

The background is a complex abstract artwork. It features several vertical bands of color: a wide red band on the right, a blue band in the middle, and a green and yellow band on the left. Overlaid on these are various organic, painterly shapes in shades of blue, white, and brown. A series of small white dots forms a wavy line across the composition, adding a sense of movement and rhythm.

# METRIC

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GNARLED LOUP  
THE RENTALS  
ON SHIFT

YOUTH  
SHADOWS  
HURRY

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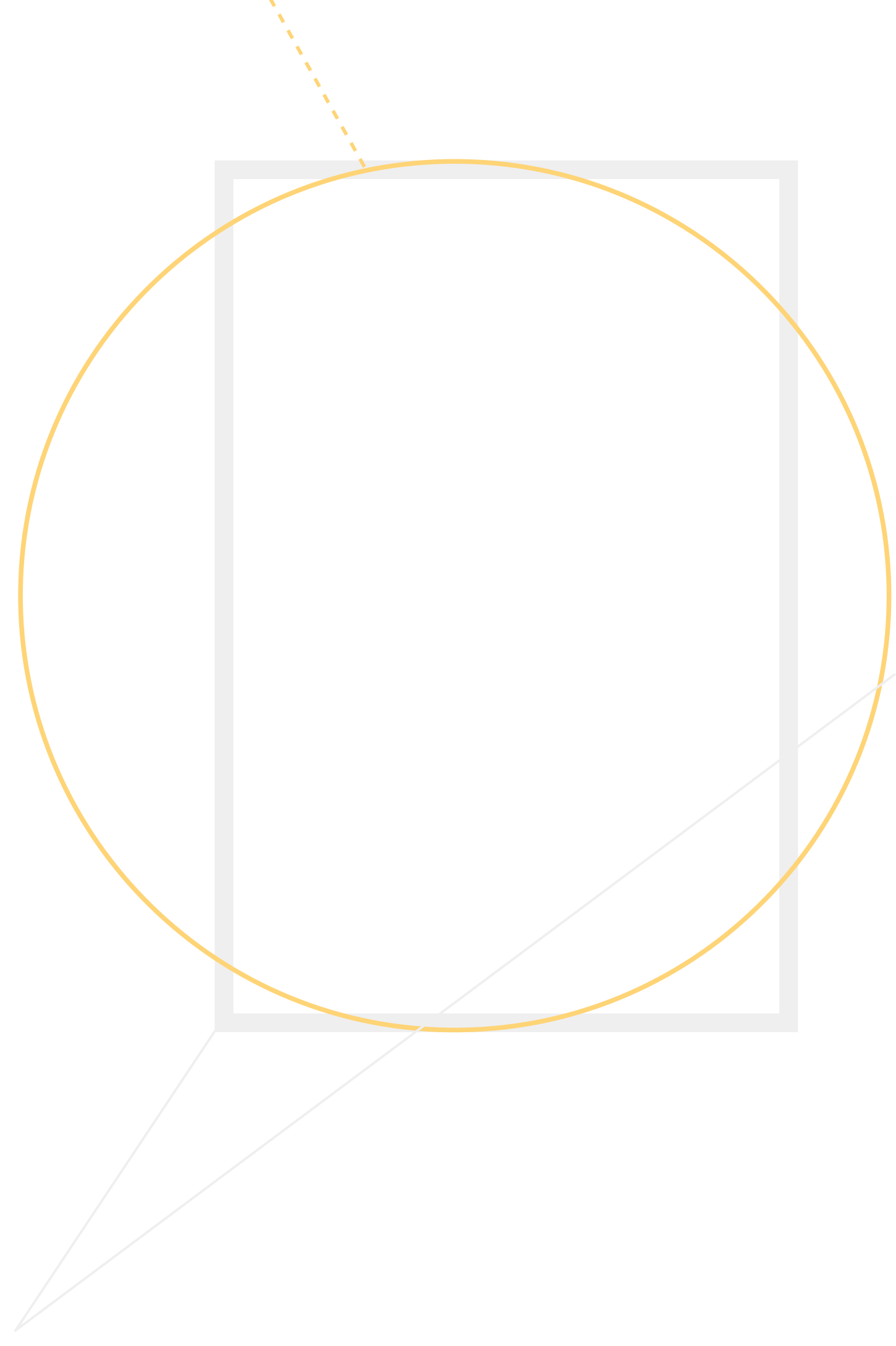
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PROSE

# SHE WRAPPED HERSELF IN BANDAGES

At night, snipers come and take shots from darkened windows as Eastern Bloc buildings shape-shift. I am always their target. Jungiantherapy.com says this means I am trying to purge an aspect of my personality, but it doesn't specify which. This is the fourth time in a week I have woken up rigid.

I started going to St Matthew's at lunchtime for that comforting church smell and to be reminded of other places. On my first visit, the stained glass window shone blue and red shapes onto the worn carpet in the centre. I sat down on a nearby pew and stared into the red: flames from the Last Judgement, I guessed, turning my

head to find an archangel in the middle of the scene, holding some scales.

A woman was sitting on the pew in front of me, about four seats along to my right. She was picking at the plaster on her thumb and quietly intoning:

*Guava root a medicine  
Guava root a medicine  
Guava root a medicine  
Fe go cure di young gal feva*

*Guava root a medicine  
Guava root a medicine  
Guava root a medicine  
Fe go cure di young gal feva*

At first, she was picking at the plaster as if the tip of her thumb had been stung. She was frowning and crumpling up her body to get at it. The scratching became more vigorous and her whole body began to vibrate. Then she just stopped moving. She stopped scratching, stopped shaking, she just sat up and stared ahead. A minute or so later, she walked out, her Tesco bags rustling as she walked. I noticed I had been clenching my jaw.

Tuesday, I was in the same spot when she sat down directly in front of me. She turned her head and said:

“Why do you come here?”

The white of her eyes seemed whiter than any I had seen before.

“Well, um, I suppose it’s quiet and it’s somewhere different to go.”

“Yep, yep,” she said.

I began to study the ingredients on my sandwich wrapper.

“I like it here. They don’t bother you,” she continued.

“I got a mocha today.”

The woman nodded towards her paper cup then back up to me, as if she was expecting a compliment, or praise,

for the choice she had made. She nodded towards the café in the entrance to the hall.

“Hmm.”

“Have you tried the mocha?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“It’s nice. Where do you work?”

“Not far, near the Imperial War Museum.”

“Do you work for a charity? Is it that gay one? Do you work for them?”

“No, no.”

“Do you know the one I mean? The gay one. It’s just around the corner. They come here sometimes.”

“Oh, OK.”

“But do you know the one?”

“Stonewall?” I offered.

“So you do know.”

She was staring at me, but I couldn’t read her expression.

“I’m going now,” she muttered, then she was up, collecting her bags.

“Will you be here tomorrow?” she asked.

“Maybe.”

“OK. Bye.”

I watched her leave, her gait jerky and uneven. As she reached the door, she lent over to put her paper cup on the counter next to the coffee machine.

“Bye Bernice,” the café worker shouted after her, a middle-aged woman with tired, bleached hair.

“She’ll be off to St Barnabas,” she said to the woman next to her.

I didn’t go back to the church that week. I spent my breaks at my desk, eating packed lunches and reading problem pages online. I researched the healing properties of guava root and found that although no health

benefits had yet been proven, it was widely used in Jamaican communities to help induce relaxation and prevent sleep disturbance. I bought a jar from Holland & Barratt.

A week later, I saw her face in the local newspaper below the headline:

#### WOMAN KILLED IN HOUSE BLAZE

The police had not yet determined the cause of the incident, but her neighbour was quoted as saying:

“I heard she wrapped herself in bandages. Then she set the bandages on fire.”

Now when I lie in bed, I see her body engulfed in flames, thick smoke obscuring her old room, the white of her eyes shining through.



## GNARLED LOUP

A dishevelled old man shuffled in, the door swinging-to behind him with a second cheerful peal of tiny bells. When the door to the café first chimed and swung open, there were already two glasses in front of me: one empty, the other half full. He looked to be late middle-age, his grizzled, weather-beaten face peering over a dirty grey beard; it is not easy to judge the ages of those rough sleeping, itinerant sorts. I surreptitiously watched over my book as he began a round of the solitary café patrons, appearing to question each in turn, and by each in turn being dismissed. When he had exhausted his choices of elderly patrons, seeing me, he made his way over

to my table, bypassing the local youths clustering at the bar. I stared resolutely at my book as he approached, feigning obliviousness to his presence until he addressed me.

« Tu parles anglais? » His accent was thick with english, i's pronounced as e's and e's as i's, as Anglophones so often do. I felt some pity for the man, his manner of speaking would not make life easier for any person in this part of the world.

« Un peu, I speak a little english. What is the problem?

— Thank Christ, lad. How be ?

Here, you couldn't help out a fellow traveller could you ? » He glanced meaningfully at my empty glass.

« Help you out with what, m'sieu ?

— I be fair parched, out travelling all day, an it be thirsty work an all. Me wallet got nicked in the last town over and - » I was about to interject with an excuse and apology but he caught the look on my face.

« Here lad, be there anything you'd take in exchange ? Our mam didn't raise us to be no beggar. » I raised an eyebrow, but he ignored it and continued.

« I reckon you might be a feller who enjoys a good yarn, would you buy a tired old man a drink to hear his tale ?

— Of course m'sieu, a good story is worth a drink. But ... a bad story is not. How can I tell which is yours, until it has been heard ?

— That be fair do's lad. How's about I tell you me tale first ? If ye think it be worth it, you can buy us a drink after.

—You are willing to take this risk ?

— Oh aye, I reckon you'll like it well enough. Do we have us a deal then ? »

He was mistaken to assume I was reading stories; it was a treatise on language. I had been struggling to make sense of a particularly drôle section on palindromes, but the alcohol and lack of sleep had already addled my eyes; I was not absorbing the words, only running my eyes back and forth over the page. So his interruption was welcomed and I nodded my assent. We shook hands as I introduced myself and asked his name. He pulled back a chair before answering, but did not yet sit.

« Right you are then. Me mates calls us Wolf, but our mam called us Rob. Robert Ross I be. Pleased to meet you lad.

— Wolf ? What sort of name is this for a man, Wolf ?

— Just call us Rob then, aye ? Right, just stay sat a moment, I'll be back in half a tick. I need to wet me whistle afore I start. »

He slid his backpack under the table then turned and hurried out of the café, out of sight past the large windows. It seemed to me that the level of conversation in the bar swelled at his exit, but I paid little attention and took the opportunity to visit the toilets and wash his grime off my hands.

It did not take long, so I was a little surprised to find him already sat waiting at the table, clutching a glass mug of semi-translucent yellow liquid which smelt of fermented apple. A wide, faceted pint glass, out of place beside the slender bottles and fluted glasses in which the establishment's lagers were served. I silently congratulated myself on having not fallen for his disingenuous begging. As I sat down, he took a sip then spoke.

« So, where should I begin, eh lad?

— I cannot say, it is your story, is it not ?

— You wants I should start at the beginning, aye ? Right-o. I moved to the continent a few year back. What it was is I used to be a techie for film, doing special effects, you know what that is ?

— Yes, in french it is called the same.

— Good lad. Well, used to be good steady work, but dried up the last few year. All the studios were making the switch over t' using computer effects. It's all shite, don't never look proper. You ever see a film shot with real special effects, just looks right. When it be done on a computer like, the explosions be too clean, computer monsters

don't be nigh good as puppets, and you can sees the blood is painted on, digital like. It were all about doing it cheap. At any road, it mean there were less work for us hands-on types, so we had to go on the road. Me last job was over here, working on some artsy bollocks. You can say what you like about the french but they knows how to make a film.

— ... What do you like to say about the french?

— Just a figure of speech, lad. Look, they used to know how, any rate. As I were saying, money was tight at home so I took us a job over here, working on the pyro-team for some art-house film. We was shooting in the Alps over the border there. I had full-term down in me contract so I thought it were a good bet. O'course they don't pay you in advance, see, so I rented meself place to live and got part time work doing security.

About a third o' the way through filming, studio only went an got bought up by some girt big american corporation. A right bad lot, they wanted to 'take the studio in a new direction'. More blockbusters, less arty shite and all special effects done in digital. It were all about doing it flashy an on the cheap, no craftsman-

ship, see. New company meant all old contracts was void, had t' be renewed. Course they didn't want us lot back, all us techies were chucked out on our arses.

It were a pickle, no mistake. Tied into full term for me rented house, without a studio pay check an' lumbered with a load of unused gear. I were stranded, stuck here. Lucky I had money coming in from me security gig, but even so 'tain't easy living a place you don't speak the lingo. In the security business there ain't much call to speak to folk so I weren't about to learn. Ain't like I planned on staying, neither. There was many a time I put aside near enough to get meself home, but I'd go out to celebrate an the next morning somehow it weren't enough. Pissed it away. I were living like that for a while, covering shifts where need be. It were a big security contractor with a load of different gigs so work weren't scarce. There was a norwegian feller they paired us up with, my partner Chute. Spoke english he did but never did speak much of anything. He'd worked that gig for years, always doing the night shifts too. That an his glasses be why he were called Chute.

— Chute ?

— Yes lad, Chute. Girt big feathery

things, ye get em at night, hooting an such. You must know what an owl is, lad. All us guards had nicknames.

— Ah, but of course ! Une Chouette. And you are Wolf. Je comprends. Mais ... he was not called Hibou ?

— Not Hibou, that were the joke. Hibou be crested an' he were a slap-head. At any rate, they kept us two moving around from site t' site. Eventually they got to trusting us with real work, so we got put steady on night shift at them there research labs up in the mountains.

— Oh ? What were they researching ? » I interrupted, sensing an end to his rambling prologue and looking up from my beer.

« Hang about lad, I'll get to that. It were a serious job there, we was even sorted out with side-arms and stab-proof vests. Worked there a few months, I got meself a routine; sleep through the day, up in time to make me pilgrimage t' work the late shift an down t' pub at weekends. Might turn up 'ungover but never late, me. Proud of that I be, our mam raised us to always do a proper job.

It were a lonely lot for a while. Chute an' I went out on the piss with t'other guards some days but the only

soul with me phone number or reason to give us a ring was me boss. Which is why it shook me up one afternoon when I was woken by the darn thing ringing. I fell right out a bed and ran to it, but it'd stopped 'fore I got to it. I figured I'd overslept and me boss wanted the reason why. Rather'n give excuse, I were up an out the house direct, took the car and went straight in to work. Course, soon as I were there I seen it were hours early. Bloody typical. It were the end of the day still, so I had the place to meself. Even the frogs on the shift afore me had clocked out early. Weren't unusual for these lads to skive off so I didn't think much of it. I kitted up and took a gander round the place; nothing were out of order so I settled in to wait for Chute to turn up.

Never did though, did he ? Instead he calls us up on the office phone, says he couldn't make it in, road were closed off. Turned out a tanker truck overturned when some crazy bugger ran out front of it waving a gun, whole main road were shut down while they cleared up and looked for him. Word from the boss was for us to double all me patrols that night, or least 'til more security were let through. They thought some real trouble might be headed down our ways, but I were stranded. Didn't want to frighten me but they thought it might be eco-ter-

rorists or jihads or some other shite. Could even be trouble from a rival lab or some foreign government up to no good. It weren't a situation I were glad to be in, on the job for months but never dealt with nern more serious than trespassing kids 'til then. At any rate, thought I best get on with it. Grabbed me pistol an torch and set about making me rounds.

It were dark by the time I'd finished me second round. I gave it a few before heading out of the guard hut again, 'cross the unlit courtyard to the labs. That's when I saw the bastard. Scruffy bloke in a big coat, all hunched over like. Looked jus' like a terrorist you see on the news. I shouts for him to freeze and shines me torchlight on him to get a better look but he throws up his arm to shade his eyes from t' torch, meaning I can't see his face. What I does see is the gun in his hand. Chute was the one with experience, I ain't no sissy but I'd not come up against an armed feller before. I panics and squeezes the trigger, shot three girt big bleeding holes in that poor feller before he were off his feet. He dropped cold dead right there in a pool of blood in the snow. » Rob paused, scratching his receding hairline as the barman called for la dernière tournée. « At any road, it be time for a smoke I reckon. You coming, lad ? »

« But Doctor, I can remember all of the year after that ! »

When travelling between, or through, time zones, the body clock can come unstuck, unable to decide whether it should be awake or asleep. Whichever it should be; it knows you are tired. This is jet lag: not just a shifted or altered sleeping pattern; a de-synchronisation from time and reality.

Perhaps in the days of analogue or the earliest digital clocks it was easier for the chronic traveller to keep track of when he or she last slept. To change the time on a simple watch, it took some thought and effort on the travellers part to set it back, or forward. It would be a tangible event to remember. On crossing the border to a new country you were forced to recalculate the difference every time, the thought and action imprinting it in your memory. It was a reminder that you were now as many hours ahead, or behind, as the case may be. Thanks to the convenience of modern technology, this practice is no longer a necessity.

Today, the watch (or more often a phone) does the calculation for you; it detects the move between time zones via satellite and silently adjusts itself to show the local time. The sort of

thing that, once one is accustomed to, is impossible to do without. For someone as un-mathematically minded as myself, it means there is no longer the need to work out the relative times for each journey, no longer the need to worry that a connection was booked that left before arrival or twelve hours later. It is possible to arrange to meet a foreign colleague at a certain time and be sure of not arriving hours before, or shortly after he or she has given up waiting. Life would be a great deal harder without it.

The downside to this is the feeling of disconnection from relativity; time seems to skip and loop. You could fall asleep for an hour or two, only to wake up and find it is now earlier than when you first closed your eyes. You might find yourself reliving the same bleak early morning, twice or three times in a row before it is finally midday. Time might skip forward unpredictably; it might take you two hours to read this sentence, or six to drink your coffee. Add this to the jet lag and the effect can be profoundly disconcerting. Unbound in time and unhinged in time zone, reality gains a certain surrealism.

The surest curative I have found for this is to drink, heavily. As regular travel entails a certain amount of waiting, there is always plenty of time for it.

Whether waiting for a plane in an airport bar, waiting for a contact in a hotel foyer or waiting for a train in a side street bar near a station, there is always an opportunity to have a quiet drink. Even a late-open dance club will do as a last resort, one just has to ignore the music and other customers. I don't doubt you'll agree, that it is infinitely preferable to spending your time in a urine-soaked waiting room or huddled on a windy platform. My habit is to find a quiet corner to sit and read as I drink, to pass the time.

That is what I had intended when recently I found myself stopping over in the small town near the Alps. I was waiting for my connection: a late-night train which would take me further south. I wanted some cigarettes and a drink. Typical to that part of France there is very little near the station itself; however a short walk away down the road is the built up area of the small town. In these built-up areas is often a choice of shops and drinking establishments. The first I passed was a small bar, a painted blue exterior but a sign in the window, from a distance I could see it was dark inside, closed. The streets were partly deserted, but it was not too long before I spotted someone coming down a side road towards me, a woman to whom I waved and approached, hoping for direc-

tions. She acknowledged me, speaking in what you might call a cut-glass accent, certainly the variant local to that department.

« Etes-vous perdu, jeune homme ?

— Oui, un petit peu, merci. Je cherche un endroit où je pourrais m'asseoir et boire quelque chose, est-ce qu'il y a un café ou un bar près d'ici ?

— Le Café de la Renaissance se trouve au bout de la rue, vous n'avez qu'à continuer tout droit. Si vous arrivez à l'avenue Lucian Fèbre, c'est que vous l'avez dépassé.

— Merci. A propos, pourriez-vous m'indiquer sur le chemin un endroit où acheter des cigarettes ? Je n'en ai presque plus.

— Désolée, she apologised, il y a un tabac ouvert 24 heures sur 24 à côté, mais... il est déjà 21 heures passées, il vient juste de fermer.

— Excusez-moi, je ne comprends pas très bien. Il y a un tabac ouvert 24 heures sur 24 qui ferme à 21 heures ?

— Oh, ils ouvrent de 9 à 21 heures tous les jours, deux fois simultanément.

— Deux fois simultanément ? » I thumbed my chin in pensively at this, considering that perhaps I had misunderstood her accent.

« Oui, exactement. Comme ça ils ouvrent littéralement 24 heures sans avoir besoin d'ouvrir la nuit. Ce qu'ils perdent comme ventes ils le gagnent en ne payant ni électricité ni heures supplémentaires. C'est génial.

— Pardonnez-moi, madame, mais comment un magasin arrive-t-il à ouvrir 'deux fois simultanément' ?

— N'est-ce pas évident ? Voyez, c'est tout simple: chaque porte du magasin est en fait deux portes qui occupent exactement le même espace physique. Il est impossible d'ouvrir ou de fermer uniquement une porte car l'autre lui bloque alors le passage ; donc elles ne peuvent être ouvertes ou fermées que si deux personnes qui occupent le même espace physique ouvrent chacune sa porte exactement au même instant. Comme ça le magasin peut ouvrir douze heures, deux fois simultanément par jour, ce qui fait au total vingt-quatre heures.

— D'accord, mais n'est-ce pas impossible ? Deux personnes ne peuvent pas occuper le même espace.

— Impossible non, mais très dif-

ficile, she stated with contempt, Il semble que c'est pour cela que les employés du magasin doivent ne faire qu'un pendant les heures d'ouverture. » As though it were a simple and obvious fact.

« Mais...

— On vous pardonnerait de penser qu'à tout moment il ne se trouve qu'un seul employé dans le magasin.

— Mais... je... pardonnez-moi madame, peut-être qu'on ne se comprend pas très bien. » I decided it would be best to make my excuses and disengage from the conversation, apologising and wishing her a good night. She wished me bonne nuit in return and we parted.

I took my chances with her advice and made my way down the road to the location she indicated. Thankfully, her directions were sound and the Café de la Renaissance was not hard to find. Inside it was quiet and cool, a group of youths were perched on the high chairs at the bar and a handful of what I took to be regulars scattered around who glanced up as I entered, but seemed generally uninterested in my presence. I made myself comfortable in a corner with a glass of beer and busied myself with my reading.



« Doctor, doctor, I think I'm going insane ! I can't remember anything that happens next year !

— That's hardly surprising, sir it hasn't happened yet. »

Rob rose from the table and went out, taking his half of cider with him whilst I rolled a cigarette from my last few crumbs of tobacco. As he left, the murmuring conversation of the youths swelled louder once again. I caught intermittent glances thrown at me, one in young man particular was openly staring. Choosing not to see them, I pulled my coat on and followed the storyteller outside.

We stood a while smoking in silent, affable companionship. Rob leant against the wall, staring into the middle distance, myself shuffling my feet on the spot and looking up and down the street. Our cigarettes had burned perhaps half way when the youths left the bar. The door opened only once but swung to and fro so the bell tinkled repeatedly as they filed out, somewhat conspicuously ignoring us. The last to leave was that same young man who had been so resolutely staring. As he came through the doorway his squared shoulders slammed against the pane with such a force I thought the glass might crack. His hands thrust firmly

in his pockets and shoulders raised, he glared at the floor as he hurried after his companions. Ten metres or so from the door he turned and loudly spat at us, before hurrying away after his receding companions.

Nonplussed, I turned to Rob, hoping for an explanation. He avoided my look and fiddled with his cigarette.

« This man, do you know him ?

— Oh aye, ran into the little bugger next town over. Big flamin' bully thought he'd pick on a lonely old man, attacked us when me back was turned. I tell you, I were so angry I were beside meself. We sorted him out good an proper, he ain't about to forget in a hurry. »

I took a moment to process this and opened my mouth to ask for clarification, but Rob had stubbed out his cigarette and was already moving towards the café entrance. I kept quiet and followed him back indoors.

We sat together quietly in the now nearly empty café. Rob appeared pensive, mulling some thought over in his mind. He sipped his cider, swilled it around his mouth then swallowed and spoke:

« Here, lad. What does you know of quantum computing ?

— Not very much at all, why ?

— Right. Chute explained it to us, this be how I understand it. If it ain't right, take up wi' him. What it is, was what them up at the labs there was making tiny super-computers so powerful they can work out everything that be. That sort of thing be right dangerous, mind. Heard them scientists talking about it once, them said it were like they been making demons in that the place. Never been one for religion but by gar hearing that sort of talk from science folk can rattle a feller ».

Rob's eyes glazed over and he began to speak in a monotone, seemingly reciting something from memory.

« There be an infinite number o' overlapping three-dimensional universes, but 'cause they be in a different dimension, they ain't observable, like. Every moment in time be movement into a near but different dimension, so like, causality ain't causing change, it be making a choice o' which universe to move to. See, like information be a qualitative state of matter. For example, transistor can change state without moving, so if you have you a

system where everything be computed relative to everything else and everything be computed in continuum, the littlest inaccuracy can explode into yon fractal of new events, if the system goes in a feedback loop. Follow ? » I didn't, but nodded anyway.

« Nowt moves, it just be information, which don't physically exist. Like a reflection in a mirror. At any road; what they reckoned be that we're locked into a perception o' the time us lives in, what the mind does be protecting us from t'other timelines, else nowt would make sense. Now, with yon quantum computer you can nudge sideways, from the current universe to yon parallel one that that you already been.

— You are talking about a time machine ? »

At this suggestion Rob looked aggrieved.

« No, lad ! It bain't time travel, you be moving sideways through a fourth dimensional matrix. ».

He leaned back in his chair, a triumphant look on his face.

« I understand. So, how does this relate to your dead intruder ?

— Well that be the thing. At them there research labs, they'd have a gadget that they'd made, looked like a fancy wrist-watch. I seen them a few times afore, so I recognised what I seen on the fellers wrist. I walks over to him, pulls his arm from his face and what does I see ? It were I ! I'd only went an shot meself ! »

I was starting to wonder how much of what he had told me so far had been true he truly believed. His face told the story as earnestly as his mouth, but perhaps there was the faintest glint in his eye.

« Don't you give us that look, lad. Have some respect for the dead. I were staring at me own dead body laid out cold in the snow. Same clothes, same gun in me hand, fourth-dimensional matrix trans -

— Time machine.

— - transponder, strapped to me wrist. What could I do ? I'll tell you what I did lad, I kept panicking. Unstrapped the fourth-dimen -

— Time machine.

— Alright, alright. Unstrapped the time machine from me dead body, strapped it to meself and hit some buttons. It made a peculiar noise and next

thing I know I'm blinking in t' daylight an me body was gone. Wandered back over to the guard cabin, day guards was there and right surprised to see me, but took the opportunity to ask us if I'd take over an they could clock off early. I weren't thinking straight, so I just agrees. All I was thinking was how to avoid getting shot by meself in t' future. Once t'other guards had driven off I locked up behind meself an started walking to the road. I figured what I'd do was flag down that big tanker that was going t' cause a pile-up so it wouldn't, that way Chute would be on patrol with us, it would all go different. I got to t'road just in time to see the truck coming. Daft sod that I am, weren't till I'd ran out on the road in front of it waving me gun that it clicked.

— Of course, then it is no surprise they did not find the culprit ?

— I be here, baint I? I just hit the switch on me fo — time machine — again and were gone. T' pile-up vanished so's I walked back to t' labs. Now I seen enough films about time-travel to knows you ought never talk to yourself or it'll end reality, or some shite like that but I didn't know what else to do. I be ashamed to admit it, but I found a phone there in the labs and rang meself up.

— I think reality did not end, but unless I am mistaken, you did not answer ?

— You be right there, lad. I didn't. All's I did were wake me past self up in time to miss the pile-up. Seems you can't change the past, trying to jus' causes what's already happened. You can travel in time but the blummin thing's immutable.

— Quite a problem. But I think you are not dead, were you mistaken ?

— No lad. Well, aye, but it don't be what you think. Found us a way out I did. »

He swallowed the last of his cider and raised the empty glass to me.

« So how's about that drink ? Mine's a scrumpy. »

Guessing by scrumpy he meant another cider, I grinned and acquiesced, taking the proffered empty glass and my own to the bar. The man serving wordlessly refilled my beer, and filled Rob's large mug from a murky bottle kept out of sight behind the bar. I placed our drinks on the table, Rob sipped his and gave a satisfied sigh.

« Ah, that's a good'un. Do you have any idea how hard it be to find a

decent cider in France, lad ?

— I confess, I don't, monsieur. Please, you have your drink: finish your story. How is it that a man can escape certain death ?

— Well you can't change the past, see ? It be immutable. What has happened, has and will, but can you be sure you knows what it were ? There ain't no way to be certain like, subjective reality an that. So I reckoned, I can't change the past, but maybe what I seen weren't what happened. I got the idea from Chute. Funny feller, he were keen on vitamins — swore by 'em ! They just be placebos I tells him but he would nern listen, just kept swallowing the things. So's one night when we was out on t'piss, just the two o' us, I asks him whys he took them. What he said was, it didn't matter none if he knew they was placebos, so long as he knows the placebo effect works, that way they'd still have the placebo effect. He were playing a trick on himself. Maybe I can trick myself an all. So afore I goes back one last time, I popped home for some of me old gear. See, when I were laid off from the film production, I was saddled with all this spare equipment they weren't going to use. Bits of animatronics, squibs, remote detonators, false limbs, blanks an that.

— Ah ! So you put blanks in your own gun ? Super ! But you must have seen there were no holes, no blood when you checked your body ?

— There it is though, when I first seen me body, there been holes an' blood. I were shot, no question. Do you know what a squib be, lad ?

— A squib ? No, what is a squib ?

— Hold on a tick. » Rob pulled out his bag from under the table and began to rummage in it. With a satisfied grunt, he pulled out a length of wire, from which dangled a tattered plastic pouch, affixed to the centre of a square of rigid material.

« See this here ? Back in the day, we used 'em to simulate folk getting shot on film. Stick one under yer clothes and run a charge through it, goes off with a bang, blows a hole clean through t' little blood pouch and your clothes an all. I kitted meself out with some, then I goes back to the labs. Arrived just as t'other me was heading back in. He shines a light on us an shouts. Soon as I hears that, I hit me detonator. Once, twice, three times an three girt big founts of blood shoot out of me frontways. Stung like heck, but it worked. He takes us for dead an nicks the time machine from me

wrist then vanishes. Saved meself from death at me own 'ands. Let's see you do that with fancy computer graphics !

— Génial ! How did you explain this to your colleagues ? Do you still work at the labs ?

— Ah, there be security cameras on all t' labs, I put t' time-machine back where it was from and cleaned up the blood but they gave us the sack from the security company for deleting the footage.

— Surely they would understand, if you told them the destroyed footage was an accident-

— No lad, it ain't so simple, at any rate I reckon I didn't want to work there no more, it be dangerous with that type o' tech jus' layin' around.

— Even so, surely the security contractors would - »

Here we were interrupted by the café owner who was trying to close for the night. I thanked Rob for his story, and we hastily obliged the manager, gathering our belongings and leaving. I noticed that Rob, who had been too busy telling his story to drink, took his glass with him.

## THE RENTALS

And i'd get drunk at night after Mom went to bed and get in my truck and drive up the hill and park in the church parking lot and turn off my truck and sit there on the hood looking down at my rentals, both of them, right next to each other down there on woodlawn avenue

and i'd smoke cigarettes and drink from my flask and look at my properties, which my mother inherited from my father, and sometimes i'd see a light go on and i'd know it was one of those college girls getting ready for bed.

and then i'd get to thinking about her undressing, and then i'd get to

thinking about her, her straight dark hair and even teeth, and then i'd get to thinking about the two of us

and then like by magic i'm transmogrified into her bedroom, and she snatches up a t-shirt to cover herself and exclaims something like,

"How did you get in here?"

and i say,

"Don't worry," my hands out in front of me, moving slowly forward, "it's ok"

and slowly i'm on her and then quickly, convincing her with my hand

over her mouth until she realizes that  
it's all ok

and then we get going real strong  
and steady and she sits up there with  
me in the cab when it gets cold, drink-  
ing a little bit of my whiskey and look-  
ing down at the rentals until she falls  
asleep with her head on my shoulder

until we're married and have our  
kids and i cry behind my sunglasses  
when the older girl graduates high  
school and i sell one of the rentals so  
that she can go to college

and then the boy is gone without  
a note and we don't hear much from  
his long hair and don't miss him either  
because then we have a grandson and

mostly forget him

and then we got old, and then re-  
ally old, and tell everyone in the home  
how we met, how it had been my rent-  
als, and when she goes up and surprises  
everyone by dying before me i just go  
right along after her two weeks later

not believing in heaven or in much  
of anything just no way that i could  
keep going

we always told everyone all the time  
that great old story about the church  
parking lot and my truck and how we  
would never have had a family if it  
weren't for those rentals and it always  
got a big laugh because everyone could  
see how things were.

## THIRD RED DEBT PT.III

... “Seems an unlikely end—where would Cohen be if he buried Montesperro?” Crough picked his teeth with a long fingernail.

“You forget—the Eastern legions are coming soon. Their presence will keep the workers in line, and keep the industry on its feet however it happens—Cohen will still be poised to gain. You can’t think financial power struggles that threaten the stability of the mines could persist? They’ll lock the town down, and Cohen keeps growing wealthier. We all survive on that one export.”

“And no one can touch him for fear of the Clerics.” Crough added, examining the end of his little finger. He turned Bower’s words over in his head and stuck his finger back between his teeth.

“I wish I could say I’m not afraid of them. But fortunately for me, I have a more convenient excuse.” Crough raised an eyebrow, only halfway curious. “If I’m gone, the Warren will have Montesperro to his heel when the legions come before a new Minister can be elected.”

“Here’s where I come in.” Crough grunted.



“Kill Saul della Cohen.”

“What makes you think he won’t gut me first?” Crough peered at Bower, drumming his hand on the table.

“Oh, I think your bounty has put a nasty twinkle in his eye.” Bower replied with a curious grin.

“He nearly killed me in the pines—thought he had, he put the Hastings place to mud with me inside.” Crough rambled on darkly, taking Bower somewhat by surprise, “Cohen draws steel whenever I show my face, he killed my wife—” His voice broke. He squeezed the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger and clenched his eyes.

“The Clerics changed their minds.” Bower began carefully, “They want you alive—that order came across my desk not seven days ago.” Crough looked up.

“What?”

“When Cohen turned in on your head, he found himself in quite a mess of trouble. When he gets word you’re still breathing, he’s got to get you to the Clerics alive—their orders.”

“What for?”

“Hell if I know, I don’t ride a black horse. I’m just the Minister; nobody cares a shit for keeping me in the loop. Point is this: Cohen’s still on orders to take you alive at the moment—prints of those papers are safe with me. When you get to town, he’ll have to send for the Clerics, and keep you around until they get there. There’s your window. Kill him then, while he’s busy trying to hold you at arms length.” Bower finished, leaning back in his chair.

“He collected my bounty, did he?” Crough asked after a moment.

“He did.” Bower replied curiously. Crough nodded.

“Okay, sure as sure. I’ll give you the Warren’s life, squares you for mine, squares him for my wife.” He rapped his fist on the tabletop, as simple as that.

“Good.” Bower nodded, mulling over the conversation. “Be careful when you get close to the river.” He warned, “Nobody gets into the Warren’s town without him knowing. He’ll have a rider.”

“I’ll count on that.” Crough barked. “The Warren has a wife, doesn’t he, Minister?” Crough added suspiciously. Bower started, and then narrowed his eyes.

“He does.”

“Hmm.” Crough frowned and raised his brow.

“Crough, you let the Warren’s wife out of his affairs. She’s done everything she can to help me at every turn.” Bower warned.

“Of course, of course—what kind of animal do you take me for?” Crough chortled. Bower held his hands up.

“I don’t want to know. Just see it done.”

Crough stood and brushed his trousers off before adding, “I’m obliged, Minister. For the time being, I’m in your debt.”

“Where to?” Bower asked.

“I’ll be needing to bury my wife.” Crough said slowly, casting his glance away. He knew the wolves would have gotten to her well by now—there’d be nothing left. Regardless, he’d search until he found something or was satisfied by his effort on her behalf. She deserved better.

“Ah.” Bower said, “That’s been taken care of.”

“Speak plain.” Crough furrowed his brow.

“Plain?”

Crough nodded stiffly.

“As you like. Seemed to me collecting a rotten body from the snow would be the last thing you’d want to get to. I buried her myself that afternoon.”

“Where?” Crough started.

“In the clearing, just behind the house. You’ll find a stone out back, waiting to be set.” Crough made a scrunched expression and nodded, smoothing his hair flat on his head and tightening the wrap about his thick bun. Bower looked as if he might offer condolences, but hesitated. A man with a name as feared as Crough must be a strange place to lend your sympathies.

Bower stood instead with a scrape of his chair, and the two of them made for the front door. Crough worked his shoulder around absently; testing the pain and trying to force away the limp he bore for the stitches in his back. The Minister pushed the front door open and Crough ducked beneath the lintel out into the frigid night. The two of them stood on the porch for a while.

“Thank you, Minister.” Crough offered roughly. He held his hand out.

Bower grasped it with a firm shake.

“Kill the Warren, Crough.” He replied simply. The Mountain nodded. He wasn’t clueless; Bower was playing him with the temptation of revenge, though he did it with the best intentions he could muster. Sometimes a man doesn’t mind being a piece in a game provided he knows he’s a piece. That, and provided it’s a fine enough game.

“The glamour of vengeance is a thing for younger men, wouldn’t you think?” Crough mused as he lumbered down the front steps and crunched his feet into the heavy snow.

“Too true, too true.” Bower nodded, cupping his chin in one hand, “Tends that way.”

Crough stretched his shoulder this way and that, and grunted, blowing foggy breath out with puffed cheeks.

“I don’t feel so old.”

“Huh.” Bower chuckled. With that, he set off through the pines beneath green needles and faint starlight.

Crough scraped a dirty fingernail against the flat of the blade. Cohen glared at him, his hands set back to a slight tremble. He rubbed them to-

gether nervously.

“Bower bought you to kill me.” He said flatly. Crough gave a solemn nod, as though he mourned the Warren’s imminent passing.

“Something like that.”

Cohen’s eyes slid over the door again. Nothing. He strained his ears but heard no approaching horses, no dusty clatter of black hooves.

“The Clerics are here, Crough.” He started, “You’ve underestimated me.”

“Oh?” Crough didn’t seem startled in the least by his contrived revelation.

“Did you think you could just walk in here and plant a knife in my gut? All of Montesperro twitters that the Mountain lives.” He sneered. Crough tilted his glass to his cracked lips, but there were only bullets and sweating ice left. He sucked up an ice cube, wiped the cold drip from his chin, and slurped obnoxiously at it.

“I sent a rider out last night.” Cohen continued victoriously over Crough’s noise, slapping a hand down hard on the countertop. “They’ll take you for themselves toward their own goals.” Crough eyed him.

“No they won’t.”

Cohen caught the low note of honesty rumbling beneath his voice. He felt his stomach drop.

“You got to my rider.” He said. Crough nodded.

“So I suppose you underestimated me Warren. And while you were at it, you did the same to your rider.”

“What?”

Crough leaned forward, chewing away at the slush in his teeth.

“Technically the Clerics are coming, I just paid the boy to sit in the pines for another day. Greed is often such a tantalizing woman.” He sneered, “They should be here by dawn tomorrow with any haste.”

Cohen leapt up from his chair, but Crough beat him to his feet. The Warren brandished his glass in a reflexive defense and Crough seized his hand. He smashed the glass to pieces against Cohen’s temple, spraying the floor with sharp, tinkling shards and sent Cohen’s head clattering off of the countertop with a sickening crack. Cohen fell to a heap on the dusty floor, knocking the chair over with him to add to the ruckus. Several handfuls

of gleaming, golden coins clattered to the floor all around the Warren.

There was no telling when it started, but Crough eventually became mindful of a familiar, low drone wafting around the brewery. Death and misery were here. He snorted and spat over his shoulder, listening absently to the deep hum—it sounded close.

Crough wiped his nose on the back of his sleeve, and inspected the damage in his palm. A few minor scrapes and cuts, and one decent gash in his index finger from the glass—nothing remarkably serious, all in all. He nodded approvingly. Cohen gurgled on the floor.

Crough wrapped a beefy fist around his knife and plucked it from the countertop.

“You collected on my bounty, didn’t you, Warren?” He snarled. Cohen groaned. He rolled onto his back; eyes clenched shut, and grimaced through stained, red teeth.

“What happens when the Clerics find out I’m still alive?” He chided. Cohen coughed. Dark blood spattered down his chin. He ground his teeth with heavy breath and tried to pull himself up on a nearby chair leg but Crough kicked it away, and he

crumpled back to the floor. The cavernous drone dove deeper, rattling Crough's bones.

"You haven't spent it yet, have you?" Crough asked spitefully. Cohen scraped a fistful of coins around on the floorboards, struggling to push himself up.

"It's a damn shame," Crough began in a sardonic tone; he stepped around Cohen and squatted before him. The Warren glared at him from beneath his brow; several scarlet pockets stained the whites of his left eye. "Shame that such a large debt to the Clerics falls to your estate after you're dead." Cohen tried to speak but the words slipped on his bloody tongue. He made an odd squelching noise instead.

"Shame that pretty wife of yours'll have to answer for it." Crough beamed happily at him. Cohen managed to grab a fistful of his filthy pant leg but the Mountain shrugged him off, and he thumped back onto the floor.

"Y'know, come to think of it, that's quite a lot of coin they offered to take me for." He mused thoughtfully, "Enough for the Clerics to pack her off to the mines, or ship her out to some plantation, Gods know where." He scratched at his scraggly beard and

added with a spiteful flourish, "She'll be put to the blistering sort of work for the rest of her life, I reckon." He tapped the point of the knife playfully on the floorboards next to Cohen's nose. The Warren thrashed helplessly on the floor; blood ran thick and oily from his split temple.

"Muh" Cohen spluttered. His cheeks shook with the effort.

"What's that?" Crough leaned down, scraping the heels of his boot on the floor.

"Mmm—" His lips drooped.

"Come on now, son, sound it out."

"S'a Mud." Cohen spat. He shook his head and pushed himself up to the elbows. Crough sat back and searched the Warrens eyes, full of hate.

"Huh." He watched as the Warren struggled to get to his knees. Once Cohen had slumped back on his haunches Crough leaned in and clapped the Warren around the shoulders with one arm. He slid the knife into his gut up to the hilt. Crough twisted the blade hard, jerked it upward and pulled it out; Cohen drew a sharp breath and worked his mouth silently, bloody spit strung between his teeth. He slumped over onto Crough's shoulder, and the

Mountain hoisted him over arm and stood up. Cohen's punctured stomach ran with blood, smearing over Crough's coat.

The low drone had since turned over a pulsing melody in Crough's ears. He retrieved the Warren's revolver from the countertop and tucked it away in his sash alongside his axe, snatched up his rifle, and slid out through the brewery shoji onto the porch.

Crough stood outside in the drifting heat for a moment and searched the street up and down through narrow eyes. He glanced over to the side, and found a slender man with skin like black mud seated against the wall beneath the banister. He lowered the end of a twisting mast of wood from his lips. The drone died away.

Crough shrugged Cohen steady on his shoulder and looked the stranger over. He wore simple pants of burlap lashed to his thin waist by a length of rope. His head was shaved; save for a bushy stripe down the center that stood on end. Around his neck hung a string of wooden beads—each as large as Crough's own fist—bearing burnt markings.

Crough gave the Mud a stiff nod. He returned it, then pressed the nar-

row end of the instrument back to his lips and resumed his song.

"Told you." Crough muttered.

Several people peered on from across the street in frightened curiosity while Crough hefted Cohen's limp form from his shoulder. He heaved, grunted, and slung Cohen down the steps. The Warren sprawled out into the dirt street, mixing dust and blood with a faint, gurgling moan. He'd be bleeding for a while, he would—a wound in the gut was a slow sort.

More townfolk appeared on the main street, hushed and deathly curious. One shaken looking fellow wearing a grubby, wide hat with a gouge in the brim stared fixedly at the Warren. He wiped a few beads of sweat from his brow with the back of a dirty hand and licked at his teeth.

The Warren strained and scraped at the dirt with sluggish fingers, bloody grit bubbling on his lips. Crough glowered around, lumbered down the steps past the Warren, and stood for a moment in the open street soaking up the afternoon sunlight. By now a small crowd had gathered, sliding through their thin doors and murmuring in the shade of rickety shops. They whispered of deliverance, and that Grizzly

Crough couldn't be killed. He smiled to himself.

Crough looked them over for a span and turned to leave. His eye caught a familiar, weary looking ashen-faced man standing on the steps of a humble shop as he lumbered by. Hauf della Hastings glowered over at him and spat gritty swill into the dust. He wore a filthy pair of miner's boots and had an iron band clapped to his wrist. Crough tore his eyes away.

He ambled off west down the street, making for the river on the outskirts of town. By his count, there was one last score to settle before the day was out.

Before he made twenty paces distance from the brewery, he heard a gunshot ring out over shoulder. Crough turned sharply and saw the gentleman with the gouged hat silhouetted against the glaring sun. He lowered the smoky barrel to his side and stood over Cohen's motionless corpse. Crough could have sworn the silhouette nodded stiffly out in his direction. Hard telling if it was a courtesy, or just someone who wanted to do it himself.

By the time Crough made it back down from the pines and neared town again, the late afternoon sun had begun to sink. He didn't figure he had

much time to waste; the Clerics would be in the valley by early morning. He slogged on through the dirt and the rocks, hefting a thick length of rope over shoulder, gripped white knuckled in tired fingers. At his back, making an awful sort of scraping noise over the rocks Crough drug a simple coffin made of rough-cut wood. The coffin scoured away behind him leaving a trail like a wandering snake in the dirt; its dull iron nails glinted dully to his back. The river's fading gurgle disappeared to the wind as the town's gate, if you could call such a thing a gate, loomed into view.

Two great wooden lintels rested on two high wooden pillars, forming the massive torii gateway. He shrugged the rope higher on his shoulder, breathing heavy.

The highest beam was littered with cracking ceramic shingles. Crough puffed his cheeks and trained his eyes on the ground—he took to picking out scattered clay pieces strewn in the rocks where some unfortunate shingles had fallen and been crunched under foot. He glanced up as he neared the massive gate and slowed to a stop. The coffin slid to a halt behind him in stride and he let the rope go slack and fall to the ground.

Hanging from the lower lintel near the right side was a man's limp figure. Cohen's polished boots stirred in the light breeze. Dried blood stained the dirt below, mud and dust caked his blue uniform and obscured his mangled features.

Above Cohen's gently swaying corpse several resident pigeons had taken their perch on the higher lintel; his blue uniform was speckled white about the shoulders. Crough snorted. The pigeons cooed softly down at him.

"S'a bit disrespectful." Crough muttered. He shrugged the strap of his rifle over his head and pulled the bolt back. He pressed the stock to his shoulder but didn't set his eye to the sights. Crough squinted up carelessly at Cohen and squeezed the trigger. The pigeons scattered to the air, and Cohen's corpse tossed back; a puff of dust erupted from his chest.

"My fault, Warren, my fault." Crough grunted, and cocked the bolt back a second time. He closed one eye, stuck his tongue between his teeth, and pointed the barrel in Cohen's general direction. Another shot echoed away, and Cohen's head snapped backward.

"Beggin' your pardon, Warren—" Crough apologized, shaking his head as if he were embarrassed.

Crough snapped the bolt one more time, and lazily leant his eye to the thin, iron sight. He fired a third shot, the rope snapped apart above Cohen's head, and his corpse plunged to the ground with an odd squelching crack.

Crough hefted the coffin forward through the gate's long shadow and ground to a halt beside the Warren's corpse. Cohen was a grisly sight to behold. His temple had bruised sickly black where Crough had struck him. Beneath the filth, the heat had just begun to set him to stinking and swelling about his wounds.

Crough clicked his tongue testily and kicked the lid off of the coffin with one massive boot. A pile of gold burned like fresh greed in the afternoon sunshine. He stooped over and heaved Cohen's corpse into the coffin over the heap of gold coins, replaced the lid, and set off through the gate.

There'd be nothing gained from seeing the Warren's wife off to the Clerics and if he needed another reason, Crough had made that promise to Bower. Across town to the northeast the Cohen estate sat atop a low



hill, where Crough meant to deliver his payment and put the Warren's wife from debts that didn't belong to her. With each step the coffin grew heavier in his tired hands, but the dead weight of the Warren inside only tickled Crough's grin wider.

## ON SHIFT

He turned the gleaming chrome tap and a stream of sparkling cold water gushed into the sink, mingling with the steaming torrent of hot. Leaning back, breathing in the luxuriant warm vapour, he picked up the squared block of herbal soap and began to lather his hands. The waxy slab slickened and softened as it surrendered a heady fragrance of blended lavender, honey, clematis and ginger. He daubed and smeared the rich foam around his neck and jaw. The aroma rushed through his sinuses as he reached for the razor, dilating the sleep-clogged channels tracing beneath his eyes, across his brow, down his throat. It was a wonderful product. The sleek, well-

balanced razor was as light as a bird's bone in his hand. Looking straight into the cleared mirror set above the glistening sink he drew the keen blade over his thickly lathered skin. The drag of it was as nothing; the lick of kitten. He finished shaving, taking his time with clean, even strokes, then stepped from the deep-pile bathroom rug and into the shower. A bracing, cleansing cascade struck him directly in the face, coursing over his shoulders and chest. Emerging into a chamber of fine, perfumed mist a few minutes later he wrapped a warm, dry towel around himself and walked through to the bedroom. The room was silent: he enjoyed quiet in the morning. Ly-

ing on the bed was his uniform, clean and flawlessly ironed. On his way out of the house he noticed a sheet of notepaper lying on the sideboard in the hallway. He picked it up and read it as he walked to the front door. "The wine is in the fridge. There's some goats cheese left, and the walnut loaf is still fresh if you get hungry before I come back. So pleased we finally made a decision. See you soon. Love x x x" He smiled and let it fall, the graceful script turning end over end as it tumbled to the doormat. He adored Jennifer's handwriting.

The buzzer sounded three times and he stepped back from the greasy bench. He let go of a ragged sigh. Three times meant glass. Glass meant stop. Not in his section though: they'd start up again soon. He wiped his forehead with a clean fold in the sleeve of his smock. The coarse, heavy cotton rubbed like a shed snakeskin against his clammy brow. Chill dampness seeped through the worn rubber of his standard-issue galoshes. There was no sensation at all in his cramped toes. Abruptly the buzzer sounded one harsh tone: get on. He resumed his place at the bench immediately and silently, not caring to exchange talk or worthless gestures while there was still work to be done. He looked down. Sunken, glazed eyes stared up at him

with nerveless, impotent intensity. For a moment he stared back, into a sorry black piss-hole of violent panic, suffering and incomprehension. He blinked and cleared his throat then took hold of the fish and slapped it over onto its side. He pulled his knife out from the pocket where he wasn't supposed to keep it and slit the fish open from its flappy gullet to the tailfin. Cold, bloodless fish, seeping clear oil and clotted black. Dropping the knife onto the stained surface he quickly dressed the fish – left handful in the right-hand bin, right handful in the left-hand bin – and snatched up another from the pile. The bench was awash with iridescent scales and a gelatinous, filmy essence. Unfathomable radio sound clattered through the girders overhead: half a melody; a beached one-liner; an obnoxious jingle. He didn't even know where the radio was. As two more handfuls slopped and thudded down into the bins he glanced up to see who else was on shift. He recognised several figures. Everyone was in. It seemed that way sometimes.

Under a vibrant fruit-salad sky of yellow, pink and orange pastel he swung the car into the empty driveway. He pulled up the handbrake and turned off the engine. A tranquillity settled over him; the only sound the

creak of leather upholstery beneath his fractionally shifting weight. He inhaled the scent of pine and polish and plastic through his nose. A relaxed sigh passed over his lips as he pushed open the car door and stepped out into the clement evening. He strolled up to the front porch, pausing to rub out a pale mark on the car's deep-burgundy bodywork. The hanging baskets swung gently in a caressing breeze. His key slid easily into the brass Yale lock and he passed into the house, carefully avoiding the letters spread on the doormat and dropping his keys onto the sideboard as he did so. Though it wasn't particularly dark in the house he turned on the hall light. Two crystal-line chandeliers illuminated the long chamber with an even, buttery light. He kicked off his shoes, shrugged his jacket from his shoulders and headed towards the kitchen. There, he folded his jacket over the back of a high stool and crossed the room to the glasses cabinet. He withdrew a slender high-ball glass, dropped three ice cubes into it and looked over the bottles arrayed against the tiled wall for the Grey Goose. He poured himself a decent measure, topped it with a splash of tonic and carried it through to the sitting room. The cooling glass pressed a pleasant ache into his fingers, damp with condensation. He settled the

drink down on a polished maple-wood coaster, drew the curtains and walked over to the record player. He glanced at the LP already on the turntable: a Jacques Brel collection. It was one of Jennifer's, but he set it to play anyway. He smiled at the thought of her; at how she wouldn't let him keep the vodka in the freezer, at how methodically she pinned her hair, at how the small of her back felt under his hands. As the first bars of the music came in he sank down into the deep armchair, reaching for the cigarettes resting beside the silver and ivory ashtray. He lit one, blowing a dense stream of smoke up into the shadowy cavity of the high ceiling, and looked across the room. The glossed mahogany of the coffee table, the discreet but elegant standing clock, the soap-white lilies by the mirror. As the last remnants of evening sun paled to blue beyond the heavily draped curtains he sipped at the vodka and tonic and smoked and waited for Jenny. When she came it was with wine – a Mersault Chardonnay – the walnut bread and a wedge of goats cheese. She smiled, setting the things down on the coffee table, and kissed him fully, giving, gratefully on the mouth.

He heard the buzzer sounding angrily from the car park. He was late. Swearing, sweating, he paced over

the rutted ground and in through the door of the stark, squat, grey building. He changed, threw his clothes into his locker and hurried down the concrete corridor to the work floor. He clocked in, splashed through the chemical bath and shambled into the spare, floodlit warehouse space. He apologised to no one in particular though everyone was looking at him – frowns and grey stares from beneath white caps and hairnets. He moved towards the bench with his eyes downturned, flickering across the spare surface, and ushered away his stand-in. He took up the already greasy knife. For a few seconds he seemed to be able to hear the radio much more clearly than usual, then everything was as ever it was. Reaching for a fish from the mound heaped between himself and his partner he noticed that his usual knife was gone. A dull, squeezing ache tugged in his abdomen: it had been a good, reliable knife, and there would be no use in asking for it back. They all looked more or less the same. He tried the edge of the knife that his replacement had left behind. It was close to blunt. Sighing, he roughly vented the flaccid fish. The sensation of loss and disappointment would not release his chest. When he looked into the right-hand bucket and saw that his stand-in had done more work than he would have

done by that time, a new pain flared within him. He sank into the work; the swish and rake of the blade, the slap of the flesh, the bellow of the line manager, the cold, the stink, the intermittent sneer of radio sound. When the buzzer sounded twice for lunch he walked out slowly, by himself. In the cafeteria he sat opposite Ken and Dave and ate his sandwich. He didn't have much of an appetite. Dave was talking about trading his car in. Ken complained that his girlfriend had banned him from drinking during the week. Chewing on a bland mouthful of soft crust he smiled sympathetically. The hard light of the cafeteria glaring on the tabletops and the grubby vending machines made his eyes ache. He was glad to put his tray away and head back to the floor. As he was leaving, Andy, an older worker on a different shift, sat down in Ken's place at the table. Though he tried not to he couldn't help noticing the condition of Andy's hands. Cut and scarred, the tips of two fingers missing. Andy was clumsy.

As he pulled into the top of his street he was surprised to see that Jennifer's car was already in the driveway. With a puzzled smile he drew up behind it, parked his car and loped up to the house. Jenny opened the door just as he was stepping up into the porch, startling him. He looked up at

her. She was wearing a light, delicately patterned dress, otherwise unadorned but for a silver necklace and the ring on her finger. The heavy pendant of the necklace, set with a green stone, lay nestled at the top of her cleavage, accentuating the soft paleness of her skin and the captivating swell of her breasts. Her dark hair glistened in the warm glow of the hall lights. He had taken hold of her around the waist, kissing her and turning her so that her back was against the wall, before he noticed that she was holding a dripping magnum of champagne. The immense bottle looked absurd clutched in her slight, pale hand. Laughing, they moved quickly along the hallway. She was still giggling, looking at him with an elated, enraptured expression, as she lifted the first glass to her lips. She had never surprised him like this before. The strangeness of the evening carried him along as happily and beguilingly as the wine. The chestnut brown of the panelling up the stairwell, the fractured light catching on glass and stainless steel, the laden fruit bowl, the enveloping sofa, the searing incense, her lips, her hair, her touch; all wheeled before him as though they were a part of some great performance, in which he had no part to play. Much later, when all was dark but candles and glassware, they shared a cigarette,

enfolded on the suite, and drained the last of the champagne. Credits rolled to elegiac viola, then the television snapped off to blackness and they dizzily climbed the stairs.

He pushed the awkward plastic container over the rutted concrete. It rumbled and bucked, the stiffened wheels stubbornly resisting his effort. Men and women in long white smocks, stained and crumpled as his own, passed by him. A cloying, almost earthen smell, familiar but never stale, rose up from the heaped guts as he stewarded them through to the back room. It was dim through there, slippery and damp. The ducts, pipes and girders all glistened as though freshly oiled. He was staring ahead, waiting for another to offload their morning's waste, when a large ungloved hand settled on the rail of his container. It dragged the tub away roughly and swung an empty one around from out of the chaotic murk. The dark container bumpily clattered to a halt in front of him. Without looking up he thanked the hand and seized the lip of the wheeled bin. It trailed behind him as he trudged back to the workfloor. The radio blurted some wedding or anniversary staple, fuzzy and thin in the thick air. He shoved the container up against the back of his bench and returned to his station. He was feel-

ing the cold that day: the handle of the blunt knife felt as far around as a truncheon in his numbed hands. Staring down at the dark, scored patch on the worktop in front of him he reached into the dulling heap of fish. He found that it was hard to focus his eyes; his vision rolled and roamed around the inside of the vast chamber, straying from the work at hand. Once or twice he thought he recognised a face amongst those propped above the far bench. He strained to see, trying to place them. He was certain that they didn't belong there. People and places streamed before his mind's eye. After a few anxious moments he remembered the sliced and undressed thing beneath his hands and began with his work again. He was working slowly and he was aware of it. He shook his head – he'd never had any trouble with it before. Before he could find his rhythm he was distracted again. A movement, a fluttering. He turned and followed the suggestive gait of the enshrouded woman walking past. He traced her with his eyes. Suddenly a weighted hand settled on his shoulder. He dropped his knife and turned. It was Kevin, out of his place. For a time they just looked at one another, then Kevin spoke. "Are you all right?" Resting his hands on the bench he replied that he was fine. He scrabbled

for the vile, unwieldy knife. The buzzer sounded twice. One by one they turned away from everything and filed out of the room. Following up behind Kevin and Dave he thought about the woman he'd seen. Something of her stayed behind his eyes. Who was she? The light was strong and lunch had no taste.

He leaned back in the armchair and stubbed out a cigarette in the ashtray. He rubbed at his eyes. He was tired. The room was quiet: he wanted peace. Jennifer had gone out to celebrate the engagement with a few friends, so he had the evening to himself. Shaking his head, clearing his throat, he rose from the giving support of the chair and wandered through to the kitchen. He put his glass down heavily and reached for the vodka. He'd had one already, but he didn't feel hungry enough to eat anything. He was pouring large measures, tacitly urging the day on towards its end. He walked from room to room, trailing his hands over the polished wood and glistening marble, toying with the drapes. A perfect, lulling, even warmth reached into every corner of the house. He blinked and smiled, suspended. He raised the glass to his lips, clinking cubes of ice bobbing in the clear effervescence, and picked up a book from an overlooked corner table. Hesse. He'd read

it several times before, but he was in the mood for something familiar. He knew the stairwell, the lodgings and the twilight streets well. Falling back into the chair he thumbed through the preface, lit another cigarette and began to read. He felt bodily lighter, lightened, skin delicate, movement easy and slow. He finished the drink and carried on reading, quickly, keenly. Comfortable and sure. The fixtures of the room broke up and drew away. He was still in the chair when Jennifer returned home; turned into the cradle of it, dozing with the book lodged alongside him. He smiled up at her as she gently coaxed him out of sleep. They made Miso soup together in the kitchen, neither really hungry, and ate it with the end of a bottle of burgundy and a repeat on the television. He peered into his wine glass as he placed the empty soup bowl on the coffee table. It seemed to have a peculiar, lingering taste. He took another sip. Dark, sickly, filmy. Perhaps it was too old. The stagnant flavour hung about his tongue, caught on his breath, even after he had brushed his teeth and got into bed. He tried to put it from his mind.

His head ached. Even his hair had felt brittle and malnourished as he'd settled his hairnet into place. The fluorescent overheads teased and nee-

dled him. His hands seemed a half-mile away, flapping and flopping on the bench, but he worked quickly. A nervous agitation charged his actions, as though he was labouring in fear of the fall of the whip. Concentrating on the process, stifling the giddy sickness pressing up under his skull, he hacked into the fish, throwing handfuls left and right. It was like shredding old newspaper – frail and dulled. Still, the downward drag of pollution tugged at his thoughts. He couldn't understand why he felt so ill – he'd not had so much to drink. He swallowed drily and recommenced, again and again. The morning waned. He dragged two full containers through to the back room. The nausea was gradually reduced to an eggy, metallic tang in his mouth and a faint tinnitus hum in his ears. It was strange. He worked on, satisfied with his gathering rhythm. Then he heard something. The movement of his hands slowed to stillness. He listened. It was music; something he recognised. The voice carried between the girders, against the corrugated walls, over the bowed heads of the other workers. He put down the knife. Frowning disbelief hardened his stare. He strained to hear, tuning out the slap and rattle of the workfloor. There: there was the accordion. He listened. Dans le port d'Amsterdam, Y



a des marins qui mangent. It was Brel. A pitching refrain of piano joined the rousing accordion. He backed away from the bench, peering up into the roof in search of the speakers. It was Jacques Brel – on the radio. He glanced around at the others all fixed in application. No one else seemed to have noticed. He glared about dumb-founded. It was incredible – hardly possible. He quickened his pace, tracing through the factory. Dans le port d'Amsterdam! Dans le port d'Amsterdam! He reeled, stumbling to a stop, as with an urgent cry Brel died away. He would not believe it. He straightened, trying to catch an even breath. The babble of the DJ resumed. He closed his eyes. A dissonant howl tore through his head. After a blackened minute he gathered himself and stood up straight. Breathing steadily now he opened his eyes. And there was the woman, of the day before. He glimpsed her face for only a moment before she turned away. She was crossing the floor with a container. In the clearer light he could see that she was not a woman, but a girl. He looked up at the grubby clock, fixed high-up on the wall. It was nearly lunchtime. A frantic resolution overtook him and he pulled off his gloves, abandoning his position to pursue the girl. All around him the clank, drop, pummel,

slap and shove of the factory's processes clamoured. The rhythm of it was close but irregular, resonant and distant. Faces turned familiar. He was fixated by the languorous movement of the girl. She trundled the container up ahead of him, her hips rolling with an entrancing, youthful suppleness. Black cotton stretched over the curve of her buttocks. He choked. The noise heightened. Black cotton. No smock. He hurried after her. A white, loose-fitting blouse swayed over the waistband of her trousers. A school blouse. He broke into a run, suddenly desperate. Young, knowing eyes stared out at him, rows of lockers lining the walls, linoleum under foot. An exuberant swell of conversation rose up, pierced by the sound of the buzzer – or the bell? He lurched forward and grasped her shoulder. She turned. A luminous, milk-white, smitten face smiled coyly up into his eyes. He gazed down at her soft, delicately powdered skin, at her carefully lined eyes, the pink sugar-glaze of her lips. Slowly he raised a hand, absorbed in her features, and cupped one of her tight, trembling breasts. She gasped, and laughed. His vision flickered. The yard. The library. Rachel.

A weariness thumbed at his eyes. He glanced up at the kitchen clock, paused, and looked again. The numer-

als bled and receded. The digital display set into the brushed-metal casing of the oven blinked – 00:00 – 00:00 – 00:00 – 00:00 – His eyes roved hungrily and disgustedly over the counter. A half-loaf of bread. Jars of tea and coffee. An unclean chopping board. The aroma of the lamb casserole that Jenny had left to slow-cook pervaded the room; rich, winey, visceral. He looked around for the remainder of the bottle. She'd mentioned it was a pinot noir. He found it amongst the oils and spices standing in the corner. He seized hold of the bottle and dragged the cork back out. He took a long swallow from the flour-dusted neck. It was good. Clutching the bottle he walked down the hall to the pantry and sought out another bottle of the same. In the kitchen he took up the corkscrew and reached into the cabinet for a glass then strode through to the living room. It was dark. He looked around for the candles, stopped, and reached for the lightswitch. Amber, suffusing light glowed from the wall fittings. He fell back into the armchair and fumbled for the cigarettes. He lit one, drawing on it until he felt it burn hard in his throat. A tumbling stream of expended smoke coursed from between his lips. He sagged gracelessly in the chair. The wine was good. Meaty, biting and strong. The fine, glimmer-

ing room turned around him. Fixed against the far wall the standing clock loomed blank-faced. After a time, impatient and ravenous, he rose from the chair and sloped back through to the kitchen. The scent of the stewing lamb overwhelmed him. He took a slab of gruyère from the fridge and grabbed at the end-piece of bread. Swift and imprecise, he yanked open the knife drawer. A weird yelp caught in his throat. Bile and tainted phlegm tasted on his tongue. A gory, grease-slick filleting knife lay cold and stark on bare newspaper in the drawer. He moved to push it shut but suddenly he didn't have the strength. He clutched at the counter, obliquely aware that he was falling down. A sticky humour ran from his nose. Wine. Blood. Blood-Wine. Wine-Blood.

The cubicle door clattered shut. He pulled the greasy bolt across and turned around. Worms burrowed into the glands of his neck. Self-doubt, mortal doubt. The people – he could not be sure of them any more. Not after yesterday. The people around him were false, out of place. He stared at the plasmic cistern before him, a glossed whale-bone headstone, and at his trembling hands. His knuckles were tinged with blue. Nothing could be depended upon. His eyelids flickered, fluttered open and shut. With

a heaving gag he knelt down to the cold ceramic bowl. The viscid tiles. The light. The hairnet crumpled in his hands. The plink and gurgle of the plumbing – all the sound he could hear over his shuddering breath. “It’s wrong.” His gut seized and cramped. “It’s wrong – how am I meant to tell?” Salty, acidic taste in his throat. He lay down on his side, murmurs of words teasing his lips. He heard another sound. Something approaching; tap and clack on the tiling. He sat up and coughed. There was a voice.

“Are you there? Are you in here sweetheart?”

In a single, flinching movement he threw himself back against the toilet-bowl, squirming backwards into the corner.

“Come on honey, are you in here? Are you not feeling well?”

His jaw was clenched so tightly he could barely utter a word. Tears gathered at the corners of his eyes and trickled down the channels of his face. He whispered something. It was a thin, hoarse nothing, even to his own ears. He couldn’t do it. The click and tock of the footsteps on the tiling came nearer.

“Look, I’ve come to take you home

– you’re not very well sweetheart. Come on.”

He looked down at his hands again. They were shifting, contorting; changing shape, texture. From fine, deft and unmarked, to calloused, misshapen and scored. He reached into his pocket for his cigarettes – No. The other jacket. His whole body began to shake. Suddenly he scrambled to his feet, falling back against the cold cistern. “No!” he screamed, “No – I’ve tried. I’ve really tried! It’s not easy – “

Slipping, slow, but hard, and chill, “ – it’s not easy to make this work.”

Jennifer’s body was warm against his, soft and pliant. The goose-down quilt that covered them both touched along his naked length, cossetting and caressing. His own body was locked – a taut braid of ligamenture and sinew. The pocket of air between them was clammy, beading the hollow of her back with moisture. She slept on. Shivering he ran a hand up her thigh, over her belly. This is were it was. This is where everything was – all else was a foulness. Irrelevant and hideous. What had happened, all that had happened, was dead and gone away. He closed his eyes. “Leave me be,” he whispered, “leave me be.” But still he dreamed.

He twisted the point of his knife in the scored surface of the work bench. His breathing was ragged and faltering. Sweat cooled dismally under his arms and between his legs till he felt that he had somehow soiled himself. He leaned slightly on the knife and the blade bent. He leaned further. It snapped, suddenly, the razor-shard hurtling off across the cold, monochrome expanse. The murmur of talk, the hard, downward push of the overhead lights and the thump and rattle of flesh and machinery seemed to carry on indifferently. He gazed ahead at the opposite row of benches. The light-headedness and trembling in his legs struck up again. The sweeping strains of Jupiter swelled and boomed from out of the radio speakers. The array of faces before him stared expressionlessly past his head. He saw his first boss, from the butcher's shop, he saw Jennifer's parents, he saw the whole of his secondary school class, he saw an old doctor, a landlord, an ex-fiancée. He shivered and gagged, not looking away. The air was foully acrid, cold and stale. Suddenly a football cannoned out of the vaulted empty space and smacked him in the side of the head. He heard a girl's voice, and smelt Rachel, and felt a hand reaching for him from behind. He clamped his legs shut and retched. The buzzer

sounded twice. He was not surprised when the duty manager called him into the office. It was clear. Manifest. It was clear. He was done. He clutched his hands to his chest. At least he still had his fingers.

A single candle flame burned in the centre of the table. A stiff and tightly-fitting shirt and trousers hampered his movements, distressed his nerves. He smiled weakly at the slender, alluring, elegant face suspended across the table from him. She was speaking of some future, but it was all confused now. There was nothing in his vision but that leaning portrait, and the flame of the candle, and his sweating, restless hands. A word from the waiter broke in and he shifted in the chair. The tall, purposeful figure set a plate down in front of him. It was thigh of chicken in a mushroom, tarragon and white wine sauce. Without hesitating he snatched up his steak knife and skinned and boned the meat. Sauce splashed across the tablecloth and into his lap. He threw the crumpled sliver of skin across the table away from him. Jennifer cried out and reared away in her chair. He stabbed the knife down into the tablecloth and screamed – over and over again. He was done.







POETRY

YOUTH





Two half-grown children on a bench  
sit warming themselves in winter.  
“You can sleep here with me,”  
says he. “You don’t have to go.  
I’ll kill your uncle. Stay here  
with me,” says he.

“If I don’t want to sleep,” says she,  
lips red fire most inviting,  
“may we...”  
“Yes,” says he,  
stop hearting, catch breathing,  
flood minding with her heavy eyes.

Her delicate teeth around his skull,  
his neck, shoulders, chest -  
like a snake swallowing an unbroken egg.

# SHADOWS



The stone garden lingers like a shadow  
reflected in the depths of her eyes.

The shadows of water spiders  
lie on the sandy stream bed  
like black petals.

Here, in the heart of the forest,  
cleft by a waterfall,  
the sun's heat never penetrates.

HURRY



God draw up an inventory of the Universe.

Under his footsteps orbits flatten.

Leaks warmed antimatter

from His hands.

In comet rising tide

His face is hidden.

The meteor plankton

is stranding at mud-bank of galaxies.

Signals of strict escort we send

to another subtle sense.

Patience!

God still creates another alien.

SATURN TURNS TOWARD ME



In the cold light of silvery winter, Saturn turns toward me.  
Harsh, implacable, merciless to the weak, the hopeless.  
The sick at heart.  
While clickety clack, youth's hands blur on the keyboard,  
Seeking pollen in the hives of like minds.

Snap goes the flytrap, cutting off success?  
He's trapped in the mindless net of people, places, and things.  
Yet in this seductive morass, surprised, the youth cries,  
"Here I am!" But he's inside.  
Outside on the far shore of spring, my Saturn is fast approaching.  
I worry- can youth navigate the dark planet's pull?  
Inside the hive, he feels the high tides, but not the shadow,  
which weighs heavily on me.

Like Rip Van Winkle, I awaken and stare at the alien world.  
Then I see them.  
Strong arms held up to the searing gray sky  
White, black and brown trees—stalwart sentries  
in the snow, resisting the planet's dark pull.

Youth turns. Not seeing his true face in the murky screens  
of Incessant illusion, yet he knows he's there!  
He stretches. He stands strong, outlined in the dawn.  
The sun moves closer. Warming earth beckons.  
Youth takes off his headphones.

From the anarchic pit, he sees a high road.  
In the planet's shadow, I wave him ahead.  
There! Spring! The youth climbs out.  
I feel green buds.

ANTI-FREEZE





Ice blocks  
the city  
dumped into  
the Connecticut

bob in eddies  
under us.  
Two milky  
chunks

fringed  
with soot  
spin in debris,  
bloom

wings,  
flash  
through rusted  
trellises

of the old  
railroad bridge.  
I am told  
what I need

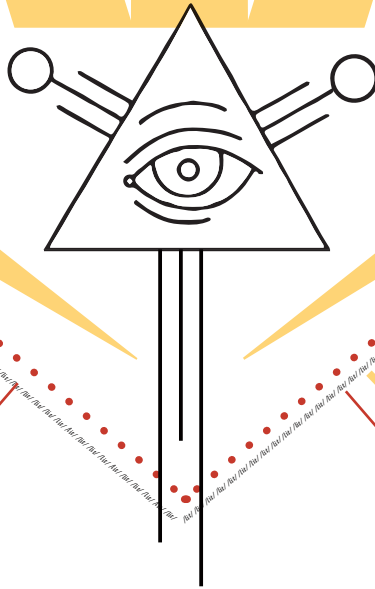
is glasses  
when I point  
out flight  
but see

I love the soul  
bang  
of half-blind  
magic,

when sight  
falls  
between  
planks

into cold  
black flows  
and frees  
doves.





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