

With 23

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Writing for Charles

This autumn, as part of the work towards the Charles Causley Symposium, students from Falmouth University English and Writing Department attended a series of workshops led by Alyson Hallett. Alyson is the Writer-in-Residence at the Charles Causley House, Cyprus Well. Two of the workshops were held at the house itself, and this experience was particularly memorable: writing in the extraordinarily peaceful setting surrounded by Causley's effects, in a room that has seen the likes of Ted Hughes, Seamus Heaney and Philip Larkin, was moving and inspiring. The house is aptly named, a well of calm and generosity of spirit. The poems below came out of exercises set by Alyson, partly in response to the house, to Causley's poetry, and to the River Kensey, which flows across the bottom of the steep lane on which Cyprus Well sits.

Thanks to Alyson Hallett, the Charles Causley Trust, Literature Works, and AIR at Falmouth University, and the students, for making these workshops possible and memorable. And – thanks to Charles too.

Dr Kym Martindale
& Professor Jason Whittaker

Sycamore

Battered and torn
You lie in the nudging cold
With your skeleton bare to the world –
The shrivelling withdrawal
Displays the intricacy of veins,
The secret infrastructure that
Networks across your brittle wing,
Once smooth and curved,
Perfect ballerina,
But now possessing the ragged grace
Of a carnival widow.
The wind tugs your edges –
You jerk, shift, tremble.
Tell me, helicopter,
Can you still fly?
We share the memories
Of dropping,
spinningturningtwistinggroundandroundallthewaydown
To the ground,
And then again,
Until the tree stands bare.

Affection

A Moth trapped in a cup,
By my own hand
I feel it tremble
As we walk around.

Your face is like the moon,
Hands deep in pockets
Rolling bus tickets
Into cigarettes.

Lie in my barricade
Of coffee cup mould,
Concentrate on the cornflake,
Floating two days old.

Leave your print
Leave your mark
And drink, drink, drink
Drink 'til your lips go black.

Beech Cottage

My house, a cob-walled treasure
marooned in the sea.
Overnight rain has overflowed ditches,
pointed dazzling bright ferns
down to earth.

Beech tree trunks stand guard
over water-joyed muscovies.
Chickens mither and brood
at no let up in the weather.
The fishpond hums and bubbles,
all fur has hid its head.

My house – a lighthouse, haven, home.
A beacon. Enter. Come.
This practical porch welcomes
every mud-slicked leaking welly.
The fresh damp smell of socks,
and laughter.

Here is a sound of music,
a cosy flow inside.
China tea set, observing etiquette
set enough places for everyone.

Granite

Sharp cuts
Crack up
They branch
Like limbs
The stone
It splits
Keening
Hymns
Weeds
Fall begging
Thirsty
Starved
Poxed
The grasses
Littered
Carved
Sleeping
Curven
Sentry
Heads
Fractured
Homes
Earthen
Beds.

I am the song...

(after Charles Causley's 'I am the song that sings the bird')

I am the song that sings the bird
I am the book that writes the word
I am the beat that pounds the heart
I am the flint that marks the path
I am the sea that fills the sand
I am the rock that lifts the land
I am he who sees it all
He is me who sees nothing at all.

Emu

He took me down to the river.
I asked if the emus would look different
in the dark. He smiled
and took my hand away from scarf.

It flapped wildly in the wind;
red stitching, red wool pattern flailing
behind me. I couldn't hear it over the noise

of the water below. I ask again
about the emus, I've never wanted to see something
as badly as this. Just over the fence.

He still has my hand, pushing them back
against the steel bridge wall; my knuckles knock once for yes
and his mouth is moving against mine.

Somewhere close by, four heads swivel;
we are being watched. I imagine they look almost blue
not black, but like buoys on the water,

bobbing. Nodding safety. And I fancy they can hear me
scream. They clack their beaks, like Morse code,
but they can't do anything.
They too have no way to carry a message.

From ‘Sibard’s Well’, this is how we live

I’ve spent too long

In country silences.

It is a thin
language

of isolated sounds, and people
cut off by water.

Intimidating pockets of water.

The weather is a terrorist in these places,
to these fallowed spaces it is shrugged off
by city speeches.

The water is swollen with leeches

and we cannot venture.
We’re used to thick muck.

Stuck in the quiet life. Listening out,
holding out, for the turn of the season,
for the precious sound of a breakthrough.

The noise
of water

creeping through the clay is all we have left.

Madran

A careful skin
slipped the sharp
breeze muted.
Against decay
haunches covered
sacrificial pelt.
Still gripping
a scour at the altar
stripped with ribbon
hosiery, branches
altered, pinned
 back to sacrifice and soil.

I am

after Charles Causley

Mawling space against the motorway
I am the breast that fever-stings the scale
to compete/complete

 the robin on spade handle.

Khaki Telephone

'Khaki?'

'Yes sir!' he shouts.

'Can I see you?'

'I hope not Sergeant!'

well he's wrong.

whilst the colour scheme is correct,

mundane and tired,

his position is awry.

Claverton – along the canal

The name echoed like an old keyboard
Or bone
But it was the quietest place I ever lived.
The silence stunned clatter
Before it could do harm.

One night I wrote a lecture on Milton,
And heard myself falling for rhetoric. I would love
Such deftness,
Such logic of message.

One night I set sail in my room
Puttering up to locks,
The canal glassy and indifferent,
To my hand on the arched
Bridges. I would love
Such precision,
Such hold.

One night I turned carefully
To the moon's glancing blow
And heard myself
Thinking.

And the dark outside
Detonating.

Politically-motivated Maverick Speech

from up here (.) on my pedestal (.) all I can see is you (.h) every one of you (1.0) your expectant (.) hopeful (.) faithful faces (1.0) you stare up at us (.h) we (.) the sly:: syndicates (.) the parliament (.) the politicians (.) with trust in your countenance (1.0) well (.) some of you (.) the rest have the sense to see through our façade (.) our synthetic masks dri::pping with empathy and community (2.0) those of you who have taken off your rose-tinted rims for the clarity of the cold (.) harsh (.) white lights when the stage lamps fade (.) you see us for what we are (1.0) so what is the aim here↑ (.) how do I gain your vote tomorrow (.) the maverick against the glea::ming iceman (.h) shall I recite to you list upon list of deceit↑ (.) or promise you fathoms of fabrication (.) distortion↓ (.h) is that why you are here (.) to listen to my spew↑ (.h) I wouldn't come for that↓ (1.0) maybe seeing us squi::rm under a shellfire of questioning would do it for you (.) but not for me↓ (.) no (.h) me↑ (.) I'm fed up of pee::ling off the skins of a carcass (.) picking to pieces the sticky lies of my partisans↓ (1.0) I am no vulture (.) so be it that my occupation assumes I must be so (1.0) still I say no (2.0) here I stand (.) I will descend from my podium (.) not to start swinging a pendulum ba::ck and forth in front of your narrowed eyes (.) but to simply say hello (2.0) but wait↓ (.) is this what you want↑ (.) do you want a politician who knows you name by name↑ (1.0) there are 63 million in the UK (.) that's an awful lot of names↓ (.h) when would I have the time to make these useless policies that get slandered by ba::by birds (.) tweeting (.) no what you want (.) what we want (.) is a Hovis↑ (.) a best of both↓ (1.0) a leader (.) yet one who will get his state school hands dirty sifting through the muck that is the Thames (1.0) through the sli::ck of the oil riding for free on our offshore waves (.) through the bullshit from the tax evading dogs of our upper class (.h) and that (.) ladies and gentlemen (.) ladies first of course (.) would be where I come in (.h) I have no public school stain but I have my red-bricked education (3.0) I could be lying

to you e::ven now (.) as is common in my line of work (.) we
 commen (1.0) where is the vali::dity where is the solidarity the
strength (2.0) is that why you are here↑ (.) to knot your fingers
 and knock on wood and pray to whatever God (.) that this time
this monster will be a little bit different↑ (.h) that he will come
 out of the closet (.) down from the attic (.) out from beneath the
 bed (.) and tell you every Gods' honest truth↑ (1.0) I am doing
 that now↓ (1.0) but how on earth (.) thanks to our forerunners
 (.) would you recognise it↓ (2.0) from my pedestal I can see you
 all (1.0) from down at your feet (.) at your mercy (.) all I can see
 are the pa::ws of the bea::rs about to feast on my flesh (.h) so I
 have to stand tall (1.0) I'm just choosing to stand at a coo::l six
 foot (.) not twenty feet up on a Buckingham balcony (3.0) vote
 maverick (.) for I am standing with you↑ (2.0) come and stand
 with me↓

Key:

- (.) micro-pause
- (.h) pause with an intake of breath
- (1.0) timed pause in seconds
- ba::ll elongated vowel
- done stressed word
- ↑ intonation rises
- ↓ intonation falls

Cannon Fodder

With **OUT** *concern* for the **effects** of...

Sociopath [(soh-see-uh-**path**, soh-see-uh-path)]

Burnt, *battered babies* floating in the **vested** interests

Vested interests

Puppets to the lies with *peaceful* **MEN**

Electronically **bugged**

Systematically **antisocial**

Often criminal

Tricky men *concoct* their medicine for
states and **states of mind**

Sending lovely **naïve** boy's bad *behaviour* on others

Recruited on waves of our good faith [(soh-she-uh-*path*)]

In the name of **OUR** *safety* and betterment

Those **beautiful** boy's, all those beautiful **boy's**

Side-lined, hog-tied, eyes burnt shut, **crippled**

[(*So'ci-o-path' -ic*)], all of its *weapons* of **mass**
destruction

As a *condition* to *possess* and **conceal**

My fellow citizens, be **deceived**, be happy **deceived**

President's *speech* betrays the *ripped* limbs of **dead** mothers

Sociopath [(soh-see-o-path, soh-*shee*-o-path)]

United *based* on the **random** house

Dictionary, *detachment* from **reality**

Psychopathic ***personality*** whose *behaviour* is
regime

Orphan's and **vengeful** needs **created**,
Murdering men made

[(**Soh-see**-o-path)] **LACK** *empathy*

Leaves **all taught stupid** to
walk over innocents

An Astronaut Who Is Afraid of Heights

I lean in gently, and place a kiss upon his unresponsive lips, while my hand reaches up and brushes itself through his beautiful brown hair. I don't want him to go, and I don't think he does either. He looks ill; his face has gone pasty white. He is standing so rigidly in front of me, and I don't know how to make it better. 'Have a good trip,' I say, kissing him again, maybe I should slap him instead. He just nods blankly at me; he usually has such expressive green eyes, but right now nothing.

We met on a flight to Rome, I was going for business, he was going for an adventure. I was a nervous flyer and he held my hand as we took off. After a week in his company I realised I wanted him to hold my hand for the rest of my life. He made me feel brave. I wish I was there to hold his hand, and make him feel brave, right now. I can imagine them climbing into the rocket; he's shifting around to get comfortable. Now they're strapping him in, tightly I hope, very tightly, and with every tug on the harness the crease between his eyebrows is slowly becoming more defined. His eyes are scrunching closed. Maybe one of his friends will lean over and rest a hand on his shoulder, and that will make everything OK. But maybe it won't, and I can't be there to hold his hand. An astronaut who is afraid of heights. It's too clichéd to be real, but it is.

He's always wanted to be an astronaut; it was one of the first things he ever told me. His mum has hundreds of embarrassing photos of him in astronaut costumes and sitting in cardboard rockets. She gets them out whenever she can. His parents are so proud of him. So am I, he was born to go to space. The moon and stars are his sun. He breathes in starlight. He loves space so much, sometimes I'm jealous. Whenever he talked about the universe it was suddenly there, in the room with us, close enough to touch, just at the end of our fingertips. Everything was going so well, until the accident.

We were in the car on the way to his niece's first birthday party; it took him months to decide on the perfect gift for

her. Just as we turned the corner a truck came out of nowhere and slammed into the side of us. The barriers on the cliff edge stopped us from going over, but Isaac was never the same. The impact from the truck crushed my left arm, they had to amputate. Every time he looked at me afterwards it was like he was seeing his mortality, his death. He confided in me once that he had just stared down that cliff. After all that time looking up he was seeing how far away the sky was; how far he could fall. But the trip to space was already planned, he was training with NASA, he ignored the fear and pushed on.

But it festered, like an open wound hidden behind a plaster. Slowly the glue was failing, and bit by bit the fear slipped through the gaps. We were getting on a plane to Rome, a holiday for our fourth wedding anniversary, when it happened. He couldn't breathe and I couldn't do anything about it, he just kept gasping for air, all hunched over, nothing I said seemed to reach him. The doctors called it a panic attack; he convinced them it was just stress from the rigorous training he'd been going through. I wasn't fooled, I forced him into seeing a psychiatrist. He refused to cancel the trip, no matter what we said, and the psychiatrist said if he felt able we shouldn't stop him. He had to get back on the horse, but he never fell, he went up and never came down, he got stuck. Last night I cried so hard I couldn't breathe. I can't hold his hand through this when he's a million miles away from me, physically and mentally.

'Please, don't go,' I wail, grabbing onto his suit and laying my head on his chest.

'It's been my dream for too long to let my own fear stop me. You're right, I am stuck, which is why I'm going to space, so I can come down again. But also because I'm only want to look up now.' He bends his neck to kiss the crown of my hair and wraps his arms around me tight. I'm in a place I haven't been since the accident, home.

'Plus you can't fall in space, no gravity.' He winks cheekily and moves away from me, allowing his mother and father to give

him a hug, and then he steps away from them as well. I smile, that's all I can do, give him a small wave and blow him a final kiss. I watch as his friends converge on him, slapping him on the back and slinging an arm around him. He will be safe with them, right? I watch him walk away from me and, just as I am about to turn away, he turns back to look at me. He smiles, and I grin back because maybe he really will be OK.

3...2...1...

When words meet heartbeats

My words
Meet your heartbeats
As we lie
Together
And the best compliment you ever gave
Was when you told me
My words are amazing,
Because they are what makes my heart beat,
And my tan will fade,
And my hair will grey
But my words will forever stay young
And strong.
And I don't think you even realised you said it,
But to me
It was like
You created a glow
In me
That felt better than winning any prize
Or being published in any book
But just to hear you
Say they are amazing
Validates any words I put together
And so when they meet heartbeats
like aching lovers at the platform
Or like a child and mother after a week apart
Or the first taste of lemonade on a hot summers day
It refreshes my mind to know
That you
Like my words.

The Soldier

A chill breeze floats across the darkening city, gently caressing the snowflakes as they make their helter-skelter descent to the earth. Although the sun has fallen beyond the horizon, there is no electric light. The street-lamps stand tall and silent, their buzz eradicated with the destruction of the power-station. The windows of the houses are either boarded up or broken. There is almost no sign of life.

The real gun-fighting stopped within days of the coup. Now there is merely the occasional cruel burst, ricocheting through the deserted streets, causing the poor souls still hidden away in their homes to cower down that bit more under their blankets, and to pull their loved ones that bit closer, as they wait for the inevitable. This gunfire is not from true conflict.

In one of the city's many suburbs is an old basketball court. The snow is falling harder and the temperature is far below zero. Three sides of the court consist of 8ft high mesh fence, dirtied with rust. The fourth is an old wall, bedecked with faded drawings from happier times.

Huddled against this wall is a group of children, none of them can be more than twelve years old. Some are sobbing, others are clutching each other in a futile pursuit of comfort and warmth. Some are staring into the distance, living in another world. The cold has captured their tears, crystallising their sorrow. The children are surrounded by a group of men. They wield their Kalashnikov rifles grimly. Not one of these men dares meet the eye of another. They wear the uniform of the newly empowered army. They know what must be done, but not one will offer to do it.

They have stood like this for what feels an age; in silence, the snow growing deeper, the night growing darker, the air growing icier, death drawing closer. The children cannot be released. They

are the sons and daughters of the fallen traitors, future enemies of their precious, newborn state. Most likely, these children are already plotting and scheming to overthrow and destroy what has been so recently created from the greatest sacrifice of so many of their comrades. This is what these men are trying to think. Still, not one shows any sign of movement toward acting.

A single gunshot rings out from the neighbouring block, snapping the men from their contemplations. They shuffle uneasily. The commander of the group frees his boots from the snow and with slow, heavy steps makes his way to stand in between the children and the men.

‘I will have a volunteer,’ he says, ‘or I shall choose one.’

The men stare at the ground.

‘Do not make me do this, dear friends. I would not have myself force one of you to do this.’

The men do not look up.

‘You leave me no choice then, I apologise. Evgeny, please.’

The tallest of the men raises his eyes to meet the gaze of the commander.

‘Is this right?’

‘Of course it is right. These are future traitors! See how they are huddling together. Most likely they are conspiring this very minute! Are you questioning my order, soldier?’

‘They are children, Pyotr... they are cold. Are you not also cold?’

‘I will not have this! Direct disobeyal of my order. Think of what we have been through together. But if you do not do it for me, do it for our great country, at least?’

‘I will not.’

‘Evgeny, you leave me no choice.’

The commander pulls out his pistol and levels it with Evgeny’s forehead.

‘If you do not do as I say, I will execute you. The men have witnessed your insubordination, the action would be warranted.’

‘Pyotr, old friend, you are right. *Do* think of our past. I have saved your life more times than is worth remembering, as you have mine. This, these children, these traitors. It is not worth the trouble. Lower your gun. I will do as my commander orders.’

Looking taken aback but nonetheless relieved, Pyotr lowers his pistol.

‘Evgeny. I knew I could trust you. What you do now will save the lives of many good people in the future. For Mother Russia!’

Evgeny raises his rifle to level with the faces of the children, his heart frozen, sickened by what he is doing. His eyes meet those of a scrawny little boy in the huddle. The child is shivering, but Evgeny sees no fear in his countenance. He grimaces and places his finger on the trigger, tensing his body in suspense at the murder he is about to commit.

In one swift movement, he angles the gun away from the children to face his oldest ally, his commander, his Pyotr. Somewhere along the line, things had changed. It was inevitable. He fires without hesitation. Each second the trigger is pulled, he expects to feel the bullets of his comrades tearing through his body. That second does not arrive. Pyotr falls, his mouth agape, his eyes wide open, staring. He lies still. His limbs are splayed as if he were a rag doll, dashed against the ground. Blood is pouring from his body into the snow, a dark patch creeping steadily toward the feet of both the soldiers, and the children.

Evgeny looks up at his compatriots. They stare back at him. He throws down his gun, turns his back on them, and walks away. One by one, they follow suit.

Eve

The Garden of Eden was a put-up job,
we all know that. Entrapment doesn't even come close.
Yes, she was caught on surveillance. The silly mare
thought she could sidestep the secret cameras,
and that damn serpent, such an old-school trick,
wearing a wire.

Adam, her complicit goon, never saw it coming
bless him.
But she always looked shameless to me
(though played up to the papers, at being 'shocked at the naked
pictures')
from the moment the statements were read
banishment confirmed, she never felt her guilt,
not the way Adam did.

'Well that's humanity done for,' she vaguely mused in exile,
not the least in concern.
(Adam in the background, tending to the children)
and her with a little smile and drool,
eye turn inward to that close-up of a memory
a little cropped and photo-shopped
though it was pretty much perfect, as you would expect

Those succulent orbs – still so edible and juicy
plucked then engorged, over and over and over,
for what seemed like... well this was a different time.
'Truly Paradise', she was heard to say
though the Almighty swore later, all apples were the same
in ripeness and crunch

She was never convinced,
and scoffed at those who claimed she skewed her reason
added flavour and texture to something forbidden.
She knew all the clichés and connotations,

and, I think, revelled in the title of fallen woman though she would argue it was just a momentary slip, while happily conceding it had all been worth it.

A Poe Faced Child

I recant to you, if you will let me, a story – my own story it must be said – which is not meant to feed your fears or promote any kind of undesired dissonance in your heart. It is simply an account of the events as I saw and heard them. What trust you place upon me with the telling I'm afraid is for you to decide. But please, I beg of you, do not be too hasty with your judgement. I am but a man! – And my frail sensibilities cannot be ignored when you come to consider my sanity.

Yes – YES! – I speak of insanity. Hear me out! It was my wife, you see, and her belly plump with child that first spurred the events of which I speak. Her belly, swelling fat with foetus that I would sit and stroke in the evenings, whispering and murmuring my fatherly affections to the unborn within. For I loved that babe with all my heart and my wife the same.

As the pregnancy wore on my wife, she swelled to enormous proportions. Unsightly she became, warped and cantankerous, vile and prone to outbursts. The delicate thing she had been before disappeared before my eyes and in her place this... *thing*... remained. I would sneak up on her as she lay bloated on the couch and sneer at her – at the wretched humiliation of her condition – it would make the bile rise in my throat I tell you!

It was at this time that the voices first started. Yes you heard me correctly... voices! For at the start it was a single voice, dripping in sweetness and venom, emanating from my wife's huge belly. A voice only I could hear. A voice that spoke twisted niceties in riddles that I could not solve for all my powers of reasoning. The voice was that of my unborn child, of that I was sure, but why did it speak only to me? What did it want with me?

The single voice became two voices. The two became three... and then four... and more!! Until they were indecipherable from each other and as they chattered they increased in speed and insistency until they reached a deafening crescendo of such pitch and ferocity that it drove me from the house, my hands clasped

about my head, and induced in me a state of malaise so complete that only a strong spirit in the local public house could alleviate me of.

As I crept home a plot emerged from me that might rid of those fearful cubs – for I was convinced my wife carried more than one in her womb. I resolved to abort the pregnancy without my wife’s knowledge by using a simple tincture that would fool her body into miscarriage. She would be grief stricken but I would have my darling returned safe and whole to me and the voices should be banished. The Fates had other ideas however.

As I cleared Regent’s Park and crossed the road a smudge of orange appeared glowing behind the buildings and smoke rose above their roofs. Hastening my pace I came upon my residence – Ablaze! – An Inferno! The heat was hideous and I could not fight my way close enough to gain entrance.

Aghast I was. My Wife! My Babes! Babes in arms – More babes than arms maybe but mine none the less! Oh dear Lord?! What punishment is this you visit upon me? I was wrong – WRONG! – Dammit. Wrong to condemn them!

I wept for myself I am not ashamed to say. Wept for my loss. Wept in disgust at myself. Wept for those poor innocent souls.

Officialdom tormented me. The fire was started deliberately the fire chief said. The police constable questioned me on my whereabouts. The coroner conducted an autopsy and showed me my wife’s blackened remains and my children’s bodies, five in all, so small, with smiling faces, each one holding hands with the next like a grotesque paper-chain. And our doctor, come to reduce my night terrors so I may finally sleep, who told me.

“She complained of voices you know?”

And she had the rest of her life
to spend with a small part of him.

The child stands over a bed of flowers
with a headstone for a man they never met
but know every detail about
more than anyone else
except her of course
and he looks at his mother
her blue eyes filled with a repeat of the tsunami
that filled those same eyes ten years ago
and doesn't understand
but he comforts her
the same way his father used to before he left
to go back to war

And this breaks her heart at the same time as it warms it
because all she can see is his father

Dead as a Dodo

Uncle Brad was dressed as a dinosaur, which is both silly *and* naughty, because Mummy wouldn't even let me wear my white trainers with the flashy lights, the ones that are almost like the nee-nor-nee-nor of a police car or fire engine. His coat is green, and it has a pointy hood and toggles that look like a tail. He *must* be a Tyrannosaurus Rex, because that was my favourite from when I collected dinosaurs when I was four, and I know almost every single one off by heart (just by looking).

So Mummy shouted when I put on my flashy shoes, and she even said "Jonathan" ... which meant I was one hundred percent for sure in trouble, because it's *never* Jonathan, it's always Jonny. I asked why I couldn't wear them, and she said it was disrespectful – which is stupid, because they are a million percent brilliant. So I have to wear black, which reminds me of the dark, which is sometimes scary. I told her Katie would want me to wear my shoes, because she was the one that helped me choose them, and was even the one that said I had fire engines on my feet... which is great because when I run, people move out of the way because it's an emergency.

An emergency was what the ambulance came for when the angels decided to take Katie away. A car came around the corner too fast, and went SCREEEEEEEEEECH and hit her over. It was a really bad day, but also a bit of a good day because I got to ride in an ambulance for the first time ever. I was telling Mummy when we were inside how cool it was, because there were cupboards and buttons and lots of hidey-holes full of medicine. I decided then that I was going to be a paramedic instead of a rocket driver, because that way I could ride in an ambulance every single day and pick up people in emergencies. But Mummy wasn't really interested, because she was screaming and said "Shut Up Jonathan", and the paramedics moved things out of the way and got electric shockers. They shouted "Clear" and then Katie went BOOM as her body jolted upwards. She then slammed back onto her special cardboard bed but didn't wake up like Mummy begged her to do.

I think some people shouted numbers, because it made me think of maths and I felt a little bit sad. I didn't want angels to take Katie away, because she always helped me with my maths homework and helped me get ten out of ten and a gold star for doing such a good job. But the electric shockers didn't work, which is no surprise really, because once I was trying to get toast out of the toaster with a fork and Mummy shouted and said I would die of an electric shock if I ever did such a silly thing ever again. She called me Jonathan then, too.

Katie looked like she was sleeping, and I was annoyed because I realised that one of the paramedics had ripped her purple top. It was definitely one of her favourites, because she ironed that one especially for when Jacob came over. But that is a secret and I'm *definitely* not allowed to tell, even about Jacob and Katie going into her room with the door closed. She even made me do a pinky promise, which are so serious you might even die if you break one. So after I noticed her top I decided that I didn't want to be a paramedic anymore, because I was really annoyed with them. And I never ever want to use a defumigator or whatever it's called, *ever*. I had one of those once in my bedroom to suck out all of the water inside my walls. Maybe instead of water it sucked all of the life out of Katie, which is why she had to go to the angels.

Mummy was super sad then, and crying so much it made me cry, even though I didn't feel the sadness behind the tears because Katie wasn't really gone... she was right in front of me, just sleeping, but for a really long time. I blocked my ears and imagined we were in a big spaceship. I was a green alien with three fingers on each hand, and a massive head. My eyes were black and humongous and I had supersonic vision – I could see miles away, even into space past all the stars *and* the moon. We were transporting Katie up to heaven directly like a parcel, because it's better to know she arrived safely than to let her go by herself.

When Mummy shouted about my shoes, I had to wear my school ones, which are actually too small. But I don't want to say

anything because money doesn't grow on trees and I've already had two pairs this year. I think they would fit if my big toe was one centimetre smaller, but it isn't, and I don't think I'm old enough for cosmetic feet surgery... and that is probably infinity more times expensive than a new pair of shoes.

The actual funeral was really boring because everyone was talking about God, so it was like a giant school assembly only instead of the head teacher it was a priest, and instead of school children it was family members. And even though I think I believe in God I don't like be told about him for aaaaaages because it makes me sleepy. Things were read out about Katie, which gave me happy memories, but I don't think I was meant to be smiling because everyone was crying and looking sad, so I just looked at the floor and turned my hand into a running man. My fingers were the legs and he ran all the way along the long seats inside the church, which had turned into a really long road in some far away place like America or even Australia, and he jumped between surfaces to avoid the crocodiles. He even ran along Mummy's arm, but quickly disappeared and hid in my pocket when she gave me the look that said she would probably call me Jonathan if I didn't stop in that exact second.

We had to go outside after the service, to bury her in her new bed under the ground. I don't think I would want to be buried because all the bugs would eat me, but that would be kind of cool too because then maybe I would turn into a giant worm, and I could eat all the mud and escape from the ground and scare people. I could even visit Thomas's house, and scare him so much he would never bully me or anyone else ever again. I could be Super-Worm, with a red cape and everything and everyone would love me even though I was a little bit slimy and kind of gross and cool to look at.

I threw a flower at Katie. I don't know what flower it was but it was white and it stank of girls and perfume, and Mummy said I had to be careful because there might be a thorn that could prick my finger and make me bleed. I think she's scared of blood, because when Katie had her accident her head had a

massive hole, bigger than a crater that splattered out blood like a volcano.

I don't understand why we threw flowers at her wooden bed because the worms would probably eat them and it's not like Katie would even know that we gave them to her, because she's as dead as a Dodo. Unless the angels and God told her, which maybe they did.

Afterwards we went to our house to hold a wake. Mummy wouldn't answer me when I asked why it was called a wake because Katie *wasn't* awake. She kind of just walked straight past and shook her head as if I was being stupid, which is mean because it's a perfectly valid question really. I was getting some sandwiches when I noticed Uncle Brad was a penguin now instead of a dinosaur. He and Uncle Max and my older cousins had all taken their coats off and had undone their suit jackets and even took off their ties, so they looked like penguins, especially because they were huddled around the tuna sandwiches. I thought they must be a bit too warm inside the house, because there was no ice for them to slide on or dance on top of like in Happy Feet, so I opened the kitchen window which made Uncle Brad and Uncle Max and all my cousins turn into humans again, because they re-buttoned up their jackets.

When people left it was really sad because the house was empty. It was full of hurt and tears because Katie would usually be laughing, or talking on the phone to her friends, but instead it was just Mummy looking old and me wanting to play with my toys, but deciding not to in case it was disrespectful. Once, I watched a program on the history channel about a place that was full of death and sad and tears called Ostrich, which is where Hitler was nasty to the Jews. I think Ostrich probably felt like our house only a trillion times worse, which actually made me feel a little bit better because at least we *weren't* at Ostrich.

I decided to go up to Katie's room, which I think will definitely one hundred percent be mine soon, because it's bigger and she doesn't need it anymore. I thought I would be helpful and start packing her things away to make moving in easier, but

then Mummy started shouting at me *again*, and said “Jonathan, what are you doing? This is Katie’s room.” I explained that I thought it would be mine now but she didn’t understand and started crying and said “She’s only just gone. How could you be so selfish?”

I didn’t know being helpful was also being selfish so I decided that I would never ever help Mummy ever again. But then because she looked so sad I felt bad, so I took Katie’s duvet and wrapped it around the both of us so we were in a tent. I said I was sorry and Mummy said she was more sorry, which I thought was silly because it wasn’t a sorry competition, but I didn’t say anything else in case she got mad again. Mummy squeezed me super tight then, and I held on to the duvet, so we were in a teeny tiny tent without much space, holding on to the edge of a cliff like some of those crazy people do when they decide they want to climb a mountain and need a sleep. Or maybe we had fallen off the mountain already, and we were sat huddled on a little branch that couldn’t hold the both of us, not really. But because Mummy loved me and didn’t want to lose me too, which is what she whispered into my ear, she held me even tighter, and we managed to cling to the branch and stay alive. And because we are alive, it means we should be happy because we aren’t dead like Dodos or Katie.

Thirteen Months: A Fragmented Confession

God, but life is loneliness, despite all the opiates. I love solitude but nobody wants to love a state of mind forever.

Some nights the thought of you overwhelms me so much you can feel the warmth of my breath brushing tendrils of hair across the skin of your back; You're just a hopeless mess of passion. I just want silence for a while, and to forget your name. Darling, you aren't supposed to resent me. What did I do to kill the sun at such a time when everything was finally going right?

I think I made you up inside my head: Is there no way out of the mind? Close your hands over my shoulders and whisper into my skin. I crave to know the intricacies of your body;

the beads of perspiration that collect on your forehead as your head rolls and your collar bones hollow. I want to be important.

by being different. And all these girls are the same.

Perhaps someday I'll crawl back home, beaten, defeated. But not as long

as I can make stories out of my heartbreak, beauty out of sorrow. My hair, heavy with water-weight, he takes in one hand, and with the other he squeezes a spot of fragranced liquid and lathers it into each strand. All the lyrics rhyme with his name. If living with uncertainty is torment, living without him will be death.

Contradiction. I fall for people too good for me, who are really not good enough. His silence hung between us like a sort of confession.

I want frenzy and clumsiness and a heat so wild we can't contain ourselves any longer. If I wake in the morning and find you're not there, I'll survive on memory alone. Rejection. Inconsistency. O God, I am not like you in your vacuous black, stars stuck all over; bright stupid confetti. Kiss me and you will see how important I am.

Serotonin-noradrenaline reuptake inhibitors. You upset the balance of my mind and disabled my literacy for a few long months. The darkness creeps in, catches me unaware and suddenly I'm insane. Monoamine oxidase inhibitors. I can't think of the words to write tonight, but I'm thinking about you. I feel safe with you and your broken sentences. You're mute despite your tormented mind. Rather than confront my own emotions I'll convince myself they're not real. You'd rather settle for silence and the sound of
his voice
inside of your head—
Doctors' pills—
than know that he feels any different. I just want
a love so honest it acts as an atonement
for every bouquet of dead roses gone to waste on another
impermanent lust. Sorry I can't concentrate,
I just got asked out on a real date.
I didn't want it to end like this. Yes you did
because it did. Tricyclic antidepressants: stabilise the mood with
one pill every morning. Plenty more fish in the sea.
You were just a hole that lacked passion. What did my fingers
do before they held him? I want to be eternal with you, but
we don't have to begin today. I am so horribly limited.
If the moon smiled, she would resemble your annihilation. I like
people too much or not at all; I hate you. I love you now.
Spearment gum, I bought some too—like you,
Just like you. Copycat. Contradiction. I must get my soul back
from you;
I am killing my flesh without it.
Some people keep your heart beating.
I talk to God but the sky is empty. I have so very much to learn.

Endless Sonata

The sun is rising but the sky is clouded. There is a soft blush of red at the horizon that casts an eerie half-light, like a torch shone through a chiffon veil across the street, and the bricks of the houses are stained a darker crimson than they seem in the bright of day. They are taller in this light, the buildings, each one towering up and sending an ink-stain shadow pouring across the tarmac down below, but Kit sees none of this. He sees instead the first ninety seconds of Vittorio Monti's *Czardas*. He sees each shadow as a languid slide up the strings of his fiddle, each brick as a quick little staccato played with the heel of his bow, the haze of sun as a fine vibrato trembling throughout every note of the song. I can see him, in his window across the street from mine, releasing his instrument from the confines of its battered wooden case. Every movement is a caress: the gentle fitting of the shoulder rest, the sweep as he raises it up to his chin, the feather-light touch with which he tweaks the pegs to his will until he hears each string ringing harmoniously with its sisters. He raises his bow, catches my eye, and yes, it is *Czardas*.

I remember the first time I realised how constant the melody in Kit's head is. I knew he was musical – how could I not, living opposite him playing all hours of the day and night – but I hadn't quite realised then that even when his violin is not cradled in his arms, it is still singing in his heart. It was a normal sort of day, no particular weather or events to speak of, but I was feeling a little out-of-sorts for no real reason. I wandered across the road in a fog of idleness, not sure if I was feeling pleasantly calm, horrendously sad or entirely neutral, and tossed a stone limply at Kit's window. It wasn't long before I was sitting cross-legged on his mattress feeling distinctly floppy and still peculiarly detached from my surroundings. There are not many surroundings to speak of in Kit's room. He likes to keep it minimal so as not to dampen the acoustics, so the entire sum of his possessions is this: one mattress, discarded on the floor with no bed frame and covered with a single sheet and duvet; one virtually empty

clothes rail, purloined from the department store I work at; one bottomless cardboard box overflowing with sheets of music; one music stand; and of course the violin.

So I did not have much in the way of scenery to distract myself from the strange calm-sad-neutral emotion that was clogging up my insides. I looked at Kit, with his eyes the colour of his chin rest, too deep to fathom. His small mouth pursed as he considered me.

“You’re feeling a little *Gymnopédie* today, aren’t you?”

“What?”

“Let me show you.”

I didn’t recognise Erik Satie’s *Gymnopédie No. 1*, but Kit was right. In the way each note lingered, hesitant, and some took just a fraction of a beat longer to tip into existence than the rhythm suggested they should, the soothing melody was a more exact interpretation of my emotional state than I could ever have articulated myself. Kit’s long fingers quivered as he held each droplet of sound, then let it drip slowly away as another trickled down the strings. I realised as he released the final bead of music that that was how the world was to him, everything was a melody waiting to be played.

The sun has fully risen now, the dawn chorus has passed, and I am waiting on my doorstep for Kit to emerge. When he does he is smiling – he has the most glorious dimples when he smiles, dimples that would make the sound of an elf’s bare foot tip-toeing in dewy grass – and he says to me,

“Today is very much a day *Concerning Hobbits*.”

I smile back at him and hop to my feet. I know where we must be going, then.

To reach the coast from our houses we have to pass through the town centre, which is not a place *Concerning Hobbits*. I can tell by the look on Kit’s face that he cannot hear the music. He cannot read the sprightly tune in the grey paving slabs, crusted globs of chewing gum and crisp packets that flit about in the breeze. No, from that he reads the later parts of *Flight to the Ford* or *Minas Morgul*, something industrial and daunting,

threatening and bleak. We move quickly, and from time to time Kit's case brushes my leg. It's old, his violin case. It came with his very first full-sized violin, and he liked it so he kept it. It is wooden and covered on the outside with some black fabric that makes a feeble attempt at pretending to be leather, and inside it is lined with brushed cotton the colour of mushy peas. The black is peeling off in parts and he has had to replace both clasps, but it is the first case that was not rented along with a cheap student instrument so he likes to have it still.

We have made it to the end of the dark songs now and are emerging, with a tentativeness that Kit hears as the first few bars of Dido's *See the Sun*, into a park close to the cliff top. The breeze has dropped to nothing now, having blown the cobwebs of clouds from the sky and revealed the yellow blaze beneath, and we accelerando from an adagio stroll to an allegretto pace, then into vivace as we catch sight of the sea. As we reach the top of the path to the promenade, I see in the brightness of Kit's eyes, the bounce of his curls and the smooth thumb-print dimples that he is well into the *Strings of Fire* duel and that nothing now is going to pull him back from the brink.

"The sea!" he cries. "I need to be in the sea. Let's go!"

And suddenly, in a whirl of his long black coat and a skip of his boots, he has hit presto and there is nothing I can do. He runs, and I have no choice but to follow. Before the duet is even half done, his feet are bare and the arches are licked by the dying waves as they retreat. He calls them back, fiddle in hand, and it's Yann Tiersen, *Sur le Fil*, and I know this is a sure sign of the point of no return. The waves, like me, are drawn to Kit, sucked into his whirlpool of sound, desperate to see the magic that he sees every day, if only for a moment. It is an assault on the ears, but marvellously so. His laughter, my name dancing on his tongue, his bow raking passion from the taut strands of steel that grip his heart always, I want all this and more to engulf me, and in this moment I do not care about what I know will come later. All that is real is the now, the salt around our legs, the golden glow in Kit's cheeks, and the music, oh the music!

It is two days later this time that Kit says to me, "I'm feeling a little sad today."

For the next three days, he hears the world in a way I do not want to. He sees only transcriptions of *Heads*, *Sad Romance* and *The Funeral*, and, if he can find the energy, *My Manic and I* and *Innocents' Song*, and none of this would be a problem at all if only he could play, but his violin lies untouched in the corner of his room, and Kit lies catatonic on his mattress. Sometimes if I sit with him his eye might leak a tear just to prove he's still alive.

They hurt me, these days of stillness and silence. I lie by his side in the dark, humming softly in his ear, singing the songs of the highs not the lows: *Shenandoah*, *Granuaile's Dance*, *King of the Faeries*. I sing to him that the road goes on, that no-one's gonna love him more than I do, that ha-la-lala-la-lalife is wonderful, but he cannot hear any of my words for the oppressive medley that tears endlessly through his mind.

Kit lives in a world of *prestissimo* followed by *larghissimo*, of the highest sharp preceding the lowest flat, of soaring heights of *gioioso* and *animato* that suddenly drop him down through *agitato* into *malinconico*. Sometimes his spirit dances barefoot through the sand around a fire, fiddle in hand, dimples in cheeks, but he cannot reach that height without the murky depths he has to drown in every once in a while, the tar-black waters with tides that pull him far from the only instrument that can save him.

This is the endless sonata that we live, Kit, my manic, and I.

St Ives Woods

Trees know instinctively
something's always happening.
I have to be very quiet.
I come to watch the birds in Spring,
to do my psychic painting.

He turned his back,
nibbled a blade of grass, while
she rearranged her dress –
found her face once more.
It's a question of co-operating with fate.

I have to be very quiet.
The slightest hint,
could be a warning –
colour brushed on a flat stone,
whiff of sandalwood,
a painter from the past
revelling in the light.
Anything I could catch became a pet
until it died.

She tore the photograph
and threw it in the fire –
day trips to the countryside,
before pesticides, an incredibly sexy place.

The Ashlad and The Troll

It is cold outside the halo of the fire. There the Ashlad sits, his skin bronzed by the flames and dusted with soot, watching the fire spit golden sparks and waiting. As he watches, as he waits, as he drinks in the heat and the light and the smell of the smoke, he sings.

*I am the King
 The King of the air, the King of the wood, the King of the flame
 And all that I say
 Is true
 I am the King
 The King of it all*

The Ashlad likes to be alone, and he is alone for most of the day. But when the sun dips, when it scorches the valleys between the distant mountains, when its umber pot is upturned at the end of the world, then the shadows arrive.

There are three of these stains that arrive in the Ashlad's clearing: his father and two older brothers. They do not respect the Ashlad, though he is the King of it all. They forget that without the Ashlad they would return to a circle of snow where they would shiver, their blood would cool, the night would grasp their fingers and toes and not let go. By the time the sun's jaundiced gaze looked upon them once more they would be no more than ice.

The shadows close in on the fire, and the Ashlad is shunned from his own heat. They talk of troubles in the forest, of pesky Sprites and meddling Fae and fearsome Trolls. The Ashlad smiles to himself, squeezes past the shadows to settle another log onto his fire, and behind his eyes the kindling beneath a plan is lit.

When next the shadows leave, and the Ashlad feels warmth return to his clearing, the plan burns fiercely. He waits until the sun is at its highest point and then, for the first time in all his fourteen years, the Ashlad abandons his fire. He takes with him a loaf of bread and a round of soft cheese, for he does not know how long he will be away from the fire that feeds him. He

makes his way through the forest, fixing his eyes on the peaks of the trees, watching leaves the colour of flames twitching and whispering in the wind. The trees grow taller and, though the sun is still high, the forest grows darker, and the Ashlad keeps walking. He walks until he reaches the place where the trees grow so thick and tall that the sun has never seen the earth, the tumbling snow cannot pass through the canopy, and here, safe from the ancient fire of the day, dwell the Trolls.

It is not long before the Ashlad sees his first Troll. It is huge, at least fifty times as tall as the Ashlad; it has a nose so long it hangs right down past the Troll's feet and drags along between its legs leaving a trench in the soil behind it. The Troll is a moving mountain, but the Ashlad is not scared.

"Ho! Troll!" he calls, and the Troll reaches up its two-fingered hands and twists its head around on its shoulders, for it has no neck, until it can see the Ashlad. It bends at the knees and lowers itself, oh-so-slowly, with the sound of an avalanche, and looks into the Ashlad's face.

"Ho, Ashlad," says the Troll. "What business have you in the Realm of the Trolls?"

"I have come to ask a favour of you, Madam Troll," says the Ashlad, and because he calls her *Madam* the Troll is flattered and decides she will not eat him yet.

"And what right have you to ask a favour of a Troll?" Madam Troll asks.

The Ashlad smiles and sings,

*I am the King
The King of the air, the King of the wood, the King of the flame
And all that I say
Is true
I am the King
The King of it all*

The Troll smiles back at the Ashlad, and her teeth are mossy boulders, each one larger than the Ashlad and capable of crushing him in no time at all.

"Ah, but I am not air, I am not wood, I am not flame. I am stone, Ashlad. What can you do to me?"

The Ashlad pretends to look thoughtful, but he is ready for this.

“Why, I have never tried to be King of the stone. I do not know what I can do.” He frowns, and points suddenly to a white rock on the floor. “Ah!” he says. “I shall use this stone. If I can crush this stone with my hands, I could crush you just as easily, Madam Troll. If I crush this stone, you must do as I say.”

Madam Troll looks at the little white rock and laughs, for she is convinced the Ashlad can do nothing to it.

“Very well, Ashlad,” she agrees. “You crush the rock, and I am under your control until the sun sinks and rises no more.”

The Ashlad bends down and picks up the small round of cheese he had taken from his pack and placed on the floor. He holds it on the palm of his hand and, looking into the milky eyes of the Troll, he squeezes. The soft cheese crumbles and oozes out between his fingers. The Troll begins to tremble.

“Truly, Ashlad,” she says, and her voice quakes, “you are King of it all.”

The Ashlad wipes his hand clean on his coat, and then he commands the Troll.

“There are three shadows in this forest: my father and my two brothers. You must do away with them, Madam Troll, and then I shall not crush your head as I have crushed the stone.”

Now the Ashlad sits alone in the halo of his fire and is never interrupted. He sits, lit up with the soft orange of the flames, and he sings to himself. He is the King, the King of it all.

Sparagmos

Hiss, thump, hiss, snap,
all these oppositions are eating us up.
The beat is sticky;
the floor is singing a siren song.
My head, bowed by a crown of feathers;
the fingers never where they're supposed to be,
our tongues of never flesh flashing intensely.
My teeth hurt but they are hard, tight, out of sugar no more;
ash in my mouth, no longer a fashion statement;
ash in my mouth, I've eaten all the dragons.
I'll eat you too if you'd like.
The fullness will be your last thought,
the heat, a kingly cape only for you;
no need to beg, a forced smile will suffice.
The trick is to always keep your mouth open, the rest will
follow naturally.
Don't listen to me, the heart is only a means,
who can even guess the end?
In the cemetery of almost forgotten beasts,
the last one to show her teeth is always winning,
like I am, right now.
I may not be fast, but i've worked hard on sharpening bone.
It's done.

Quickstep

It is instinctive to roll into a ball.
Ribs try their best
but they're just bones.
Bones which snap and crack,
to clean your teeth on a Sunday.
Her head has rolled
with punches,
drunk on confusion.
A whiplash ricochet
rebounds the flashing fist.
Shiny crimson beads be-dot
the lips a smile betrayed.
You'll wear that smile on the other side of your face.
And hair? It's attached at the root –
unless force is applied.
One handful forms a bond,
a lever. Here to there and back again,
whilst shouting.
And what are eyes but witnesses?
Antagonistic little mirrors.
Smack.
There is the carpet –
soft,
a home,
absorbing her and holding.
Her hands, that clamp her skull,
for many hours soothed oil into
these toes and heels and soles
which, leather-bound, aim into her.
Quick as lightning.
The *stupid ****ing bitch* has said nothing
but 'no' and 'please' –

I'll take that as a yes.

It is dark in shock's dull blanket.

When her brain catches up –

terror finishes his babe,

his girl,

his lover.

A bag of bones

that snap and

crack.

Healer

(A creative response to Eva Figs' Light)

Here, from my perch in the window of my studio in Rotherhithe, I sit and watch as the Thames tide arrives and departs leaving its etchings on the mud flat banks. Like the riven and sculpted lines on an aged face, the river bank involuntarily records the life and histories of many generations. My work involves another's history and design; my white coat, specialist tools and knowledge all serve to correct a wrongdoing. In the early nineteenth century watchmen wore reflective white coats and carried lanterns around these docks, their intention to be seen and heard. I am just a catalyst employed as a medium between ruin and restoration, preferably neither seen nor heard. The casualty is delivered in its unfastened state and returned revived, following my ghostly laying on of hands. The watchmen of old, vigilant of body snatchers and grave robbers trading in the dead and decayed beyond repair, are the antithesis of my industry of replenishment and renewal. I am a latter day Merlin rather than a Frankenstein. I have read of the Resurrection Men who would plunder local graves but, unlike me, they harboured no intention of breathing life into their cadaverous cargo.

When an artwork arrives at my studio, particularly a ceramic, it sits with a shattered aura like an abruptly interrupted symphony, or a well-known route riddled with impromptu dead ends. This damaged force, more palpable now than the artefact itself, resonates with leaking heat, colour and continuity, until I adopt my radiant armour of white rabbit paw gloves and white chemist's coat. Should it be a canvas with the plague like scars of mould and damp, or the red wine induced acne from a careless hand, the grizzled surface requires a deft alchemist's hand to revive its former glorious countenance.

This old warehouse has itself been the subject of regeneration and refurbishment. It stood for many years like a ship's carcass in a dry dock. New life was breathed into the skeleton of this building, which had once been resplendent with commercial energy. Now reignited with new life and vigour, twenty first

century vitality radiates throughout these walls. Irregularly sun bleached floor boards, with the patina of a pock marked face, act like a part time sundial. Formerly, a river of brutal work and toil, ships and commerce, but now home to much gentler industries. The banks, now a place of discovery and play for children who unearth ancient artefacts, reveal debris from previous generations of life and slog. Clay pipes embedded in clay. Whales hunted and slain delivered to this shore, their blubber reduced and redeployed to produce oil for lamps, pulsing with life giving light again, to illuminate hopeful pale Christian lives.

On the ground floor is an Italian café where I regularly call for my grandè cappuccino when seeking sustenance, or just an excuse to delay addressing the day. The caffeine ignites my enthusiasm with a flare of pure positivity and I'm ready for all the day has to throw at me. They say it's psychological, but it works for me. Signor Graziano prepares the finest coffee I have ever tasted, whether here or in Italy. When asked about his technique and the alchemy involved, he declares that it is the ambient rays that are key in his deliberations, as he employs his barista's tools; If a cloud inopportunately passes overhead as he percolates the mixture of some fine Italian blend or agitates the milk, the result will be a failure, death in a cup.

I work most effectively in the mornings. The work sits directly under the skylight drenched in a divine glow; even on a dull day the downward shaft of a radiating beam of light, along with gentle contributions from the balcony doors, assist me in my work to reunite separated particles, pooling them together. Artificial light from angular lamps are a stock in trade in my world, but the vibrant throb of natural heat and light create the optimum mood which accommodates my work. All the artificial light in the world could not usurp nature's bright product for me. I do not claim to be an artist, but my response to colour and form are a necessity in my work and wield a potent power along with dexterous hands. Painstakingly learned techniques with duteous studies in art history, chemistry, and molecular biology all contribute to my arsenal; I am a scientist, a surgeon

rebuilding fractured forms in pursuit of a reinstated perfection. I rub shoulders with artists from all disciplines, alongside in the next studio, Peter traffics in the unnatural, capturing bold neon to trap it forever. His old studio in Kent was surprisingly dark but the warmth of his welcome, one dead December afternoon, with the opening of the log burner and victuals of scalding tea and homemade banana bread, ignited the room with beneficent waves. He describes his work as altering or reaffirming a space; an artificial glow that pulses and throbs with a rhythm of its own, altruistically dispensing its positive vibrations. The influence of the Blackpool illuminations, having inspired him as a young boy, are now transformed and transposed to more rarefied locations. Beatified and cleansed the trapped argon or krypton now more mysterious than Blackpool's ostentatious coloured bulbs, glitz and glass.

Further along this floor, Harry, a painter, is unaffected by the drama of the ever changing light outside. He paints with immense softness; where severe interfaces should exist instead there are forms which gently bleed into one another, with outlines becoming mere palimpsests of colour. Transparent edges willingly surrender to each other in the absence of acute seams, just like the gentle traces of greys and browns in the ever shifting river below us. He converts nature's caresses into an unworldliness which is nevertheless convincing, producing a plethora of divine supple hues. In his youth he used his talented hands to pluck bass strings alongside Clapton, but now his body of work throbs ceaselessly with a singular energy. His musicality leaks through his canvasses with narratives both familiar and strange.

In the entrance to the building there is a copy of Turner's 'Fighting Temeraire', which exemplifies his mastery of painting techniques, endeavouring to suggest sea and sky with the paint being laid on thickly in order to render the sun's rays colliding with the clouds. By contrast, the ship's rigging is meticulously painted. The image forlornly represents the decline of Britain's naval power. The gun-ship is shown travelling east; away from

the sunset, but Turner's preoccupation was to evoke a sense of loss, rather than to merely record facts related to history or geography. This artistic enterprise is polarised to my approach, which defeats failure and relies on the precise transcribing and realignment of the inspiration of others. I harness this nurturing atmosphere, air and evanescent miasma of vapour emanating from the tributary below and procure it to aid me in my binding and repair. I reconnect the veins of artistic flow and restore its circuits to remove its shade; I am an architect of resurrection and epiphany.

With the procedure completed, an artwork restored in perpetuity, all whilst the river glimmers and glances past perpetually re-presenting its reflections, and as the amorphous arterial vein of London weaves past my window and on to delight others. My symbiotic relationship with the regenerating river influences my mood, whilst flowing unfaithfully in and out of other people's lives as it traverses the city. This energy, passive yet critical, ricochets indiscriminately, as I gather up the fractured prism of a delicate single-fired Maggie Humphry figure, and reconfigure it and reroute its energy as when reconnecting a broken circuit. The work is reborn, resurrected and delivered anew. I may not be an artist, but my skills attend to hidden deformities needing to be erased, uncovered or reattached. I breathe life back into the fractured form and resuscitate a withered entity. Just like the mellifluous river below me, I reveal and restore a history's narrative with an apothecary's embrace.

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Meon Hill

Welcome to Meon Hill. Feared by the indigenous people to this day, the hill was conceived by an angry devil, raised by Cavemen and Ancient Romans, became the hunting ground of a ghostly hound and a pitchfork-wielding witch-murderer, and now forever blessed as the resting place to the grandson of our very own High Priest, Kingsley Williamson. And this is, of course, why we're here in the first place.

We're lucky, for only recently has public access been granted to the flat top on which I stand now, where we stand, you, me and your reader, for you have as much presence here as I. You're the only one being thought of in this place, and the connection will remain strong even once I've left and returned to the depths of the West Metropolis I call home. You can read this as many times as you will, and let it transport you back here each time. There, you have your introduction. Now, let's begin.

My boots are still in my bag, the temporary foot-strengthen is proving itself to be past any temporary I have ever come across – five days and not a splinter. Combined with a dress-like garment, loose to my ankles, I feel as our Priests and Priestesses of old must have felt, that is, a part of nature, as nature is a part of them. This is something I feel has been forgotten in our Neo-Timist society. To be a creature of no more and no less importance than an ant, and with less control than a lab rat as to how life unfolds is the natural state of mind, but witnessing a place where we're surrounded by nature in its purest and most beautiful form...

If you can, picture a colour that is around the same intensity as the neon strip above the curfew sign outside the Great Church. Now, take that colour and cleanse it of any glare, make it duller and yet, in some way brighter. This is what is beneath our feet in long strands. There is no word but 'natural'. There is no thought but 'peaceful'. It makes me cry. I think back to those before us, those who lived amongst this, and even those simple ones whose town backs onto this beauty. Facing away yet infected –

infatuated, they must be. Photography, Radiation Printing, and Collecting are prohibited, so I have the responsibility of bringing this back with me in words and internal images. There are no colours or shapes or even smells that can successfully compare to those at home. I suggest you close your eyes. Read this once then close your eyes and remember what I say. Readers with a voice, make them speak now.

So we walk. We're walking for thirty paces and we stop. We see mounds of varying heights that come to an abrupt stop perhaps one hundred feet away. Shades of colours change gradually and abruptly. None clash. We see the same sky. The shadow of the town buildings doesn't much breach the colours. Our feet are cushioned by the long strands and specks of bright beauty are resting amongst them for protection. This hill is sublime. It's a place of incredible peace. Peace for one's feet, eyes, and soul. There is a near overwhelming feeling of oneness with one's ancestry living in this place, dying here. We see how the great Timists realised the truth of our existence whilst playing in this very area, with this exact same view – this special, delicate micro-world. The strands bend beneath our feet. We stop at the grave, a pile of stones, polished and numbered. I step up to read the inscription, there are cool stones sprinkled with blown dirt. I feel a splinter.

The Loss of Everything

We could go through into a land much deeper,
where darkness grows darker.
Forget. Forget everything. Hide away.
Let's create peaceful space.

Another ghost of a wasted dream –
repeating, like a hologram:
the loss of everything.
Late; we were too late.
No more doors; future is lost.
Even hallucinations have dissolved.

Our inspiration was burning
but stars were never so far.
The green glow
above jagged mountains now cuts through thickness;
landscape a never-changing background:
passing the scene, falling behind.
Unspoken words between the crease of night
when the hero died.
Emotion eroded.
And flashback:
the girl. Together. Close up.

No more.

Cameras projecting onto the stretching land:
our eyes, smudged and blurry, looking out
where the ship witnessed nothing.
The pilot under the translucent navigator
was our only source.

Far away: the girl, the hero –
where
darkness is illuminated.

Catching the Ferry from Skagway

mountain silhouettes
swallow starlight

morning muffles
talk and engines

unseen waves
hush the harbour

steaming breath
bleaches sea-mist

Alaska

my heartbeat beats

Thorn

I thought I saw a molten core, adored by three revolting doors,
revolving for there's nothing more to do than spin in silence.
A day chock-full of fraying thorns, with braying brawn
 waylaying dawns;
I dare not stay for late today will be a night of violence.

The teeming musks and steaming tusks and dusty rusk of pelvic
 thrusts.
A sneering lust to vanquish trust: a spacecraft and its pilot.
The epidermis barely sheared; these fleshy flaps are barely ears;
sweet Jesus, I can barely hear my peers (parrots/pirates).

In the midst of raging seas, to stave off pernicious disease,
I pray for kisses, silk and leaves, for these three things are milk
 to me.
A kiss reveals a trust in me and dares to feel the lust in me,
and on a bed of leaves I breathe in skin that's soft as silk to me.

We try our best to try our best; we lie in bed and to our friends
and to ourselves, and sights and smells mingle till it's too much
 to take.
We jut with hate that scuffs our fate, dust plasma in the rusting
 lakes;
we vacillate to find our strait but by that time it's much too late.

Missing

Denim sticks to seats
Fat flesh wedge overhang
Belt dissects
Clammy clamps on brown bear
Sticky periodical
Plastic cup cordial
Staff pleats
Reeking paper bags.

Scarlet blinking orders
Wing drops, a fluctuation
Angle easily deformed
Seats in the upright position please
Cloud slams clouded window
Unseen ocean, tidal bulge
Swollen under.

Kindly sit down sir
Steep lilt, undulation
Surface elevation, rotation
Sir I must ask you to sit down
Sweat streaks matted lipstick slugs
Knees fold in capital letters
Steel body shivers
Steel spine drags in the dank air.

This is your Captain speaking
Shattered breaths steam
Cockpit tips
Emergency
Vertical circles
Vertical all and all

Please stay calm please
Wide blues blink
They blink hysteria
Drink it in
Fall.

Graceful flailing
Wailing
Open water wound
Pulled toward the tide
Hands pull hands
Mama
You will find your oxygen masks located
Within the wave
Foaming brown bears
Burst of yellow jacket lungs
Fleshy interference with the sea floor.

The waters backwash
Drowning vantage point
Filtered fracturing
Bones twitch
Crevasse mouths crack, silent roars
Eroded sedimentary terror
Vast expanses feast.

God help us.

I ate my heart and my teeth are hard, let them come

We are the granddaughters of perseverance, tailor-made parasites;
so real we're shades, so real they stopped believing it.

The world, a deer we feast on, eating all the truth, gnawing and
slurping, a war-zone left behind.

For we lied, we do that sometimes, but you've never seen such a
tragedy of bones.

They call you Medusa: a monster, black shiny tails and claws, just
because you stand still, look straight, burned mouth, skin pulled
tight.

We are by your side as the world keeps ending, our smile of
violence and light, we will chew the unriddled lie.

Girl who stopped being snake, who lives in perpetual monstrosity,
come play, the pain is not yours to bear alone.

Here is home, you are new, worlds are born in the time it takes
you to consume yourself.

The greedy ones would eat you up in bursts of randomised
violence, don't give them the pleasure.

You don't a liar's face but seem to lose the drive to go through with
it.

We all have scales, wars, weaponised tongues,

You'll learn;

Come stand by us.

Spat out, blackened gums, their lies have made us whole.

Girl, you're a cathedral of teeth, an exploding asylum.

Find a centre in you, the hunger, a required self-indulgence.

With wolves in the smoke and leathered teeth, we feed on silent boys, body parts filled with youthful rebellion; they're paying attention now.

The dark is where the game is played, rotten and rigged from the start.

Cheat. Either way, in their eyes you are a devil, wearer of a smile brimming with defiance.

We are strolling through a perverse universe, unclean narcissism, our mouth wide open: Step right in!

We are of the witches they weren't able to burn, watching over with eyes so terrible and amused.

Never breaking character, not once cracking, not once slipping; it's only fun if it feeds on the love of others.

You look good adorned in mayhem, mouth shaped like destruction.

Your rage is a work of art.

For once, you're nobody's plaything.

Here you always win; take our hand, let's make someone nervous.

Aurora

The cold invaded my body, spreading from my arms to my legs and finally to the tips of my toes. It was getting so dark I could no longer see. It might be because of the sun, setting for the first time this year, or the clouds getting so dense they made it night over the icy fields which stretched into infinity. A thick curtain of white fell onto the blank canvas, filling up any tiny hole which stood resistant. I was one such tiny hole, a speck in the desert of frost. When you looked up, it felt like you hit the sky, your face covering with snow so quickly you became part of the crystal world. I kept on trudging, my boots reaching out of the ground like a swamp as deep as my waist. Nothing lived beneath the surface. There was no fish hidden among the piles of icicles. There was nothing. A world created anew, where the maker had yet to put the colour. My stomach felt as barren as my surroundings, empty and only filled with cold. I couldn't see and I could no longer feel. I sat down. The wind blew, sending each icicle like a bee against my face. I haven't given up. In a world where there is nothing to hear and nothing to smell and you can't see where you are going: moving forward is the same as going backwards, in fact you don't even move at all. Closing my eyes, I leaned back and let the clouds cover me in snow, making me their own.

A chime echoed through the darkness, bouncing on every snowflake and making them vibrate a pure note. When the ringing of the bells reached my ears, I thought the cold had got to my head. When the golden song ran along the cliffs and white valleys, across the plains and all around me did I finally get up. I opened my eyes as wide as I could, and far into the distance I saw the faint glow of a light. I dropped my bags and ran. I didn't care who or what it was, hell it could even be Santa Claus. As the light grew in brightness and in shape, I felt I could cry and laugh. It seemed to shine a myriad of colours, sparkling against the cold and dark.

Before I knew it I had reached a tall green gate. The light was held within a lamp perched high above the doors, spreading its

warmth onto the castle in the sky. I looked back. Watching the flakes whirl and dance before me. I grabbed a handful of snow and bunched it into my pockets. Now, feeling satisfied, I was ready to push on into this mysterious looking temple.

The door closed behind me and sent a slight breeze to coil around the room. I stood shivering in the greatest hall I had ever seen. A crystal chandelier blossomed from the ceiling, each light a golden flower beaming like the brightest star. Everything was filled with colour. A desk stood at the end of the room, with parallel marble stairs leading behind it. The steps seemed to lead, joining at their end high above. I began walking along the palace-like floor, the tiles so clean and bright I could see myself in them. You could hear my steps resonate against the walls and along tall vases that decorated the room. A woman stood behind the desk, her smile the shape of a crescent moon. She nodded as she saw me lost for words, my mind as muddled as a child's who first sets foot in wonderland. She pointed towards a door to the side. Light leaked out from its cracks and laughter could be heard from inside the room.

As I entered, I saw a table with food piled so high they looked like golden pyramids. Exotic fish and exquisite fruit and vegetables decorated the plates and bowls. A young woman walked towards me and seemed to say a few words. Her voice was silent though, as the delicious smell filled my head so tight, I could no longer even think. Her golden hair reminded me of my wife, who had left me long ago. She sat me down in front of a warming fire, giving me cups and plates to drink and eat from while I relaxed in the heat of the small sun. The light of the flames twisted and turned like an aurora across the cold plains of Antarctica, bewitching my eyes. I felt myself about to fall asleep, now full and no longer thirsty, when I was prodded by a young child. I looked at him in a daze as he pointed to my pocket which was still full and bulging with snow. I smiled and turned over, whispering:

“There is nothing, it has all melted away by now.”

A Cry for Help

‘Save yourselves,’ bellows Horatio. ‘Demons walk amongst you!’

People laugh, the crowd moves on.

Horatio sinks to his knees. ‘Nobody listens.’

One man remains, watching him curiously. ‘Sheep,’ he says, ‘do not listen.’

Horatio stares open mouthed in terror.

The man stinks of sulphur and flames dance in his eyes.

The Tale of Levi Mouse

Once upon a time, this annoying hyperactive kid just tried everyone's patience to the limit. They excluded him from school and he went hunting all day. He was good at it. It was the only activity he had the ability to focus on. His mother was relieved on two counts: it kept him out of trouble and it saved on her grocery bill. Years passed and Leviticus grew into a very handsome young man, strong yet nimble footed.

But looks and agility count for nothing when the deer on Lord Soanso's estate dwindle in population, when exclusive shooting parties have to be cancelled. And tongues quickly waggle when skins need saving. Fingers point to Leviticus. His mother points to the horizon. Levi's chin points to his shoes. Sorrow.

Beyond the verdant pastures he knows so well, there are high steel blue mountains. Beyond those lie unknown kingdoms and peoples. Levi's sprawling stride carries him to the mountain top quickly but before his eyes he sees a spectral land. A land of cold grey slabs on all sides and between. Levi shudders as clouds obscure the sun and shadows chill his back.

He descends alongside a mountain stream. Hungry, he tickles for trout, and quickly seizes a great fat fish. It flails in his hands, drops to the riverbank and casts an angry eye over Levi.

'You young fool. If you proceed you will die. And if you eat me you will surely die.'

'What the hell?' blurts Levi, 'What are you talking about?'

The wise old trout warns Levi of the curse of Tombetown.

'Everyone is old,' it says. 'Each time a child is born, the evil monster Lillicanthus descends from the skies and seizes the child to feast upon its flesh.'

'But why don't the people stop it?' Levi wonders.

'They die trying.'

'I will make it my purpose to find and destroy this heinous creature, and free these people from its abominable curse. Then I can return home a hero.'

The fish tells Levi to pluck out its eyes and use them when he needs their magical properties.

The Tombetowners are gathered in the tavern where daily they drown their sorrows. They are all middle aged and more. On hearing Levi's mission statement they don't know whether to laugh or cry. A wrinkled crone croaks at him: 'It is impossible for two reasons. One, you are like a mouse compared to a gargantuan, and two... there are no babies.'

Levi has become a hunter once more and nothing can thwart his intention. In a dying wood where the last baby was seized Levi breathes the air deep. He has missed this thrill. Reaching for his knife he discovers the trout's right eye in his pocket, looking like a shrivelled seed. 'What use is a seed to me?' he mutters tossing it through the air. 'What I need is a baby.' No sooner does the seed alight on the earth than it begins to change colours, puff and swell. The air smells of blood and puke and, suddenly, there is a tiny naked infant bawling on the ground before him. 'Oh my God,' gasps Levi, and a far off blood-curdling squawk alerts him to the awakening of Lillicanthus. 'Bring it on,' Levi intones, but is almost immediately bowled over by the almighty rush of wind created by Lillicanthus' sweeping enormous wings. He is flat on the floor. 'Shit.'

The grotesque reptilian creature is swooping towards the bawling baby. Levi's brain spins a roulette and plunges his hand into his pocket. He feels the other eye and instantaneously swallows and thinks, 'I need to fly.'

As Lillicanthus plucks the infant and arises, a cerulean raven swoops. It circles the crocodile skin neck again and again, the blade in its beak slicing through and through the warty, gristly skin, spilling viscous ruby blood all over the countryside. A thunderous rumbling crash reverberates as the death rattle screech of Lillicanthus is forced through the monsters slacking jaw. Feathers swirl to the ground as Levi lands. A monstrous eyeball regards him wistfully then sinks back into the titanic skull. Dead.

A high pitched cry reminds Levi of the child. But there against the tree trunk is a pale skinned beautiful young maiden, the child full grown. What is a hyperactive hunter to do on discovering such a sight? Levi removes his bloodstained cloak and makes decent the confused girl. What a hero!

Frayed

Tak, tok, tak, tok, tak, tok. Always the tak-tok in my head, over and over, over and over, the bell – tingting – and the six steps – tak, tok, tak, tok, tak, tok – and I see it, over and over.

I'm innocent.

I was twenty-one when I tak-toked those six steps, and there was some heavy Thing squatting upon my heart though I couldn't say why, and I opened the door – tingting – and tak-toked to the light switch.

I was wearing my boots, my big black boots that he liked, with the buckles and the studs and the leather and the hard heavy soles that clicked, tak-tok, on the shining floor. Wet and shining, liquid satin. I hit the switch – cik – and the light hesitated – hmhhh – and – ack – switched on.

It wasn't very often that I picked him up from work – he had a car of his own so there was no need – but the heavy Thing sank onto my breast, crushed my ribs, and I needed to find him. They say it would have been better for my defence if I hadn't, but when the squatting Thing settled I had no choice. On my way, tapping the steering wheel at a red light, the tips of my fingers breezed beneath my eye to waft away a single tear and came back red. The blood on my hands was the blood of my innocence, but that didn't stand up well in court.

Tingting. Tak, tok, tak, tok, tak, tok. Cikhmmmmack. And I see it again.

He worked at a boutique – expensive, designer, pure silks and brushed cottons, that sort of a place – and the CCTV had been broken for years. It was a joke between us. "One of these days," he'd tell me, "I'll run off with the lot of it and no-one will know." But I'd know, I'd tell him, and he'd promise to shear off a slice of the profits for me, and we'd laugh.

Perhaps there should have been a scream, raw and sore, ripping me open like a wrong seam from gut to throat, but there wasn't. There was only silence. The loudest in life leave the biggest silence in death. Their lost song is impossible to block out.

Cikhmmmmack. Silence.

When I woke up today the walls of my cell were red. I lowered my head to my quivering hands, saw the shredded skin of my fingertips. Over and over, on the walls in my blood: *INNOCENT*.

I saw, or think I saw, a shadowy figure running in the street, but that could have been anyone. I didn't notice at the time, and afterwards the image in my mind was too dark, too hazy to defend me. I pushed at the glass door. Tingting. The street was dark, the store was dark, the shadow on the floor was dark. The light switch was nearby. Tak, tok, tak, tok, tak, tok. Cikhmmmmack. Silence.

He lay on a sheet of crimson silk, woven from the single bullet wound in his stomach.

I didn't do it.

My fingertips fray with red and white threads.

City Worker

Alert energised juggle
Pretty damn curious muddle
I was always the purely and simply smiling
Strangely forged
Slipping easily through the screaming system
I speak a lot of consequences
Don't have the time
Don't get to do
Out of breath benefits
Intensive at the end obsessed
Invitation marathon
Want to see, see urged advice
Hate drag myself eat drink drinking eating
In some pointless agony

Routine cycle routes
Body armed daring carving
Rubbish success
I know I always feel beyond that
Popular inexperience
New dexterous academic
Preserve reserve of well-rested motion
Increasing sleep I wish
Please don't but it became normal
(Inside and out)

Eclectic literature comes to visit
Dosh careers even a few ideas
Speechless dream social happening
Murky memory of plenty
As I grow older
Plugged into phones

Groping over tape recorder
I never question sessions
Endless everything
Waking up from robotics
Drink it the city in
Vulnerable monotone
I High-pitched miracle forced
In the moment I want to live
New York rips ruins out my senses
Endless electronic therapy
We can never lose
Saving to spend winnings
Thrown into disorientation
Streetlight tunnels
One less hour of independence
Resilient ladder battle
Climbing race
Acclimatised to accepting rejecting
Incredibly alive
I could can be safe

Tuck me in
Dismiss me

I'm sold.

