

REFLECTIONS

IN

BROKEN EYES

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The Reflections

Prologue: Ripples

Ghosts

The Living

The Dead

Epilogue: A Virtually True Story

(of a literally contrived theory)

Prologue: Ripples

They skimmed the smooth stones across the clear water. And at some point realised that this time would never come again.

GHOSTS

Hidden Leaves (The Fourth Object)

The man couldn't remember his name.
He lived in a garden of hidden leaves with a large black dog who talked.
He had but one friend in the world, but he wasn't a true ally, but in fact a spectral interloper who sought to steal his secrets.

At night, when the moon bloodied, he left the garden to walk through the tendrils of fog-light. During this time he was never sure if he truly left the garden. Or if every movement took place in a dream,

Once upon a time he found himself on a particularly dark path of brown. As the buildings disappeared one by one, and the fog pushed in increasingly from both sides, the path turned to mud.

And there he found a velvety black box by the side of a pulpy puddle. He bent through a corrupt knee and tentatively placed his cold palms upon its surreal flesh. The brass clasps and hinges opened silently, as he drew the oaken lid back, and revealed the mysterious, yet discarded contents.

A small, golden key; a gossamer bound diary; a collection of ivory tiles.
The gold key held weight which belied its size, the diary was inscribed in a feint hand, and the tiles seemed to bind in the formation of an oblique game.
Acquiescent between the book and the key was a gap that seemed built for a fourth object.
He ran his index finger carefully around its contours. He lifted the box and smelt it, but wasn't sure why. He glanced all about himself furtively, tucked the box under his arm, and hurried back to the garden.

When he returned to the garden he instantly noticed a change in the dog. His dimensions, his movements, even the scent of his ancient breath.

His inverted friend stayed away for an entire week after the finding of the box. As if he knew, as if he were jealous. When he eventually showed himself he had a tale of his own to tell, but unfortunately, it was not a tale that could ever be told.

In the following weeks the tile game took over his mind, and he first suspected, and later knew, that he was the only person in the world to ever play the game. The game took over his life.

The only thing that ever broke him from his focused reverie was the question of the fourth object. His preoccupation with the omitted thing grew and grew, took on a life all its own, until it seemed the lacuna of his soul.

The dog grew tired.

His red eyes of fire dimmed a little with each passing day. Spittle appeared at the periphery of his muzzle and unnatural tears of mucus hung from his eyes. He spoke less and less, but in the twilight he whispered in his sleep about his victory over the sun.

Eventually, he crawled into the furthest corner of the garden and died.

The friend – a shadow to begin with – grew increasingly faint until he eventually vaporised into a cloud of pale smoke.

On a night when the moon was crescent, and the clouds around it nebulous, he drifted willingly once more into the mist.

A grainy white sign shimmered in the organic ephemeral light snaked through the skeletal trees. Upon the corner a latticed window displayed a sole bulb and a fat moth. He walked and walked and walked, and grew increasingly disorientated. The path appeared to twist around him and taunt his weakened mind. And the thought encroached upon his consciousness that he had made both his decisions and mistakes, and now, within the lunarscape, could never (ever) find his way back home.

Bull Shit

Everything was the usual when he'd come into work today. That was assuming that you didn't count the dead bull hanging from the ceiling on the third floor.

He'd gone upstairs to hand over some papers to one of the managers, and there it was. At first he couldn't make out what it was he was looking at. He thought it was some sort of mascot or charity promotion. Then he realised it was real. It's eyes glazed, it's hair rough. A lone fly buzzed around it, as though crying out for company. He was sure it wouldn't be alone for long. He asked somebody about it, the person who happened to be nearest, but she just shrugged, and carried on typing. He told himself that there had to be a reason; something simple, something logical. But he couldn't think what. So he took the files over to Jean.

Back on his own floor he told a couple of his colleagues about it, but they didn't seem to be surprised, or interested.

For a moment he forgot about the bull, but then he saw Jonny sticking his dick in the coffee machine, crying out as he pressed the buttons and unleashed steaming cheap beverage onto his manhood. Steaming torrent after steaming torrent, his eyes watering and rolling back in his skinny head. Everytime it happened it acted as though it were the first. As if he had no say in the matter.

He turned to John, but he was too busy driving staples into his fingers to concern himself with Jonny's dick.

By late afternoon the walls were awash with blood and screams. As he walked down the corridors glass cracked behind him, as rape victims were thrown against walls, and chairs were were throw in hysteria.

Outside in the world everything was sticky orange and bruised purple and people walked with invisible limps.

On the way home, on the number 32 bus, a man stared at him, whilst a woman rummaged incessantly through her carrier bags. But he spoke to no one.

Macfarley's Skulls

Macfarley was carving his skulls by candlelight. Removing layers as though he was peeling a milky white apple. He was striving for a very specific shape, but he couldn't quite grasp it, the design floating somewhere on the edge of his mind.

It was snowing outside but all the window offered was black, soot that had gathered due to the smoke from his candles. He felt something against his foot as the old greying dog stirred. One day the dog would die, and Macfarley still hadn't decided whether or not he would he would carve his skull. On the one hand it would be a fitting epitaph, a crafted tribute, but on the other he and the dog went back a long way. He was not just his oldest pet but his oldest friend. His longest stretching connection with the past.

Recently his work had been going well, the best it had for years, but today it just wasn't coming. His tools didn't feel right in his hands. He felt like some sort of amateur. Even though he has always carved skulls he didn't feel as though he knew what he was doing. He felt like he was a child who had wondered into his workshop whilst he was out.

This was a special skull. It should be one of the finest examples of his work...if not the finest. He hadn't made any mistakes as such but...

There was a tapping at the window, the old man barely had visitors during daylight and at this time of day he had none at all.

The dog stood alert, and for it's age, taut. Who could possibly be here now, at this time? Macfarley went to the window and removed a thin film of black with his palm. Outside the snow had ceased, and the two bare undead trees that stood either side of his property were as still as ever. There was no sign of anybody or thing.

The dog seemed unsettled and was sniffing around the closed oak door. MacFarley trusted the animal and decided to take a closer look.

He opened his study and the dog moved (as fast as it could in it aged state) towards the front door. It then looked the old man dead in the eye and let out a single yelp.

Macfarley approached it, kneeled down and petted his friend. But the dog appeared serious, not scared or angry, but grave. He got to his feet and opened the door. Cold air struck him like a sobering thought, and he was shocked by how truly cold it was.

But outside there was nothing. He looked down at the animal, it was sniffing at something...a skull. Not one of his. Not that polished but never the less captivating. In fact, as he brought it closer to his eyes, he realised he had never seen a skull quite like it. The shape was beguiling and the texture like roughened silk.

The dog stared at the skull as though it was a piece of left over steak.

Macfarley closed the door and returned to the study, skull in hand. He moved the one he was working on and put the mystery in its place, so he could take a closer look under the candle light. Yes, there was no doubt, he had never seen a skull like this before, and the realisation gave the aging carver a fresh shot of inspiration. He picked up his curved, double edged knife, as the dog rested his head on his knee.

At that moment Macfarley decided that the dog's skull would lie in the dirt of the garden, not on the polished wood of his display cabinet. He would rather it be consumed by the worms of the earth than the eyes of the living.

The Mask on the Wall

The mask hung on a hook, like all the others in her grandfather's collection. Most of the masks she could recognise in some way. Some were skulls, some were demons, others originated from the theatre or depicted caricature. Yet this one was alien to her.

She wasn't allowed to touch this mask. He didn't even seem comfortable when she looked at it. He would always try and distract her at those moments, by asking her a question, or giving her a sweet.

The shape of the mask was vague, and if somebody was to ask her to describe it, she knew she would struggle to do so.

A mask shaped like a ghost stretched through a hole in the ground. That was the best she could muster.

One day when she was left alone with the mask, she stood on a shelf and removed it from the wall. It felt as strange as it looked. She ran her finger over its contours. She raised it to eye level and peered through the narrow eye slits. The room spooked her through that frame, everything seeming unnatural, warped and drained of colour.

Slowly, and with illogical fear, she placed the mask against her face. The room fell dark. She was surprised by how well the mask fit. It had a bizarre shape yet it felt as if it was moulded especially for her face.

She went to remove it and the mask didn't budge. She began to trace the edges with her fingers and realised that she couldn't find them. The mask had no end, and her skin no beginning.

A Tale of Gothic Lilac

Beneath the frail cobweb sky, and the rain of fan dust, she unveiled to the dubious Chinaman her long and complicated history. As a wall mounted candle cast an arc of broken light like the broken eye of a god.

How she had pursued the tall man with the gaunt features and the mummified hand, from Belize to Bosnia, from Playa del Carmen to Paris. How she had turned up nothing but conjecture, rumours, lies, and ultimately, the deadest of dead ends.

Turquoise smoke pushed its way around the room like shadow. Smoky moths drifted in from a small, high window. As she wove her tale he pushed the jade and ivory pieces, listlessly, around the board. A war between ectoplasm and spirits, minds and ghosts.

A street peddler had told her how to reach this place. To a building out of place. The one functional place left over from the colonial days. The gargoyle hadn't belonged, grafted on from another era, a rift in time and space.

A lone dog had prowled the alley with liquid eyes of electric white. At the head of the street two little girls play some incomprehensible game with wooden poles and hoops.

She didn't knock, just let herself in, just as the one eyed peddler had instructed. The tiles were cracked, and the dark glutinous, dripping from ceiling to floor.

As she progressed along the narrow hallway, she had smelt a scent, extinguished wax mixed with damp earth and spoilt mushrooms. She was about to give it up for a bad job when she heard a wet, sloppy, guttural cough. Unmistakeably male.

She had crossed paths with the street peddler before the witching hour had even bore down, before the street had worked up the nerve to come truly to life. The breakthrough coming swiftly, she had expected to search and bribe, and pick apart fact from fiction – like fibres from thread – for hours.

Hennessey Street was always simultaneously vibrant and virulent - baby octopus bubbled in large pans like melting plastic; the night smelt of garbage and onions, copper and damp. Shadows licked the walls and dark eyed faces were momentarily revealed by the orange and red lights of passing cars. Fading Neon and open flame, troubled private lives of lost souls played out publicly like Grand Guignol theatre, a place so simultaneously dead and alive.

He had whispered to her from the shadow cocoon of a doorway. Told her of the large white acronym of a house, once populated by the bourgeoisie and actively despised by the old order.

The moth advanced upon her cheek. The china man slid a small ivory piece, shaped like a bust, diagonally across three octagons. She wondered what she was doing here, licked her dry lips.

"Do you reflect?" He asked cryptically, not bothering to raise his eyes from the antique board.

"On what?"

"Your personal history." The words neutral to the point of synthesis.

Her ponderous thought was interrupted by a firework exploding damply in the damp streets. No doubts sending weak, bloody light bouncing against the night.

She swallowed hard, involuntarily, "I'm not sure what you mean."

"Not how? Or why? But what. The fragments, the milestones, all those lost things."

She looked at him. Trying to take his measure and find his meaning. His eyes never left the board. He didn't seem to be posturing, but genuinely enraptured in the movement of inanimate objects – of unconscious algorithms. For a moment his tongue darted from his mouth and assassinated a tiny bead of spit. When it did, it appeared split, amphibian, lizard-like.

She could not see his eyes with his head in this downward slant, but she imagined them to be small, carmine, glowing. A chill dripped down her torso and she was reminded, without manners or warning, of a childhood nightmare. Of dogs, of loss, of primal fear.

"I guess I lost the way I feel," she said without thinking about it. She took herself by surprise and didn't know what she meant by this.

He looked up, grinned enigmatic.

"If I could shed light on your predicament, do you really believe that it could help you?"

"I don't know, it depends what type of light."

He smiled, seemed pleased by her.

Another fire work expired, laughter was born and then died, the moth froze against the wall.

He asked her how she could be so certain that the man with the mummified hand was the one responsible. Couldn't he be just a coincidence, an innocent bystander, the dreaded maguffin.

She told him firmly and outright that he was none of these. That sometimes, occasionally, things in life WERE just black and white, and he was her man. No doubt about it.

"We don't always want to uncover liars you know? I'm willing to assume from your intelligence level that you know this. Even though we should never really assume."

A horn blared out on the street, slammed into the room uninvited.

Her heart tremored.

"I am ready," detecting a lame note buried somewhere in her voice.

"Okay," he replied, although this time his lips didn't move.

He peeled away half of his face – the left side - a condom removed from a severed dick. A sinewy membrane. A prematurely butchered calf. One white eye like a ball of wax spasmed violently. His limbs twitched as if the body had been severed from the mind, but the voice is cool and smooth and clear. Bland yet familiar, soft yet strong. The voice of her brother. A sonic transfiguration that grounded her in the moment. Her journey shrinking behind her as her memories faded and the china man grew brighter.

He stood up and wove a story amongst moth and shadow, of mistakes repeated, of inevitable transgression, of an endless search...

Discourse

Why did you do that?

I didn't.

You must have.

I didn't.

Well who did?

It must have been him.

Who?

Him, over there.

Shit...I didn't see him.

Don't stair.

Fuck, did he see us?

I don't know.

Oh no!

What...what?

He's coming over.

The Jungle's Wayward Son (Terminal 32)

So here in the concrete jungle once more Samuel scans the terrain. Viddies the glass, the alloys, the endless sharp edges and the angles which seem to defy. The latter day saints had left him back at the church, alone with his cold coffee and antiquated magazine. Peta had caught his stony gaze as if she understood his doom. His fate. His burden.

So he flowed from city quadrant to city quadrant like a broken ghost. He dragged himself through the too bright shopping centers and the too dim subway tunnels.

He ate a hamburger – bought from a street vendor – but tasted nothing.

He browsed pornography - in one of the back street stores where the light never seemed to truly penetrated – as a form of meditation.

At around 2 o'clock he thought he caught site of a childhood sweetheart at the entrance to Terminal 32. But then when the light shifted about her, he realized that it was just another myth.

In the evening the sky darkened to wet coal as it began to rain softly. The traffic streamed by as he played whack-a-mole with a lonely little girl on the street. They pounded on the grinning heads of ex-presidents, her with glee, him with indifference. He left her his last two quarters and moved along.

And all the while in a foreign land the misty pink cloud vapour swirled.

His first victim was thinking about their washer dryer when Samuel pulled the modified Glock 32 from his innocuous sports jacket. He'd purchased it seven days earlier, at a steal, in china town.

The fat lady's jaw shattered like imploding ice, a fragment was sent careening into the face of a pretty young girl, slicing open one of her pretty blue eyes, a little boy screamed like a little girl, the anguish filling the ears of a strong man who passed out and hit the concrete silently, blood and smoke and heat filled the torrid city air, people ran and panicked and screamed death.

Samuel continued on his path, calmly taking time out to reload. Sliding cold metal into cold metal as the rapture pleasingly curled up his spine.

He trod the beetles into the dirt. He soared with the angels. He died alone.

Spring Dance at the Boneyard

Margaret pulls the fork trough the frail and dry earth. Reaps up something darker and more moist. The smell of her garden is one of her few remaining pleasures. The sweat of the earth – worms and ashen stone. She looks at her wrinkled fingers and

then at deep pink roses. She envies their youth and wishes that she was sixteen again.

The fork hits something hard. A few months ago she dug up an old clay plate. She cleaned it up and put it on a shelf in the kitchen. She tries to uproot this new find with the fork. A dome is pulled to the surface, and she wonders if this is the bowl to go with the plate. She thinks that soon she will have a full dinner set, and the thought makes her smile. She digs her hand into the damp earth and pulls out a skull. A human skull – minus the jaw.

She is nowhere near as unnerved by this as she knows she should be. She turns it to the sun and examines its shape. It is brown, as though it has been bleached by the dirt. She removes muck from the eye sockets, brushes it from the upper teeth. It is remarkably well preserved. How old can this be?

She holds it beneath her nose and breaths in deeply.

She wonders if there could be more and begins rooting around for the rest of the skeleton. Almost straight away she finds a long narrow bone, which she assumes must be a rib. She begins to dig deeper and wider and before long discovers a three fingered hand.

An hour later when the temperature has cooled, and the sky darkened a few degrees, Margaret has half the remains of a man.

She takes them inside and places them in her bath, then cleans them off with hot water and bleach. Dirt is sucked into the plug hole. The rest of the bone are as brown as the skull.

She arranges the collection on her coffee table. She thinks about adding the clay plate, but dismisses the idea as silly. The arrangement looks okay but doesn't satisfy Margaret. She moves a few pieces, and then a few more. She tries dozens of different shapes and patterns, formations of bone, a paleontologist with a child's sense of wonder. She wonders if she needs more pieces and thinks about going back into the garden. Then decides that she should only be working with what she has.

By the time she has an arrangement she is satisfied with it is dark and cool outside. The bones are stacked tall like a house of cards.

She stares at the construction for an indeterminate amount of time. Unconsciously, her body begins to sway, and before she knows, is dancing around around them. She dances like she was sixteen again.

Elephant Graveyard

Somewhere in Tangiers there is a poacher with one arm. I know, because I had it removed and a flute carved from it. I gave it to my daughter. She loved music. She played it every night, blowing her gentle breath down its dead shaft. Whilst outside, in the world, men committed bad deeds.

Her mother died one rainy April night. Leaving me with bad memories and relief. And a house that was even emptier than I.

It was a hot, sweaty August when my daughter began to see her. She said she had been stood on the gazebo – arms crossed, dress billowing...mouth closed.

I went to the spot where Mary said she had been. There was something strange clinging to the grass – a transparent, green-grey gel like substance. Cautiously, I touched it. It felt very cold and smelt of sour breath. Although I knew it

not possible, I began to look myself, expecting to see her in shadows, behind doors and on the edge of dreams.

Yet, she never appeared.

Mary, however, continued to see her, on an almost daily basis. And on those days in which she did not put in an appearance, tears seem to teeter on the tip of her eyes and threaten to spill onto her hollow cheeks. Then Patrick arrived. Patrick was young, good looking, quite, and walked around with a look on his face that suggested he knew something you didn't.

His entrance into the home seemed to mark another shift in Mary's behaviour. She stopped playing her flute, and furthermore, stopped looking for her mother. She started to do the things that other girls of her age did, and she seemed quite taken with the handsome young man. I was never sure as to the nature of their relationship, and I thought it best not to wonder. It didn't matter to me, as long as her happiness was raised above zero.

Then one day I saw her in the hallway, still as a statue, her amber eyes burrowing into her mother's portrait, as though she were staring through it, at something written on the hidden wall. I asked her if she had a problem with Patrick, but she said everything was fine, and that it was nice to have some new company about the house. So, for a while, I simply let things lie.

Shortly after that I had new responsibilities in Libya, and I spent less and less time at our country residence. I came home, on a gaunt December night, to find the house empty and full of a loud silence. I moved from room to room with a bad feeling swelling in my gut. Something was wrong. I found Patrick in the bathroom. His bloodied body slumped over the bath. A trickle of blood had congealed into a thick vein, and hung from his neck like a discarded snake skin. Across the mirror and on his face was more of the translucent green gel I once saw in the garden. His face was twisted into a mask of anguish.

Then I remembered Mary and bolted. She was in her bedroom. I found her eating toast and watching an old movie on silent TV. Relief flowed through me.

That night I heard the flute, though I was sure that she was fast asleep. I tried to think of a better time, but could not. And the notes echoed through the house, like the ghosts of the notes, and seemed to have no end.

Verses

He studied the scriptures until his eyes bled and all he could see was perdition.

Following

The stranger turned left onto Maple Drive and Michael followed. He had been tailing the driver now for two whole hours. Ever since he had witnessed the hit and run. Ever since he had seen the old woman sprawled out on the road.

Michael wasn't sure what he was going to do when he finally confronted the stranger, but he knew that he couldn't let him out of his sight. If he did he'd never forget it.

Eventually the stranger stopped outside a house, much larger than Michael's. He was greeted at the door by an attractive woman, who seemed pleased to see him. This was probably his wife, Michael thought. She looked like the type of woman he

would like to have married. As the happy couple disappeared into the house together, his dislike for the stranger grew.

Michael waited and waited. He drank the flask of coffee that he had taken to work but been too busy to open. As the coffee disappeared the minutes accumulated. Occasionally people passed by his car; teenagers, dog-walkers. People who had not had their day disturbed by the harshness of their fellow man.

Michael looked up, at a full, milky white moon, and remembered the victim. He had left her to die alone.

The River of Regrets

As Michael floats away against his will – watched by sepulchral eyes – he wishes that he'd listened to his sisters' ghost.

The Dog Story

The animal runs, leaps, misses, falls.

The man watches, laughs, spits, takes a drink.

The dog (a mutt crossed with a stray) has been trying to catch a bird, perched on the low fence for about half an hour now. It was as though the bird was taunting it, as it flew away and then resumed its position on the fence. The man takes one last drag on the cigarette and flicks it towards the dog. It looks shocked as tiny sparks bounce off its fur.

* * *

The dog is on auto pilot as he ascends the stairs, makes his way through darkness, to wear his master sleeps. It can hear the deep sounds that the man only makes when it is dark.

The dog pounces, grabs, pulls, rips. He has his master's throat in his jaws now. Hot blood runs down his throat and it is the very first time he has tasted blood.

* * *

The vet has a tear in his eye. Too small to notice. He always feels this way, although in just half an hour he will be thinking about something else entirely. The needle is filled, checked, tapped, inserted.

White Light and yellow Bones

As Malcolm walked across the orange wasteland he felt like killing something. Anything. But everything around him was dead. And you didn't kill the dead, they killed you.

He hit his foot on something and almost fell. It was a pile of little yellow bones that had caused him to stumble.

Before the storm came he had been a killer of children, but now there were no children to kill and no adults to punish his sins.

It was as though the wasteland surrounding him was a sin. A transgression made physical, rock and earth and dust.

The tobacco smoke was stale as it ran across his tongue. Once upon a time he wouldn't have been permitted to smoke where he stood, but the rules were gone now.

In the distance was a building he would once have feared. It was a place in which he was tortured. They'd punched, cut, and taunted him between its phlegm coloured walls. Now it was just a giant concrete shack. He could relieve himself on its stone if he wanted. He could dance around its perimeter with disregard.

The shiny rock. The jade green telephone. The Plastic table.

Everyday he spoke to someone different on this cryptic line. Apart from the days when he couldn't bring himself to leave the dilapidated fast food restaurant. Yesterday he spoke to a man from Wisconsin about petrodollars, the day before a transsexual who was fixated on postage stamps, an old woman who was trying to reanimate her dog...

The phone rang. He answered on the third ring. He always answered on the third ring. This voice was different to all the others. This voice was familiar.

A high pitched whistle sounded in his head and without warning the sky opened and bright white light flooded in. And with it came the rules, the past...the prison.

Lying in a hotel room in the afternoon with a married woman

I tried to tell her that everything was going to be okay. But I just couldn't do it.

Down Pour

The bulb of water fell to the ground, impacted with the pavement and broke into pieces. Hundreds more did the same as the ground got wetter and the puddles grew. Streams rushed down the road towards the gutter.

Frank looked through his window at the rain swept street outside and wondered if it would ever end. It had been raining now for fifteen years.

That was more than 5000 days, over 130,000 hours, nearly 8 million minutes and he couldn't even consider the seconds.

Obviously people had gotten used to the constant downpour, but the effect it had had on their lifestyles was devastating. Of Frank's close friends most were alcoholics and several people he knew had committed suicide.

The other day Polly (who was only seven years old) asked if he could remember the time before the rain and what it was like. And to Frank's horror he realised that he no longer could. Nothing. It was a total blank. All his memories streaked by rain.

Without really thinking about what he was doing Frank got up and headed to the door. He unlocked it, opened it, and was lashed with hard rain. He stepped outside not bothering to close the door behind him, leaving it to swing in the wind. His feet sunk into the muddy water. He walked about one hundred feet into the wasteland and sat down.

Then he laid back and let the rain beat his face.

Deer

The deer ran through the forest with metal in its side. It kept on moving, until it reached a part of the forest not before seen.

Lucky Cigarettes (AKA: The silly things we do to get us through)

“But it’s my last cigarette, my lucky cigarette, I never give it away.”

“How can anything that makes you ill be lucky?”

“Well, admittedly, it’s not good for my health, but it’s lucky in other ways.”

“What ways?”

“I don’t know, it’s kind of hard to pin point, but I know that it’s lucky somehow.”

“So I can’t smoke it then.”

“Sorry, but no, it has to stay in the pack, it’s been there a long time.”

“But you only bought that pack yesterday.”

“Okay not this pack, but whatever pack I was smoking from at the time.”

“So how long have you had that cigarette?”

“Uuum about...10 years.”

“Really? You’ve kept a cigarette for ten whole years.”

“Yes.”

“Doesn’t it disintegrate, I mean they’re not exactly strong are they, there just thin paper. I’ve bent them by mistake loads of times.”

“Yeah but if you’re careful you can preserve one. I treat it with care.”

“Well why not get a cigarette holder, a silver one or something, wouldn’t that be better if you want to keep it?”

"No, it likes packets, it doesn't want to sell out, it's strange flying business class after a lifetime of economy."

"Uuum, I imagine it is. But how do you know which one it is, how do you avoid smoking it by accident. Have you marked it or something."

"No need. It's the last of it's kind, a true survivor. It's from a brand they don't produce anymore, and obviously the name is just above the filter. You see that's the other reason I can't let you smoke it. It is an endangered species. The last remnant of a long lost brand."

"I don't think I want to smoke it now, I'd feel almost guilty."

"And so you should do."

"Can I look at it?"

"Erm.. I don't know about that. Like you said yourself they are fragile."

"I'll be real careful, honest. I'll treat it as though it's my own."

"But you don't keep a lucky cigarette."

"I know. But I'll be careful, you know what I'm saying."

"Maybe you should."

"What do you mean?"

"Keep a lucky cigarette. Maybe you should get one."

"How would I pick one? I mean yours has got a lot of history."

"Yeah, well...you make your own history don't you. Even my lucky cigarette started off as a normal one. It could just as easily been snubbed out in an ashtray, left their to breath it's last. But I saved it. Took it through the years with me. Now it's special. I mean you're begging me to let you hold it."

"I'm not begging, I just wanted to see it. I was curious that's all."

"Okay you can see it, but be really careful."

"I will, I will."

"What are you doing?"

"Smelling it."

"Why?"

"I wondered how it smelt, thought maybe time had changed it. How do you think it will taste now."

"Gorgeous. It's a vintage now. Like fine wine."

“Tobacco doesn’t age like that.”

“Doesn’t it?”

“What, you really think it’ll taste better.”

“I have no doubt...but I certainly won’t be finding out.”

Number 117

Sometimes you had to do things you knew you shouldn’t. It wasn’t so much doing the right thing for the wrong reasons as doing the right thing in the wrong way. The same people who would tell him he was wrong, were the same people who would secretly admire what he had done. They would show their support behind closed doors.

He carefully loaded the gun, bullet at a time, as he had done before but would probably never do again. After this he took time to check his appearance. He wasn’t sure why he did this, but knew there would be plenty of time to ponder it later. As he sat alone in a cell.

He left the house, closing the door, but not locking it.

He walked down the street, leaving the gate swinging behind him.

A young girl sang out of tune, a bird drifted by. The gun was limp at his side – unconcealed.

He passed Mr. Wilkins who was cutting his grass for the millionth time.

The reasons he was doing this never crossed his mind, only his ultimate objective seemed important. The rape was back in another world.

He rounded the corner. Approached no.117 and casually unlatched the gate. Walked up the path and knocked on the door.

Three times (no more, no less), firm but not too loud.

The man who answered looked ill, weak and pathetic, but this changed nothing at all. He raised the gun, cocked it, and pulled the trigger.

He walked back the way he came, this time minus the shotgun, and with another man’s chin hanging from his own, but the little girl’s singing was exactly the same.

By-Passing the Thalamus

The rain was falling down the window panes like dying spiders tumbling down their webs.

What they said about smell was true. Scent was the senses true connection with the past. Whilst Mark looked around the bare, dusty room, his whole body began to tingle. He’d sustained more pain and misery, in eight years, in this room, than most encountered in their entire lives.

He didn’t think he’d ever return to this place, and if by some bizarre and unexpected chain of events he did, he thought he’d burn it to the ground. Stand back and watch the flames, feel the heat upon his face.

But as he stood within this space, such an act seemed pointless. He couldn't even be bothered to strike a match, let alone douse the place with petrol. Yes, the smell was wreaking havoc with his mind right now, but once he left he'd smell nothing but fresh air. The very moment he stepped outside the rain ceased. Sometimes life seemed so artificial, it was the only way that you could tell it was for real.

The Third Bridge

The third bridge had crumbled. There was no way they could get out of the city now. They would have to hide until morning came. "Did I ever tell you what my mother used to say about me?" asked Susie. "No," replied Thomas, "you never told me anything about you mother." "She said that I was the..." Another bomb exploded nearby cutting her short. Thomas stumbled on some debris, Susie pulled him to his feet, and said, "Come on, I think there's a shelter nearby." "I've twisted my ankle." "Come on...I'll support you" In the far distance another bomb went off. Susie wrapped his arm around her shoulder for support, as they began to move through the destruction.

* * *

The fire was going strong and Thomas had his head rested on Susie's lap. He watched the frail flames as they licked the cold air. The base of the fire shifted from side to side, as the wind slammed against it. "You never did get around to telling me what your mother said about you," stated Thomas. Susie looked into the flames, and smiled.

Purple Light

Purple light fell from the wires and struck the street like rain. The old tramp danced around and felt like all his lost christmas' had come again.

The Sandman

During the day the boy was sad but at night he turned into a sandman. And stood tall and proud and fierce against the night and the thunder. He ran past wolves into the forest deep and slayed golden maidens with pleasure. Left their eyes aflame; teeth bleeding, cunts on fire, their still vibrating bones on rocks in clearings, for the eyes of the night and the muzzles of cubs to lick.

The moon glowed like a fiery bone and drenched the strips of jade grass with ancient illuminescence. And the worms which burrowed beneath the earth and between the mushrooms held secrets brighter still.

Sometimes he would look down at his footprints with wonder and awe and wonder how he got here in the first place, here being the world, not merely the forest

Upon occasion he would hold court with the denizens of the woods. Surreptitious squirrels, schizophrenic spiders, bears darker than the night and a wild dog who was obsessed by the sun. They would converse for ages in an archaic tongue but *he* craved the flesh of the aeons.

And fires burned on the periphery in purple dusk and timeless night, and the trees would part in his wake, and when he howled at the moon the moon howled back.

Yet invariably, sooner or later, one way or the other, the sun would rise, his heart would slow, and his mother would call him home.

Subjectivity

They said that he had crossed a line, but Charlie didn't think there were any lines, only circles. Circles that went around and around and always led you back to where you'd started. All he'd done was break out of a circle, stepped to a different beat. He was just redefining his environment. After all wasn't that what the lifestyle experts said you should do? Wasn't the world wide open now? The old moral codes stripped away and replaced with something far more complex... and far more flexible. Something more suited to Charlie's questionable tastes and dirty thrills.

But when they find him he knew that the old order would kick in and the individual would not be quite so free anymore. Then there would be lines, vertical lines of metal that housed him and kept him trapped.

But until that day, Charlie was going to be his own god, make his own rules, and have a lot fun.

The one with the guy in the que

"Hey, what you think you're doing"

Jimmy had never been one for ques, especially long ques. And this one was an epic.

"I said what the fuck you doing?"

He'd try and ignore it but wasn't sure that he could.

"Do you see this line, do you see this line, i'm talking to you."

He decided he'd give the man one final chance to shut up. And for Jimmy this was generous, for Jimmy this was exemplary. And for one moment he thought the man had sensed the danger he was edging toward, but then:

"Oi!"

Jimmy snapped, much the same as he always did in situations such as this.

Many said they had never seen so much blood.

Abuse of Trust

He spoke proverbs in a monotone. Disconcerting, unconvincing. He wore clothes that tried to look old, but were not. He slapped the children on their backs, as he dug their graves.

To Allow Last Kill

He was always talking. Talk, talk, talk...talk. Ernie wished he'd shut the fuck up. His veiny fists tightened on the end of the oak veneered bar.

He couldn't quite make out the meaning or structure of the words anymore. But he knew Mike was talking, that was the main thing. Recognised that tone, that pitch, that rhythm, that too steady flow.

For years he'd been hearing these stories, some he'd forgotten, some he wished he could. A few were mildly interesting (granted) the first time you heard them, but not now, not anymore.

Ernie tuned into the frequency for a moment (he couldn't help it – it was like a verbal train wreck); he was giving his opinion on Albanians again. Jesus.

Ernie wanted to silence him, imagined throwing his half drunk glass of beer at him.

Not near him, but right at him, right in the face...right in the mouth.

A month in prison for a moment's silence.

Faded Neon

The last time she had been here the neon had shone a little brighter. This motel had been tidier, the owners friendlier.

She walked up the green concrete stairs (which she was sure were not covered with graffiti before) under a broken light (working just fine last time) to a dented door.

The room was damp and musky, nothing like she remembered it. She headed to the bathroom, which had sparkled the last time she was here. Now rims of dirt encircled the sink, rubbish laid in the corner of the shower and the previous occupant's bodily waste still hung in the toilet.

She curled up on the bed; moonlight entered the room through holes in the curtains, and splashed across her face. She removed the tattered good luck charm from her bag. Held it tight.

The Third Eye Sees Only the Self

This was horrible.

They'd told him he'd enjoy it. That this would be a life altering experience.

But his visions seemed to be fuelled only by the negative...

The distortions of reality dictated by his own fears and worries.

He'd felt apprehensive as he'd chewed the bitter fungi. Black and hairy, it was certainly the ugliest thing he had ever placed in his mouth.

To make things worse he had no control over time. His body would decide how long this lasted. He didn't even have the option of escaping into sleep. And even if he

could sleep, he didn't know if he could face the kind of dreams his subconscious was likely to create in this situation.

His friends thought that it would help him to overcome his "rough spell", he'd never known that hope could taste so bitter.

For a few unlikely moments he felt lifted, felt as though the tide was about to turn, but as the walls closed in he realised that it was nothing but a cruel joke.

He watched his friend cram a double dose into his mouth, chewing away with a large smile.

As he sat in the corner he realised that his third eye was as blind as the two blue ones that sat above his nose.

Levitation May Occur

He walks down the hotel corridor with a black eye and a broken heart.

He passes a maid and looks right through her.

He feels like a ghost, disconnected from both his surroundings and the events that have just unfolded.

He moves through reception, where he is oblivious to the looks that the girls behind the desk give him.

When he steps outside the daylight stings his eyes. His body feels light, empty. He feels as though he could leave the ground, float over the gravel, and not land until he reaches another place entirely.

Questions Without Answers

"So where you off to all dressed up?"

He'd somehow known she was gonna be a talker. But not just a talker it transpired, but a talker with a hugely irritating voice. It was like vomit being filtered through a rusty colander.

Michael had been on the train for half an hour, and so far the journey had been peaceful, relaxing even. Just what he'd hoped for. Then at Moxton the old woman had boarded the train, and sat right next to him despite there being several vacant seats and tables. She'd smelt, not much but a little, mildly of sour milk. But he could ignore this as long as she didn't talk.

Oh well.

"You look very slick."

"Thanks," he replied with the mildest hint of sarcasm.

"What do you do then if you don't mind me asking," she said removing cigarettes from her pocket in the no smoking carriage.

"This and that."

"What?" she asked sharply.

"I'm in advertising," he said with more than a little irritation in his voice.

"Oh advertising, I'll tell ye what one I like. Ye know that one with the little black kid and he goes to his friends and they've run out of his favourite lolly...Did you do that one?"

"No."

“Sorry?”

“I said no, I can’t take responsibility for that little masterpiece.”

“Oh it makes me piss everytime I see it.”

What Michael didn’t know (could not have known), nor anyone else in the carriage or on the entire train, or any of the towns the tracks ran through or by, was that this deeply irritating stranger was the mother he had never known. The one who sometimes kept him awake at night with questions. One’s without answers.

Pale Horse

The pale horse stood alone in the night filled field. Like a wisp of smoke in the darkness - Beautiful loneliness.

Bugs crawled around its feet, in awe. They would happily die for it, be crushed beneath its hooves, sacrifice their bodies to the freedom of it’s movement.

Occasionally they crawled up his legs, just to near him, just to feel him. They nestled between his hairs, and this never seemed to irritate the animal.

One mild day, when a phlegm coloured sky hung over the field, the horse’s body laid on the ground unmoving. The dirt had already managed to taint it’s perfect colour.

The substance had fled it’s eyes leaving only glassy surfaces. A thick string of saliva fell from it’s mouth.

The bugs kept their distance.

Birds of Pray

The birds were circling overhead – obsessively. They were like junkies. The sweat that had previously covered his body had now evaporated, and rejoined the air. He thought he could see their eyes, although obviously he couldn’t. All he could see were ragged black forms moving around the sky. He tried to count them but couldn’t, it was as though their number was changing, although he knew that it wasn’t.

His vision was getting darker, the colours becoming more muted.

Aspects of the day appeared in the darkness. The money he had stolen, the woman he had hit, the one he had smiled at, the old man in the straw hat.

For a few moments the darkness faded and the sunlight stung his eyes. He closed them and the old man reappeared. But now he was changed, and appeared stronger than he had before. Then he realised that he himself was becoming as ghostly as all these images that were burned into his retina.

And even he would have trouble arguing that he didn’t deserve this.

He lost consciousness counting the birds.

The Man on the Cross

The dust fell through the shafts of light, and was momentarily brought to life. Sarah tried to avoid the accusing gaze of the wall mounted Jesus. His paint was beginning to flake, and at some point one of his toes had been chipped off.

He looked at her as though it was her fault that he was in such a state. She felt like he knew about every bad thing she had done that week. The lie she had told at school, that was burrowing away inside her, like a diseased worm. The priest was speaking words, but she may as well have been deaf. She looked again at the pale man nailed to the cross, she could not help it. She noticed the state of the small church, it threatened to blow away with the wind, and leave them all sat in a field.

And this stare would set her on a long path of broken promises and misguided dreams, of ludicrous priorities and self harm. In pursuit of a written morality she would create a tower of sin. Until she would eventually leap from it and come crashing to the ground.

Fastlanes, rusty car crashes, assault and battery charges, vacant motel rooms, duplicitous smiles...

Then she realised that the man on the cross was only made of wood, and had no more power over her than the beams above her head.

(Didn't she?)

The new generation

Julie hadn't expected to be called here on a Sunday. She barely knew her grandmother, and the old woman was notoriously reclusive. She had actually met her on only three occasions in her entire life prior to this. The first was when she was just five, and this must be her oldest surviving memory. They had visited the woman's property of the time, a large house, that had seemed like a mansion to the little girl who passed through its rooms. The old woman had given her a box of fudge, and her parents commented in the car, on the way back, that this was uncharacteristically kind. Her grandmother had been an enigma for her from that point onwards. The second time came five years later, at a large family occasion, where she met several relatives she hadn't previously known existed. Amongst them was her increasingly ill grandmother. This time she barely spoke to the old woman, a mere twenty seven words passing between them.

The third and final time (until now of course) was ten years ago, 25 years after the family gathering. No one had expected her to live this long, and the woman barely spoke, but to Julie, she appeared haunted. If by something in particular, or merely life itself, she could not tell.

And now this call had come out of nowhere and the woman, who should by all rights by now be dead, wanted to speak to her. Needed to see her immediately.

When her mother's mother answered the door Julie was instantly struck by how much younger she appeared. She didn't look much older than her mother. Julie had remembered her as being on her last legs, on the verge of the grave, but now her hair was several shades darker, her skin less wrinkled.

She didn't speak a word, merely stepped aside to allow her entrance. She then motioned towards the lounge where a large decanter of Brandy lay open beside two crystal glasses.

The old woman sat down and poured two large measures, then slid one towards Julie.

"Why did you want to see me?" her words sounded like they were danger of being lost in the air, never making their way to the other woman's ears.

“Try your Brandy, it’s a special Armagnac, very hard to get in this country...and even more expensive.”

Something told Julie that she would need a drink. So she took one.

Her Grandmother’s glass remained empty on the table.

“Is it bad news?” her voice sounded a little stronger this time.

“You could say that. The thing is dear, I’m dead.”

“Sorry.”

“I’m dead. Have been for a very long time. That’s why I look younger to you today. I have no physical presence, so my appearance is determined by your mindset.”

“When did you die?”

“I died a few days before you were born. I suppose there wasn’t room for the two of us.”

As Julie took a second, larger, sip of her Brandy she somehow knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that this was true.

The 144th Story

When the knock on the door came it frightened them. They were unaccustomed to visitors at this hour. Cautiously the man answered it. The person on the other side stood just four feet high. A little boy. His clothes sodden.

They did not know him, but that didn’t mean they would leave him out in the rain.

They brought him in, gave him a hot drink and a dry towel. Tried to question him but gained no answers. He didn’t even murmur.

The woman went to bath him, and ten minutes later came crashing down the stairs screaming. Her husband came to her thinking that perhaps the boy was sick, or had drowned in the bath. Between gasps of air the woman told him of the scars she had found on the boy’s back when undressing him.

They put the boy back outside, with the rain.

Morgue Dreams

The pale corpses were awash with green light. The edges of their steel beds glinted – sharp as knives. Murphy’s cheap and steamy coffee was the only warm thing in the entire room. He looked over at his companions. He had full access to the files which documented their deaths, but it wasn’t their demises which concerned him. It was the circumstances of their lives which he wanted to wander through.

He wished they’d all sit up and talk. He’d buy them all a machine coffee (and never even ask for the money back). They could discuss the events of the day (even things that didn’t interest him in the slightest).

He could tell them about himself, perhaps they could learn from one another. They must be aware of some things that he was not.

Just because they were now cold and still, did not mean that they hadn’t left a trail of light and colour behind them.

Love and Romance

At 15:20 on the 18th July 1974 Simon fell in love with the 1940s French Screen icon Viviane Romance. The following day, at an unspecified time, he took his life.

Blood Bath

He'd been laid in the bath tub full of blood for over three hours, he suspected that when he finally emerged his skin would be bleached a pale orange from head to foot. The drained bodies were sprawled out like rags in other parts of the house. He thought of his daughter on his knee. He thought of his son kicking his football. He thought of his wife's mouth wrapped around his manhood.

None of these images changed a thing. Because what ever his state of mind, he'd ultimately done what he had, because he wanted to. And no matters how many images of gentler times he conjured, the regrets simply didn't come.

Additional Safety Features

I exit the Motorway in the lashing rain. The water sounds like it could tear holes in the car. My mind is as blurry as the windscreen. I can't get it straight in my head. Why did she do this to me? The tires slide on something, losing their grip, and the car follows them taking me with it.

We go through a metal barrier and tumble down a grassy incline.

At the bottom I find my answers.

Last orders

The first day that he went to the bar the beer tasted bitter. By the second it was growing on him. On the third it tasted good and by the fourth it tasted like gold. The fifth days' didn't taste as good as the fourth's and by the sixth it just didn't taste right.

On the seventh day god kicked back and the beer tasted like shit.

Mundane Revelations

Yet another bullet spun by his head. It was nothing less than a living breathing miracle that one hadn't cut him down by now. Someone (a bastard) had once told him that it would end this way. But he had never cared to mention that it would be raining, that he would breath his last in damp clinging clothes. With dirty water in his eyes and itchy feet.

The Redistribution of Wealth

It wasn't as though I was sticking a gun in the face of some poor girl (who couldn't get a better job and thus had to be there), or mugging old women of their less than substantial benefit. I was merely doing what I was paid to do, what I had always done in one way or another. I was just reappropriating funds.

So why then, in my dreams, did they treat me with such disdain? Why did even the office junior look like he was going to sink his hand into my chest and tear my out my heart.

Last Night I dreamt I couldn't Sleep

Last night I dreamt I killed an entire town. Walking through the streets with a gun in each hand. Exterminating men, women and children; cats, dogs and mice. I walked into bars and turned laughter into screams. Walked into homes and redecorated the walls with blood.

By the time I got home I was wet with it, like a membrane, a red figure – a demon.

I showered, drank a whisky, and went to bed. I slept like a baby.

I awoke; sweat stuck to my back like flies on fly paper. I showered, drank a whisky and stayed up through the night, like a crying baby.

Scarecrow

The wind ripped around the reeds making them dance. The scarecrow stood like a raggedy Jesus Christ, his black uniform tattered and torn. A crow landed upon his head and pecked him. He was a joke, a has been, and they all knew it. That's why they taunted him. He wanted to lunge forward, wanted to spin on his pole, flail his arms. But all he could do was stand their (stiff) and watch, as bird after bird paraded before him.

The Rotten Fruits of your Labour

The old man with the crinkled face was shouting about the fruit again. Telling anyone who would listen, even for a moment, how the fruit had fucked them up. Telling them to renounce their lives and start over, burn their money, smash their computers and return to innocence.

He squealed how false knowledge was dangerous. How one generation was misleading the next.

Yet he seemed to hold more knowledge than anyone.

The reluctant resonance of the retina

He looked through the glass at the flickering green neon light. The word meant something to him but he couldn't quite remember what. When he turned to walk away he found that it was still imprinted on his retina. He rubbed his eyes as he walked into the cold of the night. It was still there when he got home, and still hadn't dissolved completely when he woke up the following morning.

Seven days later it still haunted his sight and he realised that he had until the day he died, whenever that may be, to try and realise it's meaning.

This however, gave him no comfort whatsoever.

Games

The children played games that he did not understand and he hated them for it. Everyday, back and forth, back and forth with cheerful repetition. *Were they insane?* It made no sense. The outcome, afterall, was obvious. Certain players always won at their best game. Yet still another day meant another game.

And instead of losing interest their enthusiasm actually grew. He couldn't believe it. So he began to play his own games, alone in the house. Special games that only he knew the rules to. And if things were not going his way he would simply re-write the rules.

But as the children laughed outside he began to cry. His games gave him no pleasure whatsoever.

Charlie's Secret

The last time I saw Charlie he finally told me what I was always asking him. It had been his secret (his dirty little secret I had joked) for eight years. Charlie had told me everything else so why not this? Why was this his and his alone?

That afternoon I sat on the train (first class – of course) and was reminded of the beauty of the English country side. I looked at the sunlight dancing on a lake, and reflected on what Charlie had told me. In a way though, I now wished that he hadn't.

Something like that, well, it's his and his alone.

The Big Fight

It was like he was back in the slaughterhouse, pounding on frozen cadavers, that barely moved and held no emotion. He'd never fought a man like this before. Speed seemed useless, tactics nieve. This man was a pure fighting machine, brute strength writ large.

The bell sounded and both men returned to their corners. His opponent looked like the fight hadn't even begun yet, Carter felt like he'd done twelve rounds.

His sweat stung eyes ran across the crowds. There were over 20,000 people here to watch him fight tonight, but somehow he found just one. Someone who looked as

tired as he felt. The bell sounded and Carter realised that he would fight on. After all, those huge chunks of meat and bone were only held up by hooks.

Office Work

He stared through the crisp, perfect paper onto the decadently convoluted glass table. Below, his shoes appeared embedded in a clean puddle of water.

He didn't know how long he had been that way, with that doomed posture, but it was Simmons who brought him round. Not that he was grateful to the younger man for this. He hated Simmons. Had always hated Simmons, everything about Simmons, and this hatred had only grown with time.

Simmons was the greyest man he had ever met, but he tried so hard (so desperately hard) to be fun, that it only served to make him even more hate-worthy. And even more dull.

Besides his cardboard personality, the man was one of the most physically awkward specimens he had ever observed. He would manage to shuffle and trundle through wide open doorways, his gait constantly that of a drunken tramp. But a tramp laden with papers, folders and files, that threatened to spill, along with his coffee, at any given moment.

Then there were the clothes that lay upon the man. Grey and muddled and cheap and misplaced. His ties were the cream of the shit, as if his demented, elderly mother had picked every last one out personally.

He often fantasized about strangling Simmons to death with one of those hideous accessories, and visualising the look of shock and untamed fear spread across his muddy grey face, never failed to give him the greatest satisfaction.

Next to Simmons, sat a little too close if you must know, was Andrew. He didn't hate Andrew, so much as the older man made him nervous, made him overly-analytical and overly-concerned. Faults he possessed anyway, and didn't need any encouragement with.

But when it came to Andrew, at least, he knew for sure that he wasn't alone in these feelings. Many people felt the same; he observed how the young red-haired man in Sales stepped to the other side of the corridor to avoid him, and how the girls in HR physically lurched away from him, their stomachs turned. As though they could sense his intent.

There truly was something *off* about the man. His voice, at times, and the twisted shadows that flickered on his face when no one was looking.

He didn't hear the details of the men's words or the nuance of their sentiment, but he knew essentially that they were telling him that the decision was his. But, of course, they weren't really telling him that at all. They were in fact saying quite the opposite. And they were saying it with thinly veiled contempt.

It may have angered, or even upset him, if he had been paying attention in the first place – if these men still appeared real to him, as opposed to the calcified spectres they had become.

The inconvenient truth was that his entire life had become a bad film he couldn't walk out on. As though the doors to the movie theatre had been barred from the outside, by some mischievous imp.

Somewhere during the interim, between disenchantment and halcyon days, fear had nestled in there, in the deepest recesses of his belly, and laid its fevered eggs. And then, at some awful, indeterminate time, they had hatched and broken – grotesque scraps of shell held together by sinewy demon phlegm – and the babies had cried out, spread their wings.

And now these minions dominated his entire frame, cellular and mental, *idi* and *ego*. They scratched at his innards with bony fingers and inverted talons. They gnawed at his tired flesh. They spat in his mind's eye.

So now when he had an unusual thought in the icy depths of the night, he no longer truly knew if the thought belonged to him. Or some pathological interloper, some deranged and hateful doppelganger.

And when he occasionally smiled in the sun light, it always caught him by surprise, and that, also, was held up to scrutiny.

At times he would find himself writing his name out on a clean piece of paper, time after time. Matching the words as closely as he could manage, carbon-copied endlessly...

One time he filled five and a bit sheets, just with his name in columns of tiny script.

So as he looked across the designer table at his colleagues, he yearned for the demons to show themselves. To work with him for a change. To cast this aging flesh aside and give him control of all they had lumbered him with. To use taut demonic muscle and shark teeth to ram flabby faces into trendy glass and tear deceiving throats from torsos.

Their echoing voices were asking him question now. Questions that in reality were so abstract in nature, the askers could surely not even begin to comprehend their meaning.

They wanted complex and myriad company figures (*quarters*, *margins*, *returns*, *infinity*). He had to smirk at their requests. Some days, he couldn't even recall his own name. Which was perhaps why he had taken to writing it down so much. He gripped his diamond studded platinum pen tightly, turning the flesh of his hand white, as a lone bird catches his sight.

Outside the light was a diamond curtain, waving in the sky and falling lazily across the upper reaches of the building, but all inside was cold and blue. The truth, it occurred to him, was reflected in everything; which was why he couldn't be happy, which was why he would never lie in peace.

**THE
LIVING**

Dead Faces: An Ode to the Unknown

The morgue was green. The shades varied, but ultimately it was green. Marty was halfway through the seventeenth cigarette of his shift. Not that he was keeping count. He'd been half heartedly browsing a newspaper for nearly an hour. He was bored out of his mind. It was at times like these that he usually went body browsing. Some of the corpses at the morgue were more interesting than others. Occasionally a beautiful woman would be wheeled in, sometimes the carcasses displayed fascinatingly horrific injuries, that went far and beyond the usual trauma. Successful suicides whose heads ended with the individual's bottom row of charred and chipped teeth. It wasn't that he was ghoulish, he didn't 'get-off-on' these things, it was simply that they meant something to him. Something he could explain no more than a burning sunset, or a snowy plain.

Sometimes, he had company on the shift. Harold, seven years his senior (although most of the time it seemed more like seventeen) had been away for the past three weeks, attending a convention in Birmingham.

He'd heard a rumour, about six months ago, that Harold was capable of hypnosis. He had mistrusted the older man when he was just worried about him spying on him, catching him taking too many cigarette breaks, and generally slacking on the job. But finding this out took it to another level, although he still wasn't sure whether there was any truth in it, or if Charlie and some of the others were pulling his leg. Either way, he was glad that Harold was a hundred miles away.

After one final, pointless glance, he threw the tabloid in a wire mesh bin, stood up, checked his reflection in a dirty mirror, and left the room.

At this time of night, the city outside was alive, and Marty knew this. It was alive with music and laughter, smoke and light, sex and drugs, violence and confrontation. It screamed and itched and coughed. Half of him wanted to be out there in the thick of it, but the other half was perfectly happy to be here in silence, with only the dead for company.

He walked down the corridor (green, of course) caught site of the occasional co-worker in a lit up office, and heard the occasional sound.

He knew who he was going to look at first: a young Asian who had been brought in at the very start of his shift. But it wasn't the appalling injuries that interested him this time. It was the tattoos that covered the young man's torso; blue, flowery and obscure. They looked like prison tattoos, yet they didn't. Looked a little like the kind of henna display a silly young girl travelling would delight in, but they weren't.

The ink etched into his skin formed some sort of a plain which flowed into a kind of vortex. That was the best description that Marty had come up with so far. He wanted to take a closer, longer look, to see if he could articulate it any better. Plus, there may be some other, smaller tattoos, which shed some light on the main one.

He stopped, only once, to grab a coffee from the machine. He planned to spend quite sometime examining the tattoo, so he thought a drink would be a good idea. He

never smoked around the deceased though. Somehow it seemed disrespectful - flippant. He sometimes wondered what the relatives might make of his hobby (obsession?) if they were ever to find out.

He checked that nobody was around, as he didn't really have a good reason for taking the body back out of its container. Satisfied that the coast was clear, he opened the heavy door and slid out the plastic covered corpse. Then slid the standard issue sheet down to reveal waxy skin stretched over a taut angular frame. The man had been naturally skinny in life, but now, stripped of his blood flow, he was damn right skeletal.

He gave the horrific head wound only the most cursory of glances, moving swiftly to the artwork stretched across the dead man's chest and abdomen. The spiralling lines which made up the vortex were constructed from stars. Marty thought upon the various possible meaning and connotations of stars: *space, astrology, astronomy, star of david, pentecostal star, jesus, energy, dead matter, dark matter, sci-fi movies, hope...*

What did he know about the victim? *Unemployed, possible gang member, criminal record for assault, a disabled sister, a distraught mother.*

His eyes grew tired, he sipped his unpleasant coffee, as if in an attempt to waken them back up. He continued to look at the pattern. *What did it mean? And why did he care?*

He was about to replace the sheet when he thought he saw the ink move (ever so slightly), one of the stars near the dead man's waste. He looked carefully, closely, they were still. Of course they were still. He rubbed his eyes, repositioned the sheet, and put the corpse back where it belonged.

He went back to the office. He'd watch a little tv but the old 14inch portable had been broken for weeks. He couldn't believe they hadn't gotten around to replacing it yet (especially when you considered how much some of the night shift guys loved their tv). One of the new starters, a young guy called Phil (or Bill, he could never remember which) had promised to bring one in, from home, days ago, but it had never happened. Marty figured the new guy was just trying to make friends and win votes. Talk didn't get him tv, talk left him bored.

To his annoyance, he fished the paper back out of the waste bin, opened it to the puzzle pages, to cross words half done. For a moment they took on a form similar to that of the dead man's tattoo. But an instant later it was just black squares and scribbled letters, once more. Marty drained the last of the fourth rate coffee. Asked himself once again why he drank it in the first place.

He reflected briefly on an incident that had taken place in the previous week. A woman had been brought in, beaten to a bruised pulp by her scum bag of a boyfriend. Another new starter (who hadn't made any promises he didn't keep) had taken it very badly, and quit, via telephone, the following day.

Marty had been asked to call him, he didn't want to, but...well, it was part of his job. He'd gently probed him and the young man had said he couldn't understand why such things happened, how men could do these things, and how people could bare to look at the results. To him it was all a mystery.

He fell asleep briefly at his desk and dreamt that Harold returned early and caught him staring at the dead man's chest (except in the dream the deceased was black - and his tattoos golden). Harold laughed at him, surprised he didn't understand the images. He said they were egyptian hieroglyphics, and surely any fool could see that. Marty showed his incomprehension, so Harold started pointing at the body with a pen and spelling it out for him. He said that the markings meant that they had to get a new tv, or the new recruit (the one who had been disturbed by the battered woman) would be killed by a street gang.

Just before he woke up, Marty felt immense guilt flow through his body.

He was awoken by a distant murmuring sound which sounded just like a television. A radio perhaps? He got to his feet and left the office to locate the source. He followed the sound as it snaked first right, then to the end of the corridor and right again at the water cooler. It was emanating, unmistakably, from the janitor's supply room. He opened the door warily, even though he couldn't really account for his caution. A small television atop a tiny stool. A monochrome image of a studio debate panel. He wasn't sure whether it was the programme or the tv itself that was black and white. On the screen a presenter from another era was discussing the possibilities and conundrums of M-theory. He was stitched, tightly, into a colourless suit like a ventriloquist's dummy lost in the twilight zone. A man sat either side of him. One, small, looked incredulous. The other, large, stared with a thinly veiled sense of rapture.

Everybody in the audience seemed oddly identical. Each held a small box and appeared frozen.

The more the presenter spoke the faster his pace became and the less he played to the layman. He became impassioned and adopted the posture of zealot; words poured forth from his lips, which seemed too progressive for the medium. The man's body shook. Static descended on the studio set like a gentle snow and the image began to roll.

The television flickered out like a candle and Marty was met by his own reflection, softened and rounded by the old screen.

He had an epiphany and ran back to the morgue. Pulled the sheet from the young asian man's torso. Saw the stars etched upon his chest, saw the cosmos, saw vital questions written on atrophied flesh. He realised that he wasn't looking at a tattoo at all; but an after image, screen burn, reluctant resonance.

These bodies held more questions and vitality for him than the living, who were just blank pages etched in invisible ink.

Structural Colour (aka what's good for the hive...)

It occurred to her, not for the first time, that all the office's ultra modern fixtures were shaped and smoothed like beetle's shells. And that the noisy fissure above her desk was like a platoon of burning spiders. The over-head strip lighting refracted off the chromium sheeting of the lift's exterior. Everything automated.

At times she felt like the only human being in the building.

She could hear the muffled laugh of the new girl. So softened by the reinforced door that it resembled under water drops of rain. Different this one. Not in attitude or spirit, or anything truly fundamental, but in appearance. Not innocent and not predatory. Some girls came in who could play both roles, switch and bait, dom and sub, back and forth. But this one just looked...different.

Yoshiaki was regaling her with his usual insipid repertoire. Every time she glanced back at the beetle phone she prayed that the paper company she interviewed for on Thursday would call her back. Not that she had given them the number for the studio, of course

She glanced at the coffee pot, virtually empty, and the clocks hands had progressed more than she had suspected. It was almost time. The new girl would be cleaning herself soon, and they'd be rigging up the lights downstairs...

The unusual girl was starting to gag on the leash as her would be captor pulled it tighter. At one point Tomoe thought that she was going to vomit all over the concrete. She hated it when they vomited; she could tolerate most things, make herself cold and oblivious to the most unnatural acts, but simply could not stand the vomiting.

The black thighs highs of the leash holder, were as beetle like as the telephone. They had the same suppressed, man made glow.

And thinking of the telephone made her recall an unusual question the area manager had asked her on Thursday.

“Are your limits self imposed, or exterior?”

Echoes of the truth

She ignored the phone until it stopped ringing forever, but the echo never left her ears.

The Demon in The Kitchen

Charles couldn't sleep and he'd wondered down stairs for a glass of milk. He was sat now at the kitchen table drinking the ice cold liquid. The demon was sat in his usual place – unmoving.

He'd forgotten all about him. These days that was the case. They'd kind of grown use to him, something they never thought they'd do.

It hadn't been like that in beginning of course. In the beginning they'd been scared to death of him. Petrified. They had considered moving out.

Were on the verge of doing so, when, well, things came up.

Now, nine months later, he was almost a matter of fact. That wasn't to say that they no longer feared him, that wasn't to say that Charles didn't feel at least a little nervous as he drank his milk, with the demon in his peripheral. But it did mean that they were no longer consulting paranormal investigators, or Catholic priests.

Nine months ago Charles had also gotten up for a drink (although on that night it had been Orange Juice as opposed to Milk), on that occasion he hadn't sat there and drank, he's dropped the glass on the floor, and then stood on some on the shards in panic.

His first thought was robbery of course, an intruder in a mask. He'd ran up stairs, foot bleeding on a new carpet, and woken Marie.

Neither of them knew what to do. There was no telephone upstairs. Charles knew that he was not a tough man, and just hoped that the intruder would leave, flee the scene of the crime. Of course the idea that it wasn't a robbery ran through their minds, along with a hundred other unpleasant thoughts and images.

They waited in silence. They heard nothing.

Neither the sounds of him leaving, or ascending the stairs. What was he doing? Waiting? Were they waiting one another out, did he think they were playing some sort of game? Charles had felt sick. He didn't want to throw up in front of Marie. He would have felt as though he had failed her.

Not knowing what else to do, they waited. Charles clutching the closest thing to a weapon he could find, a bedside lamp, minus the shade.

They waited until the sun came up. Then, tentatively, more on edge than he had ever felt in his entire life, Charles ventured downstairs.

Marie told him not to. But what else could he do?

When he'd gotten there the intruder had gone. It had taken a long time to decide that of course. Every room, every corner... everywhere had to be checked. Charles expecting him to leap out at any moment. Even when he had checked everywhere downstairs three times over, he still couldn't relax. He began to imagine him in the attic. Waiting to come down another night, slit his throat and sodomise Marie.

But of course he never did anything of the sort. He never even left the kitchen. He simply reappeared night after night, without fail, and without change. He arrived every single night at dusk, and never failed to leave at dawn.

He always sat in the same place, in the same position. The only part of his entire body which moved were his eyes. Jet black on pure white, those eyes were evil. Charles knew it was a fucking cliché, but it happened to be true.

Those eyes were watching him now as he drank his refrigerated milk. They were watching his hand hold the glass. Watching his fingers move across the smooth transparent surface. The demon was fascinated by simple things and slow movements.

Charles' thoughts turned to the day he had just lived. Trains and tickets, old men with crooked posture in dirty stations, files that always looked the same (even though the number changed), machine coffee, false smiles, bland radio. The utter mundanity of his life always struck him the harshest, during the hours of darkness.

Last Chance Gone

She clutched the ticket tight, it was her way out. She couldn't keep her eyes off of the men at the security terminal - with their superior gait and shifty, accusing eyes. The unusually short one who sweated a lot, he annoyed her the most.

Over the seas they grasp the bricks and shift the stone. Knuckles crack, hands break and the blackest of crows fly overhead. Their view is fence after fence, a perimeter stretching into the horizon.

She edged closer to her goal, the magic line.

But looking round she suddenly noticed that it was not just the security men who stared at her. Everyone was her accuser, the little girl with the small brown bear, the elderly Chinese couple, the ridiculously attractive couple in their early thirties. All eyes – blue, grey, green, brown – burrowed into her.

She looked down once more at her ticket and noticed, for the first time, that the ink was smudged.

The Porn Stars Who Serve My Coffee

Jamie Gillis poured my coffee. Gillis was pouring because it was Sunday morning. Gillis always poured on Sundays, because Sunday was Ron Jeremy's day off. Old Ron worked hard but he said he needed that one vital day to get himself right – 'spiritually aligned' was the phrase he used.

The two men were like chalk and cheese, their attitudes so different. Jamie always leering at the girls, especially the marginally under aged ones, chewing on a company straw or surreptitiously touching his grubby crotch. Whilst Ron, ever the good little Jewish boy, would be folding napkins and restocking the straw dispenser. Just for Jamie to empty it again with his malignant sexual fantasies.

Gillis was never on time. Ron was never late. Ron's company fatigues were supremely pressed and fastidiously cleaned. Gillis' company fatigues – what there were of them, as he often favoured an old Throbbing Gristle t-shirt, or some contemporary obscenity – were dirty and sported stains from previous lives.

The fundamental difference was that Jamie had followed the darkness whilst Ron had reached for the stars.

But both men were in exactly the same place, even if they didn't know it.

The Conspiratorial Whispers of Children

On those mornings I always walked to work alone. Alone and frightened and cold. Watched without feeling as Chinese children fired ghosts across the river. I did, however, gain some small comfort from the masked people in the park. There were roughly thirteen of them and they all wore animal masks. Goats and sheep mainly, but there were also horses and foxes, the occasional rabbit, and if you looked very closely, a shark. I was never sure if anyone else shared this delusion, or if I was all alone, the mad butcher in the disused slaughter house.

Meanwhile the faces of my co-workers began to desolidify, to melt away like plastic, as whatever good I saw in them abruptly evaporated.

But the strangers took on the form of animal more and more. I bought coffee from horses, received ugly looks from chickenhawks and was berated by sheep.

One day I arrived (five minutes late) to the office to find entire building to be populated with nothing except mannequins.

I'd wondered for days, weeks, months where my 'real' co-workers had gone. Until one day I heard faint murmurings coming from the ventilation shafts. The conspiratorial whispers of children, as knowledge comes, unbidden, over them.

Low Budget Film Making: An ode to dead foxes

The location: a dilapidated (and soon to be demolished) house. The mission: to shoot desperation on digital video.

The owner thought we were shooting a porno. I was in love with one of the cast. My best friend was a drunk. I was, and still am, a fool.

We arrived to find something scratching around in the shell of a house.

A tramp we thought, someone as derelict in the flesh as the house was in bricks and mortar.

We entered to discover a wolf sized fox – a pale orange and dirt monster.

He leapt with wounded knee to his grave. He died alone.

So will I. So will the drunk. So will the girl I once loved.

Stray Cat in a Damaged Brain

“There is only one way to skin a cat, and anybody who tells you otherwise is a fucking idiot.”

His father’s words rang in his ears at regular intervals. One afternoon he found himself repeating them, as his own, to a friend.

“What do you mean by that,” asked Ben.

“Fucked If I know,” Jack replied, tossing another stone at an already shattered factory window.

Jack dreamt of cats sometimes. Dreamt of a naked woman, with huge tits, skinning them alive.

Jack always awoke from this dream hard, and it both excited and disturbed him. He never told Ben about his dreams except for one, which was more weird than sick, that he just had to get off his chest. Ben had just shrugged and called him a weirdo.

They were stood now, as they stood many days, by the side of the disused train track. The trainline had been built five years previous as part of a large scale regeneration for the town and surrounding area. It had fallen flat on its face. Theirs was the type of town you did your best to avoid passing through, let alone visit. Jack’s sister had worked on the train for a while. But things never worked out for Jack’s sister.

Jack dreamt of the train often, even though he had only been on it the one time. He dreamt that he and Ben were stood by the tracks, doing nothing like today, but then a train came and he pushed his friend into its path.

This dream also made him hard.

There was another dream, about the train, but this one was always fuzzy. In this one he is a passenger on the train and he gets into an argument with the conductor. His sister is there. Then something bad happens.

This one doesn’t make him hard, it just makes him feel sick.

Ben says something about a dog and Jack notices the small Alsatian near the abandoned factory. He picks up a stone and tosses it at the animal, it just misses and the dog disappears around the side of the building.

“You’re a cruel bastard you are,” laughs Ben.

Jack stares deep into his friend. He thinks he hates him and one day he will kill him. Not today, but one day. He’ll never see it coming, and this makes Jack smile.

Sorry, I'm not boring you am I? (Further Discourse)

What do you mean?

Well you seemed distracted.

“Oh, nothing, something caught my eye.”

What?

“It doesn't matter, continue with you story.”

“Well I've lost my flow now.”

“Well find it again.”

Okay, well he went to see him and...you're doing it again. Just tell me what you've...
...oh my god.

Dampened Stones

Outside the night was shiny and black. The kitchen was warm and steamy. Lucy was cooking her favourite vegetable (Asparagus) whilst keeping an eye on the bubbling pans, and chopping chives. She could hear Dan shuffling around in the lounge, looking for something he'd misplaced.

She looked up from the chopping board and caught movement at the end of the garden, near the children's swing. Then a wind swept across the garden, disturbing the blades of grass, and ruffling leaves. She saw ghosts in the wind, ghosts like rain soaked statues.

She had thought she could put the past behind her. She had thought she could forget. But there they always were, when ever anyone interrupted the steady flow of her life. A simple change in the weather, even a subtle change of light, could bring them to her.

All at once the pans overflowed.

Shards of Answers

Her favourite toys had been reduced to a pile of plastic pulp. The specific colours had been drained into one mass of pale grey and cream. She couldn't believe that Simon had done this. He had done things to hurt her before, but nothing on this scale. She could identify the odd specific toy in the mass. In one place a Barbie head stuck out, in another a leg. She could see the glass of her beauty salon set glittering in the sun. Simon himself was nowhere to be seen, and her father would be back from work soon. She imagined his car pulling into the drive, and the thought made her feel sick.

For some reason, which she couldn't explain, she pulled a piece of the plastic from the edge of the lump, and placed it in her jeans pocket. Then sat down on one of the plastic garden chairs and waited for her father.

Years later, when her brother finally took his life, she stared at the piece. She looked over every detail of it. Touched and smelt it, even tasted it. She sought answers within its rough edges.

Ghosts in the Well

Every night the dead called from the depths of the well. Marris looked at the wall paper, he looked at the clock, he looked at the moon. He looked at anything to avoid looking in the direction of the well.

That same frail cry emanated...

He imagined, actually visualised it, crawling up the cold stones, clinging to the moss and climbing out. Using the pale moon as a guide, a beacon. Flowing over the gravel, swimming through the grass, towards his door. When his ears absorbed them, was he taking them in? Allowing them to rattle within his frame? Was his body absorbing them?

He'd heard stories about the well, many of which were conflicting, others just plain silly. He didn't pity the victims, he didn't want to hear about them, he just wanted silent nights. To be left alone in a house, which had more history than he did.

The Graveyard of empty coffins

The coffin was so thin it looked as though the damp earth could dissolve it. The moisture seeping into the wood like water into a battered sponge. The mourners were as pale as the fresh tombstones. Their clothes as black as the lettering that marked the names of absentee friends.

You could actually see the yellow of whisky in the priest's breath, as it hung in the air for a few moments, like dried ice. Patches of stubble clung loosely to his face like cobwebs. He held so tightly to his bible it was as though he was afraid it might run away, and leave him empty handed.

The children appeared bored and restless, and why shouldn't they be?

Angie wondered how anyone could rest in peace in this dumping ground for the dead.

Near by a man and woman were whispering – a muted argument - and looking around to try and identify the culprits she realised just how few people here she actually knew. How many had she spoken more than twelve words to in the last five years?

Then it struck Angie that in this place the dead outnumbered the living...and the living were barely alive.

The Web of a Killer

Rusty beer cans glint below the moonlight. Nobody is there to witness the man enter the abandoned house. Without an audience he is a spectre.

Detective Wareck heads up the decrepit stairs. The walls are plastered with years of graffiti, made by teenagers and later by their younger siblings. The smell that was faint outside is stronger now, filling his nostrils and penetrating his brain. He reaches the first floor. It is bare apart from a pile of bloodied clothes.

Wareck has been tracking the killer for five long months. For what had seemed like an eternity there hadn't been a single true lead. But now Wareck had had a true breakthrough. An anonymous tip off that had checked out and led him, on a humid august night, to this dilapidated house.

By now the smell is making him feel sick but he knows he must press on. There could be someone still alive up stairs, someone depending on him for a future.

The next set of stairs is even more worn than the last, and threatens to give way beneath him. Spider webs hang from the ceiling like dried out veins.

A sound comes from upstairs - movement. Wareck comes to a dead halt.

He waits a few second and the sounds comes again. He takes a deep breath.

It's now or never.

He bolts up the stairs. And falls. Raising his head he comes face to face with the eyes of a dead woman. He scrambles to his feet to see that she is not alone. There are butchered bodies scattered across the room, like the discarded toys of a restless child.

He sees a shape move through the deep black and unleashes a bullet. A whimper floats out of the darkness. Wareck retrieves his flash-light and makes a yellow hole in the dark. In the centre of the hole is a young blonde girl, bloodied and naked, breathing her last. A bullet hole hangs in her chest.

Footsteps disappear down the stairs.

Outside in the wild garden apples haunt the branches and the grass grows untamed. A black widow hangs between the trees. Footprints lead away from the scene of the crime and into eternity.

Generation Gap

After the mugging Mary didn't leave her flat for a week. No one came to visit her, as she had no family. It was the council who sent her somebody to speak to. Mary was sceptical; there hadn't been such things in her day. You didn't ask why, you simply got on with it.

But to Mary's surprise she liked the young man they sent and enjoyed his company. They would watch afternoon soaps together and discuss what ever was in Mary's favourite tabloid on that particular day. He even made her laugh sometimes, which few people could do.

* * *

Mary caught him in the act. And yet this didn't scare her but strangely excited her. She grabbed the large knife on the kitchen counter. He put her money jar down and claimed that he was *adding* money, because she wouldn't accept any. Mary didn't believe this for a second. They were all the same, his generation, would rather take than earn.

He had covered her kitchen with blood, but this didn't bring Mary to her senses, but made her even angrier.

Afterwards, to her shame, she realised that she had felt more alive in those moments, than she had for the past twenty odd years.

The 35th Story

The dog had barked at Elly for as long as she could remember. It annoyed her but she never stopped to ask why, out of all the people who walked by, it was only she who rubbed the animal up the wrong way. One day she was walking to the shops when she noticed that the Smiths had left their gate open. Teeth out, mouth sneered, the family pet bounded towards her.

* * *

Elly was sat in hospital with a bloodied bandage on her left leg. She was angry with the dog for putting her there when she had things to do. She thought about work and studied the prescription that the nurse had given her, but didn't wonder, for a single moment, why the dog had bitten her.

Just Because You're Paranoid...

I've dug a 10 inch deep ditch all the way around the perimeter of my property, and cut off the water supply.

I've cut off the water because I don't trust it anymore. I think they've put something in it; Poison of some kind.

I don't know why I dug the ditch. But there must be a reason.

I know they're all watching me. My neighbours. I think they do it in shifts; take turns, that sort of thing.

They'll come here one day. Break in during the night. But I have a back up plan if that happens. A sharpened knife never leaves my side. I will cut my own wrists rather than be taken.

Child Of Light/Child of dark

She could cast a shadow in a darkened room. Her entire life was haunted by bad weather. As she looked at the girl, sat across from her in the classroom, she saw only light. Her entire existence was obviously one of sunshine and vibrant colours, from dusk 'til dawn and beyond. Even in the deepest depths of night a special glow must have accompanied her, and made her shine out.

Why had she herself been denied any light? Why was it distributed so unevenly, so unfairly, upon the world?

If she cut the girl open would she bleed pure white. For she had no doubt in her own mind that if someone was to cut her, it was a dirty tar like substance that would be spat from the wound.

Bankrupt Teller

When Frankie was 11 years old his older sister took him to see a fortune teller. She was in a withered tent on the edge of a two bit Carny. She wore cheap clothes and even cheaper jewellery. She even smelt cheap.

She took Frankie's palm and traced its smoothness with her hardened index finger. This had made him uneasy. He had pestered his sister for weeks to see the woman, but now he was here he regretted it deeply. He tried to avoid eye contact but it was impossible. The teller's eyes were pale and grey, like a stale puddle, and they seemed to wander everywhere and not miss a thing. If she had been gorgeous and naked it would have been easier to look away.

She spoke of things yet to pass in eerie tones. The words did not truly sink in, however, for Frankie had a vision of his own. He saw the woman's future. Saw her go from town to town, saw her mocked by drunken teenagers, saw her hands grow harder and her eyes dissolve into salty water. Fresh holes appearing in her tent every year until it was reduced to nothing but a rag fluttering in the wind.

The 3:15 to Nowhere

I am sat alone on a train beneath a flickering light. I am alone because I have killed every other passenger on board. I don't know why the light is flickering.

Sick to the Back Teeth

Eric was feeling sick more and more of late. The vomiting had started on Tuesday afternoon. He had sprayed all over his shoes and socks. He changed them immediately of course.

But that was three weeks ago and the vomiting was now happening on an hourly basis. It was becoming more a part of his daily life than pissing.

Cleaning up was getting more and more difficult. He was running out of clothes. Jesus, he was running out of water. And he was starting to smell.

He was getting looks in the streets, looks at work, and the phone was ringing less. In fact, it hadn't rung for a week.

Soon he had thick clumps hanging from his hair. The stain of effluvium upon his chin. Dried sick blocking his nostrils. At least he was used to the smell by now.

The floor beneath his feet was a sponge of fluid and waste – bodily detritus. It took a mere two months for him to give up completely.

Estrangement

She is so cold it is as though her skin has been removed and buried in mud, yet still has some connection to her nerves.

Her friends left her here and drove off into the night about three hours ago. She is shivering in the rain and cold, she never thought they'd actually do it.

It had started as a conversation, which soon mutated into an argument. Before long they were shouting, all shouting, apart from Paul, who never shouted, just stared.

The radio hissed on inconsequentially in the background, their row underscored by sounds they never comprehended.

Soon all raised voices turned on her and she was named as the root of the problem.

Now she looks up and down an empty road, which disappears into darkness both ends. No cars, no phone box, no town. The rain glitters under the streetlight like poison gold.

The Package

He couldn't stop opening the package. Everyday when he got in from work he went straight to it. Opened it up and stuck his fingers in. His hands were sticky for days afterwards but he didn't care, it was worth it. Well worth it.

He knew that he couldn't really afford any more when it ran out, but that didn't stop him dipping in on a daily basis.

After a while his fingers were stained dull black where the soap failed to remove the tar like substance. He knew sometimes when his colleagues were staring at his hands, it was embarrassing at the time, but he forgot all about it when he was back in the privacy of his home, with his fingers in the package.

The obituary said that his life was "cut short". But it was well worth it.

Never go home

Back to where you began was what his grandmother used to always say. As though imparting some wise words from some forgotten text. But as Tom stood on the dirty corner of this run down road, he wished he had never known his mother's mother.

Cigarette

"Who are you really?" asked Ben, full of doubt.

"I've told you, I'm your grandfather," replied the old man, not without doubt himself.

"But how can I know, I mean really, how can I..."

After a short pause (which seemed very long) the old man shrugged.
"Perhaps you should come in," said Ben, not knowing what else to say.

* * *

The old man spoke for hours and Ben's head swam. He wasn't sure what to make of any of it. He talked of people he knew and people he didn't, he showed photographs and stated dates.

Then he suddenly noticed how the old man held his cigarette. At an upwards angle, that was far from typical.

Ben only knew one other man who held his cigarette in that fashion.

Good Girl

The old man was dancing with the swans again. His coat flailing in the wind like dirty battered wings. From this distance Marie couldn't tell whether the swans were dancing or just scared.

The old man pumps his sagging arms with enthusiasm. Suddenly a yellow beak penetrated the air like a dart and struck the old man's hand, causing him to step back. He stopped dancing while he examined his hand. From where Marie stood she couldn't tell whether or not the bird had drawn blood. But the old man's expression had certainly changed, he resembled a child who had been hurt by someone he trusted, scolded by an adult who he thought kind.

The swans had changed also; their entire posture transformed into something far more menacing. Several were stepping back from the circle, wings spread hard and taut.

Another (as suddenly as its friend) struck the old man's hand. This time Marie was sure she had seen blood. The old man attempted to retaliate. His weak arms punching out. This only served to anger the birds further. The first swan struck again, this time going for the man's scrawny neck. He stumbled (not unlike his dance) and eventually fell. The snow white birds closed in.

Marie saw white fur stained red. From this distance the man's screams were mute, but they must surely exist.

Marie did nothing, as the birds tore his fragile frame to ribbons.

She felt sick in her stomach; her mother had always said she was such a good girl.

Special Visitor

The little man had been staring at him for the last ten minutes, only stopping to blink occasionally. He'd never had so much attention from anyone or thing in his entire life. His grey bulb like head moved from side to side, the deep black eyes darting frantically, like two balls of flies.

The giant metal disc tumbling through the sky, surrounded by thick, acrid smoke.

The brief and blinding flash upon impact.

McKendrick had approached the crater with great caution. Had looked down upon metal mangled with burnt earth. The smoke smelled both strange and familiar.

He had felt like he was being looked at, and that's when he turned around to see the little grey man staring at him.

They stared at each other for an indeterminate length of time, and when Mckendrick returned to the house, the little man followed in silence.

Mckendrick moved between the pictures of his family, the framed reflections of the past. He wished they were here now. He wished anybody else was. He wanted to sheer this audience. Have the burden lifted somewhat.

He sat down and drank his fourth whiskey. As he lit his cigarette, he saw the flame erupt in those eyes, saw the fascination. It was going to be a long night.

The Head of the Beast, will not sing after Death

He rose from the puddle of blood like Venus from a sea of sperm. His features contorted, his posture implausible. He gripped his gun tightly, and Det. Warwick wondered why he wouldn't simply die. Was he to spend the rest of his days haunted by this freak?

Always looking over his shoulder, lying awake in the night awaiting a phone call. His wife frustrated, his children angry. Asking when would the '68 killer disappear from all their lives forever. His son returning home from school distant due to the taunts of his classmates.

Drinking too much, thinking too much.

The killer's large fist dripped with deep red. His pupils were like burnt match ends.

A book written in prison, mixed review, high sales, number 1 best seller, late night talk show and serious debate...

Being shot was not enough to change this fuckers world view. His aims and motivations were unchanged.

No...there would be no incarceration, there would be no talk of mercy, and there certainly would be no fucking fan club.

Smith grabbed the pistol of a near by uniformed officer and emptied the clip into his enemies' face. He then walked over to the large still body. Pushed his foot, hard, against the killer's chest, bent over and grabbed his pulpy head. He then pulled with all the strength he was ever likely to possess, and tore his head from his body.

One uniform was sick, another fainted.

Smith lifted the head of the beast up to the sky, and the blue strobe of a patrol car lit it for all to see.

No Ocean View

He'd been here so long that the shadow of the bars were like a tattoo etched into his skin. He no longer heard the sounds that ran through the prison block at night, the screams and howls and taunts.

The floor of his cell was dirtied by the shoes of a thousand societal terms of punishment.

He'd given up ideas of freedom, images that existed outside the prison walls, and of course, any notion of hope.

It was only in his dreams that he escaped, that he was able to sink into a vast river. There he sank to the bottom and was surrounded by fish. Not exotic ones, but plain ordinary ones like Carp and Pike, that were coloured like miserable weather.

All Good Things will (At The Edge Of The World)

This is where it began. So this is where it will end, all things must, I've always known that. They think I'm insane but I understand the consequence of time. I've been flowing freely with it, whilst they've been racing against it.

In a situation where someone is operating outside the lines, it is the rule breaker who is in control. And if I am the string puller, they are poorly made marionettes.

This shack of cheap wood and weak structure is where I killed the first one, on a simple whim. She'd been out here alone – fishing, Which I thought a little strange, but was perfect for my aims. I'd knocked her out at the riverside, then dragged her back to the shack. Her body turned out to be disappointing, but it wasn't enough to ruin the event. I was hard for hours and eventually stood between the trees, and released the tension into the moonlight.

Many more followed, and the more I transgressed the more I began to feel at home in my new skin. And although I was aware of the pretentiousness, I honestly felt like I had experienced some sort of rebirth. Sometimes I kept them, preferring their company after they had gone through a transformation, for which I had been the catalyst.

They were missed, not by me, for whom they were only temporary – fleeting – but by others for whom they mattered. So as time went by the more important it became to find me. Sometimes I left clues, just for fun, as opposed to carelessness.

I can hear the helicopter overhead. It doesn't belong here. I felt secure here, felt like this place was on the edge of the world (although I knew it wasn't really).

I sit in the darkness and wait. I don't feel much anymore. I feel like I have run through all my emotions, and none are left.

I hear the crack of a twig. A few moments later the door opens and I see a flash of metal. He thinks that this is his doing, him being here, but I want it this way.

Self Robbery

In this land of thieves he was the only honest man he knew. So why then, was this old woman screaming in his face?

The Walking Dead – Have no destination

The lone zombie staggered up and down the graveyard. He did this, without fail, everyday, for the length of the moon's life. Up to his knees in grass. When the moon caught his eyes, at a certain point, for just a moment, it gave the illusion of life. As though this rotten cadaver had been miraculously reanimated. His body pulled by the moon, like a tide of flesh.

The cemetery keeper sometimes watched the death march, and wondered what, if anything was happening in the dead man's brain. Surely there were no neurological connections left. Or were there the remnants of thought. The occasional synapses firing off like a single match struck in a huge cavern or heavy downpour.

The Cemetery keeper often thought of approaching the zombie, looking him straight in his dead eyes. But for some reason he could not. It wasn't so much that he was scared, he just couldn't get that close to a dead man.

Requiem for a Transgressor

As she opened the tattered boxes in her grandfather's attic, the cheerful old man, didn't seem quite so cheerful anymore.

Road Trip

When Jim looked at his grandmother's flabby arms, the scrawled veins reminded him of the lines on a road map. They'd been stuck in the traffic jam now for nearly an hour. His sister wouldn't stop wining, the dog wouldn't stop barking, and the sun wouldn't stop lashing down.

In Jim's eyes the windscreen threatened to melt, turn to water, and fall onto his thighs, burning his skin. He hadn't even wanted to go on this stupid holiday. Going away with his little sister was painful enough, but having his grandmother there as well...

Suddenly, without warning or decency, his grandmother shot out a vicious ball of phlegm. It hit the back of his mother's seat and stuck there like glue. It was neither brown or green, but in fact, black as tar. It looked hard – a rough black stone covered with a film of spit. To Jim, at that moment, it seemed like the dark heart of the entire universe.

Experimental Theatre

She knew that the group's work was "alternative", but as the cold steel molested her skin, she wished she'd never signed up.

Another Dog story

Silver veins of lightning were reflected in the mirrors of the animal's eyes. A whine emanated from its mouth. That sound, Henry thought, doesn't belong to that dog. It bordered on perversion to hear that noise coming from his expensive and pure pedigree.

Out on walks he'd seen it square up to any manner of dog, and now here it was, petrified by weather.

He decided it best to just ignore the animal. The dog look towards him pleadingly. Henry sighed.

Again, thunder cracked the sky, and the whine went up a few pitches.

The dog was physically shaking now – a bag of shivering bones.

Henry decided to leave the room, leave the dog to it. He walked out of the lounge and the dog followed, stayed tight to his leg. He told the animal to go away, but it barely budged.

Lightning cut across the sky.

Henry kicked the dog and it took a few steps back, then stared at its master. It was panting, somehow hard and soft at the same time.

Henry decided he couldn't take it anymore. He climbed the stairs and went to his room. Opened his wardrobe and took down a shoe box from the top shelf. He hadn't seen the gun in many years. It was about six inches long, weighed roughly 400 grams, and was the same colour as the sky. He loaded all six chambers, even though one would have done, and headed back downstairs.

He found his pedigree sat in a pool of piss, and for Henry this sealed the matter.

Maybe he wasn't going to shoot the animal before, but this was pathetic.

He pointed the gun at its face, the barrel reflected in the dog's muddy eyes.

* * *

The house was so silent it was hard to believe that anyone had ever (or would ever) live there. Henry stared through his window. Outside the entire world had changed. The grey had been lifted and replaced by pale blue. Every single blade of grass held a little bit of the sun.

He sniffed the gun powder residue on his fingertips.

Scattered to the Winds

Susan walked around the country estate and tried desperately to gain something from the experience.

The finest china, the rarest pots, the purest gold decoration, the best preserved floors, the oldest surviving paintings, the original timbres. The floors restored, the carpets cleaned, the dust collected, the walls refined, the clocks amended...

All of it left her cold.

And she wondered if it was really worth preserving these things. Wouldn't it be better to simply let them slip away?

A Bad Brew

Her grandmother's tea was weak and watery. Yet, out of politeness she drank it. One day she forgot to visit the old woman. When she came round the following morning,

she found two chipped cups of cold tea on the kitchen counter, and her grandmother dead in her favourite chair.

Authentic Manipulation

She could feel the gaze of the cameras burrowing into her back. She knew that they were getting a real good close up. Later they would cut up and rearrange her emotions. Add music to her words and change the meaning of her sentences. She tried to act calm but she was convincing nobody. Time after time her emotions betrayed her, as one of the masks slipped. The camera's red light resembled a cold, unblinking eye. Like her father's.

Foundations of Bone

The ghosts of the dead children looked out at the city lights. The lights reminded them of fireflies. As though the bugs were suspended in both time and space. Smoke rose from distant factories, and they could hear the faint sounds of cars. They looked at one another but didn't speak a word. Some things were just understood. A fractured cloud passed across the moon, while the lights went on and off. It was as though the fireflies were dieing, and being reborn.

The Long Road Home

He walked the long road home. To begin with it was brightly lit, and the path was smooth and clear. Then after a few miles stones littered the path, and grass impinged from the sides. An hour later it was rough terrain beneath his feet; Rocky and uneven. To make matters worse the lights were dimming and he was in danger of tripping on a rock, breaking his ankle and lying there forever. Before he knew it he was immersed in pitch black. It was like walking in space, but without the stars to light his way.

Shadow of a Comedian

The comedian was running out of jokes, and Mike thought he could see an alternative shadow being cast on the stage. A shadow that didn't smile but scowled, a shadow that had no witty retorts for hecklers, but simple disdain. A shadow that was as truly empty as the comedian joked he was.

Night walkers

The way the cats moved within the florescent orb like glow, it was almost as though they were dancing. People thought he was crazy walking the streets at this hour. You'll be mugged, they said. Occasionally he saw other people walking the same streets, as alone as himself. Did they do this regular as well, did they have similar motives, did their friends also think they were crazy? To hell with them, they'd never get to see cats dancing in the streetlight.

Spectacles and Beards

Old man Macgregor loaded six bullets into his colt 45. People were looking nervous. They knew his reputation. They knew he had no qualms about killing. He scanned the bar. He was looking for a tall man with spectacles and a beard. They all had spectacles... and beards. Well...it looked like a lot of poor children would be seeing further this week.

Every Edge and Every Angle

The old man shakes a rusty tin, frantically, with a dry hand. I don't really want to enter but still I feed the container with gold coins. He snaps at me to move on. I do as I am told. A strong wind kicks up the dirt all around me.

I walk through a turnstile towards the doors of a ramshackle wooden building. I can't remember how I came to be at this deserted carnival. I open the door and step inside.

I come into a long narrow corridor with walls the texture of damp rubber. It is cold in here and the walls are lined with the bodies of old men. They all look identical in death, even though I know each one of them is different.

Then I notice that their eyes have been removed and replaced with eight balls. I wondered how whoever did this got them in the skulls. Their heads look like they were designed for the pool balls.

At the end of the corridor I catch sight of a dark green door, coloured by flaking paint. Above it is a dimly lit EXIT sign. It reminds me of being at the theatre. Without hesitation I open the door and pass through.

I'm in a kitchen now, ultra white and ultra clean. It is so bright that the contrast hurts my eyes for a few moments. The light has soaked into everything and accentuates all - every edge and every angle.

A woman stands in the corner, a poster child for domesticity. Her cheeks are red and her teeth gleam as much as surfaces. She is wearing an apron, which does not bear a single stain. The red of her shoes is polished into a new colour entirely.

I notice something moving on the chrome toaster that sits on the counter. It is covered with bugs the likes of which I have never seen. Kind of like red ants, similar to centipedes. They scare me. Then I realise that there is something not right about

the woman, besides her artificially perfect appearance; Her eyes and mouth are sown together with black thread.

(How could this escape me until now?)

I go through a door that I don't remember being there a few moments previous.

Now I find myself in a hedge maze, the structured bushes towering above my head and seeming to reach into the sky, going on forever...

I come out of the maze and take a deep breath, it's as though a vacuum inside of me has just been broken. I am stood before a huge country house that looks familiar, but I can not place. A naked woman, with very long jet black hair, sits on the steps with her legs spread wide...her fingers disappearing into her.

I walk by her, trying not to look, because it doesn't seem right, despite her brazen display. Of course as I pass I can't help but look down, and as I do she looks up and mouths silent pleasure, as though someone or thing has rendered her mute.

The doors to the house push open with little effort and I am in a large room. There is a twin staircase ahead of me and either side is lined with arcade and slot machines. These are all being played by men with pints of lager and cigarettes in their hands. They don't acknowledge me. They don't even seem to know I'm there. In the middle of the room is a sculpture on a marble pedestal. It is coloured lush emerald green. As I draw closer I realise that the stone has been shaped to mimic William Shakespeare.

I pass between the game players and head up the left hand side steps.
(I don't know why I didn't choose the right)

I come into a small old fashioned looking school room. The children, who all look identical, not just in terms of their uniforms, but even faces, scribble symbols, onto their desks with chalks. The shapes and formations mean nothing to me.

Then, as if she hadn't been there before, I notice a school teacher, with a long black Victorian dress, stood at the head of the class. Her eyes and mouth are the same as the house wife in the kitchen. I wonder if I was too hasty in leaving the kitchen. I certainly want to leave this room.

I look around for an exit and can't see one, not even the one I came in through. I look towards the children for hope, but they are still scribbling with preternatural focus.

I look back toward the teacher to find that she is pointing towards a pair of shiny metal doors that have appeared. A small red light forming a number hovers above them. I walk towards them and they open to reveal a clean and empty lift. I step inside and it begins to descend. Things go on this way for a long time...

...I step out of the lift into a dusty patch of land, a tumble weed crawls across it like a giant spider. Ahead of me is a loose wood structure with tacky pictures of clowns and goblins. A damaged partially illuminated sign reads FU HOU E. Outside is stood an old man in a suit that looks like it was taken from a grave. He has something in his hand.

This time I place a single crumpled note into the tin, which appears a little less rusty than before. I will enter the funhouse again, because I realise, unlike so many, that the journey is far more important than the destination.

THE DEAD

Prairie Dreams

This was his homestead, and he'd almost died to create it. His withered skin and cracked bones were testament to that.

He looked out across the plain, at a low sun, and thought it was almost worth it. They said it was progress and he'd be a fool not to sell, but he'd done so much just to stand here, that he was not willing walk away now.

They'd come out on horse back one sunny afternoon to deliver the message. Two selfish, ruthless looking bastards, with new clothes he knew they couldn't have paid for honestly. And he'd seen the way his Anne-Marie had looked at one of them, and that had made it all the worse. His daughter blushing for the men who would destroy his life.

He'd given them his answer, not aggressive, but firm. He'd known even as the words fell from his mouth that they would be rendered mute.

Then the steady rhythm of prairie life returned for a few days, and he was glad of the hard work. He mucked out the pigs, tilled the soil and mended a fence that had been blown down in a recent storm...

* * *

One of the men returned in the rain, the one Anne-Marie was sweet for, and handed over a document. The document was lawful, neat and concise. The only thing in the situation that was.

He looked over the paper that night by the candlelight, he read every word and it made him feel sick. He thought about tossing it into the fire.
But he didn't.
Instead he placed it between some books. He was never one for reading.

* * *

It was a dank morning when he found the dog hanging from the porch.
That dog had made the trip from Boston. And although he never would have admitted it to his wife or daughters, he loved that dog...
Now it hung by a thin piece of frayed rope, it's dark eyes glazed over. Somehow its fur seemed different.

He thought about going into town to confront the men, but there was too much to do on the homestead, and he knew that ultimately the long journey wouldn't be worth the effort.

* * *

He was surprised that his daughters' tiny hands were holding her body. He thought the rusty nails would have torn straight through them, causing her body to slump onto the muddy ground. But there she hung. They'd torn part of her dress off and her small, still forming tits glistened with rain. They'd nailed her to the water tower.

* * *

She looked so peaceful it wasn't right. Her favourite book laid on her lap stained with blood. A hole in her head. He didn't have the heart to move her, so there she stayed, her glazed eyes peering out over the infinite grass. His wife, the meekest person he had ever met.

He broke down that night. Knowing he could never have won. He found himself on his hands and knees clutching at the dirt he had sacrificed so much for. If the dog had still been alive it would have been able to smell his tears through the rain.

Dolls

She'd collected dolls for as long as she had been able to comprehend collections. Now she had thousands. They lined every shelf, sat in every corner and peered down from every wardrobe and cupboard. She often wondered if they were aware of one another's presence. Occasionally she rearranged them. One day, when she was particularly bored, she decided to arrange them into eye and hair colour. What had begun as something to do when she had nothing else to occupy her time, turned, firstly into immense fun, and then into a quiet obsession. Which took up her entire day and half the following night.

Her grandmother had started her off down this track, and her mother often tried to stray her from it. Tried to point her towards boys and more adult, 'normal' pursuits instead. Certain dolls always reminded her of her grandmother and this made her sad, but she couldn't bear to hide them away.

Then, through one of her few friends, she met Jim. Jim wasn't like other men, and she loved the way he looked at her. So she and Jim did things. Couple's things. Special things. But she didn't like Jim touching her dolls...she didn't even like him looking at them, the truth be told. So imagine the sickness she felt, one September night, to come home and find a group of her dolls huddled around Jim on their bed. Jim was naked and some of the dolls' clothes were missing. His mouth whimpering somewhere between pleasure and bewilderment. Emerald coloured glass eyes rolled back in plastic skulls, porcelain lips quivering as they dripped with saliva. And whilst cotton and plastic

rubbed up against his bare skin, he had a look on his face, a look she had never seen there before.

It turned out he wasn't any different after all.

The Seconds of the Witching Hour

There was a tapping at the window, and there she was again. As always. He'd come to expect her now, hell, he'd even come to accept her.

The Witch. The Witch At The Window.

The one who hovered behind the glass, suspended in night, eyes whiter than white, an obscene erection sprouting from between her legs, its tip the colour of puss. Thick brown spittle around her mouth, teeth uprooted.

He could only watch with fear and dread, as she floated behind the glass, surrounded by a swirl of green some.

She always came at midnight, and he always listened to the seconds accumulating, listened to his clock ticking cruelly away. (Even when he tried ridding himself of clocks)

Then one day he met Julianne.

He met Julianne when he wasn't looking. When he finally stopped looking. Isn't that the way they always said it worked. But then they'd said many things about the mysteries of romance and relationships and he hadn't believed much of it. Harsh experience had taught him other wise.

But nonetheless there was Julianne. In the library – perusing the shelves of his favourite genre.

They went for coffee there and then. He never worked that fast, was proud of himself. A date followed and the more time he spent with the woman the less he saw the witch. The dark eyed witch who was like the personification of a vacuum – a limply deathtrap..

The witch didn't vanish instantly, of course, but he thought of her less and less and as a result she seemed to appear less and less. And when her malignant teeth did breath condensation onto the glass of his bedroom window, it seemed to be less real. Flesh turned to phantasmagoria turned to dream turned to mere flight of fancy.

It was after he made love to Julianne for the first time that the witch left his life completely. Naturally he'd been worried that she might make an appearance during the act. Had tried his best to consummate the marriage in a different location for this reason. But Julianne still lived (or rather, had moved back in with) her mother, and he simply couldn't justify a hotel. Felt embarrassed by the notion. For him hotels were for Johns and adulterous lovers. Not mousy people like he and Julianne.

So the possibility (inevitability) of the witch's appearance made him even more nervous and threatened to stop his performance dead in the water.

But once he was inside Julianne's warmth he knew that everything was going to be okay.

The next day was a simple joy, probably the purest day he had ever lived, or at least remembered. Certainly the apex of his so called adulthood. And for the several months which followed, things continued in a similarly wonderful mode.

But then for a few weeks their contact elongated and began to gradually break off. It was nothing he could really pinpoint, by date or by incident, but he knew for certain that there had been some form of sea change.

One cold, Saturday night he sat in his study, in a state of sharp despair. He'd not been able to get her on the phone for days and she never came by the library anymore. He tried to distract himself with internet trivia and endless cups of tea, but it was utterly hopeless.

He drifted off at 10:30 and awoke two hours later. The first thing he noticed was that the power was out, and that he was submerged in silent darkness. The second was the strange smell which filled the air.

He struck a match and was surrounded by halo of gold, which enabled him to see what was surely the source of the smell; an orange, brown congealed fluid with a rancid, brackish odour.

He first spotted it on the wall near his monitor, but the movements of his hand unmasked more and more stains. It was everywhere, including his trousers and shoes.

He got up and left the study. As soon as he opened the door he heard sounds, muted murmurs, muffled screams of orgasm.

A chill ran through him and his skin began to ache.

He followed the sounds into an upstairs bedroom, where an impossible spotlight presented the witch and his love. Julianne was bent over a chest of drawers as the old hag impaled her with her necrosised manhood. Julianne was covered in the foul stench. It dripped from her tits and mouth. And now he knew without doubt or consideration that this was the witch's seed, shot from the abomination between her legs.

His mouth filled with saliva and he felt the contents of his stomach crawl, yet when Julianne's eyes turned to him and glowed, there was something else...

Pattaya

A photo of a wasteland taken through a misty lens, a happy accident, a fleeting truth. There was a dog which teetered there, probably still does. It's broken eyes and fur seeming to sum up the whole duality of the supposedly forsaken city, for it's sad eyes still glowed, if you looked deeply enough into them.

One night a man and woman quarrelled in the centre of that fenced off quadrant of the city, and he wondered how they had reached that point, gotten all the way out there.

Amongst the rubble, trash and detritus – broken concrete and forgotten traces of blood.

Back in his four star hotel he sat on the edge of the bed and reflected upon the days before. Five or six in total, he was no longer sure exactly.

Never before had he seen a place so simultaneously dead and alive.

He thought of his illicit liaison with the maid the previous afternoon, and then of the opaque sun rise this morning. And it was virtually impossible to say whether or not there had been any events in between.

Then he caught sight of the troubled look on his face, suspended in the mirror, like a dead fish in a frozen lake.

Letters

He had been arranging his letters for over thirty years. Longer than his daughter had lived. The Sunday morning routine always began in precisely the same way. Boil the kettle, make the tea, open the windows, go to the toilet, a small breakfast, another cup of tea in front of the television.

Open the post.

Archive the letters.

His system for doing this had become increasingly elaborate over the dwindling years. Sometimes he thought of simplifying it by a few degrees, but invariably concluded that it was the way it was for a reason.

Certain troublesome letters bucked the system. For instance bills, that were also advertising. Or promotions, from companies who he already had a business relationship with.

Some told him that he had lost site of what was truly important in life, claimed that he had once done so much more with his time. But he didn't recall this, felt that he had always been this way.

One day his daughter went blind and turned bitter. All at once, just like that. Words he had never heard (from anybody - let alone his dear Sylvia) lurched from her mouth like riled insects without notice or warning.

And as a result he lost track of his archives, of his systems and cross-references and hitherto important sounding updates.

Yet, he still couldn't quite bring himself to throw the paper away so he dumped the letters in the office, and when that became too much he used the little prefab shed at the bottom of the garden.

Then August brought with it an uncharacteristic storm of tropical intensity, that toppled trees, felled power lines, and spiced up the local news.

His daughter screamed into the wind and rain and he began to masturbate compulsively and joylessly, as a mere distraction. And then, in the middle of the night, the gale tore the roof from its foundations and the water poured in from the heavens to bless the domestic.

And the rain devoured the paper, and the wind lifted the pulp, while the sky enveloped it all.

A life in the Day (Three Options)

The day starts – same as always. Usual stains, usual marks. Usual remarks. He's been working with these people for two years now, and he doesn't know any of them. Graham tells him to do the toilets when he's finished the counter. Then Sally argues with Graham about the pay roll figures.

The stains he's cleaning up now are the same stains he cleans up everyday. Same colours, same shapes. He's been here too long, but doesn't plan to leave anytime soon.

Kate arrives, a little late. Sally and Graham argue about this as well, sometimes. Kate is pretty pretty, for this place. But he doesn't get to speak to Kate much. Kate being out front, and him being mainly out back. He sometimes gets a good glance of Kate's tits when she leans over to serve a customer, but that's about it. He's looking at Kate's tits, and they're looking at their Hamburgers. Funny world.

By 2 O'clock the dishes are piling up quicker than he can load. Some days he hates the dishes, others he doesn't even see them.

At 5 O'clock a fat guy eats a surprisingly small meal and leaves. This is about as interesting as it gets. This is pathetic.

At 6 O'clock Kate leaves. Kate always finishes before him. And he always wonders what she does after she leaves. Eat, fuck, play with herself? There are a million possibilities, but it's probably one of the three.

At 6:27 a woman with a huge nose orders an equally large meal – the fat man's meal. She eats quick. Then she leaves. Sooner or later everyone leaves. A few come back, but they all leave.

At 10:00 he's left alone to lock up. They've only trusted him to do this for a few months.

As he walks home alone he wonders what he will do when he gets there. He doesn't even have three options.

The Cutting Position

He'd been cutting hair now for 45 years, and he was convinced that his hands were beginning to distort. They had taken on an odd shape, what he called 'the cutting position'. They were no longer a part of him, but a symbol of his profession. God, how he hated his hands. Wrinkles he could accept, thick blue veins also, but it was the cracks that bothered him; His hands were starting to resemble overcooked clay.

His customers talked and talked and talked...the news fell on the hour...he just looked at his hands as they cut. Studied their motions as if they were not his own, as though some alien force had taken him over and started cutting hair in his place. His fingers an abstract object, no more a part of his body than his trimmer or comb. It was when he tried to do other things with his hands that the deformity truly struck him. It just didn't look right. It was almost as if he was betraying his hands by using them for simple tasks such as lifting and carrying. At times he'd find himself hiding them in public places, feel them retreat into his sleeves like a tortoise into its shell. And as for laying them upon his wife's naked form...

One day Phillip (who was his most regular regular) was discussing the recent amputation of his brother's leg. For just one fleeting moment the barber's hands stopped cutting. Too brief for Phillip to even notice, but for the barber it was as though the entire world had skipped a beat.

Every Man's Sin His Own

Her body perfect as she lies upon her stage of stone, and remembering, just remembering her makes me hard, so hard it could burst. Meaning in this meaningless act. Not even knowing one another names enhancing. As this is more pure, sex as an act of communication, raw and stripped down and animal, a physical act. A psychic phenomena.

And the statues line the wet roads of that forgotten tax metropolis. Drawing only the shocked stares of the occasional stranger. Secrets buried beneath secrets here, nestling between the bones, which they lied about, and said were not bones.

I thought about you, everyday, for weeks. Like a bastard love, a warped formation of something already good and warped. Expanding reality smoothly within my fantasy. And the reality fuelling my fantasy in turn. Your thighs so perfect, the rest of your body too. That I wanted it wrapped tightly around me at moments inappropriate.

And everybody forgot and the cameras looked away. But the old and the poor still talk in hushed voices in private rooms. Of the things their false kings did. Of time and memorial. With impunity, with protection. Of The redacted scriptures of false prophets.

Stains cleaned away
Shackles turned to rust
Statues in the window
A devil in the pond
A crimson light in a dusty window
Every man's sin his own

Lightless

The light scan ran across McGregor's body like blue water. His paper pale skin tinted into something heavenly (for just a moment). The doctor looked at the patient with a sense of loss. He thought of his daughter, but was not sure why. The heart monitor beeped in sharp monotone (as it had before, as it would again). And for a split second he thought he saw the light spill out of the pod. Saw water surrounding his feet, seeping through his soft leather shoes, onto his skin.

The Doctor left the room to get a coffee that he didn't even want. In the break room he took the pot from the peculator and filled his cup. A few moments later he tossed the muddy brown liquid into the sink. Sighed.

He knew the man was going to die and wanted desperately to save him. He hadn't cared this much about a patient since he days as a Junior doctor. But that was so far in the past he could barely see it.

He saw a thin film of liquid on the counter near the sink. Then realised that it was just the reflection of the bulb above his head. He needed to sleep.

* * *

Macgregor was unchanged. The situation was unchanged. Again the light on the edge of the pod looked like it was flowing. This time the light went further, fell halfway between the pod and the floor, and then hung there like an angelic moth. Macgregor rubbed his eyes and the light/liquid stayed.

He turned around and looked into the corridor, and there, light bled from the ceiling tubes, like yellow curtains blowing in a breeze.

Tentatively Macgregor approached the pod light and touched it with a single finger. The finger came away damp. He sniffed it and it smelt as plain as normal water. He licked his finger and found that it tasted like normal water.

He jumped as the water dropped onto the floor with a loud splash. More followed. Outside in the corridor the tube lights did the same.

Water gushed down rapidly. Macgregor's feet were soon soaked and before long he was submerged. He floated through the hospital's corridors, giving himself up to the movement of the water.

Designer Labelled

The staff in the upmarket fashion store always gave him dirty looks. What was their problem? They should be used to him by now. He came in every Saturday between one and half past. After he'd finished his tea and snack in the cheap Caf around the corner.

The first time he could of understood it, but every time he goes in it's like it's happening for the first time. Yes, he must look out of place with his old grey trousers and his dirty cream cardigan. And yes, obviously he can't afford a single item in the shop, not even in sale time.

But still he likes to look and they should be used to it by now. An "hello" wouldn't kill them (would it?).

He wonders if they think they're too good to talk to him. He knows what people who work in shops like that are like.

Designer Labelled - Joanne

He reminds me of someone, who I'm not quite sure. I told my boyfriend, but he was dismissive. But I can't shake that feeling.

He always comes in about the same time. Melanie thinks he's dangerous, but I just think he's weird.

I did wonder if he was one of those eccentric millionaires you read about who dress like tramps, and horde all their money. Recycle tea bags and refuse to run a car, even an economic one. But no, he probably is as poor as he looks. I feel sorry for him really.

I often wonder what happened to him. You know, did he have a family once, stuff like that. I don't know for a fact that he sleeps rough, but he probably does. I mean look at him.

Designer Labelled - Melanie

I hate people like him. No marks. Losers. And I don't buy all this abused child shit either. All this hard luck story bollocks. Some of my friends have had it pretty tough and they've all turned out okay.

Joanne thinks I'm harsh but I think she's just a little soft. If he comes in one day and gropes her she won't think I'm harsh. It's alright being sympathetic and all that, but there was someone like him used to hang around my school. He was being watched all the time, and he still tried it on with one of the girls.

He smells funny too. Not just in the usual way either. Strange. Hard to explain. Ian should do something about him, he is the manager after all.

Designer Labelled - Ian

I've heard a lot about him, but never actually met the man. He's been in so many times and not done anything. Melanie wants to ban him but I think that could just cause problems.

Besides, he doesn't usually stay long. Sometimes he's in and out in a few minutes. He's never tried to steal anything. Melanie watches him like a hawk. It's funny, I think she'd actually like to catch him at it, just so she'd have an excuse to have a go at him. I wouldn't like to be in his shoes. When Melanie loses it she really loses it. She had a go at one of the Saturday girls once, reduced the poor girl to tears. She was kind of lazy, but she didn't deserve that.

Joanne doesn't seem to mind him, but then I think she'd led a bit of a sheltered life to be honest.

God gave us free will and ammo

I was only eight years old when I first realised that I'd killed my father. This explained why my mother had always been so cold towards me and favoured my brother. After all Tommy had never killed anyone, not even a fly.

It was on my thirteenth birthday that Uncle Raymond gave me the gun. It wasn't Raymond's fault, he didn't know what I was capable of.

On the day after my twenty-first birthday I went to the park. I can still hear the birds singing, I can still smell the blood.

Unmarked Skin

There are seventeen scars on Paul's hands. One for each night spent with his uncle Jimmy. One for every night of his life wasted.

He's here again tonight, same pub, same table, same pint...but he's running out of unmarked skin. Jimmy's yammering on about something, someone who wants to kill him. Who the fuck would even try and square up to Jimmy?

The pool table is all the way on the other side of the pub, but Paul can hear the ball's colliding in his ear. They're far too loud. He's finding it hard enough to concentrate on what his uncle is saying (due to a not so small amount of speed ingested a couple of hours previous) without that added distraction.

Jimmy's saying something about Tom Cardinal, he hasn't mentioned "The Cardinal" in years. This talk is starting to make him feel nervous. He wished he had finished his pint, so he'd have an excuse to leave the table, get another one. But it's nearly full, he doesn't feel much like drinking tonight.

Now Jimmy's mentioning some bloke he's never even heard of. But Jimmy's saying the name as though he should have done. As though it's a given that he has.

Jimmy goes somewhere. Where? The toilet he supposes. No the bar. Jimmy's finished his pint. Without Jimmy's voice the crashing balls are even louder. The noise fills him with dread. Maybe a drink will help. He takes a few large gulps, looks at the clock. It's only ten past nine, he wishes it was later.

He tries to look upon the bright side. What would he be doing if he wasn't here?

Jimmy's not all bad is he? But he struggles to convince himself.

Then Jimmy returns, with another pint he has already half drunk. He sits down and settles instantly back into his speech. He's on about the Cardinal and that bloke again. Suddenly Paul realises just how wound up Jimmy is.

Someone enters, a short stocky skin head in a black jacket. He look towards Paul. He looks familiar. Is he a friend of Jimmy's? He is walking towards their table, the table they always sit at. He pulls out a knife. A weird thin twisted knife, that looks like it would struggle to cut foam. He plunges the knife into Jimmy, and it seems to enter his chest as smoothly as red hot wire into butter. Blood is on Paul's face now, blood has landed in his glass and is making it's way towards the bottom.

The Witch and the Apples

Daniels had been raking the dead apples back and forth for hours, whilst the grey witch watched him from the upstairs window across the street. Every so often she lifted a healthy green specimen to her lips and took a bite.

The man in his mid-fifties had no sense that those occult eyes were upon him, as he was pre-occupied by the children, specifically Dorothy, who had recently taken to doing very odd things with her dolls.

He was momentarily distracted, from the task at hand, by a car that sped by, and disappeared into the twilight at the dark end of the street. A pale blue mustang, perhaps, though he could not be certain.

This switch in focus led him momentarily to glance at the window across the street, but by now the old lady was gone.

Bar Waiting

The Budweiser sign flickered behind the bar.
He'd seen so many people come and go while he'd been waiting, perched here on an old stool.
He wondered where she'd got to. She wasn't usually this late.
The enigmatic girl he had met four months ago had never ceased to fascinate him. It had been her idea to meet in this bar, and it really wasn't what he'd expected. It was nothing like any of the other places she liked to visit.
He couldn't imagine her fitting in at a place like this, but this was definitely the right place. Maybe he was wrong, perhaps she was a regular, she certainly seems to have a lot of friends, and appeared very adaptable. He found it hard to imagine her not getting on with a person, and for that reason (amongst others) he found it strange that she wanted to spend so much time with him.
He expected this relationship to end at any given moment, to come crashing down to earth and crack into a thousand desperate pieces.
He was also scared of self fulfilling prophecy.
The bar keep ran a grey cloth across the surface of the bar, soaking up spilt drink and ash. Around him people sucked beer and filled their chests with smoke.
The Budweiser sign flickered behind the bar.

Innocent until guilty

The blue lights strobed against the side of the house. Two policemen were stood on the front garden, making notes. Inside the youngest daughter was being questioned. When they took her through the house they would have to shield her eyes from the blood. The inspector knew all too well what the sight of blood could do to a child. He didn't want the world to be filtered through red for the rest of her life.
She wasn't crying, she was strangely calm and the Inspector figured that she must be in shock. The events would hit home later, and he didn't want to be around when they did.
She answered his questions in a monotone. He tried to be gentle. Felt guilty about questioning her at all. But this was routine now, automatic.
Across the street two neighbours (an unhappy couple) looked through their window at the scene of the crime. They would be up all night talking about what could have happened. And this unusual topic would avert an argument for a few hours.
Back in the house the Inspector put his arm around the girl, and instructing her to look straight ahead, led her towards the front door.
If anyone had cared to look, as the girl was led up the garden path towards the police car, they would have seen deep red in the moonlight; A small speck of blood on a soft and tiny hand. That notorious black.

A Bible and a Gun

A bible and a gun laid on her grandfather's antique oak table.
She loved the old man but there was something about him that unsettled her. His eyes were grey like his gun, and his hands used to shake like the ice in his whisky.
Sometimes he looked at her grandmother as though he hated her. And she, in turn, seemed to avoid him where ever possible.

Sometimes when he read to her at night, he'd stop mid way through the tale and stare through the pages, as though he was seeing what was between the lines. And for some reason she was always reluctant to call his name and bring him back. It didn't anger him when she did, but still it didn't seem right somehow. One day she noticed that although the leather bound book was in mint condition, the weapon was stained with use.

Open door policy

"Come on, let me in," he pleaded through the glass doors.

"No, you'll only piss me off," she retorted.

He'd been stood out there now for three whole hours. She'd asked him to leave, but he just wouldn't go.

"Come on, things will be different this time."

"Look just fuck off will you?", a tone had crept into her voice that she had tried to keep out. She realised she sounded weak.

She decided to get out of his field of vision, and put some music on loud so she couldn't hear him. He'd have to get tired eventually. It was just the neighbours she was worried about. What were they thinking?

She left the room and walked up stairs. Half way up she suddenly felt sick, and stopped dead, as she realised that he'd been inside all along.

Eating Grassy Space between the Buildings

Sammy kept sniffing the grass. As though he couldn't get enough of the smell of dampened earth. Graham had no interest in the morning, he'd rather be back in bed, and was only here now because Jeanie had made him walk the dog. She said "it" was getting overweight, Graham thought that in that case maybe he should be walking his wife around the park on a lead.

The dog was still inhaling the same patch. Graham couldn't understand the fascination, there really was nothing there. No dumped food, no stale shit, no small dead animal...nothing.

He began to gently tug on the dog's lead, but it wanted to stay. He pulled harder and the dog pulled back. At this rate he was going to be late for work.

He decided that when he got home he would do two things before he got ready for work. Firstly he would clean the dog, who had somehow, against the odds, managed to get dirty on a frozen morning. And secondly he would kill his wife of twenty two years marriage.

The Life of a Genius

As the chess master made possible the most clever and audacious move of his entire life, he remembered, for a fleeting moment, that he had left his family to die.

However Improbable

They'd been in this place now for longer than could possibly be healthy... And the air was definitely thinning now. You could actually tell as you breathed in and out...in and out. It was becoming more of an effort with every single breath. Their chests tightening like fists.

But how had they come to be in this predicament. After all everything was planned to the letter. All the eventualities considered, all their information verified, all the alarms disarmed. They knew about the silent alarm and had, well, silenced it. Yet here they were gasping for dear breath. Royally fucked.

Jonny for one was beginning to suspect an inside job. He looked over the faces of his colleagues. It couldn't be Pete, he'd known Pete all his life, Pete had given him his first real work, Pete had helped him out of several sticky situations.

There was Neil, Neil was the opposite to Pete, Neil was the one he'd known for the least amount of time. He'd known Neil for 37 minutes, but there was no fucking way it was Neil. He felt like he'd met him before, he reminded him of his brother.

So that only left Jack and Graham. Jack, he couldn't stand. He was kind of hoping that Jack would run out of oxygen in the safe, he was kind of hoping they could leave him behind. But although there was no love lost between them, and he had almost killed him once, he didn't think it was Jack either. Jack would kill himself before he became a grass, that simple.

So it had to be Graham. Graham was a strange fish. He couldn't get a handle on Graham. Doubted he ever would. But was Graham the kind to sell out his associates? No. Graham simply wasn't smart enough. To be exact Graham was a fucking idiot. Probably the dumbest career criminal he had ever met.

Jonny stopped thinking for a moment and realised that whilst he had been trying to work out who had betrayed him his lungs had made another step towards the end. His chest was now wound as tight as the inside of a golf ball. He was considering for the first time that he may actually die in this place. Die in a shiny metal box.

Why had done this? Why had he sold Pete down the river? Pete had never been anything but a true friend. Jack deserved it, but the rest of them? And what about Neil, Neil was only 27, his young life was going to be cut short, much like the lost brother he resembled.

Fallen Dragon – The Sins Of A Yakuza

The tattoo has lost its beauty. The colour was still there, sure, but the meaning had taken flight, and left him alone.

Why wouldn't it slide down his back, onto his bottom, and down his thighs. Eventually find itself on the floor, a puddle of ink. Then he could wash it away, or simply leave it where it was. Maybe it would crawl onto someone else. Distort their life also...

He remembered his daughter's shamed eyes as she looked upon him. His wife's funeral – the most shameful moments of his life. He seldom thought of the crimes he had committed. The people he'd killed, or the money he'd stolen, the lives he'd ruined.

Night after night he awoke in a sweat, fragments of dreams shifting behind his eyes. He was trying to commit Seppuku but was struggling to hold the blade because all his fingers had gone. His daughter was screaming at him, telling him he was an idiot who couldn't do anything right. Time after time the blade slipped from his grasp and clattered onto the wood floor.

In reality he had all his fingers, had never had to sacrifice even half of one of the little ones.

One afternoon he found himself staring at a fish in a restaurant. Looking into its tiny black eye. It was like a pinprick in reality. He couldn't look away. When the waiter asked him if his food was okay he couldn't even form a reply.

The Duellists

The rain was coming down, just as it had a million times before. One of the duellists liked to fight in the rain, he liked the ambience of it, the other however found it distracting, irritating even.

Although neither had actually kept count, they both knew they had done this many many times before.

It was no longer about hate, but it certainly wasn't simple pleasure. It just was. A state they had achieved, a plain they had both come to as a result of repetition. They'd wounded one another over the years, scarred and cut each other's skin. The most severe mark laid across one of their faces. Yet a mortal blow had never been delivered and one fight invariably led to another.

Both duellists now questioned themselves, wondered if they were holding back; fighting not with victory in mind, but another fight.

Best Left Alone

He hadn't seen her for eight years now, and was kind of surprised she had recognised him so quickly. They'd been talking now for eight minutes, and he'd become aware that they had absolutely nothing to say to one another.

Missing Twin

Sometimes she felt tingles in her side, and no amount of scratching or rubbing could remove them. She actually found herself talking to the empty space in the couch beside her. And not small talk, but words of substance and concern. But there was never a reply, because words, unlike nerves, don't have ghosts.

Forever Irretrievable

Somehow he had expected her centre to be as cold as the rest of her. But it wasn't. Yet, as he released his seed into her depths, he felt like he had lost a part of himself.

Old Men and Strangers

The old man had been shouting at the stranger for half an hour. The stranger was cursing the train for being late, the old man was just cursing the stranger. The thing that bothered the stranger was that the old man seemed to know something about him. These weren't just the average rants of the average nutter. These made a degree of sense, these had a connection – substance? He couldn't really know about the things he'd done, could he? No, it was just coincidence, the things he was saying were pretty generalised at the end of the day. "You're a sly one," that could mean anything to anyone. Couldn't it? "Got away with it didn't ya, ya bastard," when he said this his gaze was so intense it unsettled the stranger's stomach. The old man had some sort of brown shit all over his teeth, and pale lesions all over his face, but the stranger had blood on his hands.

Pornocopia

He'd never seen a video like it. Felt a little strange, felt a little wrong. This was different to the movies he usually watched. The ones with guns, helicopters, explosions. Those movies were violent and the little sticker on the box said that he shouldn't watch them. But this was different, this was forbidden. This tape didn't have a sticker, it didn't even have a box. He'd found it stashed in his father's wardrobe, between a shoebox and an old pair of trousers. The Picture was soft and washed out. His eyes were wide open.

Robbery at Korean Grocery Store

The door was left open and a slice of night air entered. The Korean shop owner appeared unfazed (How many times had this happened to him?). He was already methodically cleaning up the mess that the two masked men had made. Scraping up little pieces of glass with a battered dust pan and brush. He said nothing to her as he did this. The other customer looked a little surprised, but that was all (How many robberies had she witnessed?). Having a gun pointed in her face didn't seem to be enough to break up the flow of her day. She took the tub of "luxury" strawberry ice cream to the counter, placed it amongst the debris of the robbery, and pulled some wrinkled notes from her trouser pocket. Mary looked through the open door and noticed several sharp stars in the sky. Then she realised that she was the only one shaking.

Arbitrate

He'd set himself a task that was already impossible to achieve. Again stalked by failure and slowly gathering regret. The eyes of the children were white – endless, sourceless....dead. The drink had grown warm and the page was still blank. He remembered last winter and cried for a third time.

The gun smooth and rain-like.
He opened the oak drawer and scratched around for the slugs.
Another infant flung his body against the glass like a spider in a flame.
He loaded the gun – meticulous, robotically...alive.
Aimed and pulled the trigger.
The head of one infant shattered across another.
He smiled.
He'd set himself another task in the morning.

Office Hours

James worked in an office. James had a grey suit and a grey tongue.
James lied upon occasion.
James twisted the stats of his reports in a certain direction like a ghost in the wind.

Henry worked in an office. Henry had a blue shirt and blue eyes.
Henry told the truth upon occasion.
Henry twisted James arm in a certain direction like an organ grinder in the street.

Jane worked in an office. Jane had pink lips and pink thoughts.
Jane mixed truth with lies to an indistinguishable degree.
Jane twisted the minds of James and Henry around her like a doctor in a mental asylum.

You know one of these people.

Red lanterns and Pink Windows

This morning I walked along a frozen river lined with fire.
Where Chinese children – clutching sparklers – fired ghosts at one another like winter recriminations.

And in the afternoon a dust cloud consumed, and there in the eye of the storm, I heard noise incessant, and saw the animals let loose, the repetition of a million guttural sounds.
Smoke and fire and a thousand red lanterns. The streets lined with spare parts and pink windows.

I try to tell them that their children are in distress, their eyes in the darkness, their mouths in the void, but they will not even cross the street, and sometimes will evade me entirely, turning their ignorant heads in the opposite direction.

I ask my friend for explanations. He assures me time and again that they are not that evil, but that word is his word not mine, and I see fear in his eyes.

Yet Another Dog Story

They'd been finding the dogs cut open and crudely stuffed with newspaper for weeks now.

The headlines were old; distilled from incident indelible and unforgettable, far and wide.

An elderly Alsatian sprayed knotted paper from its anus, like shitty grey foam; shreds crawled from the tiny eye sockets of a terrier like earth worms.

Crooked faces and looks were exchanged up and down the block, intermittent skirmishes would break out, and neighbours would gossip and accuse one another behind drawn curtains.

And when the girl they never liked (or trusted) started to pluck the crinkled paper from the cadavers, undeterred by the gristle and gore, and spread it out like a school art project, across pavements and gardens, playgrounds and car parks, they all looked away and cursed her.

But soon words were spelt out and these words formed illicit sentences. Destined to be read only by the birds and the gods, for the towns people were far too afraid to look.

Prison Yard Yarn

Nobody, fucking nobody, had ever been this hard to stab before. It was like trying to penetrate concrete with a slither of ice. But there was no way, no fucking way, he could stop here, just drop the knife and walk away. He had to finish what he'd started. But whilst every blow needed to be stronger than the one before, each was weaker in turn. He was doing more damage to his shoulder than the freaks' stomach. Then he happened to glance up and see his burnt out eyes. The fire obviously extinguished so long ago, and he realised that he could not kill this man. This man was already dead.

Water gushed down his legs, and a pool of piss formed around his feet, soaking into the dirt of the prison yard.

Dirty Alleys

He never thought he'd sink this low, and as he looked towards his partner in crime, felt something like guilt. To his side was the victims body, illuminated by her bedside lamp, she looked like a rag doll that was about to burst into flames. But then he looked out the window, at a street which glistened with rain, and realised that he had lost his conscience a long long time ago. Had left it in a dirty alley in another town, beside a muddy puddle, and some bloodied cash.

Oil Tainting

The green was like faded grass, and the blue not much brighter than the tint of water. The frame had more character than the painting. Why had he given her this? And more to the point, why had he painted it in the first place?

There was something unnerving about its blandness and something almost vicious about its lack of commitment. Yes, the work verged on arrogance and yes, it was an insult to be given this.

So why then did it take centre place in her carefully arranged lounge, and why were her eyes drawn towards it, time and time again.

The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner

His legs were getting heavy. His breath short. His heartbeat fast. His feet numb. By now he had ceased to sweat and his body felt empty. His mind had now shut down entirely. He was no longer trying to think about something else, he simply wasn't thinking. His mind as blank as his stomach was empty.

He looked across the fields to a majestic purple sky, and the sight barely registered. As the day died he noticed that the hills were devoid of other runners.

And as the night came down he realised that he was running a lone.

Family ties

The conversation with her family was always lop-sided...

As though the words were falling, somewhere between her mouth and their ears. She wondered if they were scattered across the floor. If she lifted the table cloth and looked down would she be able to see them? To gather them up and put the sentences back together again. Reconstruct the sentiments and try again. She imagined they would be just a jumble now: verbal trash, the waste of communication. So she just carried on talking.

The more she talked the larger the pile of words on the floor became. Until eventually she was up to the neck in herself.

High Hopes

His father had always set the standard high. Really high. But not even he could have seen this one coming...

Everyday a new building disappeared from the city and nobody noticed. The press, the public, the authorities...nobody. He expected televisual debate, he expected the world's greatest minds on the case, he expected a public out-cry. Yet the changed cityscape barely registered.

By the time he celebrated his 40th birthday, with Cubans and champagne, half the city had vanished.

Discourse pushed to breaking point

We just misunderstood one another's intentions.

Oh, fuck off! You misunderstood yourself.

What?

You really don't know what I'm talking about do you?

Well humour me...elaborate...

Just tell me one thing, and then I'll leave you alone. Did you know it was him? I mean all along, did you know it was him standing there?

I knew that he could hear us.

You haven't answered my question.

Elysian Fields

Peaceful. Warm. Tranquil.

The soft pink hue, the hard white clouds.

A man walks alone through a meadow. Summer insects shimmy all around him. The sun is dropping as though just for him.

He sits down on a log, looks across the grass and takes it all in; piece by piece and all at once.

The sun brushes his cheek and he reflects on old words spoken, and days long since past.

Epilogue: A Virtually True Story (of a literally contrived theory)

“Something funny is happening,” I overheard my friend saying to his girlfriend, as they cooked a meal together.

Nothing overly elaborate mind, not too simple nor too complicated, just one of those typical meals couples cooked together during winteral nights indoors.

“Everything I like is out of fashion.” I pondered his words briefly – rolling them around my head - before letting them go, and returning to my crossword.

They returned to me the following afternoon, as I sipped my Styrofoam coffee, and awaited an already delayed bus. The sentence struck me as a little uncharacteristic. What precisely had he meant? Did he know himself? And should I even care?

As I waited for the bus, I kept an eye out in all directions. I was hiding at the time from my ex-landlady, who happened to live in the same neighbourhood as my friend. The problem, precisely, was that I owed her 500 dollars, that is if you included a rough estimate for the repairs to a door I had damaged, having accidentally locked myself out of my bedroom. However, in truth the 500 valuation was, like most things in my life, merely a rough approximation. As much a contrivance, concept or pesky variable, as every other object and notion that circulated my loose mind on its daily rotation.

My mind drifted off of the topic of my landlady, onto something inconsequential until being abruptly stopped dead, by the arrival of my longed for bus.

I'd been first in the queue, but inevitably the last to embark. As I was dropping my single note and coin into the fair slot I glanced down the bus to view the other passengers (as was my habit) and caught site of a true beauty sat on the left hand side at the back. This town had no shortage of good looking women, but this one was a standout.

Almost as quickly I locked eyes with the much older woman sat next to her – My Landlady.

I panicked, instinctively looked away, and then looked at the bus driver. He looked annoyed, and motioned me on, as I realised I was holding up the bus.

I sat down near the front. Trying not to look guilty, even though she obviously couldn't see my face from her position. Thinking about it now, I realised that she hadn't looked at all surprised or angry herself. In fact, she had the countenance of a casual observer, a stranger.

As the journey progressed I did my best not to look at her, even out the corner of my eye. Instead I occupied myself with the strangers on the streets, the babbling children, and the overly made up girls hawking their ignorance into cutting edge cell phones. Allowing myself to be consumed in a waste of life and technology so as to avoid the potential danger of the situation.

There were many rumours about my Landlady, and although I had no idea which were true, she was surely not one to let things go.

Seven minutes into the journey I couldn't resist a covert peek at the woman's features. And I was struck by two terrifying, undeniable facts simultaneously. The first was that this was not my landlady, and the second, even more disconcerting truth, was that she was somebody else.

As if on cue the bus shuddered a hydraulic halt and the doppelganger stood to disembark. Something – alien and unquantifiable - compelled me to follow. I didn't think I had done anything quite so irrational before. Even when you factored in the incredible likeness, it remained a strange act.

We got off the bus in an area in which she looked out of place, being far too pretty and well dressed for the decaying surroundings. It looked like a part of town that was something once. Yes, it suddenly struck me, she was far more pretty than my landlady. How could I ever have related the two? They were clearly on completely different trajectories.

I followed her past an out of business pizza shop and a laundrette that threatened to go the same way. She turned right into an alley, and tentatively, excitedly, keeping my distance, I followed her.

A stray dog crossed the alley with liquid eyes of electric white. On the left hand side was a discarded whack a mole game – depicting the stupefied grins of various *commander-in-chiefs*. Old cartons of oranges were stacked high up one wall. The place smelt of copper and onions. The woman went into an open doorway (which

had eluded me before) like a ghost passing through a tree.

I follow. Into darkness, into depth. I have no sense of the dimensions of the room, and the air is weightless. But I keep on walking with only the slightest sense of fear.

And within moments I find myself in a new space. A long, brightly lit corridor, approximately three metres wide. Straight, linear, uniform. The metal is other worldly, and every edge and every angle gleams with moon fire. It is lined, evenly and symmetrically, with glass cases holding bizarre and diverse exhibits. A lone figure stands at the end of the corridor. Grey in shade with no discernible facial features. Now the fear comes to me.

As I walk down the corridor voices whisper out from nowhere – a compound voice – I recognise some of the layers but can name none:

your brother's madness, your brother's madness...why did he destroy all your toys???

A jade cast of Shakespeare.

The taxidermist carcass of a Midwest serial killer, a genius with a taste for children.

An extinct and obscure invertebrate from the depths of the Amazon.

A carved dog skull.

How could you leave them to die???

A darkened deed from the halcyon days of frontier injustice.

A manuscript that no one will ever read.

A beguiling game of tiles.

The myth of love bottled in a phial and labelled with its chemical name.

That shack, in that shack too long, shared with killers and thieves from around the world, all those men and women with broken eyes, lost in the woods and calling it their home...

The figure at the end of the corridor takes on form, and I see that it is the beautiful doppelganger. Except she is even more striking than before and I find it hard to hold her gaze.

Time to stop your writing...a thousand musings walking the fine line of pretension...

The truth is I'd been ignoring these creeping voices in my head for months, telling myself that they would go away, but they just kept coming back. And back...

She steps aside to allow me an unobstructed view of the final display case, which links the two rows of display. A huge – uninterrupted and illuminated – floor to ceiling pane of glass.

But this case doesn't hold the obscure, macabre or valuable. These items are more akin to the average flea market or car boot sale. Old toys, outdated video games and valueless books. Average things taken from average lives.

As that sense of foreboding creeps up my oesophagus, I ask her what it means.

"These are the things that your friend has lost."

I reply with a puzzled gaze.

"The things that are out of fashion. The dead things."

"What are they?"

"They are the reflections. But you are too broken to see them clearly."

I turn to interrogate her further but she has vanished. Perhaps she had never been there to begin with.

When I turn back the glass has vanished and I have access to all the goods. They are suspended on a dozen glass shelves, which appear virtually invisible. And I notice for the first time a gap in the proceedings, the fourth shelf completely empty. I look more closely at the dusty bric-a-brac and out of date apparel. Run my fingers over scrabble tiles and spinning tops, prod the keys of an old hand held arcade game. Then my eyes fall upon an icon of my own history. A faded copy of *Operation*. The buzzer had broken and despite my good intentions had never been fixed. Had remained that way up until the last time I saw it in the summer of 1987. This thrift store detritus, this waste product of living, seems to be the very lacuna of my soul

I lift it from the shelf, wipe away the dust and begin to cry.

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