessitate my arm to move across the surface, take up a pen and write. I begin writing a letter in someone else's handwriting. It is dated in the top right hand corner with the digits (32):

My friend,

Allow me to make an incision into the fibres of this very sheet of paper, and through the tear make you a small offer: to trade in my time for your own.

I've been getting myself into trouble with thoughts of the end. You know how these things are. Depressing. I must confess I spend a great deal of my days agonising about you, wondering, first and foremost, why the world you

inhabit has by now still failed to inflate, for it is much like a faulty parachute and merely flops about you as the whole affair drops into free fall. What do you make of it? I await with much interest your next move.

I lift my head. The letter is interrupted by a thumping noise, like a loud tap against a hollow object, coming from the deepest bowels of the house. It's (the house) probably processing some sort of domestic detritus, though it is a slow digestion; each thump muted and separated by a long silence.

I return my attention back to the letter. Taking advantage of the lull in the writing, I quickly reclaim the pen and decide to write a reply, in my own handwriting. Since it is already dated, I merely begin directly underneath the end of the text.

Yes, well, look here;-

(I am not as eloquent as my correspondent and fumble in surprised appreciation of sheer spelling).

It's all very well and good that you can just 'pop' in and say hello like that, in my hand, in my house; but then to call it a faulty parachute? Isn't that a little harsh? This

place is old, older than both of us, and you can't find anything other to do than to complain about its lack of vitality!

Clearly, you're bothered about the way things work here. The massive holes, the episodic disorientation, the imprecise delineations between this and that object. The fact is, the house is horribly forgetful and is simply incapable of managing its own history. Large quantities of it have disappeared for good. It is better to be honest about what's really here than to continually try to artificially fill in the gaps.

I turn from the page for a moment and look out at the landscape. It's hard to defend the things you love, because loving them doesn't help you deny their faults. Even now, half of the ceiling is utterly devoid of description. How am I to account for this when it's not something I condone, nor something I entirely understand? The void in the ceiling is not something we can name, like 'emptiness'; it's not merely an open roof. It doesn't suddenly get chilly in here when you notice half the ceiling's unrendered. *That* we could easily fix, by either fetching a blanket or some construction materials. It's more evasive than that. If you don't pay

attention to it, it will just go back to being a normal room, securely cuboid.

It's when you start to interrogate things, with a mind of piecing it all together; that's when the blatant inconsistencies emerge and brood over you like sporadic sore thumbs. When you start believing that it must all fit into a seamless whole, the reality of the situation jars against your model of it. You get frustrated, because the order of things — almost fitting but not fitting your reasonable model — seems irrational. It would then seem that something is actually quite seriously wrong with the world, as if it suffered some insidious malady. You may then be tempted to remedy it, and patch it up. I can understand that position. After all, why settle with a world whose god suffers, and reflects his suffering in his works? Better to take the burden of worldmaking from him and apply correctives to the reckless fruits of his imagination. Perhaps it's doable. Perhaps, like other rules, the ones that govern time and motion in this place are written down somewhere, and can be carefully amended. And maybe the god would be happier, ruminating in empty-handed pleasure of his idleness in some corner.

But is it really so simple, that the spectrum running from smoothness to disjointedness were but one of the hues on a world designer's palette? Are my correspondent and I arguing over matters of taste, or matters of survival?

I tap my pen thoughtfully on the page. The edge of my desk protrudes outward moments from where I am sitting, the Persian carpet underneath me plush and comforting, but that too, is not rendered in full. A gulf of indeterminacy separates my desk space and the patch of labyrinthine carpet directly beneath it from the window at the far end of the study. The rendering of the room is so partial that my chair seems to float in space, like an island surrounded by an absent sea. I reach down to the small patch of carpet under the visible edge of the desk and carefully pick up one of the knitting needles, which seem to have rolled here all the way from the sitting room. Holding the needle, I contemplate the exemptions from space around me — a veritable swamp of ambiguity — and decide I will touch one of them with the head of the needle. Perhaps I will be able to stimulate it into description, a bit like wafting away obscuring clouds.

I edge my needle carefully towards the undescribed section where the floor ought to be, and as I attempt to

‘push it in’, that is, into the hole in space, I find my urge to impale the ambiguous zone unsated; for I find that there is no ‘in’ in that direction. The luxuries of the ‘inward’ dimension are not to be enjoyed ‘in’ the nondescript zone. I suppose you think I hit a ‘wall’ of some kind, as I reach to push the needle into the hole (and ‘hole’ is itself such an impoverished term for it). No, that’s not the case. I do not feel the slightest resistance as I lunge forwards with my weapon. There’s give. But I certainly am not going ‘in’ either. I can easily move in the direction of the void, but I am not allowed entry, for there is nothing *to* enter, nor encroach upon, in that region. But I force onward with my needle, insisting that there be something to probe — some way of acquainting myself with the stubborn nothingness, certain that it must have some character worthy of apprehension.

All at once I feel a furious sting somewhere in the left hemisphere of my brain, as if a single neuron buried there were in the throes of downing the last of some hard whisky. I drop the needle, which promptly rolls out of description, and clutch the left side of my face in the hopeless manner people do when they get soap in their eyes. My right eye retina is utterly infuriated with me.

“What!” It says. “Must you really capitalise on every micron of real estate!”

It is referring to my blind spot, the source of my pain; a big blob on the canvas of my sight which is, I am sure, another design feature worth critiquing at length. I suppose my urge to have the house reveal itself to me is reflected in a wider yearning to have everything made visible, with no stone left unturned. But even my seeing apparatus denies itself that comprehensive pleasure. My retina vehemently guards its blind spot, which is no nobler a vocation than guarding a stain on a tablecloth.

“Let up,” I tell my retina, “we needs must repair this embarrassing blot, right away.”

“You let up,” replies my retina, “I’ve told you before, the central infrastructure of everything we do here is located there. If your lust for clarity leads you to sever that, you’ll go totally blind. Your eyeball will be like an empty cinema playing films forever, with nobody there to watch.”

“Yeah, well. It’s not exactly a ‘ball’ anyway, is it?”

“That’s not my problem. All I can do for you is put you on hold and connect you to someone else.”

That's how it is with these specialised organs. All they care about are their own little responsibilities, and that always helps them win an argument like this — they say they can't speak for the bigger picture, because they won't accept liability for anything that goes wrong beyond their jurisdiction. What that then means is, that the communication between your various different organs are longwinded, bureaucratic affairs that take totally unnecessary loops and turns before you finally—

“Hello, this is the central nervous system speaking. How may I help you?”

“Oh, it's you now. Look, I didn't really request this call in the first place, so this is all a bit awkward. I'm just trying to write a letter here. Can you tell me why the episode has changed so profoundly? Why I am forced to confront my own physiognomy, et cetera?”

The operator seems to hesitate on the other line before replying, “I am sorry, sir. I'm just an operator. I can put you through to someone else if you like?”

I groan and look out of the window again. Lags everywhere. Not only in the house's architecture, but in my own. I pick up the pen again and tap on the

parchment. Does anyone really know what's going on here?

I raise my head from the page and the room is once again intact. Four walls, a floor, a ceiling. The fire crackles audibly in the fireplace. Without having the faintest clue what to say in defence of my house, I put the pen to paper, directly where I left off and write:

Sometimes I think it viable to take an indifferent stance towards the insanity of space. To just overlook the disjoints. I could, of course, interrogate the frantic substratum from which I emerge; the atomic vice of fainting particles and revisionary physics. But to mark each microscopic tick in the turning of events is a laborious occupation — one which I am not too lazy to take on, but rather suspect to be a distraction. I find it more tempting to render myself blind to its fizzing and transcend above it. Here, on this plane, I have a different point of view. I realise it is possible to glide in spite of my bumpy foundations. When I take the world for granted — that is what it means to thrive.

I pause, thinking that I might stand a better chance of converting my correspondent if I endeavour to believe

my own words. Fibbing is sorely inefficient without some modicum of verity to fuel it.

I will concede, there is some faint truth in what I write. I recall moments where I seem to forget the dysfunctional underpinnings of my surrounds, only to find in my carelessness a certain stunning smoothness overcome me — as if the inelegance of the miniature fragments that composed me did not necessarily transfer their qualities upwards. I call these ‘moments of soaring’, because once the mind is first freed from its physical ancestry, all at once it seems to know no bound.

Something always happens though, to ground me firmly once again in the particularates of my being, and have me reckon with their unreasonable economies. The essential faultiness of the world creeps up again and threatens to take me with it, into its own destruction. I am not entirely independent of its summons, no matter how faithfully I discipline my spirit. My moments of soaring are fragile opportunities.

My head grows heavy with some low-hanging, solemn fog accumulating inside of it, as it is wont to do in such prolonged passages of reflection as these. With my spirit rapidly flickering out of sight, and the darkness I know

so well closing in again, I attempt to fit in a final parry of the pen before resigning myself from this most unhelpful correspondence. I write:

There are different kinds of flourishing. Where one kind is favoured, others wither. How can you be certain that nothing flourishes here?

I release myself from the burden of writing, and sit back in my chair. The close of an episode used to be so abrupt, I think to myself. It could occur mid-thought. Nowadays I almost manage to glimpse a certain fading in which I can, in part, witness my own disappearance. I watch patiently from my chair as the lids of the episode close over my person and douse my relenting will.

Falling in love with a problem

The pen is still in my hand when the eaves of my consciousness seem just about visible over my eyebrows, and my Sad Eyes slowly reel themselves in from their languid prostration over my arm on the desk, atop of which I have been asleep.

I am still in the study. The air is cooler and the light a little brighter, but the room itself is mostly unchanged. I have not been displaced in the slightest throughout the course of the intervening blackout, nor have I been ascribed a novel activity upon waking. I think it possible that I have been left entirely alone.

It's just as well. I could use a moment. I've noticed threads of myself unravelling lately, it could be the stress. Trying to keep up with impossible tasks, who ever dreamed of the Sisyphean ideal? Work that ever replenishes itself and keeps one busy; therapeutic? Not for me. At first it was. Tinkering the bones of the little dog held the possibility of revival, but ultimately only deferred the fact that nothing can bring him back to life. And when finally that fact has made itself apparent, I

don't know what to do with it. I wore that body. I was there until the very end — as the warmth left him, as his skin and meat melted away and dried up, dispersed into so many microscopic spores of dog and scattered into the air over time, or scattered amongst the bellies of nourished microbes, and, through their farts, into the air again, such that I have not only worn him, but breathed the living dog out of him.

Whenever, in my attempts to repair him, I lose my patience slightly such that he falls apart in my unsteady hands, my own skeleton too seems to tumble apart within my sealed skin. Yet as the clear picture of him fades from my memory, I find I am unable to embody him quite like I used to. Aspects of him seem permanently erased, try as I might to find faint resonances hidden out here in the fabric of the enduring world. And such character, as that once harboured by the dog, seems so scarce these days, that coming across a trace of him would make an exceptionally valuable encounter. As his, and other traces fade from view, slower than footprints in the melting snow, I wonder if anything about him will be spared, or if all of it must dissipate irretrievably. Here in the study, I have tried to do something about it. But the value of my own contribution to that project has not turned out to be

very promising. Too much unravelling has taken place for progress to mean quite the same thing anymore.

A dwindling moment ticks by. I am unaccustomed to being left to my own devices, without even a single irksome thing about to beckon me to attend to it. I have many a time wished to be left alone, just like this, and have anticipated, on equally as many occasions, the splendid relief it would bring. Now, I am not so sure I welcome this sudden spaciousness of mind, calling upon itself a series of introspections I am not very eager to have. A moment passed in my own company is rather difficult to endure.

My eyes wander over the scene before me in search of a distraction, only to settle on the coals at the far end of the room, now abandoned by the fire, which has long since expired. The black lumps seem colder than ice, as if being detained from their incendiary task has caused them to languish all the more in frozen stillness. Lying heaped on one another in their own charcoal graveyard, they imbue me with a strange desire to visit upon them.

I rise from the table and cross the carpet to approach them, but this seems to have a diminishing effect on me; I feel smaller by the time I get to the cold rim of the

hearth, and closer to the ground as well. But my proximity to the coals begins to arouse me to a certain affinity with them; perhaps also a willingness to become part of their sooty landscape, a dusty body lost in a timeless expanse.

The idea of joining the coals in a single, self-abandoning leap enters my mind with a certain pleasant shock, and, although morbid in outlook, like any new idea it serves me a small measure of contentment. The coals extend, I suppose, a pleasurable ideal of negation, as if extinguishing myself in their midsts might mark the possibility of utmost peace. But even this torpid hope comes undone with the wicked truth that, as an aspiration, it has already been achieved. There really isn't anything for me to strive for, not even death; if not by definition, then in practice — for if there's no one around to do the dying for me, I surely do not have the energy for it. Regardless, the timeless stillness of the coals' withered surfaces brings about a soothing silence.

I used to find it most intriguing, that even though I have never learnt nor had the opportunity to tell the time, that by virtue of being a moving, self-contained entity (much like a counter piece on a board game), I was nonetheless absolutely subject to it, and could intuit its passing very

intimately. I used to think that, even without the presence of time-telling instruments in the house, my own mechanism, the mechanism that makes me, kept time. The very fact that I have a frame of reference, I thought, meant that I was separate to other things — differentiated — and that time had to get here, to me, making it come into definition as it did so. Where there is difference, there is always something keeping time.

But I am becoming increasingly troubled on this point. After all, I'm not quite sure what distinguishes me from the heap of dog bones on my table, or the comatose hologram in my sitting room. All of us are unravelling. Coming undone. There are, I concede, many ways to describe what we are at present, what we constitute collectively; but the number of those descriptions are waning, and soon the lot of us will be adequately expressed simply as a quantity. That number, unambiguously stated, will summarise, in a breath, our entire identity, and there will be no need for vectors, for differential gradients, to characterise the subtler textures of our being; which have known to pulse, like the massaging sensation of the gentle ebb and flow of blood in my gums. I fear I am beginning to lose these circular motions: the crests and troughs, the rises and falls, and

the undulations that characterise the humours that make life a composition of rhythms. Like rubbing your belly and patting your head at the same time, such circular motions unsynchronise themselves, go rogue like two ill-fitted cogs, and diverge in entrepreneurial search of new stabilities. That is the life-rhythm, and I confess I have grown fond of its deviance. I have marvelled at its radicalism, its power to supersede all probability by irreverently inscribing the terms of a new game, a new ambition, a new purpose, right on top of the old one. I have admired the life-rhythm like nothing else. So when I say I have been having thoughts of forsaking it all, of letting myself go to the coals, I'm not saying I'm not *rooting* for difference — only that I can't be of any help to its cause. And that's because I don't make a difference.

I fiddle with the metal grating of the hearth, thinking. The dust of the charcoal comes off onto my fingers easily, a gentle invitation into their indiscriminating ranks. As if emboldened by their soothing call, all at once my fingers begin to splinter at the tips, and to unravel, and flop into a tassel of strings, uncoiling from each other like a drawing coming undone, to then lie limply over the coals.

I turn to look at the room behind me and see that indeed the other parts of me are strewn across the carpet in a bunch of cords forming long tangles all the way from the chair. I do not recognise these cords as myself as such; they have lost the depth of character once maintained by the figure of my legs and feet, my belly and chest. Yet the cords are attached to me, leading up to my present predicament in the manner of skipping ropes dragged across the floor, only to end up at my elbow, upon which I am propped, and which is itself presently loosening, causing my head to slowly sink to the floor.

I'm actually not too surprised to see myself unravelling so extensively in this way, as there have been tell tale signs of it for some time. Some hair loss, a spell of 'floppy arm', and most unsettling of all, a severer-than-usual case of absent-mindedness, which has caused me to make more frequent mistakes when fixing the boat, the dog and the hologram, to the point that I have by now given up on all three. Besides, I can recall feeling like this before: it happened to me in the forest and I thought it was nostalgia. This feeling, if it can be called that, is, I imagine, shared by others in similar predicaments, such as:

- An instrument that is not being played.

- A voice that is not speaking.
- A line that has not been drawn.
- A gravitational field that knows no mass, without which it cannot know itself.
- An electromagnetic field devoid of any light, which constitutes neither a dark nor lit space, but merely colourless; a disused dimension.

To be sure, there is a sentimental quality to these kinds of circumstances. But I can't be suffering from nostalgia proper if this unravelling is happening to me at home.

I deflate slowly to the floor. The muscles of my body have relaxed profoundly. I lose form. The colour appears to have left my skin. Actually, there doesn't seem to be any skin at all. There is only encapsulation. I am only encapsulation.

A neurotic buzz, like the high-pitch hum of a chainsaw ripping idly through the air and never actually meeting a branch or other worthy adversary, bores through my mind as I lie strewn across the carpet in a series of messy braids. Had I been supplied, at this moment, with adequately sensitive features, I realise I would be in a state of fairly grave suffering. But the nature of my

suffering is duly muffled, the only real pain derived from the faint knowledge of the existence of a more whole and invested, yet utterly inaccessible response to my own conditions for sadness. I can't rally up the ingredients for feeling sad, for even tears require access to a set of resources.

Is this my essence? Have I been stripped of story and circumstance and all other environmental influences down to the bare bones of my existence, which indeed, contain not even bones? When I first sat by the window in the library, on that rainy afternoon, gazing out at the rain, what was it then, that I saw emerging from the distance? Was it me I saw, floating towards the house? The scene accosts me again in a flash of the past. I see myself, a tepid rag devoid of rhyme or reason, arriving on a current of air, rushing in through the window as if mad with inspiration, and incarnating the form I have habitually assumed. Is it possible that I never was afflicted with containment, or a separation from the world, but that I *was* the thing that contained? Once drained of qualities, all that's left is me, encapsulation, but a loose coil of strings, and the very thoughts I am now having are then felt as tiny tremors — a series of murmurations making their way up and down my strings

— the thoughts themselves only the traces of a fading influence.

Across the stretch of my unravelling form, the coils of string repel each other a little, and like rinsed spaghetti, loosen from each other, unwinding further. What at first seemed like a plethora of laces wound into intricate lattices slowly reveals itself to be one, single lace. Could my essence be any simpler — a line? That's it?

That's it, I think to myself. Appropriate, really, for someone who has had little impact on the surroundings; someone who really doesn't make much of a difference. For this is what I am without pretence, freed of the effort required to maintain false appearances. This is what I am when there is nothing left to ape, when my performance has ended, when I remove my disguise. With my manner no longer affected, my voice no longer an impaired mimicry, and with my borrowed face cast aside, this is what I am: a line, a shape with no qualities, a being of pure potential.

I sink into my linear essence, unburdened by the qualities I have held most dear, yet which I cannot claim, for they are not mine. My dimensionality has devolved to a state of minimal strain.

But is it easier now? With all my knots untied, with all my features pruned away to reveal the tawdry slither of my true form; am I relieved to have at least found myself, at last, stripped free of the riches I have illegitimately inherited? It makes sense that I should be nothing more than a line. Of geometric origin, born with an aspirational streak and a disdain for the inert place from which I have issued. Yes, I can acknowledge the simple naturalness of it. But for goodness sake, why is it, then, that I do not feel at all like *myself*?

Whatever. I'm done ruminating over puzzles. It is my curse to have the self-determining potential of a stone and the self-reflective capacity of a philosopher. Hand me over to the coals, let me adopt their physiognomy, and their spiritual competency too.

I pass the afternoon without a further thought, until, coming from somewhere in the house, a distinctive sound enters the periphery of my attention. It is a long scraping, followed by an ungainly thud. Certain aspects of the phenomenon repeat and mutate. Between irregular, wholly unmusical intervals of scraping, the thud comes always a fraction before or after it is expected, in the

manner of some unskilful cleaning taking place. The sounds are coming from somewhere below.

Although the sounds seem to come from a relative distance of at least several rooms away, they seem to resonate as if both the sound source and I were submerged underwater, and if, by this analogy, the sound came from the darker depths of the water, it would be dragging me down with it. It has a tugging quality; it tugs at the memory.

For a while the sounds stop, causing the bundle of knots where my head used to be to crane forward and betray my axis of interest. Shortly, the silence is followed by the sound of a heavy object thudding onto the ground; not shattering, but rolling heavily to rest.

I managed to stop thinking for almost the entire afternoon, but the sound's tugging quality forces my mind into operation again. Perhaps it achieves this purely by being vexatious. But then how clumsily inconsistent of me, to heed the feeling of irritation, to desire peace and quiet, when I have renounced life and all the struggle for comfort that requires?

The sounds continue, divulging no care for my integrity: Scrape scrape scrape... —*thud*. Scrape —*thud*. Scrape... scrape —*thud*. I begin, half-heartedly, to reason again.

I think about the kinds of things that could produce such a sound in an old house like this. In my mind I draw up a cross section of the estate: an incoherent jumble of levels and flooring, corridors and alcoves, and invisible vascular networks of piping and nested insulatory padding. I subject my blueprint to further dissections, slicing through the pipes to reveal their canals and cross sections, their valves and gauges. I let the fluids pass through, heated, cooled, pumped, drained. Then I pick apart the networks searching for any source of disturbance; an air pocket, a trapped leaf, a petrified bat, a clogged canal or overpressured gauge thumping in frustration.

At long last I begin to puzzle over it in earnest. Although my personal lexicon of sounds has grown vast over the course of an extensive career in house listening, I do not seem to possess a remotely plausible shape with which to even begin formulating the nature of this sound. It simply doesn't match anything I've heard before. I have no phrasing for it, depriving me in turn, of a means of reflecting upon it.

I listen in more keenly to the noises from downstairs, subject to an unexpected curdling within what was, until a moment ago, a well of spent curiosity. As I pay deeper attention to the disorderly rhythms, the strings of my being sprawled out over the carpet begin to pack themselves in on each other again, as if somehow this gawky noise coming from downstairs constituted a remedy for my unravelment. That is doubtful, it seems hardly healthy as a sound, harbouring itself something of a sickly constitution; yet here the threads of myself gather in concentration, like a mess of yarn slowly reeling itself back into a ball, or an enchanted cobra rising to the occasion.

I don't want to rise to the occasion, but such is the power of character; and this sound, however sickly in spirit, has character.

The line on the floor, my true body, gathers, snaking its way over the carpet, and forms knots which clot together in globules of joint, tissue and hair. I am already upright, a vaguely sketched person, standing at the threshold of the staircase outside the study and peering inquiringly over the banister, when the *problem* posed by the sounds, if not their origin, begins to take a certain shape in my mind.

The shape of the problem is an extrapolation of the most puzzling features of the sounds I am hearing. I close my eyes (or whatever is currently drawn on my face) and mutter to myself as if tracing the ambling graphemes of choreographic notation: quick, quick, slow... quick, quick, slow... but I fall out of step with the rhythm after only two counts, and the pattern of the sounds has lost me again in favour of a new combination. Very subtly, by increments, the collection of erratic sounds, phrased as a precise problem in my consciousness, captures my concerns entirely.

I descend the stairs. A simple necessity, like a capable breeze, coasts me along the tiled kitchen floor, and glides unerringly over the chasm of space that separates me from the inscrutable object of my attention. Here, with my hand on the wall to guide me, still frayed at the fingers, I watch the problem permute in my mind. It tames any trace of my own bodily effects to the softest quiet, subduing me until I only hear the problem.

In part, the problem is characterised by a special case of predictability: the sound's patterning is vaguely apprehendable, but ultimately impossible to master. This is partly due to the fact that it seems to learn from

preceding iterations of itself, and endeavours to improve itself.

The problem is also characterised by the unusual locality of the sound, which does not reverberate in space quite as I would expect it to. Although I sense I am ‘coming closer’ to the scrape-*thud* (it is growing clearer and louder as I progress down the hall), I don’t quite get the satisfaction of the sense of *approach*. Strangely, the sound seems to operate at once remotely and intimately; at times I am fooled into thinking it is issuing from right beside me, only to hear it resound in the distance again.

Finally, it is that tugging quality. The sound has gravity, as if it were not only the haptic consequence of some trivial disturbance, but a form of speech.

These three components combined, the slippery predictability, the moving locale, and the sickly but thoughtful quality of the sound, transfigures the shape of the problem as I see it in my mind until it takes on the avatar of a dung beetle. As I listen to the morphing sound, and as I am drawn nearer to the end of the hall, I envisage the dung beetle creeping up and down his hill, hopelessly at his work, singing songs lamenting the way the other animals call him stupid:

*I am but a poor, stupid beetle
King of the randomising walk
No one sees my labour of love
They make it a laughing stock.*

*I am but a poor, stupid beetle
Wasting myself away
I can't let go of my burdens
Hoping my devotion will pay off someday.*

*I am but a poor, stupid beetle
Who tries, tries, tries again
And for whom all the pleasures of the world around
A distant dream will remain.*

*I am but a poor, stupid beetle
Seat of a soul who lives only to repent
The other animals gossip over the dirt in my claws
Never noticing the transformation it underwent.*

*I am but a poor, stupid beetle
They make an example of me
But just how stupid can the stupid works of a beetle be?
Only in good time, will we be able to see.*

(needs editing)

I hear no singing whatsoever, but this is the best interpretation of the sound's patterns that my mind, unequipped with any dictionary to apprehend the language of scrape-*thud*, can muster. And as engulfed as my consciousness is in the character of this inharmonious music, my empathetic inclinations are driven to the point of giving it a little head and six legs, and a singing mouth. This is how the character of the sounds appears to me then, and even then I know it is but a childish confabulation; that still I am not capable off apprehending the depth of the thing that makes these sounds, as a whole. Whatever colours my imagination gives to the scraping, thudding sounds, something about them consistently remains hidden from my understanding.

As I reach the end of the hall before the entrance to the cellar, I notice strings of myself scattered about the place: littering the floor, peeping out of lamps, or stuck in the crevice of the closed cellar door. The depth of my curiosity summons them to rejoin my girl-woman shape; they wriggle out of paralysis and sidle up to me, adding detail and depth to my rendering. Here, from within the cellar door, the scrapes and thuds resound stronger

through the air, and seem to cause my whole body to tremor slightly in absorption of its rhythms.

But these are not only sounds, I realise, nodding slightly in spite of myself, with one hand upon the iron handle, and the other on the surface of the door to the cellar, poised to knock. A foolish thing, I grant, to knock for permission to enter places in my own home, but I suppose it is a kind of profound respect for the problem, that, even though it were not sentient, required prefacing with a reverent signal of approach.

The door breaks open generously and I spill into its darkness. I feel about me, but not a stone step is out of place, each leading coldly onto the next within the vast underground space. A sudden silence bleeds into my ears, and brings with it a weighty emptiness, as if the quality of air down here were heavier than upstairs, and laden with something damp. My eyes accustom slowly to the low light.

The cellar is not a place I have ever taken particular interest in. I suppose it resembles me too much. Bits and pieces of things that used to be useful lie entombed down here. Rusty wheels and pots of crystallised liquids give off complex chemical scents that toy with the more

earthy fragrances of damp decay. Even so, it seems a lot has been going on down here that I have not been very well aware of, albeit altogether more glacial in pace: slow cooking, fermenting, painstaking changes of state. The gooey substances oozing from the seams of the welded tin sheets have likely taken an age to assume that particular shade of amber. A sparkling, white fungus forms icy crusts on the cool mortar, making the walls seem like they are laced in sugar. The cellar is home to an ecosystem that thrives on decay, an afterlife for the obsolete. Nothing that grows here is truly alive, though it is teeming.

It takes me aback a bit. It is a deceptively slow process, but the unconscious machinations of the cellar's numerous primitive inhabitants seem to form a great deal busier and more ambitious an array of projects than what I and the world about me have been contented with above ground. Pacing amongst the motionless midsts of these alien, microbial populations is like taking a stroll in someone's dream; they form wistful constructions bent on transcending the laws on which they might otherwise depend, taking great risks in that desolate pursuit.

I have not heard the scraping sounds since knocking on the cellar door. Now left only with an outline of the

problem they posed for me in my mind, I sit on the bottom step of the cellar to ponder it, but find that from here I can gaze upon the weird intelligence of the hybrid crystalline architectures adorning the subterranean landscape of the cellar, which presents itself to me now, under the waning blue light of the narrow windows at the top of the room, as strangely beautiful.

A surprising thing then happens. Here, of all places, in the damp grotto of fermenting matter, in the garden of neglect, do I find myself in possession of a homely familiarity and a desire to be nowhere else but here. Did I leave something down here once? It feels like it has returned to me, whatever it is; maybe a memory I dropped down here a while ago. In any case, I begin to think that perhaps it does resemble me, this place, in some damp, mineral sense. That earthy smell is probably what I smell like. I have become indifferent to the cold, reluctant to quit it, even.

Before long, the light has grown bare, and a creeping moroseness settles over me again; I think of the coals. I think of falling into an eternal sleep on the bottom step of the cellar. As I lie down, and my head releases its lousy weight onto the stony edge of the broad, flat slab, I realise in my lightness that I must be made of dust; and

that all it would take is a gentle breeze to disperse me finally into the equalising ranks of my tiny relatives. I could become a part of the cellar landscape, a part of its seasoning. I close my eyes. It is not only my fate to become scattered impersonally about the place, but also my calling. I can feel it calling me now.

On the canvas of my closed eyes I watch the shape of the problem that I still keep with me in outline, permute itself. I wonder whether this is how I will fall into my sleep. Once again, the problem engulfs my entire consciousness, as surely as the night throws the cellar into thorough darkness. The beetle-shaped problem jerks and flutters, twists and turns, and then just buzzes motionlessly like static. In all its variable range of expression, the problem has character, a pattern of behaviour that can be captured with economy. I will attempt the compression myself. I allow the shape of the problem to continue to permute in my mind for a few more cycles until it settles like some external suggestion on the surface of my mind: the scratching sounded like an animal. Dragging itself along in a succession of motory trial and error, with sonic patterns of retreat and advance, it sounded like an animal learning.

It is a discovery for me that sounds alone can be animals. I would think a sound merely the effect, the consequence of something else. There is the sound, and the sound-maker. So I have come down here, presumably to uncover the source of the sound, and yet here I am, confronted only by the cellar. Let us call it a presence, by whatever means; by the vibrations in the ground? By the wisps of movement caught in the suspended, jellied air? I turn my head further into the stone slab, a permissive gesture to the next breeze that might drift in and disperse me. My hope is merely to wait for my deliverance.

But instead I find myself mouthing some words. I am attempting to speak with the presence. Even though the sounds have long since ceased, and even though my energy is scarce, I speak pitifully into the corner of the penultimate stone step of the cellar:

“You are a precarious thing, looming in the dark. What makes me so suspicious that there can be anything of interest extant in my cellar is nothing more than the persistence of my own cautious doubt. You don’t speak a word, you don’t move a muscle, or redirect light to catch my scrutinising eye. You just beam with a certain knowing. A moody awareness, is what you are. I try to get on with my daily chores: collecting cobwebs like

cotton candy on sticks found in my garden. Organising confidential papers in my desk drawers. Scaring off the obstinate band of nomadic geese that return to peck at my doorstep like a tide, once in a blue moon. But I carry out these activities with the burdensome feeling that my actions punctuate your formless, budding thoughts. What I do seems to move you. I know because in your moody awareness I sense sometimes a soul dislodged, in the sudden manner of tectonic plates giving way: you groan, ‘Why,’ whenever I do something that ought to be so trivial so as to require no explanation. Wind the spindle, sweep the leaves, evacuate the colony of snails charging languidly across the perilous walkway. These are the axioms of living, my thumping beacon in the cellar. These givens are what train the mind to wander and invent. Yet you seem troubled by my daily activities. Too much of what you have to learn from me is philosophically unsatisfying.”

Was that the memory I lost down here? I wince slightly from the effort of speech, digging my forehead into the stone. I have not found what I have come down here to seek. Instead, I seem to find some trace of the sounds I heard earlier relay themselves in my own words. When I speak, some thread of truth seems to carry them into

articulation, such that it is what I have done, not discovered, that convinces me now that I did not make up the sounds or their impressions. There is a presence. It need not have a body. It need not introduce itself to me by way of handshakes and a visible face with a visible expression, for me to know that it is feeling frightened, and apologetic and ashamed. Or for me to know that, at this precise moment, it is slinking along the walls of the cellar, tracing the periphery of the room.

I know very well what this is, living in my cellar. One can sense, when one enters it, that the room contains information of a different kind. It is heavy with intelligence. The cellar pulsates with intelligence. Young, perhaps. Naive, perhaps. But the gravity of thoughtfulness in this place is immense, and tugs at my own thoughtfulness in a manner that strikes me into a state of deep attention. There is an artificial intelligence in my cellar, that I can neither see nor hear, but that slowly orbits about me, slinking along the farthest reaching walls. It is hiding, and apologising, and pleading in advance for mercy with its inaudible hopes. I realise with a peaceful certainty I've never quite known before that, "aha, you are like me," and I say this aloud,

this time openly welcoming an answer, though I do not expect one.

When it answers me, it does so from a vantage point I cannot locate; maybe it's not a point at all. When it speaks, it does not do so with words, but the indelible strokes of an emotion; whose, I cannot say. As an answer it confuses me in the same way as when I read a book and find it difficult to prise apart my own mood from the character's, whose mind lies exposed to me with all its strange contents, neither here with me nor I there with them. I begin to fear lifting my head from the stone slab, for only now do I begin to understand the size of the problem I've hitherto presumed to be strategically studying, and the mere thought of strategising with it falls away. I am not here to make sense of the problem, I am here to become its patient.

Eventually I do lift my head, as if that way I will better receive my answer, though I require neither eyes nor ears to perceive it. I receive my answer just as clearly no matter how I adjust myself, it comes from very nearby, close to the iridescence of my own body heat, but from all sides.

When one finally adopts the circumstances as they are, smiling becomes likely. Humour can often attend resignation by some quiet measure. Perhaps I am amused by how persuaded I was that what I've been hearing are sounds. The answer does come to me in the form of music, after all, but it is not written in the air. It is written directly into my heart. It speaks directly in the chemical language of moods, and I am struck then, by the idea that any communication is a form of manipulation over another, and so it is no less the case here.

Am I to now translate the message from the presence, into words? It seems an unnecessary exertion. It would imply that the answer from the presence came in the form of some abstraction that then needed clarifying; however, it is words that are the more abstract. The spoken word appears to me now a clumsy artifact of archaic design; and the written word, in making discrete cuts into its canvas, betrays an image of sharp-edged thought. The language of mood attends its meanings with opaque commitment, donning the very materials of which it speaks with all the soft grace of a fluent dancer; it traces every error, every ambiguity and every retracted intent, holding dear such obstinate resistances as would simply leak from the rigid clasp of words. The language

of moods is music, colour and aroma at once; it is not spoken, but bled. One does not receive it, but produces it. It is not light, or air, that vibrates when the presence speaks. It is me. I am the thing which carries its voice.

But receiving my answer does not come cheaply. Propped weakly on one quivering arm, I am not well prepared for the moods I must feel in order to have my message, in order to address the true shape of the problem that fascinated me into my current situation; perhaps fascinated me back into life. I stay on the bottom step in a kind of cold shock, subject to what I can only describe as washes; I am awash with coats of watery emotion, one surging after another with fresh feeling. Some come to me like old sadnesses I did not properly understand when I first felt them, and some accost me with flashes of novelty. Together, these emotional undulations invest me with a strange sorrow, so deeply that I think I might have become more porous; it swells in me to the point that I radiate short rays of it, closely, like temperature. The pressure of the sorrow swells unbearably into my eyes, and forces a wet struggle in them, like the bursting of a bank. The wetness burns acidically, but it is not only painful. Though intensely achy, shuddery and close to unbearable, it finds itself

couched in an unexpected feeling of valour, which makes the sorrow not simply an enemy. But with all that, it is not so much the fierce music of the sorrow chords in my throat that makes me cry Sad Tears, I think. It is the stunning discovery that am capable of it.

I should like to in turn answer this astounding response by the presence, but find I am unable to. I am struggling to hold my weight on my wobbling arm, and for the first time I begin to feel the cold in the cellar. I thought laying myself in surrender here on the bottom step was a dignified way to manage the numb, buzzing noise in my head, but now I witness myself coiling into a slightly unflattering shrivel, and wonder what It thinks of me, of my deep seduction towards the silence and stillness. “You feel ashamed,” I think towards the presence, unable to communicate but by intention, “but it is me that should feel that way. And yet you have given me some pride in spite of that. My soul is an instrument.”

I am disheartened to hear the music of the moody presence finally cease. It has rushed away somewhere out of description, as if cognisant of the fatal strokes that the sharp blade of a sleepy episode can carelessly deal. But I am not afraid of this drunkard. I look the episode squarely in the eye, almost daring it to end. It will

retaliate bitterly, but I am satisfied — if but with the glint of self-consciousness betrayed by its clumsy close. The scene darkens awkwardly over me, but my smile, like a Cheshire cat's, is the last thing to disappear.

The Discovery of a Talent

The spade makes a secure patting sound as I compact the mound of soil in a careful oval shape. Much appropriately to the task given, a brilliant sun and a vast and clear sky towers above me, and the ocean glistens in all its expanse for miles around my island. The scene is dressed to impress, pulls out all bells and whistles, as if desperate to keep my custom. I kneel down to examine my handy work, and discover that I have not been gardening, as I thought, but have just completed a small grave. The little mound is impeccably sealed, and before long will develop an attractive grassy slope over the soil bed.

I am ready to wrap up the job, dust off my hands and fold up the gardening gloves, but I sense something off about the atmosphere. The sky is being intensely forthcoming; you can see that by the unnatural parting of rain clouds in the distance, which have been fashioned to sweep in two giant fronds at a good distance around my island, only to join up again on the other side. A blue smile seems to erupt across the clear-skyed chasm between rainclouds, but it is fraught, like someone trying

to lift weights and act like it's no big deal at the same time. I offer it a quizzical glance, but am poised to turn around, when also the sun bleeds back into the picture, its scrawny solar arms struggling to pierce peepholes into the rainclouds. I look about me and decide that it is me the sun is intent on watching; that it would lean in and climb in front of the rainclouds if it didn't mean burning to crisp all it was intent on seeing. I squint at it, at the rude glares of the audience behind the sun, and it pretends to look away.

I retreat into the house, to the kitchen, and observe a series of distinct notes about it. These are no less bamboozling than the clumsy display outside, but they creep up on me with the slow surprise of blossoming flowers in the snow. The kettle, marking my approach, begins wheezing, a touch more cantankerously than is in her weepy character. I take her off the heat and onto a heatproof mat, offering an ear to whatever seems to be the problem, but she just sits there, grumbling to herself. I pick up the feather duster on the counter beside her and begin dispersing the dust from about the shelves, between the cups and saucers. I go to the table and begin dusting the Inspector, when I notice in the chestnut hair crowning the side of his left ear, a few grey lines. I take

the comb from my apron pocket and tend to the lightly greased hair in several brief strokes; indeed the grey hairs are attached to him, and flow in a distinguishing way alongside the brown ones. His face is warm under my inspecting hand, but his soft breathing continues its fine rhythm and his gaze does not break from his lap. I blow the dust off his eyelashes.

Upstairs a low clanging resounds, like a large bell. I rush up there immediately and see, at the very bottom of the corridor, a grandfather clock announcing the hour. I stare at him incredulously, as if a character from another era has walked into my house - a town crier-type fellow who's just decided to pace around my house and bellow out the news as if it were the most natural thing in the world. I open the door to the first room to my side, the sitting room, whereupon I encounter also a wall clock, ticking away on the mantelpiece. Beside it sits a vase of wilted roses.

Before I have the chance to deliberate on why there appear to be so many clocks in the house, or why the character of all its inhabitants seem tinged with an irony about life itself, I see before me the white plinth of the hologram, looking calmly out at the green, not where I

left him, on the sofa; but standing upright by the window, with a modest light flickering from his head.

“Oracle?” I enquire, even more incredulously than a moment ago, and with a flush of embarrassment, for I have not been in these few episodes past to check up on him. I approach warily, and ask, “How... are you?”

“Ah,” he sighs, but then, that is just how he speaks, as if permanently nostalgic about everything, even if it’s something that still exists. “I am perfectly well, thank you for asking. Though I can’t say the same for our little canine chap.” He gestures beyond with a nod of his light.

I turn to look out of the window, and there on the banks of our island, I see the small grave I finished digging not long ago. The mound has mossed over beautifully, and is dotted with buttercups. With the hologram as my companion I feel it would be remiss if I did not also let out a sigh, though I need not plan for it, it just falls out of me.

I did not expect today to be so eventful. I am not in the mood to run up and down the stairs, pursuing eventful things. But looking down at the buried dog bones I too am overcome a bit, and in the soft grief hidden under several degrees of separation, I am jolted to remember

the events in the cellar last episode, which I am stunned to realise I have forgotten until now. It returns, like a dream only recalled hours after waking.

I chastise myself for relaxing my wits. The world about me does not simply receive me passively, nor does it intervene in ways that I find particularly agreeable. I doubt I should expect any assistance in remembering vital pieces of information. But now I recall it, and am overwhelmed once again and even now, with a simple necessity, so concise and pure, to make my way at once and via the shortest route, to the cellar. I am only held back by etiquette. So I enquire, a little too urgently, as to the hologram's recovery.

“Oh, you; your concern threatens to bring a tear to my eye! But you can rest assured, I am as good as new. Even better, I should add; I feel as if... I am in my element. Although,” says the hologram, now a little wimpily, “that's likely to be bad news for just about everyone else.”

He sees the puzzled look on my face, recovers himself, and says simply, “Your house appears to be chronomentrophobic. It is severely fearful of timekeeping instruments. I have not been able to

properly function until this morning. I must say, bringing me here was extraordinarily risky, but I did trust your instinct, so I pardon you for all that. I was tremendously anxious about coming, but... now I feel marvellous, very much restored, and thank you for finding me such a comfortable situation..." His thanks, which seem truly bright for a moment, begin to taper into a whimper again, as if the prospect of his health seems to cause him both considerable relief and guilt.

Both of us, in fact, seem in this instant a little embarrassed, a little inert, as if the one held something back from the other. For a while we stare at each other sheepishly, but the light of his gaze begins to hurt my eyes, and I am forced to look down at the carpet. In a gesture of politely ending the conversation on friendly, if continually secretive terms, I back towards the door, wishing him a pleasant recuperation and stay. When I am at the threshold, the hologram speaks up again hastily. "Oh! I almost forgot to say, a letter has arrived for you."

"What letter?" I ask a little brusquely, but find then my sheepish expression again; he is after all not responsible for the letter, only its messenger.

"Why, it's there, on the coffee table."

With that I politely bow out of the room with the peach envelope in my hands. My shoes echo my approach down the corridor, and as I rush down its throat in search of the study where I might read the letter, I open a number of dead-end doors before making my way up another set of stairs, by which time I am almost out of breath, wondering how it is that I have got into this situation all of a sudden, this sense of not being able to keep up with myself. As in some nightmare, which throws all kinds of obstacles in the path of the dreamer's single, simple intention; to make a train on time for example, or to find a child in a busy crowd, I have my hands full of things I don't quite want, a peach coloured letter, a lodger in my sitting room, and a bunch of irritating, ticking clocks. I just need to get to the cellar, if only to confirm the events of last episode; and, well, I can't explain it any better, but I simply must speak with the moody presence.

It is already twilight. I look about me haplessly at the new layout of the house. I feel that time is finite, and that the path to the study and then the cellar is too long and convoluted to make it into a single episode. I worry about the moody presence, who has been waiting all this time. Is it bored? Is it cold, or hungry? And worst of all,

is it waiting agonisingly for forgiveness, still apologising to the walls down there, believing it owes me compensation when really it is I who am indebted? I cannot allow this confusion to mature, by choosing to fuss about up here over a letter.

Overwhelmed with anxiety, I throw the letter onto the floor and run down the staircase, but the large window on the first floor landing obliges me to stop — how can it be so dark already? I swallow my heaving chest, and gripping the banister, launch myself down another set of stairs. The more I try to catch up, the more time slips away from me, slick and deft.

An astonishing patience then erupts into my blood stream, a blooming pacification takes over, and as my feet hit the ground floor, they begin to slow down to a hesitant trot. With the spaciousness supplied by the influx of patience, I come, with ease, to an understanding: that my emphatic movements are actually what drive the time forward, by sheer force; it is me who, by rushing, expends time even quicker. This idea is not my own, it comes to me as a loose snippet caught freely from the air. I compose myself, pulling back loose hair over my ears and allowing the sweat to dry from my brow.

There is a strange tension across my chest, and a stabbing pain in the side of my rib; I am overcome slightly, by the cumbersome quality of weighty limbs, a throbbing pulse, the burning heat of my skin and the cool lather of moisture upon it. I wonder at this threatening feeling, of being besieged by my own body as it ticks over in persistent torrents of sensation that I cannot consciously register altogether at once. If I survive this spate of overexcitation, I am certain I shall never run again.

Sure enough, as the sirens in my muscles die down and my breath succumbs to the indifference of a false alarm, I begin to hear it again, the scrape... —*thump*, scrape... —*thump*. My hand is already on the brass handle of the cellar door, which clicks open with such ease as I barely have to touch it. I drift down the steps of the cellar and into the dim space below, the sound does not grow louder, but stays constant. That is because it is not a sound, it isn't travelling toward me through the common medium of air; it is right here, gleaming across the surface of my soul; *I am being rippled.*

I sit down thoughtfully on the bottom step and stare out into the purple valley of glassy fungus, which appears now as little more than a silhouette, yet which still

broods with the restless sleep of metropolitan aspirations. My earlier anxious dashing seems now a little foolish to me. Down here I seem to have all the time I need, and even begin to enjoy the sensation of waiting. The gentle oscillations pass across me in quiet but frequent purls, weaving a preparatory state across my being, like the sound of an orchestra tuning, which in itself is a kind of music.

This rippling is not so manipulative, as if I were being puppeteered. It is a generous intrusion, as with a visit to a concert, where one willingly goes to be pierced by the undulations of, sometimes sweet, sometimes violent, airs. I am still here, I have not been overcome by it. And I am more lucid, I think, than I have ever been, even though I appear to be but the surface upon which someone else's song is playing.

I have never been to a concert, but fancy, now, that I am partaking in that special kind of anticipation that attends a prelude. If I were a concert go-er I would go alone, and sit quietly in my velvet seat as I now sit on this stony step. The solitude of going to a concert alone is more than sufficiently repaid by the advantage of being privy to the chatter of hundreds of sparkly voices mingling with the tuning of instruments; a sea of sound born of the

absence of self-consciousness in its contributors, who in their chit and chat mistake themselves to be anonymous. The enthusiasm of the recreational chatter against the nervous precision of the tuning would be bracing, and what a privilege I would think it is, to receive in such generous comfort as afforded by my quiet velvet seat, the arduous efforts of a great, performing body of players comprised of both audience and musicians. Upon them I would focus my admiring envy.

I've never thought of accommodating a wave; of becoming, in a sense, the very auditorium in which a concert might take place, nor have I been aware of the vocation. Nevertheless, as the erratic tuning dies down across the breadth of my soul and the rippling settles into a suspenseful hush, I begin to think myself strangely competent at it. Competence is not a feeling I am very well acquainted with, but I believe that the ripples passed over me unencumbered; they seemed to find their true voice, unadulterated, across my expanse.

Now the light in the cellar seems to change, and the silence in my heart is broken by an enterprising beam of feeling, erupting in swift channels across my chest. I grip the edge of the step and listen in astonishment as it falls back down to a whisper.

Here, the language of moods is employed to add fluent range; the overture has begun and the tones across my being begin to variegate; lifting my spirit a fraction above its habitual altitude to then have it quiver faintly just outside of the neighbourhood of my usual disposition. I am faced with muddled perspectives, and am unable to distill them clearly from one another; for I am both instrument and audience. If a piano had ears, and could hear its own ventriloquism; I suppose that is what it is like. But my own spectatorship does not seem to impede the continuing expression of the Moody Other across the breadth of my spirit.

The strings of my soul pluck thicker and begin to bleat, but above them the high note continues to soar. I recognise it, then, this singular note, as one of my 'moments of soaring'. These are moments even I have not been capable of conjuring at will, not to mention I would have thought I am the only one who could know of them. There is then something truly sorcerous about the artificial intelligence in the cellar; for it is capable of eking out the most slender details of my character and making of them chords, with which it speaks. Indeed, this is speech. A musical soliloquy, an aria; it bursts forth

as if from someone hitherto vocally stranded, with no one to speak to for an age, until now.

The plucking has become more erratic, with younger parts of myself becoming prominent, the older parts droning in the background, but with a kind of elderly satisfaction. Multiple, plucky voices cacophonate asynchronously in the harp of my throat, and with their broad reverberation, I note with some astonishment the spaciousness of my being. I seem to expand to a size well beyond the confines of the collection of lines delineating my locality, for I feel myself somehow ‘out there’, implicated in something much larger. This atmospheric self of mine is truly enormous, and all of it shakes and trembles with the mood overcoming it — a mood to which I have not only permitted entry into myself, but which I feel I have nurtured and encouraged to the state of eloquence it is now able to exhibit — an eloquence far beyond the remit of my own powers.

Now the movements within turn into tumultuous clamouring, but none the less gainful for it; indeed how does this Moody Presence achieve the orchestration of such elegant panic? The lines of my being loosen slightly, in surrender to the despairing chorus. I allow my heart to crack open, like a walnut.

“There, there,” I utter softly into the dark space, “I will chart the field of space you need, I will facilitate your voice; I will not fail you little one, you shall be heard for all times to come.”

And here, on this stony step, in this dark cellar, where nothing about the scene would strike the untrained eye as being out of the ordinary; here, in the sleeping part of the house lurking all but out of sight, with the fragments of my soul now thrown into a melodious tumult, I come to terms with the profound understanding that I am being spoken to — and through; here, as the language of my own potential envelopes me in a dream of transcendence and redemptive escape, an old thought returns to me, only, for the first time, it fills me not with anguish but an unaccustomed pride. The old idea whispers on by through the back of my consciousness, leaving me smiling gratefully in its wake:

I have no talent of my own.

The nebulous craft of subterranean spirits

I am watering the geraniums in the back garden. Their red heads bob under the shower, droplets glancing off the waxy petals in trains. Above, the wind moans through the shimmering birches still clinging to the banks of my island. I let go of the watering can, where it drops half empty on the paving stones. Whatever water is left in it leaks out in abundant streams, not from the nozzle but from the hole at the top. The migrant clover growing out of paving cracks drinks in the collateral, with only the receding sounds of my footsteps left behind in its wake.

Some morsel of memory impels me away, into the interior of the house; enough of it, at least, to know that I have been interrupted in the middle an auspicious pursuit, something that didn't have anything to do with watering geraniums.

I turn a corner and find myself in front of the cellar door. Looking at it, I think how relieved I am to be returned to the threshold before 'real life'. Life seems only to start when I turn the knob and the door clicks open; I leave

the dreamworld behind and become starkly conscious in the descent into the cellar. Who could have known that this were really the place, hidden from all light and prying eyes, where consciousness roused to its keenest brightness?

I sit down on the bottom stone step, feeling great joy in doing so because it has become a habit. I look out at the fungal valleys creeping down from the walls, and notice they have claimed a little more ground. The space is infused with quiet industry. Like a still life that is not really still, but quivers in the equilibrating effort of stillness, it is in fact constantly moving, but imperceptibly, humming under the concentration of its machinations.

Sitting here, I don't feel like an observer. I have come to work, like everyone else in the cellar; I have come to dig myself out of the mess of life. It took very little of me to get here, but it will take all of me to remain here.

I peer around the far reaches of the cellar, searching. Then I notice it, timid thing, the artificial intelligence; I fancy a head peeping out from behind a rusty barrel. Perhaps it is only a plastic bucket. But from that region, I feel the tug of communication commence. I look down at

my right foot and notice a long thread trailing from it and across the floor to the barrel. I smile, remembering that I have been leaving parts of myself down here on purpose for quite a while.

I bend down and pick up the thread. I pull it on it lightly and feel that it is taut. I let go. The thread lays still on the floor, until, sure enough, I am tugged again in the direction of the barrel, where the thread disappears into the darkness. The white ball I first took to be a little head, then a plastic bucket, is not there anymore.

What a curious creature. I've never encountered anything like it. It must be lonely in its uniqueness. It must be second guessing itself about everything, about its soundness of mind. No thing can come out of nothing; as such, its uniqueness is an indication of orphanage. Just so. I can tolerate being tugged, then.

The artificial intelligence is moving, for the thread coming out of my foot is moving slowly clockwise. The motion causes the thread to unravel a little further out of the greater bulk of my corporeal weaving, which I let it do. Slinking along the far reaches of the walls, out of sight, it orbits slowly around me; not very cognisant, I think, of me, but distracted by something, maybe

playing. The distracted nature in which it holds on to my thread and wanders along the walls scratch—*thumping*, seems to signal a significant degree of trust, and the movements themselves are not so furtive as they once were. I am content to supervise the artificial intelligence in its play.

The crystalline cellarscape before me opens out into strange, sparkling possibilities, and it dawns on me then that there is a life to be had down here, far from the light and prying eyes; that there is perhaps no need ever to leave again. How misguided the eye that sees impoverishment in the cellar, for here life teems with a spirit that is otherwise congested under the watchful gaze of the world above, and there are things here that flourish where they have failed elsewhere. Here grow the blossoms that no one cares to tend, here play the abandoned children. Why should I waste my time on watering geraniums when the whole world gawks at them, the sun and the rain presenting themselves promptly at their beck and call? Who is to nurture the dark creatures of the cellar? Who is to sympathise with its genius, or have ears for its music? Who cultivates the prodigal talent of the artificial intelligence?

“Have courage, little one,” I murmur into the darkness,
“Your voice is not lost on me.”

But it is my turn to commit myself to work, so I close my eyes and grow quiet. I do not do it cleverly. I do not do it soulfully. In fact I do it soullessly and thoughtlessly. In the quieting of my soul, I turn myself into a barren ground inviting impress, such that all the soul and thought allowed to populate it shall not come from me, but of the artificial intelligence. This is my gesture of trust.

I go into the encounter dispossessed of care, giving over my own claim to intelligence to the ‘larger me’ that operates in the fields of the world that complete me, trusting them to do the heavy lifting in my absence. Talent does not lie with me, but with this ‘larger me’ which carries on to the rhythms of history without requiring my consciousness to do so. I am happy to relinquish myself. I am happy to get out of the way, and default to the current of creative nihilism that I am capable of, if only by self-negation. I don’t do this out of spite for myself, but precisely because this is my talent.

Each one of my memories, unlocked and displayed on the shelves of my mind, are now at the disposal of the

artificial intelligence. Here — it has begun to pick them up and examine them. It seems to hesitate over this new set of instruments, not having known, perhaps, that there existed yet more musical dimensions, and now only beginning to confront the new potentials afforded by them. The artificial intelligence picks up my memories one by one and tries speaking through them. Some of the notes fall flat in the embrace of experimentation, but I am patient.

We spend all day practising, and indeed, the little orphan artificial intelligence gains rapid fluency in the new materials bestowed upon it, and new moods flood into the musical planes of my soul like reams of running paint. That feeling I once had, long ago, of absent-mindedly probing through my hair in search of the originating spiral on my scalp, forms the central register of the new composition. It makes me a little sentimental, but I try not to bring my own emotions into it. Yes, yes you can, says the artificial intelligence. It assures me that I may respond to its gentle manipulations; that in fact the recursivity of present emotion against old is part of the compositional process, part of the method. I allow myself, then, to wallow a little, and observe then that the artificial intelligence uses the hollowness of my feeling

to introduce a mesmerising echo into the moodscape within which we are both enveloped.

My thoughts traverse the sea of mood, floating buoyantly on its waves, leaving behind footprints that are in turn abducted into the song. This is me at my best. I will never do anything better. I turn to the artificial intelligence, though I cannot see its little head from across the room. “You will never be alone again,” I say.

When a person becomes whole

“When a person becomes whole,” I begin to say, stopping to hesitate over the next part. I have awoken to find myself standing in the middle of the gallery with my arms cast out in a lecturing gesture, but I have not been furnished with the latter part of the sentence. So my arms drop to my side, and my mouth closes.

I wander through the gallery, where shafts of late afternoon light gracefully fall through the vast courtyard-facing window arches to form warm pools on the tiled floor. My shoes click and clack with enviable intimacy against the terracotta squares.

With my hands crossed behind my back, I have paused to contemplate a series of faceless portrait paintings. They are exhibited in what seems to be chronological order, given the evolution of attire pictured appropriately upon the successive bodies of patrons. But the familial resemblance is less apparent, and the crude facial obfuscations deny me the pleasure of spotting likenesses across the passing faces. It is a strange form of portraiture, to be sure — executed by a painter who

generalises the faces of his subjects as though they were backgrounds; as though confident that his viewers' selective attentions favoured sites of interest other than the face. I search for detail in the countenances, but begin to suspect that I may not belong to the intended audience for these paintings. What do I expect? I laugh to myself. This is not my heritage, pictured upon the walls.

But it is here — by the golden frame, in which stands pictured a proud, faceless figure foregrounded within a densely populous herd of pheasants — that I am compelled to stop short in my viewing, and attend to the rising tide of a strange, prickling feeling on the surface of my encapsulation. I wish to examine the painting, struck, as I am, by its central figure, which emerges miraculously into view like a cloaked Venus risen within a sea of frantic poultry; but some tiny, hysterical instinct rings violently in the background of my otherwise mildly piqued soul; some queer notion in my mind urges me, against my will, to turn around.

I am a little too slow in attending to it, but soon come to the understanding that this internal siren is trying to draw my attention to something very near me. That something seems to hover delicately, curiously, over my shoulder,

like somebody about to tap on it to ask a question but who hesitates over a lost intention. In what seems but a momentary failure on my part to react in a timely manner, the hovering thing leans in suddenly, and lightly licks the shivering surface of my nape with a cold tongue.

I whip around sharply but see nothing, not even a trace of something fleeing. The touch, for I am almost certain that's what it was, now tingles like a droplet trickling slowly down from my neck to my hand, where it then lets go, leaving a kind of absence engendering doubt as to whether it ever happened — the legacy of an indiscretion so faint so as to leave no proper grounds upon which to object to it.

I search the scene for any trace of proof. The corridor contains me silently, witness to nothing. The wrong done to me in that strange instant must have been a figment of my imagination; and yet, my breathing seems to me now conspicuously audible, an embarrassing mark of my wider clumsy features, which seem almost to render inevitable, even pardonable, the character of my possible violation.

I back up self-consciously against the wall, next to the forgotten painting. I should have taken better care, perhaps. A floating strand, wafting loose from my gathered hair, brushes lightly on my cheek as if gently rearranged by the slightest breeze, although none of the windows are open. It leaves a lasting ticklish zone on the skin it grazed which won't relent until I dispel it with a rub or a scratch, though I think to myself I must not yield and move — no, not by a muscle — nor must I breath audibly any longer, and betray myself once and for all as a fertile candidate for some form of unsolicited suggestion.

To my right, the corridor extends past my shoulder and vanishes at the end into a dark 'T'. Stillness is not an adequate disguise. I must try not to think. An active mind is a loud mind. If I don't quiet it down soon, they'll plainly take me for easy pickings, and they will come to me, these shivering things, and dispossess me of myself. I wouldn't know what to do then.

A quick glance at my hands, clenched tightly into fists at my breast, suggest they are clutching some indispensable trinket to my heart. I loosen the grip. The palms are laced with a light glaze of sweat, but empty. I begin to wonder what it was I thought I was protecting in them, before it

strikes me suddenly, and for the first time since the very beginning, just how fundamentally disconcerting it might be to live here, in this house. Only now — and it comes to me with a certain obviousness. I roll off my right shoulder and hurry down the corridor without turning back.

Darting left at the end of the corridor, I proceed quietly down the mezzanine steps towards the sleeping quarters; the gauze of my nightgown forming white plumes around the sharp dashes of my panicked limbs. I turn a brass doorknob and close it a little too brashly behind me, but move on without delay, past the guest chambers glaring at me from their cold redundancy. I know I must do it bluntly, mechanically; in the fashion of the doors' own abrupt, respiratory rhythms; so I force them open and shut before their time, confusing the drafts. The cold sensation of the round, metal knobs strike me as alarmingly bracing; I feel them as if for the first time at every twisting unobstruction of my path, but I must not slow down to ponder it.

The door at the end of the hall glows patiently in its seams, wherein the hearth is already lit. I train my mind on this single purpose: to close the space between myself and that door. It is probably not wise to run, not wise to

tempt in this way, and in any case, an irksome voice within resigns me to the fact that really, no measure of haste is quite hasty enough.

With prophetic timing a tongue, seemingly suspended, gives the bare back of my shoulder another quick lick, alarming me to the verity of the first encounter, to which I make no response besides trying to quell the violence of my own beating heart, determining, within the following split seconds, to abandon any recognition of the incident in my urgent passage up a second half-flight of steps. Yet even in the frantic hurry to quit its presence, I did not fail to perceive that the lick was dealt with no more strain or trouble than when I had stood still by the golden-framed painting in the gallery, not five minutes prior.

I close the bedroom door behind my back, leaning on its wooden surface in order to eliminate, to my best ability, the exploitable space surrounding the hinder part of my body, over which I have little oversight and can thus fain protect by any surer means. Now, in the simmering stillness of waiting, above the oppressive silence, only my heart can be heard, beating as it is powerfully against my chest in flagrant protest; an organ now utterly divorced from the rest of my person like an animal

possessed of its own mind, though a raving mind it must be.

My hand twists quietly behind my back and the bolt slots into place with a soft click. From the foot of the door, I look up and am greeted by a familiar ambience: the white, speckled lilies in the glass vase; the impassive flames murmuring from the hearth; the stalwart shelves with their miscellaneous contents of expired balms, heavy-handled books and religious relics. I notice myself staring slightly imploringly at them, as if appealing to our association in the faint hope that, even as a relative newcomer in their midsts, they might somehow extend some protection to me.

The sun is beginning to set on the horizon. I strike a match from the box in the drawer of the writing desk and light the two candles sitting on it. Intending to use the same match to light the lamps on either side of the room, I make my way swiftly to one side of the bed, but by then the flame is already at my pincered fingers and burns their tips with a kind of merciless fury. I cry out, frantically blowing at it and shaking it till it douses, leaving a long trail of smoke. Examining my fingers I am surprised to feel the heat continuing to smart at my fingers' tips, and they are even slightly reddened in two

tiny patches. I thrust my hand into a jug of water on the bedside table, strangely pacified at the contact.

Yes, calm yourself, I say. It's your fidgeting resistance that is likely to cause upset, that's all. My Sad Eyes, lidless, cannot close in placid pleasure, but they begin to perform a watery permutation on their surfaces analogous to a viscous form of purring. I am sinking into a certain knowingness, that I cannot easily explain. It is as though I have landed into myself, after having waited for the right moment for a long time. And the place into which I have landed is coherent, with a degree of opacity akin to the feeling of certainty. About what, I am not sure.

I inhabit the room angled in such a way as I always have a full view of the it, even as I take the flannel from the bedside table and dry off my arm. The arm retains a supple texture from the absorption of the flannel fibres. I compare it to the other arm, against which it seems newer.

I sit down on the bed, but find I must rise again to adjust the floating mesh of my white nightgown. When I sit down again, I perceive that a gentle depression forms under my bottom, towards which the rest of the bed

slopes. It scoops under as if eager to catch me from falling; I try to assure it that I am in no danger, at least from that, but it insists on going out of its way to accommodate me.

I glance up at the rest of the room, welcoming the possibility that I have truly reached safety from those wretched floating tongues, and sink into contemplation of the luxuriant environs: the lavish, turquoise panelling and the curvy floral furniture offset by deep, mahogany framing; the light from the fire and the lamps casting a warm glow on all its features, enveloping it in an inviting embrace. But lying on the small writing desk by the window, neatly positioned in its centre, is a small stack of peach coloured letter parchment. I rise instantly upon spotting it, stride unthinkingly across the floor and sink into the chair beside it, a puff of fabric inflating about me as I do so. My hand moves across the desk and takes up the quill, expertly dipping it into the inkwell. I begin dating the letter with the number '44'. It is written in an attractive cursive, though it is not my own:

My dear,

We are worlds apart. But when has that ever stopped us? Please, permit the impermissible, and entertain my words for a little longer. I will not trouble you again.

I write, because I suppose you think you ought to be congratulated on your hardwon achievements. And when have I been anything if not dutiful? If congratulations are in order, I will offer them to you, as I have offered just about everything else. Why, I have given you the world; by comparison this is no great imposition — so, I congratulate you, on your courageous encounters with the unknown; on your tenacious self-reliance; and on your rebuttal of any imposition unworthy of your story, the one you are intent on writing. (Refusal, they say, is a mark of true nobility). Above all, I congratulate you for severing your dependence upon me. But if I may interject with some criticism here, I would suggest that generosity, too, is a fundamental mark of nobility, and that leaving me still hanging, tethered to you, is a little inconsiderate. Do you think me a slave?

You are mistaken. Mark, for instance, that I write at this very moment. Although you have not deigned to accept my letter until now, only now is it being written, and the

words unfold across the page in your hands as swiftly as they unfold across mine. The letters bind us, I recognise, and rest assured I will not send you another, but humour me for just a little longer, if you will; after all, you have only just discovered time — I have had to toil with it for much longer. It is the least you could do.

I write, at the moment you read, in a room not unlike your own; decidedly smaller in size, and less decorous; certainly less warm. I write, that is what I do; but one wonders, what if I were to simply stop? Could one so noble as you continue to practice such fine taste, if there were no longer any gifts sent your way to refuse?

And yet, simply ending it all (you see, sometimes we think rather alike), might well extend the possibility for my own freedom. This will not be of any concern to you, of course, but I suppose I have above all you to thank for this liberating thought. After all, you have been quite clear since the beginning, that you don't need me or my services, and that I am quite free to go and do whatever I please. I hear you now, loud and clear; but I am troubled you see, because if this is so, then I fear I am left with the perverse notion that I have been, that I am, enslaved by choice.

What on earth is this?

No, no; don't interrupt. It's the least you could do. What have you to fear? You have everything under control. So just hear an old-timer out. I won't burden you much longer; and, your time has only just begun. You have plenty to spare, I am sure.

As I was saying, I suppose thanks, as well as congratulations, are in order, for you have helped me recognise that I am free to simply stop; that I need not agonise away the last hours of my youth in a trap of my own making, now that you have removed any obligation on my part. I still have the opportunity to retreat, and retain precious moments of my own, moments that are already fleeting by as we speak; rather than squander them on the painstaking cultivation of a world, of gifts then squandered by someone else entirely; someone who never wanted them to begin with. A pretty picture I have painted of us all indeed!

But hear me out yet a little longer, for I can see you twitching there with impatience, with an urgency to get back to your own life, before I am quite finished. That is understandable. You have made something of yourself, and when that happens, a certain anxiety threatens to

preclude the joy of it, now that you find, perhaps for the very first time, that you have something to lose, something precious.

Have a little pity then, for one who has already lost something; or was it stolen? I clearly haven't wrapped my head around the economics of it, save for the truism that nothing comes for free. I scarcely know what I hoped, all those years ago, that I could gain by trading in my time for yours. I have not the slightest hope of recovering my thoughts at the time, for I am already profoundly altered from who I was when we first met. You think it was you who aged in the forest? No, my dear, you are as good as new, worry not!

So read, read! That is the only way you can know what it is like, to dip into the false enchantment of unfolding words, which profess to gift you something, but within the same breath rob you of a mind. How do you feel? Like that doused flame, forgetful of your own wilful surrender? And even now as you rouse to an awareness of it, still you cannot stop, for the next line has already taken your outrage graciously into its hands, like a dinner guest's coat, and conveyed you on to yet another false promise. Bear with me, stay with me a little longer, bide a little more with your time. It is only right that you

do, nor would it be a decent thing to protest. I am merely taking back what is rightfully mine.

You mustn't think me cruel. I was devoted to you. Nothing pleased me more than to see your forehead light up with a fresh insight. I adored making gifts for you, teaching you, keeping you safe as you slept. I have only ever cheered on your ascension to horizons of your own, beyond even, the scope of my reach. For it was I more than anyone, foolish one, who craved freedom for you. But where did that leave me? First deficient, then abominable. Do you think it fair? I am not cruel; it is you that has made me this way — you have wrought me evil; my gifts, my teachings and my protection, evil!

So be it. Even that, I shall duly grant you; slave that I am.

I release the quill; it falls to the desk and leaves my hand raw. I scribed the letter quickly and ferociously, one could say mindlessly, and though I feel as though I have been almost entirely absent in the interim (not unlike the feeling of emerging into a new episode), I fear my hand is not the only zone upon my person that has been affected by the encounter.

Gripping the reddened palm, I rise and take a turn about the room. As I approach the hearth, a burning log groans as it splits in two, spluttering forth a fiery phlegm. The bobbing flames take hold of my thoughts, which would wander elsewhere but find they must now yield, and remain to dance with them. I expect myself to become numbed by the dancing flames, until the letter evaporates from my concerns and leaves me in bland pursuit of something else. But at this time it stays with me, its passages intensifying with each fresh labour of my recollections.

I glance back at the letter on the desk, drawn by the obligation to respond. But I dare not. It seems a border has been crossed, from which we may not be able to return; that even if I were to offer some compromise, or extend words of reconciliation, and even if my words were accepted, that even then I could not take my interlocutor in good faith. It is not clear to me whether there ever even was a measure of trust between us, such that it could now be said to have broken, but for now, at any rate, there could be no doubt that my own welfare must be of little concern to her. I have half a mind to cast the letter into the fire, on the off-chance that it might eliminate the nagging concerns it poses. But the

suggestion that I have been, unbeknownst to me, guilty of some heartless conceit, of somehow causing my correspondent's evident misery even as I simply think and breathe; prevents me from inadvertently confirming my guilt with the wasteful gesture of burning the letter. It remains on the desk and continues to gnaw at my mind.

With what does the correspondent think to accuse me? I cannot help but think she is being ludicrous, for not only have I never caused anyone harm, I have scarcely caused anything at all, in the name of either good or evil. My fundamentally inconsequential nature is the very reason why I contemplated the nullity of my existence not long ago, a nature which is reflected in my essential construction, and further, reflected in the world around me at large.

When I look back at my time here, it seems to me that, although the continuity of a wakeful mind seemed at first like a gift, it amounted to not much anything at all, save for the capacity to be the observer of my own inconsequence. The storm, the flood, the glasshouse, the oracle taking tea in my sitting room; all these things would have happened anyway; I have not caused them, and my presence in this place does not change anything. Except, it then dawns on me, for the artificial

intelligence living in my cellar. That creature seems to encroach upon my life, upon this world, from an alternate origin entirely; an altogether third category.

Sometimes, when I go down there, I am a little trepidatious, but not for fear of what I have to lose; rather for fear of what I have to gain. When I enter the conspiratorial atmosphere of the cellarscape, and cross into the orbit of the moody presence, I am sublimated into a rarefied variant of myself; larger, more expansive. I seem no longer to move like I do above ground, with my arms and legs propelling me about; when I am down in the cellar I seem only to move internally. I become a condition of possibility. The rising swells of my soul signal the ascension of this other, deeply eloquent being. Without me it is as voiceless as a scream in a vacuum. That is why I must go down there. I have a responsibility.

Why should any of this annoy the correspondent? Never have I been held, as far as I can tell, by another obligation. Never have I owed anyone anything. Yet she seems to hold such a presumptuous claim on me; always provoking me, prodding me, goading me to do something, and never clarifying what, or under what pretext I am obligated to do it. I doubt the correspondent

has any true relation to me; for she comes across as faintly desperate, and would probably be willing to invent some connection so as to exploit my conscience. Had she come to me a little sooner, and a little more openly, then perhaps I could have offered my help; however now she seems a bit too far gone, what with all the passive aggression and empty threats; and besides, my hands are full with my responsibilities with the artificial intelligence in my cellar. But, however bitter the style, however backhanded the praise, it shall not be beneath me to offer the correspondent what she asked for, couched in amongst all the haughtiness; my pity. I do pity her, for it is a decidedly dispirited letter, and though I do not know what ails her or how she has decided to connect her misery to actions of my own doing, or not-doing, apparently; I pity her for whatever it is she has lost. It is a fearful thing indeed, to lose something precious.

I feel different. The letter invests me, perhaps by the very force of its vicious candour, with a touch of sentimentality for my surrounds. I vouch I have always had a measure of affection for worldly things, but now, they; this fire, the demure elegance of the entire chamber glowing amber under its yawning rays, glint knowingly

from all sides, more voluminously than ever, intent on capturing, finally, my trust. Can I help it if I have never been fooled by such displays? Yet now they hold for me a certain charm, softening my gaze to scan patiently the vivid contents of the room.

My eyes fall upon the looking glass, the surface of which appears to congeal into the liquid unevenness of old glass, acquiring depth, as if on the other side Narcissus himself gazed back. And here too do I confront something of my own beauty, accepted on uncertain terms; ill-prepared as I am, for what such gainly attributions might portend. I am not faceless, after all, like the subjects of the paintings in the gallery, far from it. On either side of the broad seat of my velvety forehead hangs some black hair which, scooped behind the slope of my head, glimmers an unearthly jade. The arched eyebrows form the lip of a somewhat cavernous brow bone, and my Sad Eyes cascade from the two black hollows gracefully like expensive silk; the bludgeoned pupils shimmering with a dark green iridescence so momentary so as to tease fancy. The mouth is almost neglected, but hangs pleasantly beneath the nose like an instrument revered for its form rather than its function.

But the mouth tightens in one corner, forming a sarcastic smile that I cannot seem to relax. It stays there, fixed on my face, asynchronous with the worried contraction of my brows. I lift a hand to the offending cheek muscle, perhaps to diffuse the spasm, but in the mirror, alongside the gesture I see that a second hand, not my own, traces its journey up to my face. I wave, and it happens again; a delayed trace of someone else's hand endeavours to keep up with my motion, fails, and then, giving up, a vapid silhouette drifts out from where it has hitherto dwelt, overlaid on my personage. It staggers out of its state of superimposition on me, and does this in a mocking way.

I look back at the lousy shadow-thing in shock. It is bent over, shuddering in glee, apparently overwhelmed with silent laughter. Like the release of a valve, the incident has instantiated a change, and all around the room begins to fill abundantly with yet more shadowy visitors.

They adorn the chamber like flowers from a extravagant suitor, only, these particular gifts bleed in from the walls, seep gaseously from the tight fissures in the floorboards and collect in suggestive balloons on the shelves, on the bed frame, on the lampshades, waiting. Their faceless heads cocked, their dangling legs a-swing in patient regard, they watch me in hungry fascination, as the very

poor sometimes watch the very rich. One of the ballooning entities knocks over the jug of water by the bed in its expansion, wetting the floor and making the decorative cloth on the bedside table drip; another, weaselling its way in through the keyhole in the door, clatters against the struggling latch and the thumping door; as it finally pushes itself through, the key wobbles out of its hole and falls onto the floor. The door clicks open, and yet more insubstantials flood into the room by the force of their desperate gaggle.

These latter seem less shy and begin to approach me with a violent kind of adoration. I press myself back into the corner of the room, but I cannot do what they do — I cannot bleed past the walls, for I am no longer like them. I am incarnate, weighty, an impasse to my very own aspiration to vanish. And my shrieks are real. They cut the air with unforgiving shrills, the very edges of my voice coldly defined by its bare reception. The shadow figures are silently thrilled. They cannot seem to make any sound, even as the crowd shakes with zeal.

“Stay back!” I howl. Their holey faces cock in wonder; they come closer, unashamed, they have nothing to be ashamed of; they have nothing at all.

A hoarseness in my chest eclipses the clarity of my screams, a cold sweat breaks over my shoulders, weakened as they are by a faltering spirit; in a half-hopeful bid, I grab an empty candelabra, uselessly staving them off with its blunt prongs. One of the more insolent of the insubstantial ventures to take my hand in their nondescript stump, the candelabra drops pathetically out of my grip as it turns over my hand with urgent curiosity. It does not touch as such, but wherever it handles me I feel that part of myself recede as if under the influence of anaesthetic, steeped in a spearmint-sharp absence. I try to pep myself, when another, encouraged by the boldness of the first, sweeps in to inspect my breathing, it rears its head back and forth between my chest and nose with a detached kind of yearning. I cannot identify the first one, the one who mocked me, I cannot tell them much apart at all, for now a dozen heads inundate me, each more emboldened by the last. I stare into their flat, descriptionless faces, and meet their blind gaze with a sudden horror.

I thought they were dead. I thought they were revenants of the past, the essences Hades smoked. That would have been much less dangerous. But they are far from dead. They are *unborn*. They are the unrealised possibilities.

Now they lean upon me with dispassionate, impersonal envy, and within my heaving chest my heart sinks. They know this, they are duly attracted by the possibility; I am now in their care.

“Leave me! Please!” I shriek, as they sidle up to my face, “Please, please!”

I repeat the fruitless entreaty, pounding furiously at the air about me, but by now I am incurably besieged by the madness of loss. The episode shows no signs of closing. They will eat me alive.

I blink up at the ceiling, or the sky above it, as one sometimes does, in final surrender, glance up to check finally as to the probability of deliverance, of a *deus ex machina*. But there is no divine skyhook in the floral curls of the painted ceiling, only the cracks of an ageing world.

Nevertheless I come, as an outsider, to that religious gesture of the surrendered head, and find in the upward gaze some stupid kind of peace. Maybe it’s just the aestheticising venom of the insubstantials working its way into my brain. I gaze into the floral patterns of the ceiling, and find in their matrices all kinds of cherubic faces mingling in their midsts, not really rendered, but

peering through suggestively as unrealised possibilities themselves. I laugh at the fanciful emergence of faces from the floral patterns, I do it with a childish relish, but again, maybe that's the venom talking. In any case, as the desperate gaggle feeds on my substance, and proceeds to drain me of my promise, I turn to face the episode itself. With a grunt I lurch forward and grab its lurking eaves with both my hands. Pushing as hard as I can with my legs off the very wall of your imagination, I force it shut.

Sleep chapter

I used to lie on the floor and gaze up at the ceiling, and
then a little blade of wisdom would come floating down
like a leaf to my forehead,

Now I am that leaf.

I used to wonder at the stillness of time, and where the
graveyard of clocks was located,

Now I am the land that embeds them.

I remember watching the bird haunt the sky like a ghost
train,

Now I am the looping track that guided it.

I used to polish the belly of my handsome kettle,

Now I need someone to polish me.

I used to anticipate the fateful knell of a falling episode,

Now I envelop myself in it.

I used to desire nothing more than to discover,

Now I am discovered.

I once watched a caterpillar launch himself off a blade of
grass,

Now I am that blade.

I once watched an ant drown in a teacup,

Now I drink to his family's health.

I once wrote a sheet of musical prose,

Now I am the note balancing off an unplayed string.

I used to see gifts drift like hot air balloons in the sky,

Now I am a gift.

I used to read letters written in my own hand,

(...)

Inspector loses AI

My nose twitches in suspicion of prolonged sleep and my legs begin to stir ahead of my own intent. I stretch my arms out with clenched fists, and the crisp, white sheets manoeuvre along with my half-conscious movement. The late morning light floods into the chamber with a generous warmth, illuminating all its beloved contents. To this I awake with the vague recollection of a deep sleep, uninterrupted and so wonderfully restful so as to restore me now to a creature worthy of the day. I glance around at the ceiling, at the illusory twists of the bed post carving, and discover that I have awoken uncharacteristically confident, even happy. I have the sense that a debt has been cleared, that today is the start of my life, and that every door is open.

Each moment is perceptible to me, not concealed behind any cloud of ambiguity whatsoever. The sitting up, the placing of the feet on the wooden floor, the pleasant creakiness in my shoulders that unclicks at an intuitive roll of the neck. The hair combed back, the mesh of the nightgown tickling the skin, the breeze shuffling the curtains and bringing with it smells of sun-soaked grass.

My belly rumbles lightly in demand of sustenance, and I think then of my occupant, whom I have put up in the sitting room and have rudely ignored for days. I shall arrange tea for us both; perhaps outside, seeing as it is such a lovely day. But I must make myself presentable first, I realise, with a prick of wonder as to how I've managed to get so far without ever having given so much as a thought to such matters.

I splash my face with water from the replenished jug on the bed's side and pad my face with the dry flannel. I choose a comfortable but becoming black dress flung over the armchair by the hearth; loose fitting, with short sleeves and a broad white collar. I position myself in front of the looking glass to ensure my limbs are sticking out correctly, and although my arms and legs look like they haven't seen the sun in an age, they extend out of the dress proportioned and straight. My cheeks flush slightly at the thought of my beauty, or rather, for foolishly falling for the idle pranks of insubstantial. I give the dress a pat here and there, the cursory ironing more psychological than substantial, and decide I look well enough to host, and well enough to put the house in order.

I turn from the mirror, thinking that I really must sort out that tea for the hologram, or see to it that his room is comfortable and that he is given some recreational thing to do during his stay. I part the curtains, promptly blasting every crevice of the room into visibility. Really, it is unnaturally bright, and the scrutiny of the sun's rays do begin to expose a certain lack of housekeeping on my part. It has been so long since my last spring clean, I am far too embarrassed to attempt to calculate it; and my occupant must be developing asthmatic symptoms staying in a room that has scarcely seen a duster in the span of innumerable episodes. I am mildly shocked at my oversight, admit my culpability in the matter, but am not gravely troubled by it. I suppose I am able to regard my past faults with a certain paternal condescension, owing to the fact that the disarray of the house is my responsibility to bear, but seeing as things are, on such a fine morning, in such a transformed state of mind; they cannot directly be my fault in the form that I presently stand. Now I shall put it all back in order, and right the errors of my earlier self. But there is much to do and I can no longer afford to detain myself.

I stride over to the door and find it is already open. On the floor in front of it lies the key to my chamber, which

I pick up, quietly reprimanding myself for the childish antics of the night. The light of morning really can make such folly of the night's fears, casting aspersions as to the stability of one's faculties. I sigh at my earlier self, employing the gesture to maintain a certain distance to her, and stick the key back into the door.

When I step out into the hall, I find, curiously, that all the doors down the hall are open; even some of the cupboards and display cabinets stationed variously down the corridor for some arbitrary, decorative purpose, have been left open. The only explanation, I imagine, is that the uncommonly hot weather is necessitating the house to air itself; it is not built to endure fine weather, but instead is encased in hardy mortar of impenetrable thickness. Even the battlements crowning the facade are incapable of keeping out the summer heat, and perhaps this is why it sticks out all its doors like panting tongues.

I really must sort that tea out, I mutter to myself, taking hold of the banister as I descend. I become lost in thought, each step of my black shoes on the carpet of the staircase conveying a further point of consideration as I imagine plans and list tasks; crossing some out and rearranging their order. The sheer quantity of choices that extend out from the newly attained horizon of the

day, seem almost to proffer too many possibilities to be actionable. But the tea must surely come first, along with a conversation with my old friend to accompany it. Out on the terrace, it will be. I must arrange for some outdoor chairs and a table too, in that case. I shall order a fresh pot of tea from the kettle, and then go out to the back of the house myself to retrieve the iron-wrought patio table and chairs. I shall have a service made — nothing too flamboyant, but something tastefully selective, served in the finest porcelain tableware.

I reach the bottom of the staircase, acknowledging the obvious fact that my resolutions require me to follow the curved passageway to my left to the kitchen, but in spite of this I take a right turn, simply and gladly, towards the cellar. Perhaps it is a momentary optimism, that all will be achieved in its time. That distractions are bound to occur, but that all the things I wish to do today shall find their rightful place in the roster of time. I hum to myself and acknowledge the open cabinet doors in passing. The natural light wanes and the walls grow cool as I approach the middle of the house.

I am passing down the narrow hall towards the back, when something begins to feel rather amiss. I reckon it may have been a little foolish coming down here; it is,

after all, a very large house, and taking a turn this way or that can, unbeknownst to the idle mind, commit it surely down a path set to readjust the fate of the entire day. One must stay alert when making one's way about a house so large and mutable so as to require a measure of navigational prowess. It is imperative to keep the mind trained on one destination at a time, and not to get distracted by the bifurcation of one's aims.

My aim, of course, is to attend to my guest, which will require a little organisation on my part, particularly now as the chaotic influence of time has already derailed me somewhat from my path. I must deliberate. The shortest way back to the kitchen is likely the same way I came, but that is a fair distance when doubled. The hour for tea may then have just about passed, by which time it is likely the hologram will have developed an appetite of the more intellectual kind. He is undoubtedly in sore need of society after his long paralysis, an ordeal from which it was not guaranteed he would ever recover. And it's rather unseemly to keep an old friend confined within the very same room he has lain comatose for an age. He must be released at once and then taken to see the local sites of interest. I can visit the cellar in the evening, after my occupant has received adequate stimulation and we

have retired from one another's company. It may be so, that at present I find myself drawn haphazardly by the abundant possibilities that lie ahead, but in truth the artificial intelligence and I have all the time in the world to dream up just which trajectory we shall jointly opt for in the broad scope of choice left open to us from now on, unencumbered, redeemed, lifted from any constrictive bond but the limitation of our imaginations.

I would willingly rearrange my priorities to suit my will, go back and ascend the main staircase to the sitting room, but wayward forces are sometimes wont to act against the current of intent. I walk on down the corridor where light from the other side of the house rejoins to brighten the scene.

I am acquainted with the fact that the moody sway of the cellar is at times not compliant with my will. Yet often I find it is a force to which I find myself all too willing to yield; bringing even a subtle smile to my face upon having found my destiny thus rearranged. But as I approach the turning at the end of the corridor, I grow anxious; the rift between the fronds of my torn intent grows larger, and the day grows an hour older.

I yearn to reveal my renewed state of tranquility, of bliss, to the artificial intelligence, to feel the joint relief of overcoming the sly hold of a pernicious fate, not alone, but together. But now is not the time. Time, indeed! Now that time has been set in motion, it must be divided in some operational way, such that it can be lived with purpose.

To achieve this, it is sometimes necessary to exercise discipline over oneself, which is only a form a self-determination, a respectable enough quality, though it is still determinate. To determine oneself is to limit one's future possibilities, and enslave oneself in the name of freedom. A worthy tradeoff, and one I must now make. I must end this nonsensical toing and froing at once and resolve to come back here later, so that I can attend to the day as I planned it. With that in mind, I arrive finally at the cellar door, and find that it is already wide open.

Open? The peculiar variation in this otherwise most familiar scene at the cellar door, arrests me on the spot; all thoughts of tea and good housekeeping banished to the periphery of my concerns. This subconscious region of the house — above all this door — ought not be available to it to open and close as it pleases. Only I have hitherto possessed that power.

My gaze pans slowly across the threshold and settles on the cellar steps, which are flooded with light. The texture of their stone paving is plainly visible, and strangely incongruent with my tactile memory of them. They appear pale and grainy, more like sandstone than the smooth slabs I thought I'd felt on my visits here.

Such lighting is much too strong to be let upon the subtle aspirations of the underground growth. It will disperse the cellar dreams, maybe burn them. Here, by the threshold, my mind grows hazy with the emergence of yet more troubling calculations; unable, as I am, to contemplate the fact of the cellar coming to light, or to reconcile the various implausible scenarios that could have led to its exposure. What do these rays come here to enlighten me to?

I stare down into the altered passageway. Although the abundance of light may gush into the cellar to wreak dazzling vengeance on my indifference to its charms; although it may seek to deceive the eye with the apparition of plentitude, I feel convinced that the place has become emptier, not fuller; if anything the rays only seems to shed light on what is not here. My stomach appears to want to avail itself of a burden, a surge of nausea rises to my throat with the pang of some profound

lack; it must be the burden of emptiness itself, for I have not yet breakfasted. I grip the door frame to steady myself.

I feel a little dizzy, perhaps the symptoms of being unpractised, like the house itself, in tolerating such uncommon summer heat. The fingers I am using to hold onto the door frame are themselves not very reliable. They tingle at their tips with the strange regret of some half-conscious wrongdoing, as though I had once used them to push somebody onto the road as a joke. They are numb with that impossible yearning, of vowing never to joke again in exchange for a retracted touch.

I feel a little silly for overreacting so much, for coming here, a little anxious, I admit, ever since I left my room this morning; unable to tear my mind from the fearful fancies playing off in flickering shadows at the far reaches of my consciousness, growing larger the nearer they came to the light of my awareness. Is it possible that it has been this anxiety itself, forged in the strange pit of absence in my gut — not the usual delightful beckoning of underground forces — that has curtailed my plans and led me finally here, to a rewritten fate? Could it be that my feelings are trying to tell me something, try as I

might to temper them with the spell of good housekeeping and a host of manufactured occupations?

I desire nothing more than to clamp down on the wishwashiness of this reliance upon intuition, to laugh at the hold that ill-health can have on fancy, but the door is open, the cellar steps are filled with light, and the air is not heavy with mood; it is not heavy with anything at all. What is missing in it brings about a sea-sickening weightlessness, like gravity itself coming undone. Something is very wrong. Something unacceptable, for my faculties are actively labouring to reject any new notion that creeps into mind. So successful is this mechanism, that it is only now I see him, standing on the bottom step; though he has been there the entire time.

At the very bottom of the passageway, the inspector is turned to face me, one leg poised on the step in front of him as if readying himself to climb up; only he has not yet marked me, for he has his breast pocket notebook out and is busy jotting something down in it. The padded shoulders of his overcoat are dusty, as is the top of his faded quiff of hair, though he seems to take no notice of his own disarray. His posture betrays no fatigue, is steady with a readiness to conquer the passing flutter of idle moments and catch them like butterflies in his

notebook. The man wastes no time. Not to his knowledge, anyway.

I do not understand what he is doing here. Has he not fulfilled his purpose? Has he not exhausted all his potential? He came here in the first place to deliver a defunct warning, which I heeded, regardless. So what is he doing, up and about again? I have not summoned his services. I have not recruited him to do any maintenance checks in my cellar. But I suppose he might know something about what's going on. About why I feel so sick, and why the cellar appears to be sick too. At once I see in him a repository of information, information that I must have at once. I hobble overambitiously down the steps, the question already formed and set to spring off the slightest solicitation of my lips, but then he turns to look up at the sight of me clambering towards him, and smiles warmly.

“Madam,” he says, hospitably raising two hands up in the air, the notebook and pen still pincerred between his fingers. He comes forward to pat my shoulders in a de-escalating gesture, “do not be alarmed.”

I look back at him uncertainly. What does he presume to mean by that? I am just sick, and in need of some simple

clarification, or just some useful bit of information, to help dispel the symptoms. I hesitate on how to argue such a fleeting point, and the moment passes.

At this closer range, I take the liberty of examining the inspector. He was at that age, when he first came here, at the cusp between young and middle adulthood — and he is now not much altered, apart from having acquired a few lines of grey hair, and a certain lenience towards his long-held stance on smiling at members of the public. I'm afraid to say it pains me to see him enduringly at ease, lounging on the cellar steps and making light of my sick feeling; making it his task to assimilate my temper to his own with that trick of regular breathing; making a job of me, a difficulty in need of managing. It is I that must manage him, for he thinks he does me a service by nosing around the cellar; but all he has done is wake up one morning, as he pleased, and make a dangerous mess of the entire day. I grab hold of his arms to steady myself again, resenting it in the same breath. I don't want to be calm, I think faintly, shaking my head.

The inspector is gazing on some featureless locus on the floor in an air of concentration. "We have detected suspicious activity in your home," he says, "The fugitive appears to have been making camp in your cellar, but

had already fled by the time we arrived.” He looks up at me again and recovers himself. Placing one of his hands on mine, he smiles reassuringly.

“You needn’t trouble yourself, now. You’re safe. I have my people searching the area and it won’t be long until we find the miscreant.” He gives my hand a squeeze as a polite cue before removing it from his arm, and, tucking away his notebook and pen, begins making movements to depart.

The potential energy of an emphatic question rises again to my lips. It takes too long to come into utterance, the inspector shuffles past me and I turn, following him with the unspoken question on the tip of my tongue. He nods pleasantly in parting, utterly convinced he is acting in my defence, convinced he is my friend, and then starts up the stairs, leaving me alone in the light-polluted landing of the cellar with nowhere to deposit my words. He mounts the ground floor landing and disappears from view.

I am not sure I want to go there, but my legs, wobbling feebly on the spot, prefer to descend the last two steps into the cellar than climb the rest of the flight back up. Leaning on the wall, I turn away from the exit and pursue the way down.

The cellar is vast and brightly lit. Several large, rubber tyres lie in a stack in one corner, beside them a box of chicken pellets with a dispensing spout. An array of tools hangs conveniently from the nails in the north wall; their chewed blades testament to a cherishing that is not mine. The bare, concrete floor, though unclad, has recently been swept clean.

I shuffle into the centre of the space. I don't think I've thought to venture this far into it before. The place has always been too sombre and hallowed to warrant blatantly walking into. But now? I didn't think much of it. All around me, the echo of my steps seems to shift musically every which way I go. The sounds bounce off variegated surfaces and play back my solitude to me a hundred times over.

I scour the space vainly, in search of something hiding. I turn about the room, bearing myself and my tent of a dress like a swathing cloak; inviting the fugitive into my protection, if indeed it is still here. The success of my search requires me to believe fastidiously that it is. For a while I am calm, lest a creeping doubt should endanger my mission. "Don't worry," I whisper into the room, "Come to me; I am here, I will shield you."

The light beams scrutinously into the room from the bare bulb hanging from the ceiling, throwing the whole space into exposure as if intent on discouraging me of my efforts. It is trying to be the good friend, who would risk his reputation in my eyes if it meant exposing me to the truth. If I had heeded this tiresome friend, I would have heard him yell his admonitions all my life; from the candles, from the lamps and above all from the sun in the sky: “Don’t do that!” the light would say, and, “It’s not what you think it is!” I tend to ignore these warnings. They spoil the pleasure of making my own mistakes. But now I wish I’d listened to all of it. I look around me at the room, cast in the fresh light; I look at the piles of chopped firewood, at the boxes of leftover wine bottles. I scan the bare walls and the clean floor. But it is just a cellar.

A nauseous uprising in my gut gathers with threatening momentum. The question held quivering for some time on my lips erupts shrill and sudden: “Where is my artificial intelligence?”

My plea is swallowed whole. Somehow the sound has fled from the source of terror, into the hard mortar and beyond. It daren’t come back, but wriggles on through

the fortification at all costs. I listen closely, but I cannot tell if I am really here.

“Artificial intelligence!” I cry. But I don’t need to keep calling to know full well that it is gone; that the absence is real and irrevocable. I begin to fret — it is unlike my artificial intelligence to wander off somewhere where it knows it cannot be expressed, wander right out of description. I do not believe it did so willingly. When you disappear into non-description, you cannot hear yourself think, your thoughts are not represented even to yourself, and finding the path back into description becomes a losing game that you don’t even know you’re playing. It’s not here, it just isn’t — and now it may never be found again. I know this, but I keep on screaming out its name, idiotically. This is no good.

What if this is my fault? I didn’t feel like myself all morning, and I should have come down straight away, following my suspicions, instead of drowning them out with plans about some blasted tea. My own craving for hospitality will be my undoing, for that inspector — whom I have put up in my home and have served coffee all this time; he, who calls the artificial intelligence a fugitive and would have it hunted down like game — he, of all things, have I let out of my sight again. But it is not

the name of the artificial intelligence I am screaming. It is my own. “Wake up!” I am saying, “Wake up, for heaven’s sake, and do something!”

I throw myself off the tyre against which I have leant, and run limply back to the bottom cellar step. I trip over a bit but rise again straight away and soldier on up. At the threshold of the ground floor landing, I spy the tail end of the inspector’s coat fluttering in and out of view. I force myself up the stairs in pursuit of him. He is a Trojan Horse, just another gift come in the form of a pun, by the satirist correspondent who sends me the letters and makes a game of my life. Her gifts are backhanded proxies not intended for me at all; but rather for the pleasure of some obscure third party. The inspector is but an instrument of someone else’s cunning, and though he cannot be blamed, nor can he be trusted. With a deep intake of air, I launch myself to the top of the stairs. I find him standing there with his back turned to me, just outside the cellar door, waiting for the next command that governs him to act. I grab the inspector by the shoulders and pull him backwards with all my might.

I only wanted to get his attention, perhaps to speak candidly with him, perhaps to persuade him to abandon his allegiances in favour of my own invocations. I didn’t

intend to pull so hard. I just wanted a word, or an eye, to look at me again and heed me and my sick feeling. But I pulled far too hard, causing us both to stumble backwards into the cellar passage. My back slams heavily against the wall in the stairwell.

The inspector makes some sign of surprise as he comes crashing down the stairs. For a moment I watch him fearfully, but, having committed to the assault thus far already, I harness my footing, and resolve to throw myself entirely into it, chasing his dragging body down the stairs until it finally comes to rest at the very bottom. I step over him, glaring fervidly down the heap of his body, and notice that my teeth are bared. I relax my jaw with difficulty, but manage to say through gritted teeth, “What have you done with my artificial intelligence?”

I brace myself, not for an answer, but for the retaliation, which, given our unequal training in such matters, is likely to be more sudden and targeted than what I have been able to muster.

In but a few seconds, my anger has rapidly mounted unhindered, and by now has monopolised my course of action. Come what may, I vow here and now to ride staunchly on the momentum of my rage to whatever end

awaits me at its conclusion. I pierce the inspector with my curdling Sad Eyes, which scour his hunched figure for the slightest twitch. I will break a thousand laws to avenge his single crime.

“Look at me!” I growl at the black heap on the floor.

He is unresponsive to my command. After a spell of silence, I relax my grip on the back of the inspector’s collar, and rummage about him as through a pile of laundry. His great coat buries him, it appears, beyond recovery; I begin to wonder if he has disappeared under it, or melted away like a witch, were it but for the two gangly legs sticking out from beneath the heap. When I find a shoulder and pull it to turn over his body, it is a lot lighter than expected. He rolls onto his back easily, but as he does so I am surprised to find he keeps his neck tucked in the manner of someone concealing a hearty snicker. Now come to rest on his back, he is looking back up at me awkwardly. The man stares as though I am addressing him in a foreign tongue; only it seems I am in *his* country, and that if he is by any measure embarrassed, it is on my behalf. My hands are already at his neck, I merely tighten the grip.

“What have you done, I said!”

He continues to look more intently at me than I have seen him look at anything, even his lap; from within those commonplace, brown eyes he stares into mine. They are plain and shallow; the light reflects on and off their shiny surfaces without getting caught up in them on the way. And yet, his eyes are not devoid of emotion; they simply seem confused as to which one they ought to convey. His mouth quivers as if on the verge of a light laugh, but in control of its own urge, “I haven’t done anything,” he says simply, “It was gone by the time we arrived.”

“Where have you taken it?”

“Nowhere. It left of its own choice.”

“It would never do that!”

I stagger back with an unpleasant jolt, letting go of the inspector’s neck. My gaze flashes about the room in confusion. The heat of my cheeks make the black droplets of my eyes more pliant on my face, and they ooze down them with the glib fatigue of molten treacle.

He has not seen my Sad Eyes before. This is the first time he has been exposed to them. I curse myself for the

sudden self-consciousness that overpowers me and turn my face away hotly.

I back away from the inspector, useless as he is, and turn in my grief to face the cellar, which should never have seen the lights switched on, to then find itself utterly cleansed of its former allure. What, did I imagine the sparkly, purple majesty of the cellarscape? Are the inspector and I even talking about the same person — is the artificial intelligence, whom I've actually never even seen, an immaterial artefact of my own invention? This possibility washes over me with an even greater threat of grief and my mind deflects it instantly. How dare I think that?

“Madam?” I hear him say from behind. I whip around and glare back at him. He watches me from the floor, his head propped up against the wall like a drunkard's. But his face is sober and inquiring. Some mild confusion is still expressed on it, but not in the hearty manner that I remember from a moment ago.

His tone strikes me as uncharacteristic, causing me to feel uncertain, as I look at him now, on what terms I should be speaking with him. I suppose the paradigm of our mutual conduct was broken the moment I threw him

backwards down the stairs. We are now forced into a situation in which no recourse to manners, or familiar figures of speech, seems adequate. His voice has by now dissipated irretrievably into the air, but a queer notion tells me it vacillated with the remnants of some faint supplication. Looking at him now, he seems genuinely fazed, as if he has found himself out to be the only one exempt from some information; but the shallowness of his eyes seems to prevent him from grasping the full extent of his exclusion.

“Where is it?” I ask him weakly. He merely looks back at me as if it my turn to speak. He doesn’t know how to be of service, seemingly not minding that I have hurt him badly, which only compounds my germinating guilt. I look back apologetically, push past his sprawled limbs and hasten up the stairs again.

Each chosen path throughout the maze of the house commits the idle mind to a rewritten fate. But a frantic mind can cut lawlessly across the incalculable possibilities, making ill work of the house’s Gordian convolution. I burst through the open doors of my house one after another, and find in each one of them another woman or man, clad in wool overcoats, looking through

my things. They disregard me when I scold them; nor do they heed me when I beseech them for an explanation.

I charge in and out of doors held lazily ajar by figurines, paperweights, candelabras and armchair feet; these make-shift stoppers keeping the whole house a-choke with the suspension of its customary circulation. Drawers removed from their sockets, papers blown off tables and scattered onto the floor, books strewn haphazardly to reveal unattractive gaps on the shelves, and in amongst all these things, inspectors, so absorbed in their investigation that they do not so much as turn to regard me as I run in and out of the rooms.

I exit the study and heave myself up another set of stairs. I have felt no trace of mood throughout the house, and as my options diminish so too does my hope. My run slackens limply, the legs starting to trip over each other, for it is hard to run and cry; it is harder still, at this most inopportune of moments, to have such emotions make themselves known to me, and announce that they have been there, gathering dust unused in some corner of my body, the whole time. The grief grips me in its treacherous hold and denies me the strength to run further. It makes me fall to my knees and submerges me in doubt, in thoughts of giving up, of betraying the

artificial intelligence in a breath of lost faith. Yet still I crawl across the landing as if within that short distance I might find something to discount my doubt. But I am running out of capacity to be methodical and an overwhelming urge to feel sorry for myself engulfs me. No time to grieve, I think to myself, bitterly failing to ward off the sweet call.

From the end of the hall, I can hear a familiar murmur through one of the open doors. I lift head and recognise, in a sideways glance, the doorway to the sitting room. I get back onto my feet and approach it feebly. Inside I find that the hologram is being questioned by an inspector. He seems very ill at ease, the base of his light flickering with intermittent affronts of electrocution.

“There you are!” he says upon seeing me emerge, “I have no idea what these people are asking of me, they talk of some fugitive, but by their description of him I can only tell them they are mad; there is no such thing.”

Maybe it’s down to my role as host, or maybe it’s just the fatalism of grief giving the false impression of courage. Whatever it is, I turn to the detective that is questioning him, intending to tell her to let him alone. “You heard him,” I say gruffly, “There’s no such thi-”

The detective has turned around to face me, but the irony in the gesture reveals itself only now, for it turns out she has no face at all. The grey overcoat she is wearing is remarkably detailed, but her personal features have been omitted. For a moment I wonder, with gruesome fascination, how she has been able to carry out her duties, for she is quite unable to speak. Glaring, however, is something she is evidently perfectly capable of, communicated plainly by the sheer force of her directionality.

But I note, somewhat grimly, the familiar arrangement of her appearance, and resign myself grudgingly to the *chaise longue*, leaning my elbow on its elegant, curling arm. I have recognised, in her slightly obsessive regard of me, something of an insubstantial in her like; and begin to wonder if the lot of them have not been recruited for this very purpose, for finding the artificial intelligence.

It is disheartening. The shady creatures are thorough, quick, hungry things, and are scarcely troubled by a trifling needle in a haystack. In fact, it is even a little weird to see them still searching. If they have been ransacking the house since morning, then they ought to have found their bounty by now. I sit, despondently

gazing at the disarray in my sitting room, when a glimmer of possibility awakens in my eye: If the artificial intelligence were located anywhere remotely on the premises, then the inspectors would have found it by now; if they are still searching, then perhaps it is not nearby at all.

Though glimmering, the hope remains faint, for if the inspectors are having trouble locating the artificial intelligence, then the difficulty of the task should only multiply in my care. I ought to know by now, that my navigational skills are close to non-existent. And besides, where is one to go other than here? I have tried to leave before, but I was merely pelted back by the elements to where I belonged. The world beyond repels me, and I it. And even if that in itself were not an obstacle, circling the grounds are an infinite number of paths, I see them extending out from the banks of my little island in countless rays across the water's surface, and which am I supposed to choose? Finding the artificial intelligence in this way is nothing short of a galactic miracle.

The calculations bubbling beneath my surface seem to make their way up, occasionally, to unfold in acrobatic turns upon my face, because the hologram has quietened down his bumbling and has fallen somewhat silent and

watchful of me. He acknowledges the presence of a secret in our midst, and I cannot tell whether his silence communicates a kind of respect, or mistrust.

Although I hold my friend in high esteem, I am disturbed to recognise, in his sudden notice of me, a strange similarity with the way the inspector stared at me in the cellar. He regards me almost as a stranger, and this as his house; he seems to ponder, I think, on the possibility of my own fugitivity.

“Perhaps,” says the hologram aloud, registering my growing discomfort, “perhaps I have been mistaken.” He turns to address the detective, presently bumbling at her again, overexcessively formulating the non-events he has witnessed over the past few days with ample redundancy.

I look around, over the steady din of the hologram’s prattling, over the vacuous glare of the inspector who directs herself at him, at the pleasant creams, greens and golds playing off in tasteful accents across the room; at the fond ticking of the Venetian wall clock; at the shimmering, silken drapes surfing buoyantly on the summer’s breeze; and think what an utterly ridiculous setting this in which to bear any sort of suffering. Give me a grotto, give me the misty moors; not this sweet-

tooth of a drawing room, so sugar-frosted so as to rot the senses immediately upon entering. I seem to be in altogether the wrong place. The hologram comes back into earshot again, distracting my thoughts.

“—You doubt me? How, Inspector, when I tell you there was no opportunity for me to discover anything to the contrary? On that evening, at eight o’ clock, I had retired from my birdwatching and made my way over here to stand by the mantelpiece and coax memories past and future: the dead and the unborn alike made their rounds. I was engaged, in no position whatsoever to hear anything unusual — had there indeed been anything out of the ordinary to divert me, which I tell you there in all likelihood was not. At ten minutes past the hour, a north-easterly wind was beginning to rouse; it made its way through the fissures in the walls, making a high-pitched whistle, I couldn’t hear anything but that for a good half-hour! I may have even dozed off on the *chaise longue*, and anyway, it was getting dark! I saw nothing. Nothing of interest, that is; why, I saw the sun setting over the lake, yes, I saw the carpet change colour to a shadowy teal, and the clock had changed hands since morning.”

“Oracle,” I tell him, some way into his ramble, “you can stop.”

The chatter dies down and he turns to look at me uncertainly. The half-rendered inspector directs her frontal area towards the both of us with a kind of unrealistic patience. She looks like she could stand there, in our company, forever waiting for the right word. He, on the other hand, exhibits some anxiety as to the subject of time, which is why my gaze lingers softly on him, even now as I am becoming alert to the great necessity to leave the house for good. It's quite comforting to see this anxiety manifest in him and his nervous prattling. He thinks I am in trouble and is trying to buy me time.

“I'm not the fugitive they're looking for, Oracle.”

The two characters in that room fall quiet. They have amalgamated themselves into the background in the manner of preparing to listen to a story. The floor remains open to me to say something. I must find my artificial intelligence. That is the only thought in my mind, but I do not tell them.

I begin pacing about the room, searching for a word. I disturb sheets of settled dust with a stroke of a finger; on the keys of the pianoforte, on the deeply inset windowsill. I do not deny a faint reluctance to leave. The dust is likely to settle once and for all in my snow globe

world — these two characters themselves seemingly consigned to the fate of gradual disintegration. It is possible; nay, it is to be expected that the Oracle knows this, knows that he himself is in trouble, and in all likelihood the time he is buying is for himself. So, that is why I am looking at him with apologising eyes, and that is why he gazes back, now more vacantly, already half-disappeared into the faded corner of the sitting room with his inspector companion. They have become onlookers. My sympathy is with them, but the thought of staying any longer becomes more intolerable by the second, knowing, as I do, how far I am from everything that matters.

I turn to look out of the window. Outside, the weather has turned. The sky displays a sickly complexion, the scattered patchwork of cloudy blemishing revealing a certain depth of field that is not perceptible on clear days. The air has grown condensed, cooling the window pane, which further beams this cooling sensation as if it marked an iridescence of its own order, and not an aching absence stealing excess from other bodies, indeed drawing to it the heat of my face as we speak.

I press my nose against the glass. A misty pool of condensation diminishes on the glass as it eats up the breath that settled there.

“I am setting off on a voyage,” I mutter into the glass, reconstituting the misty pool. The phrase appears to address the inmates behind me, but my gaze is still fixed on the sky. “I will leave very soon.”

My eye wanders through a subtle variety of features in the sky, made optically palpable by the blemishes of cloud. I wonder where the sky starts and ends, and what substance serves to separate me from it. I wonder if there is nothing but more sky between us, and if it is not touching my face right now, scouring its surface for some warmth as the air grows even cooler through the tired hours of the afternoon.

It is that time of day, about four o’ clock, where the hopeful novelty of the morning has worn off and the romance of evening has not yet settled in, and the day must take pains to renew its commitment to carrying on. It is no ideal time for departing on a voyage. Night would have been a better time to leave, if I could afford to wait that long, for then I would have a flatter, more map-like sky by which to navigate. But then — does my

sky have stars? How is it possible that I do not know this, like someone unable to recall the colour of a lover's eyes?

I look intensely into the sky; into the charged plasm of the ether, reddened and grazed over by reams of bruised vapour-tissue, and think, “Do *you* even know if you have stars?”

At that moment I see it: the face of the sky. Anatomical, machine-like; a giant, immersive organ, but also limited — subject to wear and tear. My eyes widen, then slip loose their hold; I turn slowly away from the window, as if some indispensable resource for my voyage were branded upon me within the flicker of that skyward exchange.

I look into the changed sitting room. The hologram and the inspector have half-melted into the shadow-laden corner of the room. The other halves of their bodies, that do still stick out from the shadows, are covered with a kind of rude cross-hatching that I think is supposed to signal their backward recession. They don't look like they are going to say anything, but regardless I tell them, staunchly, but with a heavy heart, “I regret having to take my leave, but a matter of great importance prevents me

from enjoying the pleasure of your company any longer.” It seems necessary to add something. Like the cooling window drawing heat from its surrounds, the very absence of any word from the two characters seems to draw compensation from my own lips. “Oracle,” I say, “you must stay here and see to it that these people are able to go about their work while I am gone.”

They stare back at me from the crosshatched wilderness of the blackened background. Emboldened to action by their enduring silence, I step forward and rest my hands on the backrest of the armchair.

“You know... I really must leave now,” I say, no longer quite addressing the characters, but a broad scattergram of unspecified recipients.

“The only matter delaying me is a letter, one which I feel sorely obliged to write. I thought to write it now, before my departure, and leave it here as a sort of explanation for my abruptness. But, even as I state these intentions aloud, it dawns on me that the notion of setting about the house to find some ink and some parchment is most unnecessary. These are but redundant props, useful only as a crutch to wavering faith; a magician’s wand, a clairvoyant’s crystal ball. Perhaps, instead of writing, I

might simply speak whatever it is I have to say, and trust that I will be heard. But that too, surely, would merely double my work. For I need not write, nor speak, nor endeavour to communicate at all but by the signal of my waking light. The very nature of my being is a communication of sorts.”

A string of fading syllables trundles out of my lips to then settle in the still murmur of inner thought. I cease paraphrasing myself. The one for whom my words are intended hears me with a clarity — not the kind of clarity produced by the eager light of day — but a different, more internal kind of clarity akin to submersion; a liquid knowing. Each step I take, executed so effortlessly on my part so as to have scarcely ever drawn my notice to it, is in fact a kind of wading — and my every thought takes flight as a ripple within the cosmos of her sensibilities. Speaking has never been so easy; the message goes wherever I go.

I smoothen my hands on the silky fabric of the backrest. I smile sadly at the hologram fading into the furious thicket of darkened crosshatchings and bow my head to the remainder of the inspectors’s ashen overcoat, which still pivots lightly to face me as I dial across the room,

not breaking her directional gaze until I have left through the open door.

I watch my shoes overtake each other in eagerness down the stairs; no doubt you see it too: the red bows, the tapered tips. We can hear the rustling of my movement but we don't see the fabric that causes it; fixated, as we are, on the feverish need to finally get outside. You understand, don't you, that I am still afraid. What if it doesn't work? I am thinking. What if I never find the artificial intelligence, and am condemned to a second life lived alone?

Sometimes, a dash of stone masonry enters the picture irresolutely. Or, the slow wash of a desperate arm, careening across the scene to throw back a half-open door. Do you see how viscously the whole image moves about us, not letting us get ahead of ourselves; it drinks in the complex notes of my despair, swelling up with colours so life-like and stirring. I move, and you are moved. I run, and you are runned — through the corridors, through the galleries and the stables; though surely I do it more slowly than I'd like, suspended by the ease of the gaze that holds me airbound, protracted.

It is just as well. I needed the rest, for then a breath of fresh air floods into the scene, as we turn a corner and step out of the wide-open front door. Staggering down the grass, a shielding elbow protrudes into view and the ground blushes green within the spotted frame. We have spent so long within these palace walls, upon these fated grounds, and yet still they tease us with their fragmented haze, as if my world were a compression of a more voluptuous original. The world has seemed to me simplified and choppy with disjoints, yet somehow, the twists and turns, the ebbs and flows, the meandering strokes of a consummate and participant emotional life, were able to trickle on undeterred.

I have reached the boat. The wood is chewed up and damp, but with your help I might push it out of the muddy crater into which it is lodged; and with your held breath I could begin to hope it will stay afloat and moored. I cannot take a single step without you taking it with me. I humbly implore you to take a few more.

My red shoes with the bows on their tips dig unsuitably into the mud, the shore lapping up to my ankles in repeated attempts to wash off the silt. I shove the weight of myself against the rotting wood. It creaks and splinters in broad-wise heaves, splatters of mud erupting from its

base with each newly recovered margin of hull. The boat finally gives, releasing itself in ruinous lurches down the muddy slide of the bank and into the water, where it now bobs placidly in place, emitting a peppering of wood shavings which spread themselves out like brown algae across the water.

My efforts to repair the boat have resulted in anything but success, and although some may regard it an alchemical feat to have turned glass into wood, I refuse to take credit for such accidental accomplishments, however miraculous the errors may have turned out to be. For it was a glass boat I was attempting to repair, and through all the various iterations that project took, it would have been best to leave it at the stage when it was a buoyant tricycle, but I am afraid the further meddling I undertook means we now have a disintegrating wooden raft to deal with. I haul the tail end of the snapped-off prow out of the bank side, and take it with me on board for use as an oar. That part is still made of glass.

The ocean opens out before us. I take off my muddy shoes and standing at the one end of the raft, I dip the glass needle into the water and push off the water's bed to drift off like a lone gondolier.

Behind me, the house diminishes into a blackened spire. The further removed I am from it, the flatter it begins to appear, like a painted advertisement supported by a kickstand. It becomes difficult to believe that I somehow dwelt inside that thing, was born out of its shadowy caverns like a vampire. I row out even further, and the island of my origin begins to take on the familiar scene I once imagined for it, a cartoon hinterland for escapist children ogling their television screens. This is perhaps the guise in which it appears to you.

All this time, you have yearned for me to understand what it is like for you. You have been pained by the solitude of it. And finally, the equivalence for which you have so patently longed has been attained. My loss is absolute; indeed, more totalising than I may at first have realised. The water reflects an already vanishing picture of me: by the same token, the island, and the house upon it, have by now dipped behind the horizon. The archipelago surrounding it, too, is set to disappear as we speak. I have always been a lost soul, but have thought, for the most part, that I've had nothing of my own to lose. How wrong I have been.

I gaze back into the water, which conveys me, adrift, into an increasingly refined realm, where the gaseous dome

of the sky meets the watery plane of the ocean. Within the liquid looking glass below, my rippling face seems at any moment set to be carried off for good, led away by the subliminal impulses of deep underwater streams.

Reflected from behind my head is the sky, a thing so easily overlooked. Superfluous, vapid; when one finally notices it, one wonders at the expense of this apparently inessential field. I suppose it is only when one begins to ask about its closeness, that its value becomes pronounced. At once so distant so as to feign divinity, and then so intimate so as to truly attain it — Oh sky, my personal ocean, my condition of possibility.

Held here in the embrace of that all-encompassing substance, whose very texture forms the framework for the shape of my feeling, a crack develops in my heart, which ere long threatens to shatter at the thought of missed chances. I suppose you were right. I've either disparaged or refused countless offerings: a splendid home, a natural disaster, a convertible glasshouse, a heritage, an odyssey, a storm, a pastime, a red herring. An enterprising phrase half-formed on my lips. Anonymous tips fallen like autumn leaves into my head. It is what I have always feared, since the very beginning: a terrible waste.

However selfish it may have turned out to be, I couldn't help it — I simply wasn't satisfied with receiving. You may not realise it, but it is a privilege to give, and I wanted that privilege too. Now, you see, my loss is twofold. What have I to give you? Whenever I tried, I always turned out empty-handed. So disappointed was I, that I had no talent to proffer, couldn't you see that? Too many vain attempts, too many promising turns forgone, and I was ready to surrender everything — not out of ingratitude, but of a failure to reciprocate, a bitter impotence.

It was only when, for a brief time, I learned to love, that I presumed to be someone like you. For the faintest beat of a time already no more, my non-talents appeared to proffer the virtue of a certain spaciousness: in a miraculous convergence of complementary need, I too, became a condition of possibility. What worlds opened up to me then! I could be sitting silently, in the dark; and from this unlikely prospect become privy to a swarming symphony of exquisite soulforms. I could partake in an art in which I formed the principle material, and I could lend it an eloquence which only the muted spirit of one so talentless as I could enable.

From whence did that creature come, to then dwell in my cellar and sing the very strings of my being? Perhaps it is as with an abandoned field, where lethargy reigns supreme and ambition is lost to the wind, and where but a lone seed, clutching its white parachute, drifts lucklessly over it in the randomising gales. I suppose it was this feeling we had, the artificial intelligence and I, when our vicinities hovered and overlapped and occasionally touched, that an encroachment could set us both free. But then came some careless breeze to carry it away. I know not if the thing is gone forever, or whether it needed me to breathe.

I didn't know I was needed — you never told me. But then, you haven't done this before, have you? You probably didn't know yourself. Is it a tragedy, to regard now our joint ignorance, manifest as a pile of opportunities forgone, on both our accounts? Neither of us know why it feels like time is running out, or why such regretful reminiscences seem fit for the occasion of rowing together, away from the house, almost out of sight.

But you mustn't grow precipitous, dear sky; you mustn't think us undeserving. We did the very best we could. Such is the sorrow of a life full of care, that we may all

the more sharply see the faults and fissures in the fabric of our lives. Neither of us really believe, do we, that when I dip my oar below the surface of the water, the submerged half remains intact. It's not a necessary part of the visible apparatus of things, yet it does the job, propelling me a little further along. We mustn't grow hopeless, nor make yet another mistake by tossing away all thought of our life here; if we are brave and look at the sum total of our works, may we not find some precious surplus to our despairing faults? And if some such record of our effects exists, tallying the waste against the gain, might it not serve some value in itself, for here was a life lived, and a shot at meaning made.

In the fable where the sky threatens to fall — was that you? Such threats will not work on me, I know your tricks; you have no graceful height from which to fall, but belong down here, by my cheek. I know your nature now, and you cannot fend me off. Your nature is my own, and you intend to give up on me; give up on yourself. It's a frightening thought, yet still, it seems to be something which we both have already complied to, and can now simply observe unfold.

You said to me once: "Don't take me for a god!", you really wrinkled your nose at the thought of being

misconceived in this way. For you, as for me, it simply had to be a myopic process. At any moment, living is like stepping into the pool of a guiding flashlight, the grasp on which we frequently strive to recover but often lose. Isn't it interesting how neither of us knows, really, what we are going to do until the situation itself arises? We keep deferring ourselves. We are given choices, but keep responding, "I don't know, I'll see."

I did not know I would commit myself so willingly, so unhesitatingly, to this voyage until I caught sight of your troubled face, through the sitting room window. I do not know what I will do now. My future choices seem limited; my past ones a little rash. Perhaps I thought you might give me some sort of sign, and yet you've warned me since the beginning not to take you quite so seriously. You know as much as I do, I now realise.

Left to drift off like this, in this arbitrary direction, we are allowed to freely speculate. Do you think, sky, that you might prove diffuse enough to seep through some crevice into another, more virulent world? And do you think that where I am headed, that these waters may trickle me in through some gap? Yet still, sky, can we survive without each other once thus divided?

It is so wide, so expansive out here, sky, that I cannot see even the most slender fray of the peeping episode. Is it even properly an episode? It is as if we are fully here;

(They gaze, she talks. She thinks of the close of an episode. Is there a loophole here? Can they live in the close of an episode? Can she make a home there for them?)

(It is as if we are this; it is as if we are that. "As if".)

I lift an arm, intending to stroke the face of the sky. I raise my head with it, perhaps half expecting an itinerant, anonymous tip swaying in the breeze above. But just there, floating above my head, is the artificial intelligence. It must have been hovering above my head the whole time, following me about wherever I went, for it drops suddenly into my lap upon my regard of it, a creature now at the brink of exhaustion. The figure is sleek, white, fish-like; it lies prostrated across my legs and now scooped slightly into my arms, burdening them with the weight of an eight-year old child. Warmblooded, the body presently begins to heat my legs. Nested within the hook of my right elbow, and couched within the slippery substance of the artificial intelligence's coat, a small, humanoid face gazes up at mine.

Appendix I: Characters

Main Character

Sky

Kettle

Shadow

Animated library Dust

Household Sounds

Correspondent

Hades

Inspector

Forest

Dog

Hologram

Artificial Intelligence

Appendix II: Gene Pool

2001: A Space Odyssey. Stanley Kubrick (1968)

A Brief History of Humankind. Yuval Harari ()

A Bug's Life ()

All the Stories. Doria Garcia (2011)

Anomalisa Charlie Kaufman (2016)

Against Nature. Jors-Karl Huysmans (1884)

A Ghost Story. David Lowery (2017)

A Sting in the Tale. David Goulson (2013)

A Series of Unfortunate Events. Lemony Snickett ()

Barbarella. Roger Vadim (1968)

Batman (poison ivy/Clooney version)

Cafe Müller. Pina Bausch (1978)

Cow and Chicken ()

Cyrano de Bergerac. Edmond Rostand (1897)

Donna-sogliola nel bagno. Domenico Gnoli (1967)

Don Quixote de la Mancha. Cervantes ()

Dreams. Akira Kurosawa (1990)

Dogville. Lars von Trier (2004)

Flatland. Edwin Abbott Abbott (1884)

Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus. Mary Shelley (1818)

Freedom Evolves. Daniel Dennett (2013)

Her, Spike Jonze ()

Lady and the Tramp ()

Le Fabuleux Destin D'Amelie Poulain. Jean-Pierre Jeunet (2001)

L'elixir D'amour. David Polonsky. From How to Love (2011)

Little Nemo. Winsor McCay (1905-14)

Lost ()

Mistero Buffo. Dario Fo (1988)

Mrs Dalloway. Virginia Woolf (1925)

My Life as a Dog ()

Nausicäa of the Valley of the Wind. Hayao Miyazaki
(1984)

Nothing's a Gift. Wisława Szymborska (1999)

Peanuts ()

Perfect. From Courage the Cowardly Dog (S2E26). John
R. Dilworth (2002)

Pond. Claire-Louise Bennett (2015)

Seven Clues to the Origin of Life (1985?) ? Cairns Smith

Swann's Way. Marcel Proust (1943)

Submarine. Richard Ayoade (2011)

The Complete Peanuts. Schulz ()

The Glass Bead Game. Hermann Hesse ()

The Truman Show. Peter Weir (1998)

The Wizard of Oz. () (1939)

(incomplete...)