EASTER SUNDAY

Peter Ostrowski

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CHAPTER 1
STORMING THE DOORS OF PERCEPTION

I became a black hole -
Infinitesimal yet infinite.
I tried to scream.
I screamed in silence.
Nothing could leave me
Except through my eyes.
Nothing could touch me.
I was alone.
I was all.
And all was total nothingness.

My senses clung to the room I had been sitting in,
As if its tangibility were the tail-end of Creation.
I fought to assign meaning
To what I could see and touch.
But it ceased to be real,
My fingers slowly slipped,
And I was drowning.
So I wrote to stay here.
I wrote of stars and horror,
I wrote of history.
I wrote ‘Jesus went to hell!’

Mind melted.
I had no control.
What I had once been
Was exploding deep inside itself.
Powerless,
I looked out over a part of ourselves
No one should ever see -
The horizonless wasteland stretched for ever.
It seemed nothing could be deeper,
More hidden,
Than this underworld
Where burned the forbidden truth -
The dregs, the refuse of our lives.
I looked down.
All was revealed.
I breathed hell-fire!
And as the aether boiled and extinguished the stars,
As my blood turned to venom,
And as night eventually darkened to morning,
I saw I had become something forever changed;
Something no longer human.

CHAPTER 2
SOUTHAMPTON

I had been on a mountain. Years ago, in a lullaby or a dream, I had looked out across immense distance, over dusty valleys and thick, impenetrable miles of woodland and forest, past great wide plains and rolling golden fields, at the pale, amorphous horizon and seen the blue peak, capped with snow, rising far into the white sky. A shining path, infinite behind me, led me in wonder and yearning through my life, into the landscape of miracles.

I journeyed for thousands upon thousands of days, the vast, magical mountain looming up ever higher before me, its featureless ramparts gradually crystallising into tableaux of delicate detail. The rock was stretched and furrowed, and stones lay strewn along the slopes and piled within eroded basins. I began to discern ragged sweeps of light and shadow. From a million miles away who could have dreamed that that place possessed such exquisite contrast, such finely worked engraving?

And then one day, one of countless, I felt my childhood end. The verdant foothills finally steepened and turned to dark seams of granite, until only sparse patches of grass grew among the rocks

and around the fissures left by receding glaciers. I saw the path lead behind the largest of the weathered, crumbling boulders, and reappear some fifty yards away. It turned upwards, a trail beneath sheer miles of sombre rock, eventually becoming lost in the distance and haze. I stood before a crag of broken stone, massive and eternal, higher than the clouds, wedged, perhaps, against the sky itself.

For hours I walked a path that grew constantly steeper. The closest rocks were wet, my foothold was unsure, and all was enveloped by a blinding white fog. I was breathing the clouds and I could not see.

As I climbed, the swirling vapour became suffused with ever brighter light and I felt the bounds limiting the depth of my vision retreating. Distant, abstract shapes emerged from the mist and assumed form until, eventually, I stood above a foaming sea of cloud into which the alien land mass crashed.

Above and around me the sun burned through the rarefied air. I shielded my eyes from this terrible brilliance; I could only look down. But below me the clouds too were now a plain of white fire.

How strangely the rocks were moving. As I touched each stone, each pebble beneath my feet,

they turned to colours and lights, spinning away from my hand, or they swelled and burst, spilling jewels, fluid and oscillating, into the air. Falling into the sun these spirits caught alight, burning in colours I had never before seen.

Was the mountain breathing? Were the living rocks watching my slow ascent? All was silent but for the wind's sibilation in my hair and against my face, as it pulled at me beneath the eternally cloudless sky.

A shower of small stones and earth fell across the path ahead. I looked up and saw a creature, a white dragon, half the size of a man, frozen upon the rocks. Barely ten yards away I stopped and the lizard too was motionless, even the great splayed fan behind its head perfectly still in the wind. Only its red tongue and eyes fleetingly darted as for minutes we each watched the other. The reptile's scaly armour caught the bright ethereal hues around us and at occasional random moments a wave of colour passed over the white skin. Then I looked beyond the keeper of that place and saw that the path I had been walking had ended. I knew that there was no further for me to go. Here was the only real world.

I wondered what this could really be. Was I on a

mountain, or was this the sea, or a great unbounded plain, or maybe the sky? Did such questions even have a meaning? For here, I knew, mankind's destiny would be met, in the place for which I had searched for eighteen years - this was science's temple to Creation and to all that lay beyond. My life and my work had brought me to this wondrous domain, to the confluence of art and science, to where humanity could again look upon the future that had been lost long ago.

Above me the blue of the sky was darkening. The first day of my life ended.

Morning came suddenly, as if someone had relit the dormant sun. The torrent of impossible colours fell upon me and I heard a tumult of bird-song, ecstatic and ceaseless, all around as I began my work. I had so much inside me which I longed to release into the world. The excitement of anticipation, of intrepid surrender to what would befall us, coursed through me. And I thought too of what I would receive here, of the spiritual and intellectual reawakening before me.

With the passing days I started to learn what lay beyond the starry, black wilderness and why the universe was. I could see, question, reason and contemplate. How small we were. How much more

we would be. Then many days, many weeks were behind me, but I knew that I had not lost this time, for all that I had achieved in the New World would stay with me for ever, in my arms, on my eyes and laid open before the numinous. I was creating within Creation itself and saw that I was immortal.

Each morning I found that new flowers had grown, tumbling down the walls of my palace. Bright bursting colours, blooming as I watched, turning towards the sun or myself, with leaves and tendrils that changed size and shape, waving, shedding silver droplets of their sap and winding over the rock faces and pillars and rafters. And they adorned too the steel bars over the windows to the rooms and pavilions where the others were.

During the long, solitary walks I often took I had discovered these disembodied portals, hung in air in enclaves and groves off the pathways or upon the solid faces of the mountain itself. There was nothing behind them but rock or air, yet I sometimes walked up to the glass and looking through the dirty panes could see multitudes in dark halls or in dense throngs ambling down wide thoroughfares. But I was invisible to them, for these people were not really there with me, nor I with them.

I stood for hours watching their lives. Did they

know where they were? Did they know what this place was? They had all been graced, as I had been, with making their own journey to the mountain, yet it seemed their world was so different from mine. Their rooms were so full of laughter and words, and their lives, so free and joyous, quite alien to me. I could have no part of any of this. I had no body, no way of touching or speaking. I sometimes wondered how I could be a part of any world or if I were even human. Once, two people saw me looking through the glass and bars and began to walk towards me. In apprehension I immediately stepped back and, as I did so, felt a sudden change fall upon the frame I had been standing against. It was now made of bone, meat peeling away from it. Flesh and torn skin hung down, bleeding; all of it was rotting and stinking. The blood mixed with a yellow, oozing liquid on the ground at my feet. I knew that it was I who had done this to them, infecting their world, for I was not of their kind. The two figures neared the glass and I moved away before they reached me. The window disappeared.

Not able to risk letting any of them look at me, I turned away, always turned away, and it hurt me so much. My responsibilities to mankind were immense, yet I found myself working against the

people I needed to share my joy with. It seemed only I wanted to know why the mountain stood, to understand the meaning in a tectonic collision of millions of years that had forced the bed of the ocean up into the sky, so that it now towered over both sea and continent. Moreover, I was chained and helpless; I could never enter their world. And so I found myself alone. In grief and disillusionment I stood in constant, silent solitude, the weight of all Creation supported upon my own shoulders.

Everything in my life was breaking apart and I began to see that there was little left of my time here. With each day that passed the countdown to the end continued relentlessly and I could do nothing; I could neither follow nor stop it.

Then one morning I awoke and found that that place upon the mountain had gone. There was only silence but for the rush about my ears of the harsh, cold wind. The mist of the clouds rose to a higher altitude than ever before, shrouding the sky; only the bare, black rock remained of the world that had been, the university I had found and been a part of.

I don't remember my long walk away from there, nor do I recall arriving at the edge of the sea, where I fell into exhausted, fevered sleep upon the grey,

shingled beach.

CHAPTER 3
AFRICA

‘When winter’s here all the birds will return south again, David. England is too cold for them, so they have to make their winter homes in hot places, a long way away.’

Helen and David watched the clear spring sky as the swallows passed high over their heads.

‘They must be so tired . . .’ she said quietly.

The little boy gazed wistfully at the green horizon. A single white cloud hung over the distant eminence. ‘Where’s south, mum?’ he asked.

‘It’s . . . very far away.’ How could she explain that south was a direction, not a place? ‘They fly to Africa, David, where it’s warm all the year round.’

She smiled at him but he remained pensive.

‘Is it more far away than Aunty’s house?’

‘Oh yes, much further than Aunty’s house. We can get to Aunty’s on the bus on Saturdays, can’t we?’

‘Yes . . .’

‘Well, Africa is on the other side of the sea.’

‘The sea!’ David exclaimed incredulously. How could anyone contemplate such vast distances?

‘And you can’t cross the sea on the bus, can you?’

‘No,’ David conceded. He thought for a while. ‘Is

Africa more far away than the moon?'

'Oh no, it's not as far as that,' laughed Helen. 'The moon's very, very far away.'

All morning the fragile white crescent had hung upon the cloudless sky. Puzzled, David watched the flock fly across its face, and wondered how it was that the moon could lie so distant yet still be in the sky with the birds. He could see the moon. He couldn't see Africa.

'How do they know the way?' David experienced a sudden concern for the swallows in their lives of wandering and searching, when he had his own house near his school, and could visit his Aunty on the bus.

'Well, their mums and dads and older friends take them first, and after that they can remember, so the next year they're able to show all the birds that haven't been to Africa before the way to go.'

Helen smiled and put her arm around her son, reassuringly brushing his hair with her hand. 'Don't worry,' she said, 'birds don't ever get lost, no matter how far from home they've been. Not one.'

David felt happy that the world was so beautiful and secure.

CHAPTER 4
HATFIELD

My only memory of the latter half of 1981 is of the days of continual rain throughout what remained of the summer, and then of the featureless, grey sky of the cold, dark winter.

It was a lonely and hopeless time. Again, I saw myself racing uncontrollably into a long blind alley, and there was no way to turn back or stop. Days just went on, on and on, not stopping, never allowing me to rest or wait or think. Soon, I felt, the sudden and inevitable end would be upon me. My future had been taken away.

I made cursory attempts to find a job in areas I considered to be vaguely suitable, but I never really believed there was an organisation anywhere which would accept me nor, if I were offered a position, that I would be able to do the work. Perfunctorily, I sent away application forms, even attended interviews, and on receiving each rejection letter felt, above anything else, a perverse sense of relief born of my refusal, or inability, to consciously accept what was happening to me.

I received lists of graduate vacancies from Professional and Executive Recruitment (PER).

Companies around the country would use this regular publication to advertise posts for engineers, administrators and sales staff, and it was through these missives that I learned of a year long course in electronics at Hatfield Polytechnic, funded by the Manpower Services Commission. Applications were to be open to science graduates of six to eighteen months' standing who had not been able to obtain full-time employment since leaving university. I had no understanding of the academic level of a Higher National Certificate; I just trusted that this was the right way for me to go. There was no real choice to be made - it was the only road to take. What else could I do?

Hatfield lies north of London in suburban Hertfordshire, and like neighbouring Welwyn Garden City it is effectively a New Town. Parts of Old Hatfield still remain, however - to the east, among the parks and woodland around Hatfield House, and the streets of antiquitous houses near the railway station. The rest of the town is wedged tightly into the land between the Great North Road and the motorway to the west.

The very first time I laid eyes on Hatfield I felt a strange, unnameable despondency fall over my

heart. The place appeared quite without spirit or vitality, seeming to be no more than a sprawling tangle of terraced houses, concrete, walls and roads. It was a town created in a decade by architects, 'planned', as if people did nothing other than labour and shop. I experienced no sense of any history steeping the lawns and brickwork, nothing to suggest that anything had ever *happened* in Hatfield. I wondered if the townsfolk were afraid that something might happen. The shopping centre lay like an island at the centre of this abject morass; a cross-shaped precinct led out to the market-place overlooking Queensway, and the library stood at the base of the towering block of council offices. In front of these buildings there was a string of huge traffic roundabouts, honeycombed with subways that emerged into open daylight where they met at the centres. Here beds of bushes had been planted along the mosaiced walls, and wooden benches secured to the flag-stones. Inevitably, names, vulgarities and social allegiances had been sprayed on the coloured subway walls, rivulets of paint running down from the scrawled enunciations. Flattened cigarette packets, discarded chewing gum, dog dirt and spittle covered the ground.

Yet here, in this grey, characterless, silent place

where only the hopeless could find within themselves the strength to smile, I would in time come to gaze upon the golden pillars and radiant arches of my eternal Jerusalem.

A busy dual carriageway, Cavendish Way, led away from the town centre, past the swimming baths and the Forum theatre, towards the polytechnic site about a mile to the south.

The college did actually present a very impressive sight from the road as one approached it, it must be said. A long front of yellow brick and glass rose majestically above the lawns and trees and car-parks before it, a palace proudly and ostentatiously facing the streams of traffic circulating along the motorway sliproads. Immediately behind this facade of two floors of long corridors and rooms stood a number of ageing prefabricated shacks that were used for teaching and research, but beyond these towered another large block, looking out onto the college playing field.

I have always found such immense buildings fascinating and evocative. The chequered walls of glass and brick, the serried windows allowing me to look into a hundred separate rooms at one time somehow thrill my spirit. It's as if a fragment of

buried memory is stirred deep within me, of how I felt, as a child, each time I imagined my future in life, my destiny. I am touched by a distant echo of the excitement that would wash over me at a time when I still believed that all was possible. For it seemed to my young self that the future was a real place, and that what was happening beyond each of those glass partitions was being experienced by people just like myself, only older. I imagined and believed that there were laboratories and lecture rooms behind every window, that these were places of spiritual ecstasy.

But to look at Hatfield Polytechnic filled me with overwhelming emptiness. I felt there to be only a cold, still wasteland inside that place; no science being done, no joy, no future. From my very first sight of it I felt the college to be so forbidding and imposing. I sensed a terrible nothingness there.

I returned the application form the MSC had sent me, which asked me nothing about myself, my interests or the areas which I had chosen for my future career to lie in. I had only to declare my unemployment, and that I possessed a science degree and had attained a pass at A-level mathematics. And, by implication, that my life and

faith were collapsing.

And so, on a still and cloudless Monday just after the new year, fate found me climbing the concrete steps of the administration block for my admission interview.

CHAPTER 5
IN SUMMER HEAT

Nothing moves.
Not a leaf or grass blade stirs.
There is no sound,
No time,
No yesterday or tomorrow,
Only the slow, deep, deep heat
And the gentle, somnolent fragrance
Of wild summer flowers.
There is too much light;
The world is too bright to look upon.
Against the screen of my closed eyelids
I watch pulsating patterns,
In shades of red,
Dancing, expanding,
Delicate chains and jewels multiplying.

I have never felt pain, anger or hatred,
For without people and the passing years
These things cannot exist.

I half sleep,
Half breathe,
Half wonder.
The day will never end.
The white sun is directly over my burning back
And shadows,
Crisp edged and dark,
Outline leaves and flowerpots
With thick black borders.
The tendrils of cool shade
That morning spilled over the yellow lawn
Have gone,
Sucked back into the foliage around me.
I open one drowsy eye
The barest fraction,
And past the blurred, flickering lid
I see the bright flowers
Of yellow and purple.

Somewhere
There is a universe
Where infinite space is not black,
For a dense, dark green
Pervades unimaginable distance,
And the stars are not burning suns

But these same open, shining petals,
Dream-flowers crowded together
Throughout the cosmos.

All morning the soundless paradise
Has been ringing with song,
But I have not heard it.
The trees that surround the garden
Are filled with invisible birds
Calling out in rapture.
For long hours I have not known this.
Now the curtains of silence have been torn down,
Now the delirious, spinning noise of the world
Bursts through my locked, unconscious senses.
And I am one with it all,
As it had been in the beginning.

The soul and body part.
I try to understand which I am,
Caught upon a parapet
Between life and death.

CHAPTER 6
QUESTIONS

We make our own futures, yet there are no maps to guide us, no signposted routes at the divergence of each moment we live through, of each decision and choice we face. So much of what is to come in our lives is contingent on the most careless, thoughtless actions. We cannot imagine that there may be consequence to a gesture, a smile or a drunken word. Conversely, that which appears profound in the moment we so often find to have had no value or meaning. What luxury it would be to take each such step with the hindsight of a lifetime, to be able to change what we have become. It would take so little to rewrite an entire life.

In the small office in the electrical and electronic engineering department, I sat before Edward Lewis, the departmental head, and Christine Hurst and Richard Kingsley from the Manpower Services Commission. They were asking me about university. Painfully, I was answering, but as disingenuously as I could; I didn't want to speak of this and tried to steer the conversation towards the course at Hatfield. Sitting between the others,

Kingsley led the interview.

'We would want you to be aware that you should expect the work you will be doing for this course to be considerably easier, a lot less demanding, than you encountered in your previous studies.'

I accepted that, I told them.

He paused, gauging the reaction in my eyes, then continued. 'We also want to clarify the nature of the job for which a course like this would qualify you. You would be working towards a Higher National Certificate which, although run by us full-time and with graduate entry, is really intended as a technicians' training course. I have to stress that the work expected of a technician is for the most part very routine, mundane and repetitive. This is reflected in the syllabus, which has a high practical emphasis.'

The meeting was becoming very stressful for me. I needed to be accepted for the course and thus wanted to demonstrate an interest in and aptitude for the subject. But as the interview progressed I became ever less certain of what was required of me, what qualities and attitude I was meant to place under these people's scrutiny. In such doubt, I spoke with trepidation and reticence, afraid to reveal anything about my experience and aspirations. I

could not risk condemning myself.

I had not enough time to try to identify and comprehend the reasons underlying the things they said to me. 'We would like to run quickly through some of the subjects in the syllabus, just to see that you haven't covered too much of this work before.'

That was it - that was the single moment when I should have seen what was happening, when I should have realised what they were planning for me. I felt bewildered by the situation I now faced in the interview. I had been trying to show my knowledge and commitment, when I suddenly found myself having to convince these people of a complete ignorance on my part of the fundamentals of the subject I would be studying.

'Do you know what a transistor is and how it works?'

I couldn't deny something so basic. 'Well, yes.'

'So you understand about doped semiconductors and n-p-n junctions?'

Yes, of course I did. What did they want me to say? 'I have covered that, yes . . . a little,' I mumbled quietly.

Did I know of logic gates, of operational amplifiers, of multivibrators?

'Yes . . . no.' It seemed that they wanted me to

have no prior knowledge of electronics at all. In my confusion I grew ever more silent.

Christine Hurst was sitting at the side of the desk, to my left. She held a folder on her lap and looked at me anxiously from time to time. I couldn't tell if this was a show of encouragement or worry. Edward Lewis watched me and grinned his inane, permanent grin as the others spoke; the MSC was paying the polytechnic to run the course and so his contribution to the selection process was really very cursory.

I thought back to when I had been at school, attending interviews with teachers and external careers advisors. I couldn't recall any help they had given me at all in planning for my future. It was as if their cruel purpose had been to listen to children's dreams and ambitions, their most passionately nurtured hope, and then raze it all to the ground in one blow. Reality held no room for the human spirit, for such things would be caught between the turning cogs of society's machine and simply crushed. The detritus of broken dreams would choke the world and cause it to grind to a stop. Abandon hope, they told us, your lives are finished.

My interviewers offered me a place on the course and I accepted it. Chris Hurst spoke to me then of

the grant I would be receiving - she called it a training allowance - and I was surprised that it was to be considerably more than a normal student grant. Additionally, I would be able to claim travel expenses for attending that interview. It seemed to me that it had been decided at a high administrative level that the course would be a success - it was not being lightly funded. They were trying to minimise the drop-out rate by paying the students on these courses the equivalent of a living wage. But where could I bale out? I was here because I had nowhere left to run.

The room was full of papers. Documents lay in untidy piles on the table top by the window or crammed into files, some splitting, some open and forgotten, upon the shelves on the walls to my right and behind me. Faded blue and yellow pages, ragged and creased, even lay on the carpeted floor, discarded, useless. All these sheets and box files seemed to be the purposeless artefacts of forgotten years. I looked beyond Kingsley and Lewis, through the window behind them, but could see nothing but the pale, blue sky. What else was out there?

CHAPTER 7
A GREEN HILL

The leaves of the oak and chestnut trees, bathed in the clear, mid-morning sunlight, were of the lush, bright green that shines and whispers in dark boughs at no time other than very early spring. High, high above, the sky had been dusted with flour.

A young woman left the hospital car-park and walked down the narrow lane toward the bleak brick building behind the trees. She slowed to put a ring of keys away in the zip pocket of her black denim jacket, looking around for directions to the wards.

She was nervous, apprehensive of meeting her friend. How could such a terrible thing have happened? For surely people were born into this place, they didn't leave the real world to enter here. She thought about what she could say to him, but the imaginary conversations turned grotesque, or they died upon a silent wall between them. What was there to say?

The road curved away toward the grey, decaying mansion. To the right the grounds were bordered by a black wood, whilst the lawns opposite receded undulating into the distant hedges, fields and fences. All around her grew fruit trees in pink and white

blossom, standing among drifts of fallen petals drawn into bright ribbons radiating from a grassy hill rising up behind the wards and offices.

But as she looked more closely she saw that the trees were all barbed with thorns, and that the wood of their trunks and branches was dead, wet timber that for years had lain submerged beneath dark and silent flood waters and today rotted in the spring sunshine.

It began to appear to Anna that something was very wrong; she had been walking for fifteen minutes or more, but still the grey building ahead seemed no closer. How far away was it? Three, four hundred yards? The dark wooden door and barred windows had seemed no more distant when she had first seen them from the main gates. Behind her, the car-park and road were lost from view. As in a dream, she felt she was walking waist deep in water; it was so difficult to take each step, to make any progress along the path that had now turned from tarmac into a rough dirt track through the long grass. What was happening to the world?

It will take me forever, and then I shall never return, she thought, standing frightened and still amid the cracked patterns of the coloured branches, lost upon a rainbow patchwork eiderdown. For now

some of the trees were becoming strangely angular and bare, more and more of them, upon the hill, around her, everywhere she looked. The same shape seemed to be forming repeatedly - the single, vertical pole of rough-hewn wood that rose from the ground to a height of fifteen feet, and the perpendicular beam affixed near the apex. The body of a man, wan with the pallor of death yet still somehow living, hung from each one. She was looking upon humanity reduced to an eternal, pain-racked breath. These were the dead who could never die.

She began to understand that the forest of graves had not appeared as she had watched. It had stood there always; what was left of those people had been abandoned in that place long, long ago. It was only that she had never before seen it.

Her legs could not move; she stumbled and fell with each impossible step. As gravity released her she clung to the earth as it span. There were so many tombs, so many nailed to their own headstones.

Amid the thousand crucified, the white blossom and brightly verdant boughs remained gently swaying, impassive and beautiful.

We have lost everything, Anna thought.

CHAPTER 8
BLUEBELL WOOD

David and Helen walked slowly back towards the car where his father was spreading the picnic blanket on the ground. He stood on the hill's brow and violently unfurled the heavy brown cloth, his hands tightly holding the corners and beating down as it billowed before him. John pulled the edges straight and began to remove the basket and bags from the boot.

David's sister saw them approaching and jumped out of the car.

'Watch this!' she shouted excitedly and rolled down the hill towards them, tumbling and laughing.

'Wendy, careful!' called Helen with exaggerated concern. Wendy lost her shoe and it remained lying halfway up the grassy bank.

Helen ran to catch her flailing daughter at the base of the slope. Her hair dishevelled and falling in her eyes, blades of dead grass sticking to her back, the little girl ran back up to retrieve her plimsoll. She looked at them breathlessly as she wiggled her foot back inside, cheeks red and eyes shining.

They heard a frenzied yelping from inside the vehicle, and there was Scruff, jumping up on the

back seat and greeting them through the rear window. The sandy terrier quivered with excitement at seeing his friends - his family - return. Very soon David would fill his bowl for him, and after dinner they would all set off on a long, long walk in the spring sunshine. Scruff wanted to run and run, until the world itself ran out.

Helen laid out the paper plates upon the rolling landscape of the blanket, soft upon the long grass, and loaded them with the food that she had spent the early morning preparing. Granary bread sandwiches, cut diagonally into triangles filled with salads and cheese, were piled in high mounds upon the white dishes. Cheerful scarlet napkins embossed with white and gold waved in the breeze, anchored down by the bright ovals of hard boiled eggs and by shining green apples. The top of a two litre bottle of cola protruded from the shopping bag resting against the wheel of the car, and a large round chocolate cake, glistening and sticky, lay forbidden, untouchable until last, at the centre of the rug. A fly swooped and darted among the gentle streams of sweet air and David swiped in annoyance at the buzzing about their heads.

In the trees the birds sang. Grasshoppers chattered and white butterflies fluttered in the air around

them. It was as if this was the only day ever and would last for always.

What remained from the family's picnic they collected into two carrier bags, then shook the crumbs from the blanket, folded it and put it back in the car. They made their lazy way through the long, lush grass, among which grew a million bright daisies and buttercups, scattered like stars over the vast meadow. It really was as if the constellations, and every astronomical wonder and marvel, were incarnate in swathes over the land. The emerald hillside plunged down toward the stream where the willows bent over the water, trailing long, tapered branches in the cold froth that swirled around the green stones lying raised above the coursing current. How many years, how many centuries, must those rocks have lain embedded there, dark and unmoving, like the eroded ruins of a forgotten, drowned city, the remnants of the birth of time itself.

David stood on the muddy shingle and aimed a pebble at the water. With a deep glottal sound the trickling, splashing stream closed in around the stone and pulled it deep, leaving no mark or disturbance where for an instant the surface had been broken. He threw again and the missile

bounced with a sharp crack off the solid rock, spinning into the brambles on the other bank. The flow of the cold, clear liquid was perpetual, running down out of the shadows of Bluebell Wood and wending away out of sight, toward the villages in the valley to the south. The undulating surface shimmered and gleamed, yet seemed to remain fixed in position over the undertow, this body of water constantly rushing by, carrying twigs and ribbons of weed tumbling over the polished yellow and brown flints lying motionless on the bed.

Scruff cavorted wildly in the shallow stream, barking deliriously, sending water splashing over David and disturbing the sediment around the pebbles. It billowed up in dense clouds that were immediately swept downstream.

'Come here, Scruff,' called John, clapping his thigh as he walked.

The four of them carefully crossed a line of rocks bridging the stream, balancing gingerly on the slippery stepping stones.

Then in an instant the puppy was at their heels, panting with joy and tail wagging furiously. Wendy bent to pat him and he leaped up towards her, tongue wet and lashing, to reciprocate in the only way he knew how.

They retraced the path of the snaking, cascading stream into the wood, walking along the bare earth trail that twisted in between the tall trees. Sunlight, shredded by the foliage over their heads, fell in dusty rays upon the sea of bluebells around them. Myriad waxy, fragrant flowers, dappled with fire, grew upon the forest floor that fell away to their left.

The shaded world beneath the leafy vault felt cooler than the open fields, the warm beams no longer falling on their bare skin. The sounds surrounding them had changed, too; the bird calls echoed eerily in the tree-tops, and the waves that rushed onto a distant, invisible beach breathed and sighed unceasingly overhead.

After a walk of a mile or more, the wood's border seemed abrupt and unexpected. The path suddenly stopped and they found themselves standing on the grassy edge of a water meadow. They faced into the dropping sun and shaded their eyes, looking out over the marsh plains where copses of trees stood stranded like oases in the long reeds and clustered pampas grass. The fenland sparkled and dazzled in the afternoon rays.

It was like opening a door inside a house and seeing, instead of an expected room or hallway, the infinite night of interstellar space, peppered with

countless burning nebulae and lights. Their tiny figures stood for long minutes by the outlying trees, enthralled, motionless before this spellbinding vision, then in a single step spilled from the forest through the boundary between two worlds.

David shut his eyes. He felt weary, and an inner warmth seeped through to his heart from his upturned face and brown arms that he placed behind his head. He would be home soon, back in his own room in the bungalow on the crest of Church Street, where he could lie on his own soft bed and read about magic and wonder, and then simply sleep himself away to paradise. He felt as if he were standing in their yard under the blossoming plum tree, but the wooden fences on either side and the brick alleyway at the bottom of the garden were not there, and the land behind the house was bounded only by the distant horizon.

On the line stretched between the garage wall and a pillar of concrete that rose out of the dark green juniper, the washed clothes hung in a parade of flapping colour, dancing in the warm spring breeze. At the side of the crazy-paved path the sundial cast a mid-day shadow over its weathered brass face, and grey and yellow lichen grew in coarse paisley patterns upon the stone pillar beneath.

The lawn was bordered by broad beds of shrubs and flowers beginning to burst into colour, a bright jungle of roses, daffodils, forget-me-nots and lilies. Tomato plants grew in the greenhouse, beneath the vine twisting around the supports of the metal frame, and over the trellis on the wall of the house clematis tangled, blooming with large violet flowers.

In the cool kitchen, sunlight threw the shadows of the window frame slats against the back wall and across the dark wooden table standing in the centre of the small room. The table was laid for a meal and the smell of cooking, of roasting potatoes and simmering green beans, was heavy in the steamy air. The radio on the sideboard played softly over the sound of the saucepans bubbling on the stove, and beneath the window the cold tap had not been fully turned off and trickled water monotonously into the enamelled sink.

David walked down the dark hallway past the lounge and bathroom, to the front rooms on the north side of their home. His bedroom looked out on the street where people passed, walking or cycling, and the occasional car or van rolled slowly by, purring through that quiet backwater of the town.

One can grow to acquire such a deep familiarity with a place, whether it be a home or a garden, or anywhere dear, that the mystery inherent in that world begins to wane. Its exploration nears a certain completion and it is possible to sense that there no longer remains anything to be discovered, that there is nowhere left to go. David knew every room in their bungalow, every mark on floor tile or wall, each dark and dusty recess. And so he imagined that the floor was hollow, and that beneath the heavy cupboards and cooker, the washing machine and storage heater, there were stairwells leading down into the dark cellars beneath the house.

And once, David had been up in the loft with his father. A single, bare bulb had thrown its weak yellow light over stacked boxes and bags filled with strange, dirty objects that he had never seen before, but there still remained black, uncharted space beyond, where the glow did not reach. And the unseen, to a little boy, was infinite and frightening. David's early childhood had been left abandoned there, in spirit somewhere among the broken toys, the disassembled play-pen and cot, the scattered building blocks, the rusty scooter with one buckled wheel. Searching the unknown, David had found

himself.

But for a single bright jewel of cold reality lying at its heart, life is an insulating tangle of stories, thought David. People tell you so much. And all of it is truth, all of it possesses its own special innate sense. Words bring beautiful pictures, thrilling the heart, and that is sense enough.

He sat on the edge of his bed, on the blue eiderdown cover patterned with white and pink roses, and thought how silent the house was. Where were his parents and sister? Why could he not hear Scruff barking in the kitchen or pattering upon the polished wooden floor of the hall outside the door? David had never been alone before, and now he felt disorientated and uneasy, realising that, in his young mind, he had always previously confused privacy with aloneness.

This secluded place that he loved so much was the refuge and touchstone of his life. There were bright pictures of galleons and treasure chests and clam shells and gold pendant chains on the wallpaper; rows of books and Airfix model fighter planes on the shelves bracketed to the wall; a desk by the door on which David's coloured pencils stood upright in a mug and drawing books lay scattered. But what a fragile, tenuous world this was. He could destroy it

by simply opening his eyes.

‘They say that these hills are riddled with caves and tunnels,’ mused David’s father. ‘The entrances were sealed up thousands of years ago, and even after nearly the whole of the forest was felled no sign of them remained.’

A world beneath the world! How big, how overwhelming life was, thought David. There was so much that was mysterious and unknown, and so little actually visible and understandable. He imagined the dark, dank caves and wondered where they could lead to. Did people live in that hidden underworld? Did they have cities and families? Did they speak of legends of a world far away, beyond the furthest edges of their own universe? He wondered how the citizens of that subterranean labyrinth would picture a land as alien and distant as his own.

David lay back on the grassy slope. The car radio crackled faintly somewhere above his head. His sister threw a stick for the dog and the sound of rapid scampering and then a sudden scuffling disturbed the peace of the darkening day. The moon still shone above him, turning brighter as the evening blueness deepened, and the silhouettes of

bats flew rapidly and silently between the trees, catching the unseen insects that swarmed in the air.

Time is a string of moments, and its passing is effected only by the contiguity of these incalculable instances. A mere second, were it possible to isolate it, would be endless. One such granule of time appeared in David's life. Between his lazy contemplation of the perfumed evening, and hearing Helen stand to brush the powdered earth from her clothes, a bright star flared up and died upon the empty, black sky. For the briefest moment, David was infinite and voices called him and invisible fingers took his hands as he stood, turning him to face a burning at the heart of all that was.

'David, this is you.'

From the moment the sun set, to when the police eventually arrived, Helen did not stop crying. John walked with the uniformed officers away from the car in which Wendy sat silently hugging the dog, and spoke to them out of earshot, pointing through the vespertine gloom toward the place where they had last seen David, to where they had walked that afternoon, to the fields and streams where they had searched in the twilight. One of the men reached inside the patrol car and pulled the radio handset out

through the open window, stretching the curled lead taut, and spoke briefly. Very soon a police van with five more officers arrived, pulling off the road onto the uneven grass, and with bright hand-torches throwing rings of light into the depths of the forest, they began to search the blind, impenetrable darkness. As the sweeping beams picked out each gnarled trunk, thick, magnified shadows rolled across the undergrowth behind. But the night remained silent; only the sound of the snapping twigs beneath their feet and the rustling of the leafy branches they pushed out of their path could be heard above the sporadic distant beating of wings in the tree-tops.

David's father called out his name, his tremulous voice reverberating through the invisible trees. Then again, silence. And when they had reached the edge of the water meadow there was no more they could do in the night. Even the moon had set long ago, following the sun from the sky, and the world was quite devoid of light.

'Mr Searle, we're turning back. There's hot tea in the van, please have some.'

John hardly heard. His eyes held deep despair and his breath was pained and rapid. 'No . . . not yet.'

'We've got to go back. We cannot search anymore

tonight.’

In morning’s first light they once more sifted the cold, damp wood, leaving the footpath to look among the flowers and in the ditch that cut a deep gash in the earth at the base of the sloping ground. They beat down the brambles and pushed through into the undergrowth as far as they could, their feet slipping on the thick, soft mat of rotting leaves and exposing the dark, wet humus beneath.

One officer searched for a mile along the stream that flowed out of the wood - as far as David could possibly have walked before the wide banks became so muddy that his footprints would have been visible had he come that way. The others walked out onto the meadow, finding a zig-zagging path along the ground firm enough to take their weight. But they could find no trace of David, no clue to his vanishing. That evening, as the light faded once more, the search was abandoned.

The subsequent police investigation centred around the possibility of abduction. Yet the family had seen no one in their vicinity - no cars or strangers, no sound of cries or whispers drifting on the evening air - and there had been no reason for David to walk away from the vehicle they had been

loading. Only minutes had passed from the time John last looked at David lying in the grass to when Helen called out to him, over and over.

The icy summer came to a world unreal and dead, where a plague of perpetual, biting imagining pervaded John's and Helen's shattered lives. Each day that passed was the day by Bluebell Wood, and each thought that crossed their heavy hearts was yet another visualisation of the possible truth of their awful loss. As each new vision of David's disappearance burst in their minds it meshed with the scenes that had already formed and accumulated, and the tangled web of fear and despair grew.

Helen remembered every moment they had shared with their son. Memories of his birth, his first steps, his starting school, his tears, his cuddles, his laughter, all swirled in the cold mist of a life closer to death than anything she had before imagined.

'What have these last eight years been for?' she whispered.

CHAPTER 9
THE BEGINNING

Many years ago, when the world was glass and the sky an unbroken vault of fire, milk white oceans swirled around crystal mountains rising into the orange and purple maelstrom above.

How tired the waves looked. How slow and viscous they were, lapping onto the sand that was untold miles of pulverised jewels lying at the edges of the opaque deep. A hot wind blew along the shoreline, an emissary of the eternally raging sky.

From out of the furnace overhead a sparse sodium hail fell upon the sea. As each metal flake touched the surface it burst into bright fire, effervescing violently and spinning blindly. A faint vapour rose above the spitting light. As far as the eye could see the ocean was a vast white starfield of burning sodium.

Then, over the ceaseless roar of the breaking waves, a strange, unnatural sound rose up, soft as the blue down that grew upon the diamond plateaus and barely coherent upon the buffeting wind. Falling from the silhouetted ridges of the mountains, the ethereal music of a sonic rainbow soothed the broken world in the storm's aftermath.

And the eyes of that place watched and silently waited. The voice of the universe of cold glass and fire did not speak, for there were yet no words.

What measurement could be made of time, how could such a thing be conceived of, when the whole of Creation was static, eternal and unchanging? This was all that there was, anywhere; it had always been and would forever remain.

Without day or night or seasons, in a world where the only change came with the brief lulls in the stony precipitation, we lived unborn. Who among us could hope or dream? What was there to hope for, to dream of? We made homes in caves in the glass mountains, lit by indeterminably distant glowing shapes and bright lines that shone from beneath the floors and through the ceilings and walls. Never did any of us need to be alone in an eternal life. Clear, sweet water ran through the caverns and plentiful food grew upon crystal pillars. Cold was unknown to us. There was no pain, disease or death. We had everything and nothing.

And we did not choose, for without hope there could be nothing to decide upon. The universe had begun and all that it had become in countless millions of years was exactly predetermined and inescapable. From the first moment the far distant

future could be extrapolated. All was known. There were no parallel worlds.

But one man sat alone, staring across the great white sea and contemplating the burning sky. In our blind ignorance we called him The Empty One, for we could see no part of his being other than the frail, silent shell that paced the glistening beaches, and the dark, alien eyes watching us in fear and joy. How could we have known then what we would become? The old man was of another place, his heart witnessed more than any of us could understand. What was it he saw? To whom did he speak? For surely this place was all. There was nothing else.

The fire above us was infinitely deep and the ocean had no bed. But still, could we not consider, wildly, senselessly, how it might be like if the fundamental, unquestionable facts of reality were not as we knew them to truly be? Although there would be no purpose in such contrived madness, although it would be but an idle, superfluous game, could we not at least allow ourselves just one moment of conjecture, one turn of the kaleidoscope of the mind, and imagine that there is a place deeper than the sea, that there is another world, other worlds, beyond the pyre above us? The Empty One

had seen them all.

What would the sky become, he wondered, if we could in some way extinguish the flames? Perhaps it was really white like the sea, or maybe the fiery clouds swarmed upon a ceiling of glass. Then what would we see beyond that window? Could it be that there was another world far above us, hidden behind our sky? In such a case, The Empty One thought, our world, all that we know, is in the sky of that other place.

And so time for us was like the great roads that crossed the plains beyond the mountains. The line of destiny was perfectly straight, seemingly without end or beginning as one looked along its miles and saw the track disappear into the haze at the foot of the pale blue, featureless peaks. We reacted, we did not choose. We drifted, we did not journey. We all believed everything, even the certainty of the falsehood of that which we did not believe. In theory, the laws of physics could have predicted every action of matter and energy, every thought and metaphysical convolution of conscious life. All was perfectly ordered, until the day The Empty One split the universe in two.

Never before had we known true volition. We had always thought we had; we never questioned that

we were in possession of a will, free and disconnected from everything inanimate or living, insentient or thinking, that shared Creation with us. It seemed clear and indisputable that we each had complete, unfettered autonomy as unique individuals. But it was all illusion; we had never been like that. The world was fuelled by ice-cold determinism.

I cannot recall what the first ever act of choosing was. Did he say to something deep within himself that sight was blindness? Did he stand out in the sodium storm, waist-deep in the sea, and catch the burning rain as if it were April blossom, blown still living from the trees and carried dancing by the wind, falling upon his outstretched hands and open eyes? I do not know, but at that time the universe became filled with the numinous light and life truly began. There were two ways of going; we took them both and so there were two universes. Each path split again and again until that which we called the future was something wholly unknown, unpredictable and intangible. The Empty One had brought the darkness of not knowing upon the world. And when this deep gloom descended over us, for the first time we found we could see. For it brightly lit the paths we had feared to tread, shining

over ignorance and revealing vast, unbounded tracts of blindness and seemingly unfathomable mystery which we had never imagined could lie there.

There is a waterfall, a hundred metres high and an arm span wide, that feeds a stream cutting through the beach and entering the sea. It has turned red. The crimson blood of life and murder flows down the mountainside, and where it runs into the breakers the swirling white liquid clears. I can see through the water that covers the world. I can see what lies beneath the ocean.

Stand deep in the soft, blue carpet and press your face to the diamond mountain. Watch the patterns of lights until they surround you, spinning about your body, changing into the shapes of flying arrows and floating globes. They all burn with ever changing colours. And when we can no longer bear the brilliance we will release the light into the unknown cosmos, where other universes are bursting into being and calling out across the canyons of the new night.

It begins.

CHAPTER 10
DESTROY CENTAUR!

One by one, as we each arrived at that same office, Carol Willis, the departmental secretary, led us along the windowless corridor, down the stairs and outside to the Students' Union. It was a bright, cold February morning. Overhead, the far cirrus clouds lay motionless upon the blue while, low in the eastern sky, the blinding sun cast long, angular shadows across the grass and cracked flagstones. Where the ground was in shadow white frost still remained after the long, cold night.

The Union building was an extraordinary architectural frenzy of yellow brick, with dark windows like long embrasures in castle turrets, green wooden doors, shadows and sparkling light, one end embedded deep in the sloping ground. Narrow concrete steps descended between it and the wall of the electronics department, down toward the bar in the main poly building. We entered the sudden darkness, walking past the snooker table and pinball machines and up the carpeted stairs to the coffee bar, emerging into a large room strewn with chairs and tables. Everything, the carpeted floor, the smooth brick walls, seemed to be coloured brown,

daylight streaming through the narrow windows. Across the room I saw a group of people, loaded bags and briefcases leaning against their seats, plastic coffee cups standing on the table they sat around, and as Carol and I approached them they looked up at us. Penny smiled, and that moment of radiant joy in her eyes caught in my memory for ever.

Then Carol returned to the office and I remained sitting with these strangers, my new colleagues. My friends perhaps? I dearly hoped so. I had been here before, barely escaping with my life. And now, so soon, it was all starting again. But this time it would be different, this time I would change it all, I would not waste the miracle of the second chance I had been graced with. Be like them, I urged myself, be like them. I really believed that I could begin anew - how quickly I had forgotten what I had been through.

Nervous on our first morning, we spoke of the surfaces of our lives, asking each other where we had been studying, which subjects, and where we had travelled from to Hatfield. We found we all came from different places, some having graduated a year before I and others had. The conversation moved onto our unemployment, our so far

unsuccessful searches for jobs. How many applications had we each made? To which companies? Wasn't it difficult and demoralising? But I didn't want to speak of this at all. I didn't want a job - I wanted to work.

John was red and breathless when he arrived, his brow glistening, having walked the two long miles from the station. He had a stocky, unathletic build and wore thick, plastic rimmed glasses, his hair short and unkempt. Pulling a chair over from another table and draping his coat and scarf over the back, he sat down with us and, between gulps of air and coffee, began to chat uninhibitedly, as if we were his oldest friends. Within twenty minutes there were fourteen of us, the initial complement of the great experiment that was the ETOPS pilot course of 1982.

What is the value of our first impressions of people we meet? Can we have any truthful knowledge of others before we have formed friendships with them, before we have accrued any sense of mutual familiarity? For us to know others they must also know us. In this way, can we possibly say that we know anyone? We are so alone in our lives.

I still remember how the MSC had spoken of that first day in the letter they had sent me confirming

my acceptance onto the course. ‘You will report for training . . . ’ they had written, as if we were to be reprogrammed, to be made to forget all the things we wanted to be. Overleaf there was a terse list of rules and disciplinary warnings. Drunkenness and absenteeism were punishable, they had said, yet never once being in any way positive and mentioning the prompt and satisfactory completion of coursework, or enthusiasm and dedication. These were only standard pamphlets, which the MSC sent to the participants of all the courses they ran, but still it angered me that they disregarded our academic experience in this way, that we were deemed to be somehow suddenly no longer capable of working, of studying, in the manner which had earned us university science degrees only months before.

Looking back on ETOPS through the caprices of time, I am struck by the stark dichotomy of emotion that exists in my memory of that year. I remember experiencing such massive extremes of emotion, veering between ecstasy, tremendous joy and immense spiritual exultation, and then terrible, awful rage, despondency and fear. I was caught between two worlds - between heaven and hell - my life forever balanced on a knife’s edge, on a

tightrope over oblivion. Which place was real? I cannot tell even today.

Then our tutors for the course, Terry Hayes and John Meredith, joined us and introduced themselves, welcoming us to Hatfield and briefly outlining our itinerary for that first day. Before lunch they would show us around the department and parts of the rest of the polytechnic. Any questions, please just ask, they said. So we all stood, our coats and bags in our arms, and followed our lecturers in a procession down the stairs.

John was an amiable man in his sixties with half moon spectacles and a tired red face where hundreds of broken blood vessels had marked his cheeks and nose. He was being very courteous to us and it seemed to me that he surmised our confused feelings concerning the course and why we had come on it and was consciously trying to allay our misgivings and welcome us. Terry was younger, perhaps forty. In those first weeks I think we all succumbed to the deception of the affable exterior which he presented to us. They both smiled a lot and chatted with us, leading us around the college, first to the library, where we were issued with membership cards and given a short introductory talk by the librarian, and then to the stationery shop,

the recreational areas and the rooms and laboratories in the electronics department where we were to have our classes.

Soon it was lunchtime. In the refectory we all sat together to eat, at one long table, laughing at the dreary uniformity of college canteen food across the country.

'There must be a huge central kitchen where they cook all this stuff,' proposed Mark, 'before it's shipped out each day to every uni in Britain.'

Penny Roberts was the only woman on the course. She told me she had applied for a job with a company in the town where I had been to school, but had not yet received a response to the application form she had returned. Out of all of us she was the one person that it was most surprising had not been able to find work since the summer. She was outgoing and intelligent and would have coped well with interviews, I felt. Perhaps it was true, then, that there were barriers of sexism put up by employers against women, not least against women physicists. Or maybe Penny was just being very selective in her choice of career, coming to Hatfield only for as long as it took to find something she wanted to do, just biding time and taking the money they gave us. Perhaps that was all the reason

any of us had for being there.

None of us left a clean plate or empty cup on the trays we returned to the racks by the wall. We stood outside the refectory door and, seeing that there were still forty five minutes before we were due back at the electronics department, discussed where we could go to wait.

The bar. Of course. I wasn't surprised that John and Mark and some of the others had suggested this so readily, without any thought and almost in unison. This is what students did - drank beer at mid-day. I knew this. I had never been in the students' bar at university, and certainly had never drunk at lunchtime. But if this was normal behaviour then I - my reborn, redeemed self - had to be a part of it. I desperately needed to avoid recreating the bleak isolation I had known these last years. I had no chances left.

It was easy to believe that students spent lunch-times drinking, but considered objectively, at a university of six thousand undergraduates, how many actually used the bar during the day? A hundred? Perhaps it wasn't so 'normal' after all. Was it just ETOPS, then, and if so, why? I tried not to imagine an underclass of unemployable, drunken graduates being herded onto courses such as this

each year at polytechnics around the country. No, we were not like that, I told myself; we had been invited here. We were needed.

Still, university had been for me a world without alcohol. It had not been an element of my life for I had had no chance to make it so. In fact I think I drank my first pint of beer only a week or so before coming to Hatfield, and at that stage certainly never saw alcohol as a divine panacea. But my life had now changed, for, starting the course midway through the academic year, we were isolated from the 'indigenous' students and only really had each other's company. And I too belonged, my desperate aloneness forgotten.

So, with some trouble, we managed to locate the Union bar at the far end of the long corridor that ran the entire length of the main building. We walked down a short ramp and peered through the glass into the dark room.

McMullen's of Hertford owned many of the local pubs, also supplying others, and the Union bar sold their Country bitter cheaply, alongside the stronger Courage Directors. Andy muttered something about keg beer which I didn't quite appreciate, not fully understanding then how purists would have beer served. I was vaguely aware, I think, that large

pump handles pulled strenuously by hand were good, and that small taps were not good. And what was this ‘real ale’ the others spoke of, their eyes sparkling?

After two pints the world brightened. Pieces of our armour fell away from us as we sat back relaxed, and the dark room became a glowing carousel, filled with our joyous, unbound voices. How wonderful everything was. This was the point which I would today identify as having been the very moment that ETOPS truly began.

At almost two o’clock we reluctantly drained our glasses and filed outside to go to our first lecture.

I was living in Welwyn Garden City at the YMCA in Handside Lane, which, although not actually owned by the polytechnic, was used exclusively as a hall of residence for Hatfield students. The MSC had encouraged as many of us as possible to commute to Hatfield from home each day, but those of us who had had to move there needed to be found accommodation. I was very apprehensive indeed on learning that they were asking me to stay at a YMCA. I didn’t know anything about these places and imagined a large dormitory, one bed and wardrobe each, sharing with twenty homeless drug

addicts, lights out at ten and shrill military reveille at six. It was not even in the same town as the college. But in fact my heart leapt immediately I saw the building in the silent, leafy backwater on the west side of Welwyn Garden City. It was quite unlike the mental picture I had created over the last fortnight. The hostel comprised perhaps twenty or thirty single rooms on two floors, a television lounge, a breakfast room, and accommodation for the two men who ran it. A tall, neatly clipped privet ran the length of the front of the building, screening the ground floor windows off from the street, and between the hedge and the road lay a large lawn on which three mighty oak trees towered over the roof-tops, their bare, capacious boughs shading the grass and concrete beneath. The surrounding streets were all as tranquil, forever damp and dark, lined with endless birches and chestnuts. All the houses were aged, detached properties of red, mossy brick, their tarmac driveways strewn with broken twigs and decaying leaves.

Opposite the YMCA stood the tiny Barn theatre, and it was from the bus-stop just outside, by the bushes studded with white convolvulus, that I caught the service to Hatfield each frosty morning.

My room would become so cold at night. The

outside walls were thin and the single window had an ill-fitting sliding frame, so that one could feel the icy air blowing in around the peeling white paintwork. There was a hot water radiator fixed to the wall by the door, which pumped loudly, sending deep, resonant tones through the brass pipework until midnight when it shut itself off. The morning light feebly began to warm the air I breathed, air so cold that my eyes and legs would ache as I tried to sleep. I placed both my coats over the bed and pulled my knees up to my chest, waiting for unconsciousness. The bed sagged and my back, too, was stiff and hurting as I awoke to my ringing clock, seemingly only minutes after I had at last fallen into sleep, the pale rays of first light raising the room temperature just those few degrees.

On cloudless mornings a mist rose from the fields and meadows between Welwyn and Hatfield, and looking through the dirty bus windows I saw the newly risen sun burst open behind a screen of burning fog as we drove into this beautiful world of blinding light. Fire consumed the stark trees, and the silhouettes which remained sprayed bright rays across the shrouded farmland. We entered an ethereal kingdom of yellow flame and dark, featureless earth, the sunlight sputtering and

flashing through the denuded winter hedgerows we passed. What magic had descended upon God's land?

Our route took us through The Ryde, the northernmost district of Hatfield, and along the way the bus would stop to pick up school-children, early morning shoppers and workmen carrying tupperware lunchboxes and newspapers. After passing the station and reaching the town centre, depending on which service I had caught we would then either drive up Bishops Rise, which arced uphill southwards towards the rear of the polytechnic, or go along Woods Avenue and then Travellers Lane as far as Oxlease in the south-east corner of the town. In this case, after alighting I would walk up Southdown Road, past the line of elderly people's single-floored terraced houses. The roofs of these buildings sloped with the incline of the street, while the doors and windows were set in the walls perfectly upright of course, creating odd, eye-catching angles between the frames and eaves. To my right there were numerous rows of lock-up garages. I walked up these neat, quiet streets as far as the parade of shops behind the Hilltop pub. This was also as far as the other bus route took me, and I would then walk down Ryecroft, a short cul-de-sac

off Hazel Grove, climbing through a gap in the trees at the end and into the college grounds. There was a footpath sloping across this meadow down to the poly, along which I tramped two hundred yards through the long yellow grass, past the spinney of oak trees to my left, and descended the steep concrete steps leading down to the Union and electronics department.

Each morning I would leave the YMCA as early as I could, always arriving at least half an hour before the first lecture at nine o'clock. With this time to kill, I often went into the Union building, almost deserted at that time of the day, to play the pinball machines. 'Destroy Centaur!' the synthesised voice would command us as the silver balls disappeared one by one into the bowels of the machine.

A long time ago, before university, I had played badminton to a reasonably serious competitive level. I had started again that season with renewed enthusiasm, seeking some form of escapist release from the prison I had fallen into, although since coming to Hatfield the time I had available in which to play again dropped to but once a week each Saturday. As the first month of the course passed by we all grew closer, beginning to speak much more freely about our lives outside ETOPS.

‘Did you say you played badminton?’ Steve Britnell asked me.

‘I’ve been playing for years,’ I told him.

‘Do you fancy a game sometime? Andy and Mark say they’ve played a bit. We were thinking of booking a court one day, if you’re interested.’

Andrew Ward and Mark Emerson were there with us, destroying Centaur as threatening electronic sounds filled the room. Mark was wearing faded, baggy jeans and Andy one of the many garish shirts he owned, this one striped in white, turquoise and red. Engrossed in their game, they weren’t listening to us.

‘Yes, I’d like that,’ I told him. ‘I’ll bring my kit and rackets up next week.’

‘I’ve got shuttles,’ he added.

‘Okay. I’ll bring some as well.’

I watched their pinball game for a while, hypnotised by the colours and lights flashing brightly beneath the glass surface, a wondrous, glittering world animated by the heavy, polished balls ricocheting wildly from side to side, sometimes caught and flung on the manually operated flippers, and snared then ejected by cavities in the painted surface. The bright orange figures on the score-board at the head of the

machine flickered and changed as our points tallies accumulated.

We walked to room four, where most of our lectures were held. It was just a small tutorial room, barely big enough for the fourteen of us, with two rows of double desks and an aisle through the middle. A window ran the length of the wall to our left as we sat facing the white rolling marker board at the front of the class. Looking out, one could only see the wall of the Students' Union, just a few yards beyond the glass.

The hours and days passed.

Alan Harwood had stopped taking notes. His eyes were fixed upon the paper before him, and he sat quite still, not once glancing up to where Terry Hayes was lecturing. Very slowly, Alan's head was dropping forward, his eyes unseeing yet open. Then his arms stretched out in front of him, and his fingers, too, were spread, white and rigid, the tendons in his hands raised and taut. Alan's head hit the floor and even against the carpet the dull sound of impact was loud and quite horrible. He lay supine and the chair over him was pushed away as his body curled up uncontrollably and his legs reached toward his head. He was rolling over

backwards, with only the back of his head upon the floor to support him.

Strangely, we all remained sitting and watching silently. Terry was already on his feet, so it was he who reached Alan first and tried to push him forward, for now his neck was bent and his chin was in his chest, as the weight of his body threatened to hurt him badly. Alan's eyes were open very wide.

'He told me about this,' said Dave at last. He crouched by our friend as his arms flailed. It was as if he was fighting us back, but of course these were involuntary actions into which we instinctively tried to instil volition.

'It's a hypoglycaemic fit. He should have some glucose tablets with him.'

David found the packet in Alan's jacket pocket and put one between his teeth, trying to make him bite it, while at the same time rolling him over on his side so that he wouldn't choke on the pieces.

The nurse from the college clinic arrived. Within quarter of an hour Alan lay still, his breathing rapid and his frightened eyes glancing around at us.

It was decided to finish the class for the morning. I left the room thinking how the nurse could have been so cold and contemptuous. 'He should have eaten. It's his own fault,' she had said. Alan had

upset her day. I felt glad that I would never need her help.

CHAPTER 11
THE TREE ON THE HORIZON

Beneath the world, in a far place battened down by the immense, silent blackness of the sentinel night, there is a universe of light and wonder, an infinite underground ocean of fire and untold delight.

When the stars begin to melt, running into the sky around them and bleaching the inky expanse to a cold, dark, blue glow, and a thousand birds together find the courage to rise up in song against the long, still hours of their own mute terror, then the first drops from this vast, brilliant well begin to leak into the sky and between the tangled branches of the trees, emanating from a slowly widening perforation that lies beyond the distant rim of the east horizon.

And light pours over us, filling the world, as a new day, the one extant day in a procession of countless billions, arises from a night that had seemed to be unbreachable.

When I was very young, I lived upon a high hill on the northern edge of my quiet country town. From my window upstairs I could look down upon a stretching panorama of fields and woods, rising and falling in green and golden waves that disappeared

over the edge of the Earth, many miles away. There the land met empty, blue, breathtaking space, and both plunged together into the unseen abyss. It was like looking upon another world, a forbidden, unreachable place which I could never, even in dreams, hope to ever go to. A great, yawning canyon separated me from this enchanted, peaceful land, with no bridge straddling the vast divide, no linking land at all between the grey town below me and the wonderful, blessed kingdom that haunted and enthralled me, that - so tantalisingly - revealed itself on days when the far haze lifted and evanesced on the wind.

I would gaze from my window for hours, in my imagination magically carried to that place, standing at the edges of the dark forests, or wading through the waist-high corn that waved slowly in the warm wind. In perfect solitude and serenity I crossed from field to field jumping streams and ditches, until I had climbed to the summit of the highest hill. I turned into the south and shielded my eyes with my hand, and imagined that in the far distance across the dale I could see my house.

On the jagged tooth of the skyline I saw from my window, stood a tree that seemed to be quite different from any other on that far-off world. I saw

it as no more than a speck set in silhouette against the pale blue sky or the grey and white clouds, yet there was some ineffable force or spirit immanent in its extraordinary shape which immediately caught my eye each time I looked out from my room, drawing my gaze to its strange dark form.

I could see two sashes of leaves, the lower one the larger, brushed diagonally across the trunk, from that immense distance giving the tree a crooked, gnarled appearance, as if frozen in the throes of a permanent, lashing storm.

To this day I cannot say exactly what it was that this sight evoked in me, nor why that place touched my young spirit so. For my tree did not appear to be particularly taller than any others on that horizon, nor was it especially isolated where it stood, growing between two areas of woodland a mile or so apart, and being only one in a line of several outcrops of foliage. But still for me it somehow epitomised that holy, uncharted continent beyond the town, where no road could reach, yet which seemed the embodiment of a world that lay hidden deep inside of me.

One day when I'm older, I promised myself, I shall sit beneath the shade of those branches, heaven's valley sprawled before me, and contemplate

Creation.

The years passed, and all my dreams and promises seemed so long ago on the day I journeyed out to the edge of the world.

The swollen sun had risen from behind the houses, so that it now seemed to be resting upon the rooftops themselves, spraying a red light across the world that fell on the white bark of the tall birch trees, bathing them in a bright, ruddy glow. On the pavements, on walls and fences, wherever shadow did not reach, the town sparkled in the orange and golden fire of morning. As I stepped outside a light breeze flickered against my face and I breathed in deeply, steeping my blood in the cool, fresh air.

I took the north road out of the town, walking past the lines of silent bungalows and cottages, their curtains still drawn and the burgeoning daylight shimmering in silver columns on the folds of lace. I heard the whirr of the papergirl's bicycle behind me. She rode past a short way then stopped, jumping off her bike and leaning it against a lamp-post, hauling the bright yellow bag that hung across her shoulders over a lawn to someone's front door. Further up the road glass chinked where the milk-float stood, and another figure hurried across the street.

Then there were no more houses lining the road, and the pavement reached an abrupt end, continuing only as a grassy verge along one side of the narrow lane. I walked on carefully over the inclined bank between the kerb and the broken wooden fence-posts overgrown with brambles as cars shot by me in both directions at intervals of a minute or so. Journeying ever deeper into the countryside, although I had seen no turnings off that road, it seemed to me that the volume of this sporadic traffic was diminishing all the time.

Deep, rolling fields of rape-seed, burning with a bright, pure yellow, unfolded to both sides, and before me the road I walked stretched out perfectly straight, dipping steeply down for a hundred yards then sharply ascending again before disappearing over the hill.

I came to Willow Farm. The yard was dusty and desolate, the door of the black barn half open, a dirty blue tractor standing by the tumbling stack of hay bales; everything seemed rusty and age-worn. There was a long shed on the left with two small windows set high on the wooden wall, one broken, the other streaked with grey mud. From within those frail shacks hollowed metal rattled, and cattle moaned forlornly. A rich agricultural odour hung

heavily over the farm.

And beyond those buildings, behind the thatched white farmhouse, green open fields receded into the hazy distance.

Soon the countryside shone in the full light of day, and a sticky warmth began to rise up around me as the morning bloomed. I had walked miles, and the sun's rays were beating ever more assertively on my neck and arms. The dry, crumbling earth at the borders of the fields of whispering barley was cracking, parched by two summer months without rain.

The gentlest white clouds slowly sailed across the sky. Between them an infinite cerulean sea, with no surface, no tangible depth, remained unbroken and clear, calm and still with the peace of dreams. Across the immense blueness a swallow passed, gliding over the oak that stood bound with ivy, then turning in a brief spasm, a single beat of graceful wings, to fly away into the distant worlds that lay over field after golden field.

Then I left the road, and passed through a break in the dark, thorny hedgerow. A public footpath was marked by a sign-post that leaned into the tangle of blackberry bushes, vaguely pointing across the dale which fell away before me. So I followed a dried

out ditch gouged into the soil, about which ridges of earth, tufted with tall, nodding grasses, had eroded away to reveal smooth white flints embedded in the hard clay.

The path led through the middle of the field, taking several right angled turns, as if tracing the outline of something old and long buried beneath the earth, along which now only this drained ditch, green grass starting to grow where water had once flowed, ran into the trees.

Making my way slowly over the uneven ground I eventually reached the wood, then began to walk along the edge of the dark undergrowth, its deep interior shining only where isolated splashes of sunlight fell on the coiled fern leaves. Breathless beneath the towering beeches on the hillside, I turned to look back and could not see the town, nor the miles of road that I had walked that morning, only God's unbounded land.

Dancing pairs of white butterflies wove jagged, intertwining courses among the grass and nettles, and engrossed bees bounced between the bright dandelions. All life was in ecstasy.

On the side of the hill stood a solitary oak, with a tyre swing hanging from the lowest bough, suspended by two sturdy cables. I sat down on the

hard rubber and the ring tipped forward under my weight. I let the soles of my shoes brush against the thick, exposed roots as I slowly swung to and fro beneath the creaking ropes.

I was thinking that this was the most peaceful and lonely place in the whole world. Other than the rhythmic straining of the cords in my hands I could hear nothing else but rapturous bird-song and the whispering leaves above me. The breeze bore no engine noise, no people's voices; it was as if all that created by Man had been removed from the face of the Earth, and only nature remained. This was how it had all been meant to be. Only I stayed to betray that mankind had somewhere, sometime, existed. I and the swing I gently rocked on.

A worn dirt track led for the final fifty yards to the hill's brow. As I had approached the crest I had pictured the land beyond it falling away, plunging into a landscape of farmland and countryside far below me. Thus it was with surprise that I came instead to a narrow road, and as far as the eye could see, from the woodland the lane emerged from to the opposite horizon where a distant church spire thrust through a pale green collar of foliage, the land was quite flat, a plain of higher ground.

I was standing on the horizon - the edge of the world. This road was the skyline I had gazed upon each morning for so many years. And I was there. It was a place. I looked down into the valley behind me, into the glare of the mid-day sun. I could make out only a world of shadows and strung beads of light. I could not see my house.

I tried to marry my vivid memories of the distant hills and fields and trees with the features of the land I could now walk on and touch. But I couldn't tell where I was; everything was too close to see.

In a meadow four horses stood in hopeless resignation, barely animate, as I felt sure they had been standing the whole morning. As I leaned over the wire fence a chestnut foal looked towards me dispassionately with one blinking eye, then began again to tug at the dry grass. For if I would neither free nor harm them then my presence was of no conceivable importance.

Up ahead of me pools of sky shimmered on the hot tarmac, mirages fallen to Earth and pinned sparkling to the road by rays of refracted light. There a tiny, white cottage stood beneath a tall cedar. The slate-tiled roof sagged over the rafters, its eaves shading a frontage that was no more than a door flanked by two small windows, behind which I could see neatly

tied red polka dot curtains, parted to reveal the dark interior. At the rear, the roof sloped downwards less sharply but much further, stopping barely a couple of feet above the ground. Sunflowers grew high against the side wall, craning their necks as they sought to follow the burning light arcing slowly across the sky.

The little house possessed an anthropomorphic visage, a sad-eyed face gazing wistfully forever into the chequered land far below. The white wooden picket fence that hemmed the four walls in added to the exuded sense of isolation, keeping, as it did, the untamed, marauding wilderness at bay on all sides.

My eyes turned again to the cedar tree that grew so high, pushing mightily skywards, as if Earth were not room enough. The scaly bark had grown into a flaking mosaic of purple, black, brown and yellow, and the sloping boughs, clustered far up the trunk, were sprays of dark needles, shards of green matted into jagged layers draped over the wood.

And then I knew. It was here.

I sat down at the roadside, resting my back against a stout wooden gate-post by the padlocked entrance to a cow-field. Such peace and joy flooded over me, soothing my weary body, opening wide my tired eyes, for I knew that, at last, my odyssey of

years was over and I had found my way home.

My fingers idly picked at the dry, crumbling earth by my feet, the pieces that broke away held in place only by the threadlike roots of the grasses. Pulling lightly, I ripped out the unliving dirt, but as I brought the granules up close to my eyes, I witnessed in them a whole other universe.

For I once had been this earth I now held in my hands. Once I had been so old. And now I am young, as we all are; our lives are no more than transient, fleeting sparks bursting into dim, tiny fires, before immediately dying. Yet through all time Earth remains, untouched and eternal. Hence when I become the clay once more, I will simply be what I have always been. Can I believe that my brief life is really of more importance than the ages I command in that breathless, unseeing silence?

So this was the horizon, where my beautiful tree, the embodiment of every dream of childhood, grew. I felt such warmth, such stillness. The only sounds were the breeze, the rustling of leaves and, somewhere, the faint, distant chimes of a wood-pigeon's song. Here, on another world, there was a different horizon.

And I began to see that life is the dead clay itself. I am the grass it brings forth, and the dead leaves it

claims, locked in the eternal cycle that we are. It seemed that we were all so old. And in the idyll of that late summer's afternoon, I became something I once knew, long ago, but had long since let slip away.

From my position in the cosmic vortex I watched the wheel turn with imperceptible speed, yet relentlessly and with unchallenged power. Such unspeakable happiness overcame me that my heart was torn open with euphoria and my eyes brimmed with tears. One fell on the dry mud, darkening the orange and brown, seeping deep into the planet in a perfect act of communion between human sentience and the Earth.

Over my head, the clouds changed shape, so high above me, so slowly. As they will when someone, in another summer, picks me up in their hand and looks up.

We are all so old.

I have drawn this sacred place in through my eyes, feeling the sun touch my face, hearing the sweet rhapsody of Creation's perfection. My frail corporeal form stands here like the expendable, mortal catalyst that would meld the universe with my unbounded soul. My hands must touch the

living, breathing spirit that has taken root in our world, nurtured by the hopes and dreams we held in the days of our youth.

The way has been long; I have crossed deserts and navigated oceans to be here today. I have fallen from the sky and find that I now stand before my own beginning.

The sacred tree.

The Earth has channelled such eternal beauty into this single place.

My hands. I can touch. I can be one with heaven, with infinite knowledge.

Fear;

Love;

Rapture;

All these beatific things.

The ancient bark, aglow with points of colour.

My fingers.

Near.

Almost . . .

Touch.

CHAPTER 12
THE FIRST PLACE

There had once been an uneven parade of shops across the street from the post office, a ramshackle line of colours and glass that had stood for a century. I remember still the day, so many years ago, when they came to pull it all down, leaving the broken walls lying against the piled rubble as the plaster, paint and paper, cracked and torn, fell away from the brickwork, while the wind and rain of winter lashed the shattered ruins that were left on the muddy, overgrown wasteground. For a decade or more these abandoned remains lay crumbling before the elements, until in time a vast office block began to be built upon the forgotten land.

So now new buildings look out over the High Street, and even the road itself has been resurfaced and the pavement flagstones replaced. Does nothing remain of the town that had been?

Our world has slipped back through time thirty years. I think I have built a machine that has taken me into my past. This is not a dream, lucid and sharp. This is not a film or a memory. I am in this place. But I am forgetting how I got here, and soon

it seems to me that I am really of this time. Yet I have lived all this before.

I am walking the streets of my town, along which, as a child, I journeyed to my school each morning. The sky is brighter and clearer than any I remember, the white moon hangs, exquisitely detailed, high overhead, and the roads that one day will be choked in black, gritty smoke and the continual roar of cars seem almost barren of traffic.

At the end of the street, on Chalice Corner where the last shops are and the London Road begins, a Victorian post-box is recessed into the brick wall. The years have weathered the paint; it cracks and peels away and has faded to a pale, magenta ghost of its former colour. Rusting metal shows through the worn patches. I read 'V-R', embossed in grand, curling letters on its door. This must have been the first letter-box in what was then but a village, at a time when the only vehicles that passed through, day after day, were horse-drawn wagons, slowly crawling along the dirt track that was the main street to deliver supplies to the shops, to the blacksmith, to the baker. And each afternoon the postman opened the shining, crimson face and emptied it of the letters it contained. Then he was gone, and the town had never stirred. The post-box remained, like an

unmoving rock standing defiantly in the stream of time as the waters, the years, rushed by and could not perturb or sweep it or the wall away.

So here like a miracle it still is, a living artefact of another, forgotten century.

How staidly we all dress. Women demure in hats and long, dark coats; the men wearing black suits. I sense a great, deep fear in our hearts. Almighty revolution approaches.

Children in green school blazers run past me. Mothers stand with prams and push-chairs looking through the bakery window, choosing bread and cakes, and old people in heavy, grey overcoats, gnarled hands trembling upon walking sticks, make their slow, painful journeys down the High Street. Do they all know that this is the past?

Times change, so slowly that we do not notice. The purity of the world ebbs away with the years, until we come to think back to how life had once been and suddenly realise that the town has become a different place. There is an innocence in not knowing what will be, in believing in the constancy of the lives we lead. The future has no place amongst us.

In childhood there is such delight in all things. I walk past the red brick Methodist church that stood

opposite the old market and remember how I joined the throngs of people there on Saturday mornings, pushing through the crowd to the stall where stamps and coins were sold. I used to buy old ha'pennies and farthings, black and worn, sometimes with Britannia just a faint blur above a date that could barely be read. The thrill I felt in slowly building such a collection of badly damaged old coins came from their very age. I sensed that these were relics of an otherwise lost past, a world that had died two, three hundred years ago. Real people, long, long gone, had held and used the objects which I could now clasp in my own hand, and had passed them to others, time after time. So many years had suffused the tarnished copper - history was alive in these pennies which, to me, were priceless. I tried to reach ever further back into the past, looking for earlier and earlier dates in the trays on the table-top.

I wandered around the other stalls in the market, to where they sold cheap plastic toys and novelties, or to where hung racks of bright cotton football jerseys, in various professional teams' colours.

The market stood on its old site next to the railway line, no tarmac laid down, only bare earth which turned to deep mud in the winter, caking shoes and bags and coats. People grumbled, but twice each

week came to buy there. The uneven dirt beneath our feet somehow held within itself the rustic spirit, the thrilling joy, of the old market place.

They buried the site beneath supermarkets and car-parks.

And so I have gone, back to the future where I began. To where the days have been polluted and choked with unravelled history. Onwards, ever onwards we must crawl, until we all perish along with the years we have murdered.

CHAPTER 13
THE IMPOSSIBLE STARS

In the limitless purple night, groves of bushes and trees leapt skywards like frozen, phosphorescent fires, and as I looked down from the lofty, exposed hill I stood upon I saw the glowing moorland recede into the uncharted miles about me.

I thought to descend from this height to the long grass where fireflies sparked and span threads of light in the gloom, and at once, gliding like melting butter, I began to slowly fall. My feet took no steps yet still I found myself effortlessly traversing the blue-green land.

I looked at the line of ancient, irregular stones before me, stretching far into the darkness, worn flat over millennia it seemed, and started to follow the path they formed. I felt as if I were floating in a warm, still sea of honey.

Who had walked this way before me? I wondered where the road led and whether there would be others to follow me. But in an instant I recognised that my questions had no meaning at all. This was everything. The shining trees lit the track I followed, leading me towards the distant, wooded horizon eerily daubed onto the rim of the dome of

black sky.

Then I came to a great valley stretching out before me, a whorl of pale, faint light crossed by radial rays emanating from the very centre of that land. I looked overhead and it seemed that the vault of the heavens was opening; for the stars are holes in the firmament, and were now bursting agape. I saw the universe naked, the wondrous machinations and glory of all Creation within reach of my stretching fingertips.

Silver rails ran across the velvet ceiling above me, and shining trains of bright red and yellow soundlessly followed the tracks in arcs from horizon to horizon. In the carriage windows starlight glinted, and turning kaleidoscopic patterns grew and changed, swallowing blackness, twisting down along the length of the whole apparition.

And a sparkling dust blew across the sky, billowing slowly in faraway clouds. Sporadic gusts dispersed the tiny glittering elements into the lower atmosphere.

Then I saw a great change come over the bright swathes of countless stars. I didn’t know what they were any more; I couldn’t tell what I myself was becoming. A thousand unbelievable, impossible shapes were turning in the great cosmos, shining,

some transparent, some viscid; diamonds, globes, triangles, rings and bars. Others span like tops, precessing, wandering. Transfixed by their breathtaking colours, these swirls of pink, silver, orange and blue, I saw the spirits that had been the stars moving against the crystalline sphere around the world. Some turned about axes which could not have passed through the centres of gravity of these mysterious, spellbinding bodies. I watched a glowing dumb-bell slowly swinging through the sky, as if by a short, invisible thread connected to one end. Starfish cartwheeled, encircled by planetary ring systems. Some dived, swooped to Earth, soared, drifted. Each structure seemed so very near; I could make out the finest, most wondrous detail upon their surfaces, within them, and somehow further yet than that. Heaven had been ripped asunder, and I was seeing angels.

And at that time I understood everything. We are the sum of the questions we ask, and when we have shed our physical bodies and become wholly spiritual beings, we will ultimately ask but one. A question formed not of words, nor born of pain or love or curiosity, a question that is itself the seething cosmos beyond all galaxies.

What is the watcher?

CHAPTER 14
THE GARDEN

For seven months I had not stopped screaming. A single, unbroken, piercing cry unfurled from my dry, gaping throat at the moment I opened my heavy eyes on the first morning of my new life. That was how I had lived ever since.

For my past had been cut in two by what I had done to my mind. My life before that point was now lost to me, becoming part of a world on which I no longer dwelled. The door I had passed through was not a rebirth, but more a violent death through which only bare memory could reach, and all thought, feeling and reason from before that time lay trapped and abandoned in the old world, wrenched from my grasp forever, with no way to ameliorate the damage.

The new world, a perpetual pale, grey dawn, was one of unceasing, unimaginably dreadful pain caged inside me. I could do nothing to stop it; the only control I had left was over the external universe. And so I directed all my strength and conscious will into one overriding task - to keep secret the truth of what had befallen me, to mask my agony and act as if I were like every other normal soul.

I called this wall bisecting my life the psychopause, the point of my mind's transformation.

And there, suddenly, you were, a rainbow over the bleak land left ravaged and wasted in the aftermath of the storm. Sitting alone, despairing, on the same wooden bench upon which I spent all my days, gazing since breakfast-time over the green, rolling hospital grounds, I saw your smile first, warm, happy, beautiful, in the far distance as you slowly walked along the lane towards me.

You sat down by my side, and all I could do was tightly, tightly hold your hand.

'Anna,' I softly said, not knowing how to react to your sudden, unexpected presence disinterring my soul, 'how did you know I was here?'

You gave me some kind of vague answer which escapes me now, asking whether I minded your arrival and if I had any plans for that day.

I had no future to plan for.

Above us the gnarled boughs of the ancient oaks spread out and entwined, and about them shoals of bright leaves whispered and danced, throwing their cool shade down upon us while, all around, the spring morning sunshine lit up the new green world.

There was no room left on Earth, the cities had

eaten up everything. Open fields, hills and forests had been razed and concreted, infested with churning hordes of people long ago. One could not journey in any direction over God's land without meeting walls and fences. Every blade of grass had been destroyed or chartered. Only here did nature appear infinite. We sat in the last ever place and felt that it was ours, as if one had to be mad in order to be alive.

All the time, waking nightmares welled up inside me, and I could only throw my hands to my face and close my eyes. They always came so suddenly, without warning or reason. The visions passed, but in this way I lived with the constant and increasing knowledge of the hellish subconscious which dwelled and bred within me. My memory was sick and out of control. I had lost everything, I told you.

'That's not true,' you protested, 'don't think that. Look around us - this is Eden.'

'I don't belong there; I've been banished from that place for all time. I've destroyed my whole spirituality. I'm nothing.'

'But the reasons why you did what you did haven't changed, have they? You'll have that inside you forever.'

I tried to find some sign of true understanding in

the deep, bright pools of your kind, brown eyes. ‘Do you really know why I’m here?’ I asked you. ‘Do you want me to tell you?’

A gentle gust of cool air ran through our hair and brushed our faces, and for a moment we sat silent, our eyes tracing the line of the distant horizon that was almost lost in a grey heat haze.

‘Long ago, Anna, I believed the world was perfect, I thought living was so easy. I remember longing for adulthood. Do you know why? Because I believed that I would then have a greater mind, that I would be able to think and comprehend the world in ways which I could not then. I wanted to be more, to become all I possibly could. But as I grew older I came to appreciate the beauty of life and Creation which lay in the highest forms of human striving - in art and science - and realised that these things are but manifestations of mankind’s imperfection. We cannot truly be a part of this universe without feeling wonder - literally, be filled with questions - as we look up at the stars or through microscopes or contemplate quantum mechanics or relativity. But in a perfect world, we too would be perfect beings and so would no longer wonder. It is our pain which keeps us alive. Man does wonder and dream, and understands that not

knowing is the most precious gift we have, lying at the very heart of our humanity. For we may thus choose between ignorance and questioning, and if we have the courage to ask questions then we must use our lives, our very existence, to search for their answers.'

My heart was beating ever faster as an indefinable malaise crept over me. Suddenly it struck me that I believed nothing of what I was saying to you. The words I spoke were all hollow, empty passages I had memorised long ago in my past, and now I was recalling them as if I were exhuming archaeological artefacts from deep clay, searching for broken, scattered pieces of lost and forgotten lives. But I found that the few fragments I managed to fit together told me so little of who I had truly been.

Yet still, something did remain, deep, deep inside me.

I spoke slowly and deliberately, building shapes in the air with my hands, trying to find the words. 'The darkness seems perpetual, yet though it is total, completely blind, it is not forever unbroken. I keep seeing things in the corners of my eyes, and each time, as I look there, as I reach out, the apparition has already disappeared. If I could only share with you the depth of insight into something holy and

numinous that these brief flashes, these glimpses of other, higher worlds reveal to me. It's as if, in these rare, isolated moments, my lost soul returns to me, amplified to a level transcending mere humanity. I soar high over misty rainforests that grow on the almost sheer faces of mountainsides, borne on bright, golden wings, and so very nearly touch the mighty window out on our universe, on which is engraved the truth of Creation. But I cannot catch such sparks, I cannot ever quite look through to this other side. Always my hands fumble and I fail to hold these fleeting instances. But whatever it is I do manage to see, however darting and transitory, is all that keeps my head above the surface of the dark sea.'

But I was forgetting myself. I suddenly thought it presumptive and selfish to believe that you wanted to know as much as I was trying to tell you. 'Anna, how are *you?'* I asked. 'Tell me what you've been doing.'

How heavy my heart felt as I tried to exude good cheer, as I tried to smile and put you at ease, as though it were not me you were with, but someone human, someone good. Yet, set against this guilt and despair, I was so happy to see you.

'Would you like a beer?' you asked me. You took

two cans from your shoulder bag and held one out to me in your hand.

I couldn't drink anymore. Alcohol made me frightened and produced a psychotic tightness in my chest and head. My pained smile fell from my lips.

'No . . . I can't,' I whispered, shaking my head. 'Please, you go on...'

'That's okay,' you replied insouciantly, putting them back. And then you smiled as if to reassure me.

I couldn't even walk with you around the hospital grounds when you asked me to, for all energy and will were drained from me. I was happy just to sit under the oak, just be with you.

I cannot do anything normal, I thought angrily and sadly. What have I become?

So there we sat, facing the sky and hills, locked in our uneasy conversation. How much *did* you want me to tell you? I asked myself. How much did I dare divulge? I was so frightened that if I laid the panorama of my diseased, demolished life open before you, then I would lose you, my dear friend, forever.

We chatted idly, about the weather and the approaching summer, and I asked after your family and our mutual friends. I felt you were watching me

all the time; not always looking at me, for often your eyes glanced up along the footpath and towards the nearest shabby ward whenever a door opened or anyone seemed to be approaching, but that you were always conscious of the exact way in which I spoke and gestured, as if trying to see through me into the world I lived in now, the world I tightly held within me, hidden from and forbidden to you and all those I had left behind in your own reality.

And you, to me, seemed far away, a silent, blurred vision in the fading light at the end of a long, dark tunnel I was looking through. I felt I was falling backwards and you, Anna, were the very last sight of the world I would have before it all ended for me.

In trying to examine my experience I found that the exact physical location of consciousness cycles around the brain, so that no part of it is in use constantly. The mind can use so much energy that it vitally needs to rest in this way. It seems to take a week or two for one such cycle to be completed. The damage exists in the place where my consciousness lay on that fateful night, and as the ego circles and passes through that area of maimed tissue, I suffer my most traumatic symptoms, experiencing a fortnightly relapse.

I wanted you to tell me something. ‘Anna, why, would you say, do schools exist?’

You seemed to be seeking an answer you felt would be the one I wanted. No, Anna; I wanted to know what *you* thought.

‘Well, I suppose people go into teaching partly to pass on knowledge to children - of many and varied things - and partly to help steer them in an . . . acceptable moral direction. Those, I think, are the two most fundamental facets of school education.’

If I had been speaking to anyone else I would have felt a weariness at hearing such things. As it was I longed for you to understand something higher still.

‘I feel schools should exist to inspire children. If they are to teach anything, then it is how to try to understand our existence, how to search for both our place in Creation and a truly vocational purpose to our lives. If we cannot look for these things then we have been failed, murdered. It’s so sad; so many children are subjected to such a systematic . . . disnurture. I don’t think we understand the damage inflicted on us until long after we have left school.’

‘So what could I do?’ I asked her after a silent minute had passed between us. ‘I became a scientist, with the responsibilities and duties inherent in such work, in such a vocation. I was

alive, and though I had complete control over that life in searching for its purpose, in trying to discover what it was that I needed to do with it, when I eventually found it, it was as if I did not have the right to turn away. I felt I'd been charged with my work by a power higher than my own frail will and ego. The question of what mankind 'wants' cannot be answered until our very end; perhaps not until the end of time itself. Right now we can only guess at what we desire. With human progress - by its definition - our knowledge of what we want grows. So there could have been no retreat for me. I did what I did for all of us and the love of God.'

'So you've done it, it's all finished now?'

'No. The work will not end until I have finally left this place.'

'That'll be very soon,' you immediately said, your sincere eyes trying to lock with mine. But you didn't see.

'I mean when I have left the world, not just these collapsing buildings. I'll never leave here.'

I don't know how much you really understood of what I was saying to you. But you must have been aware enough - and for this I will be forever grateful to you - not to tell me that what I had done was foolish and surely regrettable. How it would have

hurt me to have heard you say that.

For deep inside my troubled, heavy heart I believed unequivocally that what I had achieved for us was beyond value or measure.

‘Anna, I have seen the moment of Creation and witnessed the birth of mind. I have journeyed spellbound far beyond the confines of our universe to the place where we began and to where, someday, we will return. I must find a way to show all this wonder to you and everyone. But I cannot speak it, I cannot delineate it - it is a place inside you, Anna, and I can only take you there by praying with you. When those who call themselves priests speak of a life after death, when we address the question of where the universe is, our human restrictions on our ability to conceptualise the nature of problems in science render such questions meaningless. Often we philosophise about things which do not exist. We cannot speak of an ‘afterwards’ in a place outside this universe when time itself is inextricably woven into the continuum of space-time and does not exist anywhere else. When we think of the big bang at the start of the universe’s expansion, and contemplate its cause, we always assume that there was something there first, someone to light some kind of cosmic touchpaper. There was literally

nothing, not even a ‘before’. Nor can the universe oscillate, for as it contracts, imploding to a singularity, time will be destroyed, and so there can be no ‘consequent’ explosion of a new universe. Thus, for this reason, if there is any interaction between this universe and anything outside, it will not be in the form of a flow of energy in or out.’

You were attentive and quiet. ‘Do you think there is any such interaction, then?’ you asked me.

‘There is, Anna. It’s consciousness itself. Our minds are countless billions of stars in a night sky, and the blackness is not distant, empty space but a dark, dense shroud upon a brilliant light flooding all beyond this veil. What we call the mind pierces this fabric, creating a tiny hole that is kept open only by the activity of the brain - matter boring through with the energy of a property not manifest in the rest of the universe. And the numinous light pours through these holes, into us. Our consciousness is the infinite consciousness, trammelled by the constraints of the tiny, primitive human brain. We are, each of us, God. The higher the mind, the wider these holes are stretched. If we are truly alive then we must use whatever means we have - whether it be genetic change or . . . what I did - to open up these gaps as wide as we can and see as

much as is possible through them.'

'But is this light not an energy flow?' you pointed out.

'Well, in a sense there is no flow, no paradox,' I said. 'Imagine the multidimensional world outside of our own universe somehow passing through, pervading, this one. We would be severely limited in what we could discern of it, how we would perceive it. We would be able to make out only certain components, constrained by the limited spatial and temporal dimensions we have access to, only a cross-section of things which were in reality far greater and more complex than they appeared to us. It would be the same for our metaphysical perception - thought and feeling are only briefly experienced slices of something much higher. This fire within us is our straddling a great abyss, one foot on Earth, and one upon the shores of uncontemplatable mystery.'

I looked at the clear blue sky above us. It seemed to have almost infinite depth, and was quite untouchable. For one holy moment a strange exaltation glowed in my heart and I wondered if the spring sky were not a divinely conferred vision of Creation stripped of the mantle that covers the infinite light.

I felt so alone. My sense of isolation and otherness grew ever more dense around me. Would there ever come a time, I wondered, when people did not have to endure such solitary journeys through their lives and work, when mankind had developed so far spiritually that everyone lived in devotion to our common cause, our future? Anarchism will have then led to perfect anarchy, a society without hierarchy, and in this Utopia there would be only science left to do - social progress would be complete. Although I believed that the work I had been engaged in was purely spiritual in nature, quite apolitical, I saw that its *context* would be completely altered in such a future world. For science at this time inherently involves anarchistic social progress and speaking out against capitalism, repression, anti-scientific superstition and religion. All these things are bound together.

'This place is nothing but trouble for me,' I reflected. 'I suppose I'm lucky; I can leave here whenever I choose. I wouldn't be stopped. But I'm appalled by the . . . presumptiveness of it all. How can these people understand the minds of others, others who are so different from them? What aid can they even begin to offer me when they see me as a quite helpless idiot? This is happening to *me!*

Only I can understand my own life. The medical and nursing staff here regard themselves as all-knowing professionals, but of all professions this is the single one for which its practitioners are the least qualified. For what they are trying to treat cannot be understood except through direct experience. And so, if they do have this understanding, then they will not possess the spiritual strength to do the work or to obtain such qualifications as they need for it.'

'The society that proscribes what I did because of its dangers, its potential to damage the mind, is the same one that forces people to waste their lives on mindless, damaging exploitative labour. It's ridiculous, unbelievable. I wasn't looking to give my life meaning. It already had meaning - *this!* It riles me that they think I have made a serious mistake in my life, that the path I followed was determined by some severe character defect within me. Or even that I place little value on my life. I did what I did *because* I'm alive! This is my life's work and I am certain of what I'm doing. I have taken upon myself the responsibility for all our futures.'

I took a deep breath, and hoped that you would understand what I was about to say to you. 'In my

work I wanted to investigate the relationship between matter and energy - the space-time continuum - and consciousness, to search for the source of sentience. We only seek answers to those questions which we are capable of asking and, so we imagine, of understanding. The highest truths answer questions we do not know how to ask, and it is here that we must seek revelation. Science and art are the most powerful tools we have for understanding the universe, and they are interrelated. Science inspires and informs art, and the converse is also true: art can fuel the fire which drives us to do science. I really believe that, ultimately, it can be possible to meld art and science, not just on an aesthetic level, not just, for example, to write poetry about science, but to write poetry that *is* science. My work as a psychonautical priest is to seek a grand unification of art and science!'

Your hand squeezed mine. 'You look tired,' you said.

'I don't sleep, Anna,' I replied. 'I don't dream.'

All that you had heard was the testimony of a soul of lead and mind of fire. How could this be Truth? I saw people's eyes blaze and expand into vast,

black hollows, and their mouths, hideously grinning, stretched widely across their yellow faces - devils incarnate swarmed over Earth.

In the empty evenings, entombed beneath a purple, twilight vault, I would finally lose all hope, all belief that my life had any numinous value whatsoever, or even that I was indeed alive. All my troubles and grief seemed amplified and released to the surface of my consciousness, where everything that had ever happened, everything bad, filled me with agonising guilt. Night fell, and only I remained in the dark world, my brain crumbling into a hundred disconnected pieces, waiting in terror for sleep to at long last douse my unbearable sentience.

You were right - I did dream. But I dreamed of madness.

Where in Creation are we? Perhaps our universe is nothing more than a subatomic particle in another cosmos, and conversely there could be worlds in each atom around us, in our hands, in the sky, in the stars. We are lost within an endless procession of universes within universes.

I sometimes wonder what lies beyond everything, and as I begin to contemplate such impossible questions I feel the ground collapse beneath my feet and I become consumed with sudden fear and

vertigo. Is there an ultimate universe? Who could have created such a thing?

It's too big, everything's too big.

I feel so tired in the afternoons that I often collapse into sleep on my bed in the empty ward, not waking until the early evening. As I open my eyes I cannot believe my sudden sentience amazing and appalling me. It is as if a second earlier I had not existed. 'What am I?' I quietly gasp.

And so whole hours slipped through our hands like sand. As at last you stood to leave, I kissed your cheek, and wondered how it could possibly be that, in all the vastness of space and time, somewhere upon the wild, tangled web of billions upon billions of fleeting, ephemeral lives, you and I had shared that spring day.

'I'm not sure about any of this, you know,' I said. 'I feel I could easily be lying to you; I cannot tell. I have witnessed two visions, and I don't see how they can be reconciled - there's something more, something I haven't told you about. While I was burning I stood upon a high hilltop, and looking down could see everything. The human soul was laid bare before me. And I could see so deeply into it that it was no longer my individual spirit I was

looking upon, but the essence, the core, of every thinking, dreaming, searching entity in Creation. Anna, I have seen what we all carry inside us, the irreducible truth of what we are.'

I felt panic, for I knew that when I had told you, then the horror would be revealed for ever to all the universe.

'What is it?' you gently urged me. 'What happened in that place?'

'Anna,' I whispered, 'there's nothing there!'

CHAPTER 15
WHEN I TOUCHED THE SACRED TREE

Skin frozen upon immovable wood
A photograph
The world impaled
Sudden
Shocking
Disorientating
Transubstantiation
In a moment all bird-song has ebbed to nothing
The wind has ceased
The still garden is of coloured wax
Polished
Sparkling in the sunlight
Melting
Softening slowly in the heat
The cedar
Impossibly tall
Has shed a silver powder onto the grass
A glittering dust
Settled and glinting in my hair
Beneath my feet
The ground is alive with the sprinkled sky
With each step I take
I walk on electricity

The soil breathes
Undulates in concentric ripples
Emanating outwards from the place where I stand
And the lawn has turned to purple moss
Soft
Deep
Living sponge
Where the sky now is
Once was the surface of the great sea
That filled the space which is now air
That flooded our lungs
And now still I move
In slow and viscous motion
They placed something on my tongue
Effervescent and sweet
That drained the ocean I breathed
I turn
Behind me the land no longer has a horizon
For a hundred miles distant
The dry bed
Sculptured coral
Rooted sea-weed still swaying
In the ghost of currents
That had coursed through this place
Has turned upwards into the sky
And dissolved in the blue-grey haze

Heaven has deluged the distant world
Only here
In carefree isolation
Can we believe that all Creation is centred about us
Sails unfurled
Of golden chain-mail
As is my ship
The shimmering sky
The land
The cottage walls
Magnified
Amplified atoms
Set in endless lattices
Curtains of light
And untold depth
Indivisible matter
Linked rings
My eyes touch the worlds
Unseen
We daily brush aside
I have set sail upon the impossible sea
On the ship I have dreamed into being
Long fingers
Lie over wispy strands of shining rigging
Almond eyes
Dark

Wide
Opened for ever
For an ocean surrounds us
And we are torn from our moorings
Adrift beneath galaxies
Following a compass
And stars
Bewitched
And spinning
Curtains
Now opened
Behind the azure
Is not blackness
Only light
Numbers
Signs
Enciphered in the plasma on which the stars repose
In contemplation of being
In prayer
The firmament unravels
Crumbles
Melting
Falling
As rain
Upon us
Permeating all that is seen

Crimson
Seeping from the distant valleys
Hills
Forests
I am looking through my own blood
Witnessing the kingdoms within me
Breath
On a magnitude of the streamers of the ash of stellar alchemy
Leaping between curled galactic arms
Sucked helplessly
Glowing in its throes
Through black bottomless pits in the continuum
Out of sight
Out of memory
Out of the universe
The stolen treasure
Of a billion years
Half-buried in chests
Sealed caskets
In soil
Among flowers
Locks break
Bands of iron snap
The cases
Have burst open all over Earth

Shining
Gleaming in sunlight
Precious stones
Metals
In rings
Panels
Chains
Vessels
Have grown into trees
Into meadows
Spilling upwards
Outwards
From their overturned wooden trunks
That slowly decay
Like the rotting husks of seeds
Birds
Butterflies
Crystallise from each flash of light
Within gem-stones
Upon plates of gold
Lifted upwards by the inhaling sky
Set free
Bright dancing fire over my head
The new trees
Of threaded jewels hanging
And platinum mesh

Rising forever
Into the cosmic hinterland
Mighty columns
Fountains
Waterfalls descending
Passing into the soil
As if returning to deep wells
Lakes churn
Far beneath my feet
Now the giant molecules have blurred
Shapes
Colours
Only puffs of hue
Fallen together
Immiscible
Beneath the soap-bubble clouds
And all around me
In the far distance
Veils hang
Over hill after hill
Mountain after mountain
Each paler
Bluer than the ridge before
Until the final spirit cannot be seen
Until the sky is the land
My body

Fire
Cold flame
My head is in cold flame
And in my eyes lies the First Place
I am dressed in silver
Forgetting
All
There was a great storm
At the beginning of time
Raging
For a million centuries
In its wake
Diamonds were left shattered
Cleanly fractured
And the pieces embedded in the silent earth
To form a byway
Leading over the punished land
Smooth
Brilliant
Cold
An eternal road that could not be worn away
Blind
We have ventured forth upon it
And do not see where our feet fall
Yet on this day
Of revelation

Of homecoming
The path we walk has brought us to this place
Where all energy appears to us as it really is
Deep beneath the burden
Of our cold
Uncomprehending
Consciousness
Our blindness
So forlorn
So total
That even it has remained unseen to us
Never have we known
We are encased in lifelong darkness
Then this must be death
Here I stand
In no singular place
But omnipresent in all Creation
The gaining of knowledge of our ignorance
Is true revelation
So there is more
More
And yet more
Beneath flesh
And the evolutionary web
Beyond the transmutation of matter
Into heartbeat

Breath
And sentience
Something
Something
I cannot
Quite
Reach
Golden flowers
Entwine
My legs
Beams of sun and ice
Cool
Feed life
Emotion is extraneous
Parasitic
Encrusted over true understanding
Feeling
And the faith of reason
I am
Only
One
All
Are me
Again wind begins to flood the land
The trees twist in gentle genuflection

I
Know
We cannot speak of existence
And being
For words have no meaning
Science is finished
I am
Creation

CHAPTER 16
ETOPS

The time had almost come. At night in my dreams I walked the emerald lawns of vast stepped gardens. Jewels and gold grew around me in sweeping flower-beds and upon willows of cold, psychedelic flame.

Out of the cloudless sky stretching overhead the sun fell upon the flowing water, and the riverbed and its ageless, secret treasure shone in colours mottled and veined, as though through fractured amber. I looked at the glowing world and thought I could see everything.

For I stood on the threshold of a knowledge ancient and dark, more profound and sacred than our very lives. I had found the keys to that which lay beyond Creation and now the hour was nearly upon me when I would learn what it was that humankind had been searching for.

Yet I felt a tremendous contrast in my life, between my aspirations and the day to day work at the poly. It was as if I were of two separate, mutually alien worlds. I could commute between them in seconds; on one I was able to reach so high and be so much, before, in the blinking of an eye, falling to the dark

other world of despair and hopelessness, of spiritual and intellectual blindness and waste. I sat at my desk in room four writing down everything that the lecturer wrote on the board, without listening or thinking about a word of it. Logic gates, reactive circuits, amplifiers, semiconductance, all flowed over me in a ceaseless torrent. The level at which these things were being taught to us was not high but, despite not having a complete disinterest in the subjects, I was constantly elsewhere. How could I be attentive to such matters when the unimaginably immense universe lay outside the closed door and I too was infused with the numinous? I was alive. As I took those wretched notes, as I performed mindless set practicals in the laboratories, as I wrote my rudimentary machine code programs, my mind raced ahead, rapturous and free.

Blue sparks, brilliant points of cold fire, passing one by one outside the classroom window like solitary insects, retracing their courses, hovering, soaring. Can anyone else see? Someone, please. I don't want to be alone.

Our course title, ETOPS, was an acronym of 'electronics' and 'training opportunities scheme'. There were other such names on the notice board

and above the postal pigeon-holes - ELECT1, EENG4, COMP2A. Each morning we were made to indignantly sign in, as were the diploma and even the polytechnic degree course students. We were told that the relevant funding bodies would be informed if our signatures did not appear in the book provided. I began to realise that the college was only there to provide training and qualifications for consumers of education. The one purpose of that institute was to facilitate the earning of money.

My first five years at secondary school seemed to have been a spiritual wilderness. They had systematically emptied me of all reason for being alive, leaving my heart fuelled by nothing but memories of the trees, the clouds, of how it had felt to breathe and see, to live in joy. Then as I passed through the sudden transition between the fifth and sixth forms I was left breathless with amazement. I plunged into a new, free world of science and wonder, of liberating, inspiring academe, and felt that I had experienced a glorious renaissance flowering over my life, leaving me gifted with a new way of thinking, graced with a new beginning. There really was something here for me, and for everyone, after all. All those years I had been locked in a dungeon.

Yet now, once again, I was left with nothing.

There were times during my first days at Hatfield, the cage of corridors still unmapped in my mind, when I would walk that maze alone and lost. In the evenings, when all vestiges of the set sun had long before dissolved into darkness, a line of impenetrable windows stretched down the endless corridor, and in them I could see only the long reflected recession of striplights on the ceiling, or the grey wall opposite. There were so many tunnels, stairs and alcoves, all lit by that artificial yellow glow. It was a brightness cold and unreal, eerily bathing the interminable passages I followed. Where could I go, when they all led nowhere?

One Friday lunchtime, all lectures finished for the day, Stuart and Keith had taken me (using minimal persuasion) to the bar. After collecting our Giro cheques for that week from the Finance Department, we cashed them at the nearby Post Office, then returned to the polytechnic for a plate of chips from the refectory before hurrying next door for our beer. The small room was a maze of tables and plushly upholstered divan seats, the bar in one corner and dartboards on the wall by the door. Larger, glass doors looked out onto the Union building and up the

steps along the side of the electronics department. The worn, red carpet, soaked with a thousand spilt lagers, stank of stale beer.

'Piss,' said Keith, grimacing.

We sat at a central table, our empty glasses slowly accumulating before us.

Stuart came from Glasgow, and I sometimes found myself losing my grip on his thick accent during conversation, often having to ask him to repeat himself. This understandably irritated Stuart, and I began to make a special effort when speaking to him to strain to catch his every word. It wasn't quite true when he claimed that he had to say *everything* to me twice, but I did sometimes struggle with his diction. Stuart was not lazy in his speech, it was my fault, never having encountered such an accent before. As we drained glass after glass, our bodies warm and numb, lips slurring the pinball words which rattled uncontrollably in the space between us, all problems I had had with Stuart's verbal communication were forgotten. With ease I now understood his every word.

It seemed to me that Stuart and Keith drank often and copiously, regarding the consumption of five pints at midday as natural and normal. For me, this was unprecedented, yet still I somehow kept pace

with them effortlessly.

Soon it dawned on us that they were shutting the bar and we rose to leave for whichever part of the country we were each to spend the weekend in.

I heaved my weighty holdall through the bright, juddering streets of Hatfield, after half an hour or more at last collapsing exhausted onto one of the seats on the station platform.

'What are you doin' here?' A voice near my ear coalesced out of the spinning vortex of sound.

I broke off my silent conversation with myself and saw Stuart sitting on the next bench, bag between his feet, looking too surprised to even laugh.

What had we been speaking of for those two hours? We hadn't mentioned that we were both going into London that afternoon. Or perhaps we had, but had forgotten?

All those hours that year which we spent drinking and talking. What did we say? All those words, now lost for ever. Memory of those sessions is empty, our lives punctuated by episodes of vacuous death. Were those happy times all spent in vain?

On the first day of spring, with the warm, barely perceptible breeze carrying birdsong and the rasping trill of grasshoppers across the fields, Penny, Mark,

Paul, Dave and I took a lunch-time walk out into the perfect world. We carried our coats in our arms and meandered slowly through the long grass and bright new flowers. It was still March. The animals we heard and the distant rumbling traffic were unseen by us, calling from an invisible land. Here, there was only the sky and field and us.

We left the college grounds and came to the main road, beyond which there was a mall of shops. And there, as if by serendipity, we found the Hilltop. It was a modernly styled town pub, intimidating and grey, but seeing that they served mid-day meals we decided to step inside.

We must have spent a hundred lunch-times there that year. Some of the others subsequently joined us and, on most days, there were ten of us, sitting by the front window at two tables pushed together. The Hilltop soon became our unofficial ETOPS headquarters, more so than the Union games room, more so than room four. It was blessed sanctuary. We came to know Irene, the lady who took our orders, and soon found that we were being expected each day from Monday to Thursday, with our table always set and reserved for us as we trooped into the bar.

We often ordered the Spanish omelette and chips,

or perhaps the day's Special. Prices were not far in excess of those at the refectory and, most importantly, the Hilltop gave us the chance of breaking away from the polytechnic for an hour, of having a chat and a beer in more intimate and relaxing surroundings.

Duncan was the only course member who would never go anywhere with the rest of us outside of classes. He was one of those people who have an overriding passion for computers, spending every spare hour he had 'playing' - as we who regard computers as useful tools and not as life substitutes would say - on the polytechnic systems, writing programs, creating graphs and tables, quite without purpose it seemed, to me at least. He wasn't shy, just obsessed. His machines were more important to him than people.

But what sort of people were we anyway? Where did we belong sociologically? We were deemed in some quarters to be the scum of graduates, the lowest, the most unemployable - ostensibly freaks and misfits. Yet, as individuals, we were all so different from each other in our interests and passions, in the lives we were trying to forge, and, above all, in our reasons for being on ETOPS.

Although the Hilltop was the closest pub to the

poly, I don't think that we once saw any other students there. Circumstances had made ETOPS so insular that we barely had any chance to even speak to these other people. We started to return for the first afternoon lecture five, even ten minutes late sometimes. Slowly, we were moving onwards to the unseen boundary between irreverence and madness.

'I've taken the job I was telling you about,' said Penny. 'So I'll be leaving here in four weeks.' For a moment her lips feigned sadness, then she smiled.

'Oh . . . well done,' I said to her as breezily as I could, hoping Penny would not see that I imagined that I would miss her.

'If I'm there on a Saturday I'll have to drop in and visit you,' she said to me, remembering that I lived in that town.

'Yes . . . that would be nice. I'd like to see you.'

In the end, buried under the avalanche of time and event, I never gave Penny my address or phone number.

We learned of John Meredith's death one morning as we were waiting for him to arrive at the laboratory in the basement. Ed Lewis waited for a time until the smile had left his face. It was a grin

born of distress and a subconscious hysteria; a spurious, meaningless emotional signal.

'I have to give you some bad news,' he told us slowly and quietly. We were shocked and saddened; John had taken our lecture only that previous afternoon. How strange it felt now to realise that he had been speaking the last words of his life to us.

Yet, despite the tragedy of John's passing, in a way I later felt glad, for I realised that he had been spared witnessing what we were eventually to become.

Andy and Mark had lodgings in Colney Heath, and after the lectures had finished that day a group of us walked back with them across barley fields and ragged marshland, the bright sun falling from the western sky, to spend the evening in the Crooked Billet off the single street that ran through the village and towards St Albans.

The keys to the highest truths, to unbridled perception and knowledge, grow from the earth, as we have done. And the Earth itself is born of the scattered remnants of annihilated stars. Our sentience is thus the eyes of the universe, organic chemistry contemplating the nature of matter,

Creation contemplating Creation. We do not merely inhabit the Cosmos; we are a part of it. Our tiny, ephemeral lives create light in the darkness, and chance, and therefore purpose, from mindless inevitability.

The assumed physical reality of the light is arcane and esoteric. It must be sought by its own holy luminescence, it must be found through the wonder of life's odyssey, for it would also destroy us all.

Sometimes it burns as brilliant blue flowers, trumpets of sky which stud cascading trellises of wide, green leaves. Each blooms for but a day before leaving in the wake of its explosion of life and death a swelling pod of dark seeds. They are tightly bound and clustered in their drying husk, each one a hard black teardrop of night sky.

In fields and meadows, beneath cold autumn skies in which the low late afternoon sun sets, among the long wet blades of dark grass, a sticky brown fruit secretly breaks forth from labyrinthine mycelium networks beneath the earth. Dead grass adheres to the bell-shaped cap, as the slender white stalk, with immeasurable stealth and inexorable power, forces the tiny shining head into the world above.

Even upon the forest floor, after the rain and the night, the numinous is incarnate. Red shells, some

deep crimson and flecked with white, rise from the dirt tracks beneath the trees. Grouped in twos and threes, they stand incandescent and vivid as flame against the dark green and brown.

When I first saw the mural, high upon the outside wall at the front of the polytechnic, I accepted and embraced the image as a natural and congruous part of living and education. A herd of deer had found these mushrooms in a dark pine forest, before a low, red sun upon a pale, far northern sky. There was snow in patches on the ground around them and on the branches of the trees. The deer were eating the red and white agaric.

From such vestiges of history is Man's oldest folklore born.

CHAPTER 17
ABCD GOLDFISH?

And so, with Penny and John Meredith gone, we felt our hopes and aspirations collapsing. The attitude of the remaining staff seemed to change, and we too became ever more bitter and cynical.

'They don't need to take up so much of our time with lectures,' said John while we took our morning tea-break in the Students' Union. 'They can give us the same information in an hour and we'd then be able to spend the rest of the day studying.' He spoke in a resentful and exasperated tone.

This was something we were all beginning to feel by now. The lectures were being pedantically stretched out to fill the day, which even Christine Hurst admitted when she met with us halfway through the first term to discuss our progress. 'Well, I looked at the time-table and I was immediately struck by how much free time there was,' she responded sheepishly to our complaint. 'We were expecting you all to work a full day, you see, and the polytechnic was asked to increase the teaching time.'

'An academic course like this requires study, not rote learning,' Alan interjected, plainly angry.

‘You have supervised library periods,’ she answered, still trying hard to maintain her smile. She seemed worried by something deeper than simply our answering back or unexpected lack of compliance.

Supervised study . . . if our heads were down, and our pens were moving across paper, then we were fulfilling the course aims. We were being used. It was as if we were professional students, having joined ETOPS for exactly the same reasons as why we had been looking for ‘jobs’.

When Penny had left, Terry Hayes’ outward attitude to us suddenly changed. Now that the class was all-male, he spoke to us less courteously and would break off lectures to pass vulgar comments and make lewd jokes. ‘We couldn’t say that when Penny was here!’ he laughed. We? Was he trying to amuse us? How we spoke to each other in social circumstances outside of the lectures was our business, but we didn’t expect such a demeanour from this man in class.

It began to seem that he had a great disdain for us. Implicit in so many of his remarks was his perceived notion that we felt dismay at the great disparity between our educational background and aspirations, and the level at which ETOPS was

pitched and, indeed, his own background. This was true; we felt overwhelmingly that we were expected to spiral down and down until we lost all ambition and self-belief.

Some mornings I felt that the only thing which gave me the strength to remain on the course was the smell of the rain on the flowers.

We were each presented with a very basic set of tools - cutters, pliers, a screwdriver - which we were told would be ours to keep after we had left Hatfield.

Unbelievably, this was genuinely a part of their great plan to make us more employable. We could approach companies and ask them for a job. 'I've got a degree,' we would say.

'Not today, thank you,' we would be brusquely told.

But we could now retort 'I've got my own screwdriver and pliers!'

And they would suddenly embrace and welcome us, saying 'Oh well, that's different! Why didn't you say?'

One time, Terry Hayes was lecturing, and without pausing began to write something on the board which seemed coded and unintelligible.

ABCD Goldfish?
MNO Goldfish!
OSAR! CDBDIII?
ORAR Goldfish!

He beamed. We didn't understand.

'Ay be see the goldfish?' 'Them ain't no goldfish!' 'Oh yes they are! See the beady eyes?' 'Oh ar, they are goldfish!'

In Terry Hayes' mind this was a great victory over us, a humiliating chastening. For he had watched as we had written this all down in what to him seemed to be mindlessness. We, of course, were trying to keep up with the lecture - one doesn't have the time to cease taking notes whenever something not immediately comprehensible appears on the board. We had been waiting for some explanation; such stupidity from a lecturer was quite unexpected for it was quite outside our academic experience.

I had a dream about Terry one night. We had returned from the Hilltop, late, inebriated and giggling, piling boisterously into the classroom.

'You're a drunken fool, boy,' he had growled at me sternly.

They say dreams are the best private detectives we have. People's characters are dissected and laid bare before us, removing all ambiguity and

subterfuge. We may learn exactly what others truly think and, maybe, even discover what *we* think, who *we* are. Maybe I *had* been drinking too often.

Bill Whiley, having recently retired from a career in industry, had been employed part-time to finish John Meredith's course. He was a tall, stooping man with glasses, greying greased hair and a moustache. Though Willy Whiley did have an adequate knowledge of the subject he taught, there seemed to be something inflexible and archaic to his approach to the course. And at times it was as if he were speaking to an empty room. He would say good morning, answer any questions we had and, at the end of each lecture, briefly outline the area he would be covering next time, but there seemed to be an emptiness in his eyes, a complete unawareness of any human interaction. John, a mathematician, once worked through one of Willy Whiley's exercises and obtained the correct solution, $2\sqrt{2}$. He showed each step of his calculation, produced exactly the correct answer, but received only seven marks out of ten. When he asked for an explanation, Whiley told him that he was primarily interested in seeing a correct numerical answer when marking the exercises. John had lost thirty per cent of his marks for not calculating what $2\sqrt{2}$ was. His answer would have

been judged to have been completely correct if, instead of giving the right answer, he had merely provided an approximation to it. John was laughing with disbelief and impotent rage. In the end, of course, our marks didn't matter. The polytechnic was being paid for us to pass the course. 'You're technicians now,' we were told each time we voiced objection to the spirit in which the course was being run. We were to hear this so many times. How great, then, was the umbrage we felt at being told 'But you're university graduates!' when we asked for more study or revision time. We no longer took ETOPS seriously. How could we?

The polytechnic had two badminton courts, one off the main corridor, and the other, though almost adjacent, only accessible from outside. We had booked the former from eleven o'clock, for one hour's play. The last lecture of the morning finished at ten to eleven, and we hurried to the changing rooms, carrying our sports bags and rackets.

On a Saturday two weeks earlier, I had played there in the polytechnic tournament. Drawn against the top seed in the first round of the singles, I had eventually lost in a game lasting an hour and a half. Though I proceeded to win the plate competition for

first round losers, I was left riled, vowing to never again play with awful, uncontrollable plastic shuttles. It was as if the sport at Hatfield mirrored its academic facets, for I felt frustrated and drained after that unnecessarily exhausting match.

Steven was not a bad player. He had clearly played competitively; his stroke production was good, although his game was impaired by very slow footwork. Andrew had a fair ability for a beginner, while Mark would, I feared, never reach any reasonable standard. Still, we had great fun, our hour flew.

Martin Dew, the current world mixed champion, was studying at the polytechnic at that time. I used to pass him on the patch of grass at the top of the concrete steps alongside the electronics department, half wondering if he might care to join us for a game one day. I saw him watching us for a while through the window in the door as I played on my own against Steve and Andy, Mark having decided to rest for that set.

The small hall echoed as we played, filling with the loud, hollow crack of our strokes and the reverberating sounds of our running feet thudding arhythmically and squeaking upon the creaking wooden floor.

That April, the YMCA was closed down. All the student residents were given three weeks' notice and asked to arrange an appointment at the Accommodation Office to obtain addresses of alternative lodgings. It seemed that there was nowhere left in Hatfield itself for students to live, so I remained in Welwyn Garden City, lodging in Cole Green Lane where I lived for what remained of my time on ETOPS.

For some weeks I still took the bus to the college. The journey was longer now, and I also had a ten minute walk from the house, across the King George V playing field, and then a short way along Beehive Lane to the bus stop outside the Queen Elizabeth II hospital. I walked down the slip-road branching off from the main street, Howlands, where services away from Hatfield stopped under the shade of the trees, and crossed over to wait for my bus. Each peaceful, dewy morning, soaked with the scent of new flowers and blossom, filled my lungs, firing my reawakening heart.

Steve Britnell had moved to Welwyn Garden City as well. He had a car and offered to give me a lift in each day if I met him outside the parade of shops across the road from Woodhall community centre.

Yet soon, by the beginning of June, the accursed

air became laden with invisible pollen. My eyes and throat itched, and then, as the month wore on, I began to endure a constant running nose and unstoppable, painful episodes of sneezing. On some mornings, as we drove to Hatfield, conversation on my part was impossible and unwanted. The antihistamines I used became progressively less beneficial until, when I was taking ten each day, they had no effect at all.

War had broken out. Far away, across the Atlantic Ocean, British troops were landing on the Falkland Islands, engaged in operations so clandestine that the truth of what was happening there reached us only through the filter of heavy daily press briefings.

In the laboratories, we learned how to build boxes of perspex and wood, incorporating sockets, mains transformers and leads. We also undertook a two week course, supposedly a 'project', in which we were to build a digital voltmeter. Alan Williams and Dave Dowsett led the class for three mornings each week. Dismayed, we found that we were being given no opportunity to make any independent contribution to this project nor to exercise any creative will. Again, all that was expected of us - indeed, this was our specific remit - was that we

construct something which had already been designed, and for which all the parts had been provided. It was an exercise in the use of tools.

These people were so rude to us. I couldn't believe being told to take my hands out of my pockets, as if they thought we were at school, or in the army. After John Meredith died we received nothing but contemptuous hauteur, hatred and stupidity from the lecturers.

'Do you think that we ought to receive a little more freedom in deciding how we each study best, compared with the sort of people who normally take such a course as this?' Mark asked Terry one day.

Admittedly there was a thoughtless arrogance in the phrasing of his question and I winced at this.

'You mean the sort of people who would just go straight up the pub as soon as they were allowed any free time?' Terry had said with gleeful sarcasm.

They asked us to write a formal account of the voltmeter project, but all we really needed to do was to type up the instructions which they had given to us in the first place. Alan presented them with a neatly bound volume of typescript, the authorship credited in large letters on the title page to A.S.Harwood BSc (Hons).

I began to feel deeply and constantly troubled, as if

I had lost something and were searching and searching, but could not in any way recall what it was that I was looking for.

Williams and Dowsett carried a vindictive and supercilious air about them. They formed an almost comic partnership as they walked among us, dispassionate and curt. Doctor Dowsett was a tall, balding, humourless man whom we very aptly named Doctor Death. Williams would follow him around the room, always at his master's side, always ready to provide his toadying support to Death's tirades against us. Someone remarked that Alan Williams reminded him of a character in a television sitcom of that time called 'Hi-de-hi'. The nickname endured, and thenceforth we knew him as the hapless holiday camp manager, Geoffrey Fairbrother. In a strange way, the abuse we endured began to bind us all together with a kind of perverse esprit de corps.

I arrived early one morning, and sat alone in the lab, listening to Death and Fairbrother talking in low whispers in the equipment storeroom. They had heard me come in, but, keeping very still, I was able to make out much of what they said.

'And of course, as soon as John Carter starts complaining, all the others join in as well.'

‘He’s the one with the glasses, isn’t he? How old is he, then?’

‘Twenty six, twenty seven.’ John was twenty one.

‘What, and he’s been unemployed all this time?’

‘When this course is finished, they’ll be hit hard. They don’t know what they’ve got coming.’

‘That’ll kick them out of their dream world and up off their arses.’

During our tea-break I told John what I had overheard them saying about him. He laughed with an air of triumph.

‘All these years I’ve been so innocuous, I’ve never managed to upset anyone,’ he said. ‘And now I’ve finally done it - they’re all after my blood, they all hate me!’

When we are done, when all is still, when all of our memories are no more, then no part of us shall remain. There will be no more remorse or shame, no unexpurgated guilt, no hurtful, uncontrollable remembering. Our lives will have gone for ever, and we, despite all that we have thought, spoken or done, will be free at last.

CHAPTER 18
THE MACHINE

Darkness.

Silence.

Nothing.

Emptiness without time or sentience, unwitnessed and unseeing.

Mind is unborn.

Then there is light, and it is the only thing in the universe. Nothing else exists, nor has there ever been anything else before now.

It is a grey, pale glow upon the pillow, and your eyes, almost open, are filling with the cold dregs of night. Vague, colourless shapes are condensing out of eternal darkness and you are waking.

The bedside table.

The clock.

The wall.

For the briefest moment your being is no more then the sum of these dim, blurred pictures. You are rising from the clay of a primordial, lifeless world.

And you are your own umbilical cord, twisted out of your mind and eyes, plunging into the ravine of your dreamless sleep and taking unshakeable root deep within the morass whence you came. For a

great storm is rising, blowing in from the distant icy wasteland in the north.

Your eyes are open and you are breathing for the first time in all those silent aeons. The freezing wind howls around you.

Now thunder explodes, and burning matter courses through the bore hole connecting you with the underworld. There is a great cavity in your head and bombs are bursting inside your mind.

The pneumatic drilling is perpetual and is all that you are.

This is for ever.

You are moving. Slow, aching movements of your fingers and neck, until at last you have turned to face the curtained window. You are lying on the bedspread in all your clothes, only your dirty shoes thrown upon the carpet. It is so very cold. Now standing, horror is flooding your soul, for you finally understand that the fire is still burning.

You do not wash or eat.

In the street outside, you are walking through the early morning darkness and icy, biting rain is lashing your eyes and cheeks. You are shaking, hollowed out, your heart removed and your mind hideously wounded.

The sky, heavy and purple, is crushing you. The

air is poison, gravity pulls you to your broken knees.

Within the cavern of your granite skull, space expands to form the vast chamber that holds the glowing, turning orb of your thought. The sphere of consciousness almost fills the vast gallery which confines it. And the globe is oscillating, over and over. You have become this and it is uncontrollable.

It is moving through a three-part cycle. For half a second it accretes dense, invisible matter, then is suddenly propelled away in a vectorless movement where, vibrating with a violent and traumatic malevolence, it takes hold for the briefest moment before arcing away stridently and returning in blinding fire. Again, again and again, in perpetual torment, you are tossed upon the tempest of a psychosis that has become your unending life.

You beg for forgiveness. But God and Man are dead, and there is no one to hear you.

And so it continues.

How many days has it been now that you have not eaten? Your clothes are hanging from you like rags. If you do not eat for long enough you will die. If you do not eat the pain will end.

You are contemplating only that which is almost unthinkable - how you can possibly bear to witness one more anguished, interminable moment.

You are not of this Earth.

CHAPTER 19
ST ALBANS

It had stopped raining, but still a grey, featureless sky hung low over the wet concrete and grass. After three days of humid heat the night had cleansed the world. A cool breeze gently breathed down the shining mall and the morning felt vibrant and new, an exciting sense of change lifting the heart. The rush-hour traffic hissed over the wet roads and crashed through puddles where the kerb-side drains had overflowed. Bright water sprayed onto the pavements. I felt the slow, deep rumble of the passing lorries in my chest as I stood among the skeletons of the bare market stalls. There was a vitality and freshness in the air.

The shopping centre was dominated by a vast department store standing between its own huge car-park and the precinct. I had an unnerving feeling of being watched, spied upon by nameless authority, as I quietly made my way around to the left of the checkout desks, walking through the sporting goods section, past rows of golf clubs and tennis rackets, sports shoes and large, brightly coloured hold-alls, all set upon display racks draped with grocers' fake grass. Beyond the DIY department, with its bottles

of paint-stripper and creosote, stacked pots of paint and glue, and trays of nails, door hinges and picture hangings, next to Kitchen Furniture where plastic tables and chairs stood empty among the blocks of cupboards and shelves, I came to the Garden Centre. There was a revolving rack between the rows of trowels, gloves and twine. Upon it were a hundred coloured envelopes in tiered compartments and I turned the display slowly, looking at the pictures and names on the seed packets - Valmaine lettuce, Crimson Globe beetroot, Minicor carrots and, around the other side, in blue, Cyclamen neapolitanum mixed and Siberian Wallflower.

I caught my breath. I held in my hand a picture of such beautiful flowers, open so very wide that they might have swallowed the world. They were the colour of the bright blue summer sky, becoming violet at their edges, and burning white towards the hidden seed pod at their centres. I pressed the envelope close to my racing heart.

Outside, I walked through the service car-parks behind the shops, where the angular concrete world of brown and grey was still wet and dark. Massive aluminium refuse bins stood against stained walls beneath small, dirty windows of textured glass. I passed down a thoroughfare between two buildings,

their walls streaked with rain-water, and began to walk up Queensway towards the polytechnic.

I crushed the first hard black seed between my teeth, grinding the kernel and feeling the white, bitter pieces on my tongue. I swallowed but the acerbic taste remained. Going slowly up the road where Cavendish Way sharply turned north-west at the roundabout near the college, then over the bridge, I ate three more. Before me stood the Comet hotel at the junction with the St Albans Road. I chewed the uningestible paste in my mouth, but it stuck to my palate and teeth and I could not swallow any of it. I had a can of orangeade in my carrier bag, which I opened and began to drink, rinsing my mouth until all the seeds had been washed down and were becoming a part of my biochemistry.

I leaned against the railings along the side of the road and gazed at the brick building. On a tall podium in front of the hotel stood a bronze sculpture of the de Haviland Comet, its tail pointing towards the ground as if the great plane were frozen in permanent ascent. For fifteen minutes I carefully kept vigil, just waiting for a way to know what it was that I was doing.

I took the path back down to the roundabout and

turned right, crossing over the road. I stopped and looked at the grove of ash trees which, despite the cool wind blowing ever more forcefully from the west, stood still and quiet against the bright grey sky. For a moment I fancied that the contrast between the clouds and leaves was palpably growing, that the world around me was changing, all definition increasing. But then, as if a bubble had burst, the orange glow did not really seem so strange; perhaps the sun had slowly begun to break through the shrouded heavens, maybe there had not been anything there. I did not know.

In room four, no one noticed as I warily took five more of the seeds secreted in my pocket, swallowing them whole, one by one, during the lecture. Why, I asked myself, did I need to be so surreptitious? For I was doing this for all of them and felt pride and a tremendous responsibility.

But nothing happened. My consciousness did not alter, I received no revelation. In the afternoon I suffered a mild nausea and a series of sharp pains in my stomach, slowly easing during the rest of the day. That was not how those tentative first steps were meant to have been.

Soon we were taking our first exams. Along with

the final groups of candidates from other courses, we sat for three successive afternoons at long rows of desks in the refectory, scribbling silently. It was early July and the worst of my hay fever had now passed. I remembered thinking just a few months before that I had sat the last exam of my life, and that never again would I subject myself to such debilitating stress.

But somehow exams at Hatfield were not the same as any we had known before. None of us had a vocational commitment to electronics, and any interest we may have originally possessed had been all but wiped away by our treatment at the hands of these people. Consequently we put less effort into our work as we were pushed ever further down, our concentration waned, and we felt there to be less pressure on us to do well. And we were given literally no revision time; the exams began immediately after the course of lectures finished. That was the one thing above all else which I just could not cope with.

Then it was over, and there we were, outside on the lawn, intoxicated by our sudden relief and reclaimed liberty. The afternoon sun was still hot and high above us as we talked loudly and happily.

The city of St Albans lies to the west of Hatfield,

twenty minutes by bus from the stop in front of the college. It has the highest density of public houses per head of population of any town in Britain, Mark informed us. What better place, then, we thought, to stage our celebration that evening?

Eight of us boarded the service to Watford, and we wound slowly away from the college grounds, up Comet Way and onto the St Albans Road. We passed fields and woods, stopping to pick up new passengers and to let people alight. Soon the flat Hertfordshire countryside began to segue into the houses and weathered shop-fronts lining Hatfield Road. The bus stopped at the railway station and then ascended the hill up to St Peter's Street. Walking through the warm evening, for a moment we felt lost, strangers in an unknown town.

'I'm starving,' said Dave. 'Who wants something to eat first?'

We filed into a burger restaurant on the west side of the street for sausages and chips and cold, metallic lager. I sat and watched the people outside passing by the window, picking absent-mindedly at the greasy fare.

At the table adjacent someone had ordered fish fingers, and Alan began to tell us about when he had worked for a while with a frozen food company

during his time studying food science.

'All the fish pieces are washed down a long conduit during the manufacturing process. A lot of it slops over the side onto the ground, and they just shovel up these pools of . . . slurry, and tip it all back in.'

Alan did not eat fish fingers.

I suddenly wondered whether everyone who would have wanted to take that trip with us had been asked.

'Nobody else fancied coming, then?'

'I told Paul about it,' said Andy, 'but he disappeared somewhere. I couldn't see his car in the car-park.'

'Well, I don't think he drinks too much anyway.'

'Talking of drinking too much, has anyone heard from Keith?' enquired Steve, chuckling.

Keith Grey had left the course a month ago, supposedly having found a job. We had our doubts about this. His alcoholic consumption had been extreme - each lunch-time and evening were spent in the Union bar or the Hatfield Arms, and when we saw him in the mornings it was evident that his physical health was suffering. His eyes constantly watered and he seemed tired, breathless and agitated. I remembered his claiming to have read

‘Engineering with Pinball’ at University, a joke which for us seemed to encapsulate what we knew of his life. So Keith was not there with us. How he would have loved that wild July evening.

The Bell stood in Chequer Street, a tawdry and anonymous doorway between a solicitor’s office and bank. I shall never know why we chose to start our peripatetic sojourn in that pub. The paper on the walls had faded long ago and the floor was bare, just dark, worn boards with protruding knots and black nail holes. There was a dartboard on the wall and a snooker table at the far end of the room. Four or five old men stood at the bar, talking of absent friends and their own ending lives.

It was hot inside, and streams of daylight filtered through frosted glass windows. We borrowed darts and snooker cues from the barman and played in teams as we drank our beers.

The woman watching us play must have been about sixty, dark glasses hiding her eyes, her thin lips flickering with unsounded words. She wore tight jeans and stilettoes and walked slowly and unsteadily over to us from the stool where she had been sitting, a glass of rum hanging at her side as she pulled nervously at her tired, greying curls with her other hand. It was evident when she spoke that

that was not her first drink of the day.

'How do you play this?'

'Well, you throw the darts at the board on the wall,' said John with a facetiousness hilarious to all but the person he spoke to.

'I know that. I mean, how do you win?' she slurred, swaying against Andy. 'Would you show me? . . . I've never played before, see.'

Behind her shades, the person in her eyes was lost from the world, and it was as if there was a great, black emptiness beyond.

John gave her the darts and stepped back from the mat on the floor. He looked at her for a while, then raised his eyebrows quizzically as if to ask why she still stood there, bemused and lost.

'What do I do?'

'Stand here,' he patiently told her, trying to speak without laughing. 'Behind the white line. Now go for the . . . well, just aim at the board.'

The dart hit the skirting board tail first, and half a shot of rum splashed onto the floor by our companion's feet.

'Oh . . . '

By this time the men leaning on the bar were watching the drama with great amusement, but she seemed quite unaware of the laughter in the room. I

really believed that this behaviour was not deliberately contrived. The lady was barely conscious.

‘Do I get another go?’

Then she wanted to learn snooker. We showed her how to hold the cue, but our friend seemed unable to grasp the concept of pushing it forward with her right arm. With her left hand awkwardly gripping the cue near its tip, she swung across into the balls on the table as if with a bat. We quickly drained our glasses and departed for somewhere less psychologically demanding.

‘There must be other people we can meet!’ spluttered John incredulously, laughing as we hurriedly crossed the road.

Walking through a dark, narrow alley leading to Market Place, we discovered The Boot, a Benskins tied house. Inside, standing at the large horseshoe bar, we looked around but saw no one else in the room, only the barmaid, and a fat, ginger cat luxuriating on the divan beneath the window.

Although it was the course which had brought us all together, melding our disparate lives, for that one evening we created a world where ETOPS and the polytechnic did not exist. We let slip from our minds all memory of Hayes, Death and Whiley, all

thoughts of lectures and exams; this expurgation was total and blissful. For why else do we drink, if not to clear our minds of all that hurts us?

A hundred beer mats were displayed in a long curving line upon the rails that ran between the bar and ceiling. Our eyes picked out names of beers and breweries from the procession of shapes and colours, and we pointed at them and spoke excitedly, alluding to the promise and unique memory they evoked in each of us. Butcombe . . . Smiles . . . Tiger ... we were entering Nirvana.

Outside, across the street, the mosaic of windows blazed with the light of the setting sun. I glanced away, down at the pavement, yet a chequered pattern of red and blue remained sliding and jumping in my sight. I looked about me in wonder at the colours of the town. What were my eyes actually doing? Colour perception is an unbelievable miracle, I thought to myself, enthralled. What does it *mean* to 'see' red or blue? It was not delineable mathematically, yet neither was it a metaphysical phenomenon. Colour vision was something else, something abstruse and mystical.

Holywell Hill plunged steeply down toward St Stephens, and we turned off into Sopwell Lane,

passing buildings which I was sure must have stood there unchanged for upwards of three hundred years. Contorted and cracked brick and plasterwork, framed by dark, splintered timber beams, leaned over the narrow street. I turned my bleary, darting, drunken eyes upwards, to the steep banks of grey and brown tiles, stained yellow and green with moss and lichen. The long line of roofs receded to where the road sharply turned and fell away.

The others were already yards ahead, walking through a door beneath a hanging sign which pictured the cloven-hoofed Pan, red eyed and piping.

'I'm buying, I believe,' I shouted after them.

It was almost nine o'clock, and the front bar was starting to fill with people. I eventually gave the barmaid a confused and lengthy list of beers my companions had requested, changing their minds, miscounting, and then finding that the Robinson's was now 'off', the shield on the pump handle turned resolutely away from us.

'You haven't got any money though, have you?' Mark laughed. I had made some such remark earlier, jokingly trying to avoid my round.

The barmaid placed the fifth foaming glass on the

bar top and looked at me plaintively, unsure of the situation. ‘Don’t you have any money?’ she asked in a quiet, intimidated voice.

‘Yes, I have . . . don’t listen to him . . . carry on please.’

The room was hot, heavy with smoke, and my mind was starting to spin in an alcoholic numbness. I swayed and steadied myself against the varnished wood.

‘Could you show me?’

‘Show you what?’

‘That you’ve got some money.’

I couldn’t believe it. How gullible . . . did she really think I would order all these drinks if I were unable to pay? The others were standing and laughing. I tried to assume an air of indignation and pulled out a handful of crumpled notes from my pocket.

‘Okay,’ she said, sounding rather less embarrassed than she deserved to be, I felt. ‘What else was it . . . three pints of 6X?’

It wasn’t okay at all. I scowled at my snickering friends. ‘Shut up, you lot,’ I muttered, and they laughed yet louder.

So we crowded around the table opposite the entrance to the rear bar, to lose our heads in this, the

most beautiful place in the world.

We are a tall ship afloat on a golden sea, carried upon slow waves beneath a great domed sky. Before us turns a vast fiery wheel, rising above the horizon like the swirling topaz vision beheld by Ezekiel.

The ocean sparks and glistens, and shoals of bubbles rise out upon each honey swell. We are being drawn toward the burning vortex ahead. And there is fire beyond the firmament, for bright channels of reflected light arc over the sea across the deep, mottled sky, and flaming airborne lands are pulled into the rotating hub of the universe, shooting lightning and crumbling into starry fragments.

The sky is glass, and the stars have risen from the ocean.

I found myself climbing back up the hill in a strange, twilit sentience, disembodied and borne upon a celestial sedan. I felt very, very happy. Bookshops and florists passed us by, closed and in darkness, and the people we floated through were but silent spirits, vague and distant images glimpsed on another world.

To our left the great stone cathedral towered above us, ancient and cold in the thickening gloom of the evening. The immense, silent building had risen so suddenly from the earth we walked, and surveyed the city with such a staid, eternal majesty, that my heart stilled in awe.

And always, as if watching my life from a great distance, I felt I was being drawn ever onwards into this secret journey. We were walking by the lines of parked cars in Romeland, then passing through the Abbey Gate, descending Abbey Mill Lane into the glow of the set sun. A low wall of brick and stone ran by the edge of the recreation ground, and we followed it along the shattered, jutting paving stones down to the lake.

I looked up into the uncharted, violet ocean above me. Far away, many miles over even the cathedral and the pines, waves of clouds, lost from the sun and becoming still and grey, were painted upon the dimming sky. Showering sparks and particles of deep blackness, created in my dilated eyes, swarmed alive over the infinite. Somehow, incomprehensibly, something was changing and growing, awakening before me. And I, tiny and dumb, was an eternal part of it all.

Down by the water's edge, we entered the bar of

Ye Olde Fighting Cocks, where the low, timber beamed ceiling glowed red by the lamps on the walls and worn steps led down to the lower level of the room. By that hour the pub was crowded and filled with smoke that stung our eyes, so we took the last of our seven pints outside onto the grass bank at the lake's side. It was now night, and the great expanse of water sparkled only with the distant light of the windows behind us. The agitated, urgent cries of waterfowl permeated the darkness, a melee carried upon the light breeze that had begun to stir the trees at nightfall. The waterside was home to the ducks, moorhens, geese and swans, and we were intruders in their invisible world. I lay back on the hard dirt and felt the sudden coldness of my overturned pint seeping through my clothes.

We were walking a footpath through dense, tangled undergrowth. Leaves brushed us and the velvet air was heavy with the scent of lavender and honeysuckle. Far ahead, I began to see light.

We found ourselves sitting in the dimly lit calm of an Indian restaurant. Gently, the blurred room buzzed with the bright dance of sitars. I guessed that we were no longer in St Albans, although the fact struck me that I could not recall our arrival. Yet

I felt no dismay at this void in my memory; emotionally, I was capable only of a languid, unfocussed joy.

On the table a candle burned inside a glass lamp. The thought came to me that it would be a fascinating experiment to spread a napkin over the top of the lamp to see the flame dim as the oxygen was burned up. We watched the paper explode in flames.

The clear, starry night stretched over me as I walked home in a sweet delirium. There were no more trains from Hatfield until the morning, so I zigzagged unsteadily along Hertford Road and unlit Ascots Lane, singing loudly at each approaching glare of headlamps. The world was shining only by the starlight. The fields around me, and the leafy, whispering boughs above, were quite invisible. I stood still and breathless, looking overhead in wonderment. A thousand distant suns sparkled across the universe.

Then I saw something I had never seen before, something I had not considered possible. One star silently fell from the heavens, and in a second had disappeared for ever.

I cried.

CHAPTER 20
MORNING GLORY

In a glass tumbler on a shelf in my room, I soaked forty seeds in water for three days. I thought that perhaps the ones I had tried to use two weeks before had simply passed through me, sealed by their hard, dry armour. But now these were swollen and soft, their black husks flaking away and revealing the bursting, white kernels. I removed the excess water with a piece of toilet paper then placed them all in a resealable polythene pouch.

So on that soft grey morning I left the house and crossed the road, walking towards the shops to meet Steve. Suddenly, there was apprehension in my soul. This was reality; I was not going to be dreaming or reading or visiting the cinema. I tried hard to make myself understand that something drastic and profound was going to happen to *my life* that very day. I was playing with fire.

I had on occasion spoken to some of my colleagues about my involvement in this work. In trying to share my aspirations and the revelation I had witnessed, I met only the cold stone wall of incomprehension, isolating and frustrating me still further.

‘It seems to me,’ Steve told me, ‘that you’re spending every day trying to get high, then getting more and more worked up when you can’t.’

I spent hours trying to explain to them all what I was doing. But some vital key was missing and all I said made no sense to any of my friends. I was not trying to ‘get high’. Did no one understand? My work was fired by *hope,* while that which they misapprehensively perceived was born of *hopelessness.* I was obsessed, yes, but not preparing to waste myself. I was not mad. I would have told them that I was an artist, that what I was engaged in was science. I would have spoken of humankind’s future, of Creation, of God, that the self-sacrifice I was risking was my vicarious duty to Man. But in those days I had not yet the words. Could it have been that I was alone on Earth? Steve asked me why I wanted to try such things. ‘I’m not ‘trying’ anything,’ I said, ‘I’m *doing* it.’

I didn’t attend the lecture before lunch, but sat on my own in the darkest corner of the Students’ Union. I bought a cup of hot chocolate and began to swallow the seeds, five or six at a time, washing them down with sips of the steaming liquid. I felt a sudden flush as blood rushed to my head in a momentary panic, and knew I could never turn

back. The transparent wallet lay on the table, empty and wet inside. I placed it in the bin at my side along with the cup I had been drinking from. Looking for a long, long time at the brick wall before me, at the window's glare and at the ceiling tiled with panels of fluorescent lights, I began to feel a loneliness I had never known before. For the flow of the world would not carry me with it that day. Alone, I had to create from nothing everything that was, and knew that only I could prevent all reality from collapsing. It was twelve o'clock, and I walked downstairs, across the field of buttercups, past the great oak trees, towards the Hilltop.

'And where were you?' they asked as we met waiting to cross the busy main road.

'I had to . . . do something.'

Inside, the air was heavy with tobacco smoke and steam from the open kitchen door. We placed our orders and sat down with our beers. Irene had retired the previous week and we had bought her a box of chocolates and a card, and now Sandra served the meals in the bar. I looked across the room at the dark wall adorned with framed prints of old watercolour landscapes, and felt a strange silence descend on everything and everyone around. The conglomerate of twenty conversations was still

there, loud and incoherent. The clatter of cutlery and plates, the clink of glasses, all still filled the space about me. But something was changing; a red glow suffused the people and shadows, and all that was real was becoming a grotesque mural on the glass walls of the tank in which I was imprisoned, submerged, breathing water and unable to move beneath its crushing weight.

I did not feel well. I had no appetite; the omelette before me lay cut in half, with my knife and fork resting on the edge of the plate. I could not eat it. From my stomach something was rising to my throat and my face grew very hot. I took a mouthful of dark mild, but the smell of the beer, together with the closeness of the unbreatheable air, sharply exacerbated my nausea. I sat back very still in my chair, my eye tracing the lines of the dark, waxed patterns of wood grain on the table-top.

'Are you feeling all right?' Steve asked me.

Locked in the toilet cubicle I tried to make myself be sick, but just couldn't. Please, I thought, before it's too late. I retched but there was nothing there; my stomach seemed paralysed. Leaning over the bowl, pale and shaking, I saw vague reflections and shadows moving across the surface of the water, dark alien faces looking into this world to watch me.

After twenty minutes I staggered out, just as Paul was entering the gents.

'There you are! Where did you get to? Are you okay?'

I pushed past him with my head down.

Sitting on a concrete bollard among the cars on the forecourt, the traffic speeding past, I felt my body shake. Dark clouds filled the sky and it began to rain.

Alan drove us all back to the poly, and while the others returned to the lab I turned away and walked outside to the students' union. Alone once more, I watched the dark walls seeming to move, then saw a door swing slowly open, crashing against the table behind it. Startled, I looked again, but saw that it was still shut fast.

Outside, the drizzle persisted, and as Paul Turnbridge and I walked across the college car-park, the wind blew the water droplets in our faces. Paul had concernedly offered to take me to the hospital in Welwyn Garden City.

But the nausea and fear had now left me. The trees all around us, on the hill beyond the campus and across the road, were burning in the rain. Under a fierce grey sky swept with cloud, their leaves and

branches were quite motionless, painted brightly in hues of lime green and gold. They shone with an ethereal light, standing as puffy pointillist shapes each comprising a billion luminescent elements, churning, swarming and sparking. I looked at the tarmac and the yellow brick walls of the polytechnic buildings. They had all turned to white marble, streaked with crimson veins that rippled across and bound the face of this radiant palace.

In Paul's purple mini, as we left Hatfield, I told him what was happening.

'They're flowers,' he groaned in disbelief. 'You're not supposed to eat flowers!'

'But they were made from the sky, Paul.'

I looked out at the world through the rain on the window as the globules ran slowly across the glass, pulled back by the slipstream.

'Look, Paul, I don't need to go to the hospital . . . I'll be all right.'

'Are you sure?'

'If you could just drop me at the house, please . . .'

Everyone was out, so Paul came inside for a while.

'Thank you so much,' I told him. 'I'll be okay as long as I can just keep talking to someone.'

A war had broken out in my mind, in which I was fighting to retain control of my own sentience,

locked in combat against the acid threatening to pull me apart. I needed others so badly. Somehow, through my temerity, Paul and I journeyed northwards to Stevenage, where he was living in a rented house which he shared with three other students.

As we drove up the motorway the rain began falling ever more heavily. Paul's old car had some rust damage and the water entered the holes in the bodywork around the windscreen, running out in a stream along the base of the dashboard. So I sat holding a cloth he took from the glove compartment and gave to me, and periodically leant across to mop up.

'It's a good job I'm here to do this,' I tried to joke.

Paul glanced at me. 'Er, yes,' he said, thinking that it was only because of me that he was not sitting in a dry, quiet lab in Hatfield, modulating RF signals.

I felt flushed and my whole head tingled, swathed in unconsuming flame which roared soundlessly and painlessly about me, rising from within my rioting heart. I looked out at the panorama of trees and fields and saw the world bathed in a red hue seeping deep into the distant fragments of green and ochre. Somewhere, far away, the undulating hills and

woodland met the sky.

The rain was beginning to stop now, and the dark, mountainous clouds high in the west were breaking apart to form a vast shining chasm through which the sun's light was at last starting to transude.

I couldn't cope with the music on the radio. It wove thick black plaits in my heart and became singularly frightening.

'Do you mind very much if we don't listen to this?' I asked.

I turned the dial and dulled the pain.

We reached Stevenage and in Paul's kitchen one of his housemates, a Chinese girl, was preparing a meal for that evening. Metal boxes of spices stood opened on the table and their pungent aroma filled the room. Paul introduced us and I was immediately aware of him tensely hoping that I would not let slip any suggestion of what I was doing. That would have caused more then just embarrassment for him, it would have brought disrepute upon his own character. But it was easy - nobody could see inside me. I said hello to her and my outward behaviour remained entirely normal, I thought. I saw nothing untoward in going and standing at the front door, peering out through the fluted glass at the garden and street, watching the

distorted shapes and amplified colours in silent fascination as they moved upon the cold screen I pressed myself against.

Paul came back downstairs and led me out to the car, dropping me off at Stevenage station. I had no idea where to go from there.

'Thank you so much. I'm so sorry,' I kept saying.

CHAPTER 21
THE ROCK CLUB

In the empty, desolate playgrounds there were no children, no screams or laughter echoing around the uneven tarmac marked out with the white, fading lines of the netball court and stained dark with the night's rain. The school was silent beneath the mountainous airscape of grey and white that rolled slowly by, bringing episodic chill darkness to the October air as the great clouds passed across the sun.

Morning lessons had begun and a hush lay over the buildings and sports field. Passing the gates, one could hardly tell that this was not the weekend, that behind those dimly lit windows eight hundred children were learning how to live, learning what they could be. Before it became too late to learn. Before cold, grim adulthood tore their lives from them.

The map on the classroom wall showed both faces of the moon, the near and the far, side by side like twin planets, one scarred heavily by ferocious cratering, the other half covered with seas of frozen lava. The teacher's voice faded from Michael's

world as he stared open-mouthed at the wall-chart, running his eyes over the pitted relief and thinking to himself, incredulously, that the rims of even the smallest craters he could see were in reality great mountain ranges on another world. The names of the features, the stone circles and maria, streamed through his head.

'Michael . . . Michael! Are you with us? . . .' Michael turned to face the front of the class, red-faced and indignant.

'. . . thank you.'

All eyes were upon him and some of the children were laughing. But I *want* to look at the moon, he thought in dismay.

Michael and Simon were just eight years old. Never again would they be so alive, so free in spirit, so filled with dreams and wishes and hope. Everything was possible, for their whole lives lay wide open before them, their spiritual gardens in full bloom on summer's most perfect day.

Finding out, learning, understanding were exciting things. These ways of exploring, of communing with the boundless, mysterious, breathtaking natural world were called science. Science was the most thrilling thing on Earth.

Bright Saturday sunshine fell upon the green corn field the boys worked in, their trowels crumbling the bare earth in the far corner by the elm trees.

'It's sandstone,' declared Simon confidently, holding up a round, yellow pebble close to his face.

Michael looked doubtful. 'Sandstone's orange.'

'It can be yellow as well. Sand's yellow.'

Michael leafed through a number of pages of the large, glossy book on his lap. He stopped, turned back a page or two and began to read intently. Well, perhaps this was what they had found, after all.

'We don't have sandstone yet.' The boys looked at each other excitedly across the dusty pit where they sat, grimy and tired after a morning spent collecting new rocks.

Michael and Simon had founded the class geology club. Mrs Galton had allowed them the empty desk at the back of the room for displaying their brightly painted egg-boxes in which arrays of stones lay on cotton wool linings. The boys' reverently nurtured museum grew daily. In a curious way, the dead, inanimate, hard, cold rocks were infused with a pulsating life. Through hundreds of millions of years they had lain and silently watched the Earth. They had seen life rise from the boiling seas and perpetual thunderstorms. They had witnessed the

painful evolution of all that could reason and contemplate. And they had seen it all die, throughout all the epochs, year by year, second after countless second. These cold, inert stones were our history. On the wall above the desk they had sellotaped pictures cut from magazines of extraordinary geological artefacts, erupting volcanoes, rifts, canyons and mountains, and diagrams they had drawn showing the Earth in cross-section, layer upon layer from core to crust. For months the friends searched riverbanks, waste ground and gardens for a treasure more valued by them than gold. There were lots and lots of children who thought, lived and dreamed like Michael and Simon. There must have been, oh, one or two in every junior school in the land.

How much they wanted the others in their class to help them, to become involved in what they were doing, to bring strange stones in to school, wonder what they were and how they had been made. But the rock club aroused little more than an occasional dispassionate curiosity from Michael's and Simon's classmates. Their teacher recognised that she ought to show them some encouragement but, after all, stones were just dirty stones . . .

In the corridor the playtime bell rang and the

children streamed outside into the golden, blustery day. They passed along the wooden quadrangle verandah, their running feet drumming upon the boards, then skipped out into the large playground beyond.

The boys paused to discuss what they would play.

'We've landed on Mars, right, and the Earth colonists are dying and we've got to help them,' Simon expounded lucidly, visions of an alien world forming in his racing mind.

'Okay,' Michael concurred. 'They've run out of water and we've got to help them find some. If we don't find any in one hour, everyone will die of thirst.'

'I know what! The Martian man-eating plants have drained all the lakes with their roots . . . '

' . . . and they can move about - they've got legs - and they've hidden in a huge underground cave, and we've got to go there and get it back!'

'Right. This is in the year . . . 2106.'

The swimming pool fence was made of large panels of pebble-dashed concrete - a hundred thousand control buttons to take travellers to any place or time in the universe. The wall was a time machine and the school any one of a billion possible worlds.

In a hail of tapping fingers weaving a critical and precise instruction code upon the stones, the coordinates in time and space were loaded. As the ignition sequence was initiated, a vertical tunnel of light suddenly fired out of the ground, disappearing into the clouds. Michael and Simon stepped into the shaft with an air of urgency. They had far distant worlds to save before hymn practice.

A vast valley of red and brown, strewn with dark and jagged boulders lying upon the sand, stretched from east to west horizon. The great sheer cliffs rose for a mile or more above the boys on both sides, torn asunder by inconceivable forces in the planet's forgotten, distant past. A light wind coiled about them in gusts and pirouettes.

Michael and Simon stopped to look into the sky above. The pink glow above the far horizon into which the gully receded many, many miles away faded into a cold, starry blackness over their heads. There was a great hole in the sky, and the world they stood upon was exposed to the Cosmos. In an instant one could fall from the land into the vast, naked universe overhead. Upon the darkness, the shrunken sun glared down, the fire of day in a midnight sky.

They made their way to the looming wall of the ravine, breathing heavily and kicking up swirls of dust as they scrambled over the rocks and down onto the gritty, red soil. Over millennia the great cliff had crumbled away, leaving deposited stone and shattered boulders lying at its base, forming steep, rocky ramps leading up to the lowest of the dark, silent cave entrances scarring the cliff face.

The boys pulled ray-guns from the holsters at their sides and surveyed the land around as they briefly rested before attempting the ascent. Simon took a mouthful of water and passed the flask to Michael. The air seemed tainted, the opposite wall of the gorge, two miles distant, appearing faded and pale, as if obscured by a haze of dust sucked up by the tenuous atmosphere. High overhead, the faintest ripples of barely corporeal clouds had furrowed the inky expanse, dimly glowing in the strange, phlegmatic sunlight.

Michael and Simon followed the trail of the monstrous Katwan plants up the steep and treacherous incline at the base of the towering miles of stone. Many times their foothold was lost upon the loose rubble which broke away beneath them, leaving the boys clutching the ground desperately as a plume of dirt rose up into the air.

For almost an hour they climbed the four hundred yards up to the cave entrances, frequently stopping to rest and each time continuing ever more resolutely, always cardinally aware that the fate of a world lay in their hands. They entered the cave they had been led to and began to walk deep into the crust of Mars.

Very soon all trace of daylight was lost, and only their torches picked out the walls of the twisting passageway leading ever downwards. Their footsteps echoed loudly about the tunnel, and shadows leaped before them in the beams of light. Michael stopped to touch the low ceiling, gazing blindly upwards through the cold, dark miles and feeling bone hard, perfectly dry stone.

Deeper and deeper, ever further into the gloomy underworld they went. For hours and miles the tunnel led progressively more steeply down. And then the boys began to feel the air moving, blowing warmly against their faces, and a peculiar, faint rushing sound was heard in the far distance. They stopped and switched off their torches. For ten seconds they could see nothing through the blackness. Then vague, dim shapes began to form around them, visible only in the corners of the eyes, disappearing when viewed directly. A cold, amber

glow was somehow leaking through into the caverns.

Michael and Simon walked on, now cautiously and stealthily, until at last they reached the end of the long, long labyrinth and the source of the light. The sight they beheld was beyond imagining. They stood on the pebbled shore of an ocean, dark and perturbed, trapped in the hollow heart of Mars. Rolling waves broke before them and lapped seething at their feet. A fine spray, borne on the beating wind, settled on the boys' hair and faces.

One could not see the walls and ceiling of that vast underground chamber, for a mist filled the air, obscuring the distance and diffusing the yellow light which permeated the world. This expanse of water was so vast that its own curvature gave it a horizon, although this line too was barely visible through the shrouded distance.

'We have to get all this water onto the surface where the colonists are,' said Michael. 'And as quickly as we can.'

But already they had been seen, and the Katwan hordes were massing on the befogged, hidden roof. Like living parachutes, they began to drop through the mist, a platoon a thousand strong, descending into the sea as a distant cloud of dark globules.

Hitting the water, they each immediately began to swim towards the boys on the shore, floundering in an angry locomotive turbulence.

Michael and Simon saw the plants falling, slowly materialising in the murky sky. The sea grew dark with the advancing drones, antibodies of that underground kingdom.

'Hurry! Set up a space-time pump in the middle of the sea!' shouted Simon over the swelling roar of the wind and waves.

Michael held a remote control module tightly in his right hand and with his left rapidly tapped at the four coloured buttons in sequence. The device jerked violently in his grasp and the control panel lit up brightly. Deep within the mist, indeed, far beyond the ocean's horizon, a silver pole of water began to rise up toward the unseen roof of the world.

A hundred sinuous tentacles were writhing in the shallow, swirling foam that hissed upon the stony beach. As the churning sea turned white, the boys saw that they had no time for retreat, no route of escape through the dark catacombs behind them. The guns in their hands, pointing aimlessly over the Katwan in a catatonic bewilderment, were useless against this entire vegetable army.

Simon's shrill and desperate voice rose above the clamour. 'Set the controls for Earth!' Their boots crunched and slid on the shingle as they tried to buy seconds, stumbling in panic onto higher ground.

Then there was complete and sudden silence. A blinding whiteness engulfed the world, and as it slowly cleared the boys felt themselves floating in a cocoon of warmth and careless happiness, high above the cratered landscape below them.

'Did we do it?' asked Michael weakly.

There seemed to be thick clouds bleeding from the ground, radiating outwards from a single point to form a spreading grey flower, slowly bursting out over the ruddy terrain. It was a torrent of water, a hundred miles across, a deluge upon the parched desert. Once more the life-giving sea belonged to the dwellers on the mountains, in the great glass cities sparkling brightly before the rays of the rising sun.

The swimming pool wall pressed against the boys' backs, the protruding stones digging into their shoulders. They stood silent amid the shouting and running, lost in an exhausted stillness, a triumphant tranquillity. Michael opened his eyes and began to dream.

The months passed, and the boys' friendship grew closer. Childhood was an endless time and the world around them was filled with infinite wonder and possibility. All dreams came true.

Michael and Simon needed only imagination and freedom to be alive. Lessons held them enthralled, for they felt their hearts grow richer with the knowledge that was imparted to their hungry minds insatiably devouring all experience. Michael began to write his stories of adventure and exploration in English class, each one longer and more imaginative, more impossible than before. These were the things he wanted to do, how he yearned for his life to be. Simon spent hours in the town library, having been given an adult ticket on the recommendation of the school, poring over books on every subject that he felt empathy with - astronomy, palaeontology, ancient history, science fiction and biology - regularly borrowing four or five each fortnight. This was growing up, and they didn't know.

Winter became spring. One day Simon came to Michael and told him what he had learned from his parents the night before. 'We're moving to Gloucester at the end of term,' he said in an easy, matter-of-fact manner.

Michael listened calmly too. He didn't ask Simon why they were going, or if it were really definite. 'Oh,' he just said, and continued to munch on his apple, gazing away from his friend at the trees growing behind the black railings.

Their world suddenly split, and the ice floes they became stranded upon drifted far apart, further than shores across an ocean, further even than Mars. Michael and Simon never met again. All they had left was the indissoluble memory of the places they had been to and the passionate embrace of science which they had helped to nurture within each other's hearts. There was no one else in their schools, and the boys faced their futures alone.

My teacher, I rely on you. My world is in your hands. If you cannot show me the burning trees, the exploding stars, the crystal seas we walk upon, the splitting mountains, the sea-shell galaxies turning in the midday sky, the rainbow clouds with the curve of the pitted, grey moon consuming half the firmament just fifty miles beyond them, then let me be, that I may show these things to you.

CHAPTER 22
RAIN

Will it never stop? There is a deep ocean above us, low over our heads, heavy and bursting, which has been running down onto the land for six days. A grey, blank emptiness presses us into the cold, colourless Earth.

Fierce waves of wind and rain lash the window I look through, and the pane is ice to my touch. I see the garden, dulled by the dark sky and distorted through the water that streams in clear, shining rivulets, pooling into irregular, amoebic globules upon the glass. Long ago, the sky drowned beneath the storm-blown waves of the great sea.

The gale is trapped and swirls howling into the corners where the house and the dark, creosoted fence meet, rising angrily above the volleys of raindrops dashing thunderously against the windows and wall. Something stirs within my heart, evoked by a violent sky, something half-remembered, half-understood. I see endless rows of tumbled sheds, their once bright colours peeling away, exposing bare timber that seems but tenuously held together. No rain, just tremendous humidity and suffocating heat. There are no people in the pictures that my

constricting soul has expelled; there is no hope, anywhere. This spark of memory dies, and I am torn away from the vision I have glimpsed.

Though the room is barely lit by the tortured daylight, and the cold numbs my hands, I feel cocooned and isolated, far removed from the world in which the storm rages, a world that lies beyond the glass just inches from the wicker chair in which I sit. To step outside would be to be hurled spinning helplessly into the vacuum of space. I close in on myself and watch the bare trees of winter writhe, flailing tangled branches in mad, hysterical grief.

Through the sheets of rain I look for the colours that had been there, many, many ages before. But only brown and green remain, deep and bleak, entwined and strangled with black. That place is a shell crater. Where is the future? Where is anything, anything at all, still living?

CHAPTER 23
CONTROL

For days I felt so very, very old. Looking out of the library window at the footpath cutting through the long, neglected grass, I saw that something cold, invisible and nameless had devoured the world. Inside me, too, there was nothing left, only a terrible soulless emptiness. Yet at no time did I despair or panic, for I did not truly feel a permanence in the darkness that had descended. I knew that with all my friends around me I could cope with and soon bury the pain.

Joining ETOPS, I had emerged from long, dark years of isolation, when there would be whole weeks like cold iron chains, linked by interminable and identically anonymous nights and mornings, during which I saw and spoke to no one. But now I woke each day with the certainty that when the western sky had finally turned again to blackness, I would have had conversations and some form of human acknowledgement of my existence. Never once throughout that year did I put this from my mind. Nor did I allow myself to forget that the present was a sacred, privileged time, and that ETOPS would finish in December when I would be

alone once more. So many times I would look around me, at the classroom or the bars, repeating to myself that this was really here and now, that the world was happening at that very moment. I would open my senses to the whole room, desperately trying to experience and remember every detail of that single point in time, to somehow make that one second eternal.

I had gastric damage. There were nights when I awoke sick and stood at my bedroom window for an hour or more, looking through the lace curtains at the silent, orange street. I imagined a growing ulcer, welling blood which slowly filled my stomach and rose up into my oesophagus. Later I conjectured that maybe there was no physical trauma, but that the acid had acted to imprint on my mind the sickness I had felt that day, where it remained forever impregnated.

The polytechnic refused to give us our exam results. After our second set of papers we were evasively told that Christine Hurst would discuss our progress with us.

She visited us during a workshop class, and was shown around as we nailed pieces of wood together. The polytechnic and the MSC were playing an embarrassingly transparent game with each other.

‘See, we’ve got them working for you,’ the poly staff were required to gesture.

Hurst’s role was then to nod keenly, implicitly expressing the response, ‘Oh yes. Good!’

It was a rule of this charade that neither side should ever admit to the tacit absurdity of the situation.

Chris Hurst wanted to speak to some of us privately, one at a time in a side room.

‘Well, I really can’t discuss my results with you, because we haven’t been given them,’ I told her.

A look of puzzlement crossed her face. It was evident that the college had not informed her that it was not going to release the results to us. I was angry because we were not being treated as students of the polytechnic, as members of an academic institute. We were seen as trainees of the MSC, which had leased the services of the polytechnic. Yet later, when company representatives were invited to consider offering us industrial experience placements, we found that they had been given our marks, even though we still had no access to them.

On recovering her poise, she told me that none of our results had been very good at all, but a few of us had not done as well as the others. Surely, I

thought, the latter was true of any exam - a spread of marks was inevitable. We were all being pushed down to the required level, and some of us too far. I had been treated with greater respect, and had been allowed so much more freedom and responsibility for my work when I had been in the sixth form at school. And now here we were, educated adults, being made to discard every reason we had for being alive.

Our conversation was long and bitter. It was as much as I could do to not raise my voice. But what could I ultimately say to her? Neither of us knew why I and the others were there.

Why did you do this to me, Christine Hurst? Why did you pull me through hell's torments and demand still more? All I've ever done has been for you.

That day I lost control.

I relinquished command over my behaviour and started to crumble away socially and personally. For the first days immediately after my journey, alcohol seemed to be nothing, a child's toy, quite vapid compared against that which I had experienced. But then it became a fire put to my petroleum mind, and being drunk was now a mental self-immolation, a hysteria born of the sub-surface damage inflicted on all that I was. I had only my

awful, hateful, madness to offer others, as in days I severed all the friendships I so greatly valued and needed.

My joy at existing, my lust for life, each day collided head on with my frustration at the incomprehension in the eyes of the people around me, producing this terrible report that drove me to my sickening behaviour. I had spent years alone, and now I had no idea how to react to other souls.

We had been talking for some weeks about spending an afternoon and evening in London, and finally decided one Wednesday to go and see The Wall, which had just opened in Leicester Square.

I was preparing myself for my next experiment, waiting for my health problems to resolve themselves. If I had had any seeds I think I would have taken them that night. I felt that now I understood something of the experience my next journey would not be so catastrophic. But by the grace of God I couldn't find any - I remember trying - and caught the train to London with my friends with an unadulterated mind.

The film was engrossing and poignant. It was as if a higher power were trying to reach out to me, to send me a warning that if, during the journey I was

stepping out on, I stumbled or lost my way, then I could become like this. But the message never reached me, for I saw only the glory of what I was doing, while the film's protagonist was a madman. These were two wholly unrelated worlds.

We walked to Covent Garden market to have a beer, pushing our way through the bustling crowds. I found I could hardly drink, as if my body were resolutely trying to reject all alcohol. I slowly forced my pint down, and my pain and nausea grew.

Then we took the tube to Kings Cross so that we could be sure of catching the last train back. After wandering the dark backstreets for a while - our number giving us at least some feeling of security - we found a small pub.

I didn't want to drink any more, I didn't want to breathe the smoke, I didn't even want human company - the one aspect of ETOPS more precious to me than anything else. While the others were inside, drinking, laughing, I sat on a dustbin on the pavement, deeply breathing the cool night air. I wanted to turn back.

One night we all slept on the floor in Paul's new lounge, after a house-warming party in the isolated cottage he had rented just off the North Orbital

Road, a short way opposite the polytechnic. I was determined to make myself well, and my immediate measure of my health was my response and tolerance to alcohol. I wondered if a 'clean' spirit might be easier to consume, so I walked to the off-licence behind the Hilltop and bought a half-bottle of vodka.

At six in the morning, as the others slept, I left the carnage I had caused, silently walking away from that place and all that I had imposed on them. The vodka and a polypin of cider had intensely aggravated my stomach damage, and now I felt terribly sick, shaking and barely managing to walk the verge at the side of the dual carriageway.

For three days I lived only on small bowls of minestrone or tomato soup I had at mid-day in the Hilltop. I had forgotten all about not having paid for the food I had ordered and left uneaten on the day of my calamitous research. Sandra never mentioned it, and by that time I had been drawn in far too deeply to even consider that I might have owed the Hilltop money. Everything was falling away, and I was completely, completely out of control.

CHAPTER 24
THE GLASS HOTEL

It takes so long to fall asleep. We plunge to dark places beyond this world and find ourselves in wooden rooms, hunched beneath low, sagging ceilings hung with invisible cobwebs that catch in our hair and stick like insects to our faces. We cannot move, our heads feel so large and heavy, shaking ever more violently and slowly filling with the thick, viscous, impenetrable blackness. Then we suddenly wake and cannot breathe; it seems that we have not taken a breath in many minutes. Struggling upright, we are finally able to gasp. Then it begins once more. It is always the same place, the same decaying building, barely lit in the deep, silent night, that fevered we return to over and over again. I don't know where those rooms and chains of endless, cold corridors are. I don't recognise where the house they are in stands. Is it some vast subway complex beneath the Earth? Beneath the conscious mind? The desecrated museum of memory? It is all these things. It is everything which will remain in the desolate world when all hope has finally left us.

And so both nights continue. We pass from one

choking underworld back to the other, waking into our freezing lives, then re-emerging into the blackness and horror of our dream.

What is it here that crushes my skull and sets me upon this endless loop of confusion? In the dim candlelight I can just make out that I am in a lounge or a waiting room. People's faces turn away from me and I am alone. There is so little space above me. I crouch. I crawl. I have lost something and endlessly search. This is where they took all memory of my conscious life from me. I have been here before.

And so, finally, I sleep.

Is this my school? It has changed; there are passageways and rooms that I do not remember, halls and doors that have been rebuilt or added or blocked off. And when is this? Though vaguely aware that I am much too old to be here, I still recognise so many of the people that pass me. I feel that I have been away for a long, long time.

I should be studying for exams. I believe that they must be A-levels, but something stops me from understanding anything of what I'm doing in this place. I have missed so many classes; I cannot even remember starting the courses. And what has been done to the common room? It is now above a ladder

leading to a mezzanine level where, I am sure, the ceiling used to be. I have a faded and torn timetable. Parts of the week are missing or illegible and I cannot tell when my lessons are, nor the room numbers which I must try and find. I cannot remember where to go or what to do here.

So I walk the corridors of the large block of classrooms where I somehow feel I ought to be. I peer through the windows in the doors and sometimes see people I once knew. But should I not be there also? I don't know which subjects I'm studying, so after a time I concede that I must miss yet more lessons. And if I ever do find the right room, what will they say when I haven't turned up for so many weeks? The exams approach and I know nothing.

Each time, the world is familiar yet grossly mutated. This must be the hall of residence at the university. There are so many people here in the dining hall. But the plates are being collected and everyone is leaving the room. I waited so long for the lift, and then had to return upstairs when I saw I had forgotten my shoes, that I have missed dinner.

Then, through the will of some controlling power, I find I have crossed the town to be in a large, meticulously tended park. I walk through gardens

intersected by limestone steps and paths. Pillars stand over fountains feeding the cold, bubbling streams that wind across the campus. It is so regal and bright. A sparkling steel castle, an oil refinery flanked by skeletal, towering cranes, looms over us all.

And I stand at the doors of the Physics department and look inside at the concourse. I cannot leave this place. The exams draw near and I have three weeks in which to learn everything. I cannot try harder, and there is no alternative open to me in this dream reality but to stay here.

In the Union there is an underground network of yellow and brown passages and tunnels that seem to have evolved and branched out without any architectural preplanning. The floors slope, and reception desks are awkwardly cut into each available shadowy recess and juncture of the linoleum paths. People swarm, rushing in all directions but mine. All routes are futile; I am too late for everything.

In a world without weather or sky, a strange, dusty daylight falls on the village. Every house stands upon its own dishevelled and wild island garden, and across each eyot slope green lawns and plots of

serried vegetables. Runner beans climb twisting around bamboo towers that rise above the rusting wire fences and dark hedges. I can see a child's ball abandoned on the grass, a garden fork standing upright in the turned soil, cracked glass greenhouses and tumbling wooden sheds.

These cells of enisled land, raised as by earthquakes to a diversity of levels, group together to form a network of paths and alleys along the spaces between them. Where the track becomes too steep, concrete steps have been cut into the dirt bank.

I am trying to journey somewhere. I drive my car around these narrow thoroughfares, but there are no road signs, no end to the maze. The vehicle is becoming ever smaller; I must pedal to make my way along what are no more than footpaths and I can put my feet through the floor and walk up the steps, desperately trying to restore locomotion to the frail, wheeled frame clinging about my leaden legs. But I find that the metal has turned to cellophane.

Now I have parked and set off on foot to find the lecture room.

On another world, the imminent sunrise warms the eastern sky with a slowly spreading pink and orange glow. Birdsong ignites in the dark mass of trees.

But in a parallel night, one still perfectly black, I search the silent, empty, colourless streets for the place where, long ago, I had left my car.

None of these that I pass at the kerbside are mine. Only half a dozen vehicles stand scattered around the vast car-park behind the shopping parade and my keys do not fit the doors. Did I leave it here? Have I even ever been to this place, this eternal night, before? Too much time has passed; I cannot remember.

My car has been taken from me. I retrace my desperate steps over and over. Perhaps it has been changed beyond recognition and I have missed it? I search the side-streets, but none of the cold, dark shapes I make out through the gloom are what I seek. I have lost my home and my body and feel that nothing will return them to me.

There are times, however, when I do eventually find my vehicle, in the very place where I had been repeatedly looking. But often I awake still searching, and as daylight stirs me I feel a tremendous surge of relief wash over me and know that the life I had been living had not been real.

I stand in a grassy dale and the horizon all around is hidden behind the ruff of the pine forest. The sky is

blue, but I cannot see the sun. Somewhere, far beyond the trees, I begin to discern the almost inaudible whirr of a helicopter. The deep, violent tone slowly grows ever louder upon the still air, and now I see it, a red craft rising above the distant woodland, slowly approaching the isolated basin in which I stand.

I cannot feel anything here. The world is so small and empty and it is as if all that I can see is in fact the whole universe. The hills I stand on rise and fall about me, but the grass beneath my feet is paper, torn and straggled. There is nothing within or beyond the physical world, no numinous beauty, no distant memories or half-forgotten dreams or questions to be stirred within us. The chill, bland vacuum frightens me.

Nothing of what I see is living. The distant pines are simplified representations of trees. They are frozen and still, for no wind blows from the sky so clear and close. The blueness is a wall around the tiny world, painted brightly and keeping us from an eternal, vast nothingness so incomprehensible that it itself can barely be said to exist. This place has been patched together from nothing more than plasticine and cardboard. This is a world without miracles.

As the land becomes smaller and ever less real, like a backdrop in a glove-puppet theatre, I feel more and more helpless and meaningless, lost in something invisible and immense, quite, quite alone. We are the fallen and our souls have been taken from us.

The craft hovers fifty yards above me now, dropping steadily onto the long dead shore of my dream. It is a red balloon.

My heart is beating fast. The brightly lit subway stretches into a confused distance in both directions and I hear the thunder of trains, brakes squealing, doors opening in bursts of expelled air. The rumbling permeates the walls and inclined concrete floor. I had been walking among a crowd of people, but they had gradually filtered off from the passage, walking through doorways and ascending stairs, until only I remained, not understanding where I was. Perhaps the trains run through this tunnel and the roar that I hear will build until there is no other sound, when the warm air blasts my body and light suddenly explodes at the distant source of the gale.

Always, I escape into another reality. Waking is survival. Yet there will come a time when I will not remember how to wake, when I will find that I am

indeed in the train tunnel and have finally reached the ultimate level of my humanity.

CHAPTER 25
THE LAST DAY

This place where I sit is the edge of the world. Before me an endless, flat, blue-green plain stretches for long miles, continuing forever beyond the curve of the Earth. The sun has risen and the east is on fire, bright white flame lighting each momentary wave, until the far distant sea is swarming with shards of light.

To the south and west flocks of white gulls settle on the water, while others circle and swoop, flapping apprehensively just above the surface. The melee of their brassy cries echoes wildly over the beach. There was a time, so long ago, when we wished only to be as the gulls are.

This is the very place where continent and ocean meet, a collision of the oldest and most powerful opposite forces in the natural world. The sea and land were once the only places we knew. How strange, then, are the calm and serenity, the peace that washes over the golden beach with the lapping waves and lies in the baking sand and pebbles. This is no violent clash of Titans, no destructive discontinuity ripping Earth's face open. Languidly, the waves roll across the shallow water, breaking up

in a white foam as they reach the shoreline at an angle. The sea pulls back for a moment, before once more spilling forward, again and again, for ever and ever. Sand and cracked shells, dark weed and shingle, are carried back and forth helplessly upon the ocean's breath.

The shells of cockles, snails and mussels are deposited among the gleaming, wet stones with each wave that washes ashore. White, blue and black shapes, eroded and broken, lie among the flints and sandstones. Green algae cling to some, others are encrusted with barnacles. How many shells and stones, how many sand grains are there along this shore? There must be as many as there are stars in the universe.

Sand has piled up against the breakwaters we have cut into the beach to protect the coast. These low fences were made a thousand years ago, of a matt, peach-coloured alloy that no tides or tempest could destroy. Over time the compartmentalised breakers have serrated the shoreline, and to both sides of me the beach is a chain of curves, fading into the distant haze.

Brarn cluster in the cloudless sky. Above the constant rush and sigh of the receding tide, from time to time I make out the brief, faint hum falling

from above as they replenish the tyell and stratify cadence.

I construct my hand and stoop to run my fingers through the cold water. Once, I was like this.

At peace beneath the heat of the midday sun, I lie back against the weathered stone wall that runs along the highest part of the beach. I fold my wings and close my eye. We will never see the sun again.

A million years have passed since we were human. Unbelievably, the Earth and mind survive, and the ponderous wheel of seasons remains imperceptibly turning upon its ancient, eternal cosmic axle. The inevitable Phoenix of spring will arise from the cold ashes of winter smeared across the barren land by the north wind, always, always, until our dear, wondrous world itself is no more, swallowed by the giant, scarlet, dying sun.

It was in the deep, vast sea I look out upon that we opened our eyes, in times almost forgotten, living out scenes of legend. We were mermen, awakening from the long dream of our evolution, into contemplation and reason. It was here that we first tried to remember antiquity and to retell our journey, and the waters were filled with our kind, some of us giants, some swift and lithe, all of us the sum of our

myths and genetic memories.

Long before this, the sea had been the place of our birth, our creation. We had crawled from its shallows gasping, drowning in the air, burning in the drying sun, yet still for some of us the land, the trees, the sky remained our home. So countless aeons passed and that which we became returned to the oceans. And there our minds opened and bloomed.

But others among us had stayed, afraid, in the jungles and on the desert plains. And in our legends we spoke of a time when, after millions upon millions of years, they also would someday return, to be with us in paradise.

So, finally, when a hundred thousand generations had passed, our brothers and sisters came back to us. But when they appeared we could no longer recognise them, for they had become devils. Marauding the seas, they had come to slaughter us and to drown our songs in the roaring thunder of the hell they had sprung from. We could not speak. We could not retreat. We were dying.

And on the land, we – that part of us which has lineage to the devils - proliferated, to the point when the Earth became full several times over. And we saw that we too were dying, but that our end would

come upon us when we choked on our own uncontrollable number. This was our beginning, a time when people were barely alive. For inside our hearts there were but cold, brick walls and razor wire fences blockading the gateways to the summer gardens of Creation. The numinous light did burn inside us, but it was lost deep, deep beneath what we proudly held to be our humanity. We were scarcely spiritual beings.

The world we had made for ourselves in turn instilled and reinforced the dull, blanketing, spiritually muffling fog that lay over our hearts, and thus, in these first years of reason and sentience, it was left to but a very few to do what they could for us, to carry and nurture the flame of the knowledge of who we were. And such people we persecuted, imprisoned and murdered, robbing them of their will and their work, for clearly they were alien and mad, agitating our hidden, settled fears and perfect, silent order.

Then came the Last War, the war that ended wars. We found that we were angels, and the way to shed our stagnant humanity was revealed to us by the very science we had tried to suppress and destroy. But as we approached the gateway to the stars and eternal truth we became filled with fear and

trepidation. A panic rose up in our society. A great door opened before us and we passed between two towering pillars of granite, onto the killing fields of Armageddon.

The revelation that the innate mental characteristics of future generations could be genetically controlled was the most brutally divisive knowledge we had ever received. Mankind was torn apart. Some of us covered our eyes from this horror and turned away; some ran towards impossible sanctuary. Others were overcome with a wild rapture, for they believed that the spiritual revolution suddenly lay but a generation ahead. We all looked upon the inevitable Changing in the monochromatic light of our own obsessions and desires. And thus there were those who wanted for their children a certain vile acumen that would give them a strong foothold - or perhaps simply the chance of survival - in the world that already was. None of them dreamed that they would all but destroy us, for these people did not dream.

In those Dark Ages Mammon still lived, ruling over us by keeping as many of our hearts and minds firmly closed as it possibly could. So society itself, the law we made ourselves live by, already served the capitalists. It was they, the henchmen of

Mammon's oppression, who had had, for all history, the unequivocal upper-hand over the artists and scientists - the seeing few who somehow, against all chance, recognised and embraced the monumental responsibility of the individual. Therefore, as we began to identify the multitude of possible roads to take, the only true route forward was immediately land-mined, and crazy, empty souls surged down other paths, blindly and lasciviously into greed and conflict.

We were plunged into our darkest winter, a sustained and bitter Genetic War. Our survival, our victory over ourselves, even this day seems to have been impossible.

Yet here, as heroes, we are.

The first Overman walked among us, his family and friends, unassumingly, humbly. He took such joy in immersing himself in the spring water of human achievement that we felt humbled too, and it was as if his open arms that drew us close to him made supermen of our kind. He told us that the privilege bestowed upon him lay not in being as he was, but in being with us.

We kept our human forms, though we were more than that, though this was the image of only the larval precursor of what we now were. We knew no

other way to be. Yet our minds had been released from an eternal, fettering darkness.

It was as if we had evolved and staged our whole history upon a world shrouded by a thick, impenetrable cover of global, unbroken, perpetual cloud. Our technological capability advanced, after countless millennia, to a stage where we could at last rise above the land and pass deep into the unknown heart of the foaming sky. And so there came a day when one of us undertook this journey. Madman, fool, the spittle of our abuse fell over him; and others, as the metal shell around him broke through the ceiling of the world and disappeared, mourned the waste of his passed life.

But the man continued his flight, unseen and unseeing through the opaque grey beyond the glass of his capsule window.

Then in a moment the blindness cleared into sparse strands of wispy vapour swirling upon a world of impossible distance and contrast, the like of which no being ever had witnessed. A light, a fire brighter than a billion lanterns, burned before him, searing into his pained, narrowed eyes. Turning away, desperately shading his head with his hands, he looked out upon a darkness deeper than any night he knew or could imagine.

And it was then that he caught his breath and froze. It was then that the skin of his face suddenly paled and his eyes widened and mouth opened in uncomprehending stasis.

The stars . . . the stars.

So now the mind had tremendous and unprecedented power. We were in awe, not of ourselves, but of what our perception, amplified a hundred-fold, unveiled to us. For we are open wounds upon the backdrop of space-time, and through these apertures, each of us through our own window, can see the Light beyond. Sentience perforates the pervasive night. It is the mind which both tears the fabric and opposes the tension of the gaping hole, dilating it to the fullest possible extent. This resistance offered to the relentlessly constricting overview of the numinous, this brief touching of the sacred, is all that we know as Holy. And upon our deaths the portal of living snaps shut forever.

We changed the mind and widened the window, living in perpetual prayer and communion with God. Finally, we had returned to Eden.

For the first time in all history we controlled what we were and what we would be, for only now did

the people, as an entire race, understand and believe in an unequivocal Destiny. Within five centuries the number of individuals on Earth was reduced to barely a hundred million. The natural world we had almost irrevocably destroyed began to revive and grow again, spreading dark, cool forests over where we removed or buried the redundant roads and cities, and a vast wilderness returned to the world beyond the architecture and conviviality of our remaining towns and centres of learning and cultural beauty. Rescued narrowly from obliteration, Earth once more came to life, and offered us each the freedom and abandon of its unchartered byways, open moors, valleys, mountains and seas.

Our waste and dirt we recycled perfectly; indeed, with the razing of almost all the factories there was immediately far less potential for pollution to concern us. The oceans and streams ran pure and clear, the air was a joy to breathe, our lungs tingling at each deep breath, and the rain and dew were soft, untainted droplets of distilled water. We returned the extant species of those whom we had once called animals to great unbounded lands which we knew would provide a habitat where they could survive and proliferate. We recognised and declared that they were people, something no one had ever

said before. Earth flowered again, and the terrestrial cup of life ran over.

Our art and science flourished, accelerating as the energy of our sentience was directed at breaking the chains that bound us to the planet.

But there was nowhere for us to go - the difficulties inherent in interstellar travel were still too great to overcome. And tempering our will to work in this area was the fact that we were so happy on Earth. There was no population explosion forcing us toward other planets, no reason to leave our paradise home. Our science was driven only by our desperate desire to learn who we were and whence we had come.

Thus we have lived upon this isolated and tiny rock until this day, a million years beyond the spiritual revolution. We have passed through such immense changes, such fundamental restructuring of the faculties and vision we comprise, that we barely recognise ourselves.

Even in the timeless wonderland that we have made of Earth, there have been crises which we have faced and parried. When we initially gleaned the knowledge that could grant us immortality, for the first time we felt fear and asked ourselves whether we ought to censor scientific research.

Hitherto we could not have contemplated such a question. We were afraid to tamper with what had been the most imponderable mystery of living - death. Eternal life could destroy us, we conjectured. Similarly, we had not allowed the intellect to expand more than about tenfold. Plagued with misgiving, and the uncertainty of where we were being led, we had always tried to remain as close to human as we could, and only as far from it as we dared.

But the pace of scientific progress by that point in history was too great for our conscious will to hold back. As ever, we careered into the unknown morass of covered knowledge and in time found that we could be anything we wanted to be. There were no restrictions at all, not even imagination, on how being and thinking could possibly be transformed. Faced with choices ranged before us from horizon to horizon, we embraced them all.

Some of us chose to retain physical bodies. Within this plethora of forms we incorporated minds ten thousand, a hundred thousand times larger, swifter, wiser, more creative and brilliantly steeped in the Great Light which we opened yawning chasms onto than those we had dared to live in until then.

Humanity was ended.

Others eschewed corporeal existence altogether

and entered a limitless cyberspace - a reality of pure mathematics. It was as if this part of us was irredeemably detached from the universe of the sea and air and stars. But still, somehow, contact and interaction with this virtual cosmos was maintained. All of Earth's New Life was fluid and unconstrained by our physical isolation in space, so that we grew to accept that the differences among us were superficial and, ultimately, illusory.

We had become that which we had feared becoming - immortal. Yet this was not the eternal life that our forebears had contemplated with such dread. In those ancient times we would grow so old that eventually we were left counting the days to death; if we counted for too long the mind began to fall apart. Sometimes dementia would disease the brain and our eventual demise would come upon us, unnoticed, in the darkness of a dank cellar of sentience, a confused, desultory half-world where cause and meaning were arcane, intangible quantities slowly drifting away from what was left of us. It seemed that eternal life would bring with it unending old age.

But in fact the mind that we had engineered was an ever changing, kaleidoscopic cosmos of infinite possibility and ecstasy. There could be no

stagnation, no melancholy, no disease, only awesome, boundless power. It was as if we led existences of continual, gradated reincarnation. We no longer merely cheated death - we actually did not understand its meaning.

We have found the Other Place. It has always been here; how could we not have seen it? How could we not have understood that we can depart this world at any time? Now we have prepared and are ready, and this is our last day upon Earth. Tomorrow we leave for ever.

So here I sit, gazing across the waves and into the blue sky one final time. These are the waters in which we were created. This place is the only home we have ever known. I feel sadness, and a chill sweeps my heart as I realise that this is a pain that no one has experienced in almost a million years; our leaving has rekindled the embers of our humanity. A part of us has turned full circle.

There is just one cloud high above me, changing shape, slowly forming pictures in the firmament. Then I see what it has become: a great white dragon watches me, silently, almost incuriously.

We know only our continuing journey. Somewhere, long lost, there lies a place, both our

destination and point of embarkation.

CHAPTER 26
ZOOM

At the end of August, after a three week break, we returned to Hatfield and the second half of ETOPS. My stomach problems had subsided considerably during this short recess, for I had spent the time relaxed and unhurried, with all care and burden suddenly lifted away. I could almost forget about the relentless pressure on me to become something I was not. I used these late summer days walking far and thinking, alone in the countryside without the demands of people keeping me from my reality.

Some of us had to immediately resit the last exams we had taken. John, in fact, took his for the first time. There had been some end of year social function at his old university which he had desperately wanted to go to, and he had asked his landlady to ring in to the polytechnic that Thursday morning and tell them that he was ill in bed and would not be able to attend the exam. John by this time, however, had hopped on the train and was already northbound for a weekend of drunken revelry. So while the rest of us had no revision time at all for that exam, John had a month and a half. This was not ‘fair’, but what could we do? None of

us would have betrayed him.

Before starting our industrial placements we began a two week computing course. Again I consciously recognised that during ETOPS I was almost in shock at being with other people all the time. Each day was so precious. I tried to make every minute last for ever, to never go away.

We were all in agreement that one doesn't really *learn* in lectures, rather that they are simply sources of information as to what we need to study - detailed resumes of the content of the syllabus. But I felt that more than any of them I really did absorb absolutely nothing in class, sitting there, pen in hand, obsessively thinking only of my higher work. I was amazed to look over Alan's shoulder and see him actually making his own notes on the photocopied sheets we had all been given. In fact I could not concentrate on anything at all other than my precise vocation, as I single-mindedly hurtled towards either doom or salvation.

We had to prepare an oral presentation on one of a number of assigned topics of computer hardware. Dave Johnson, our lecturer, asked me to speak about the development of the various types of computer information storage devices. All the sources I used seemed to describe the information on magnetic

discs as being stored in a series of concentric circles, rather than in a spiral which the head would be able to easily track. When I pointed this ambiguity out, Johnson just laughed quizzically and asked 'What's the difference between concentric circles and a spiral?' If he couldn't see, then nothing I could have said would have explained it to him, I thought. I shut my eyes for a second then continued. But otherwise I'd felt that the talk had gone well, and that I'd been lucid and articulate in my presentation.

'Well done,' smiled Alan as I sat down.

The course required that we spend six weeks 'in industry'. A small group of students worked at British Aerospace in Hatfield, while others were placed in ones and twos with various electronics companies in Hertfordshire and West Essex.

I and two others were left without a firm to go to - the polytechnic had been supposed to find places for all of us before those six weeks began, but had failed to do so. It was still the summer recess for the rest of the college, so there were hardly any other people there as I turned up each day at ten o'clock, visited the department for news, and waited around until midday before going home. On some

days I caught the same bus as the nurse, who would recognise me and coldly glare.

The polytechnic eventually managed to find a firm in Watford which was prepared to take me for a period of five weeks. Ed Lewis had worked there before joining the college, and it was almost as a favour to him that they offered a place for one ETOPS student. I was the last to be placed.

The daily journey between Welwyn Garden City and Watford was torturous. I left without breakfast at six o'clock each morning, and walked the steep path through the twilight up Ludwick Way, over the railway bridge, and down to the town centre, a trek which in itself took me half an hour. From the green in front of the Campus West theatre I caught the bus to Watford Junction station. I then made my way to the High Street from where I took a second bus, passing the football ground and hospital, to Digital Electronics on the Tolpits industrial estate.

I walked from the bus-stop near Watford West station along Tolpits Lane, turning right into Croxley View. At the bottom of the road there was a footpath leading between the houses, across a lawn, and into Greenhill Crescent where the factory was. Violet wild roses grew at the side of the path, and in a deep field stood a white, shattered elm strangled

with ivy. I felt I had caught a glimpse of heaven.

Digital Electronics designed and built medical equipment for a larger international organisation called Roche-Kontron, specialising in the manufacture of bedside cardiac monitors and defibrillators, mainly for use in British hospitals. The factory comprised two buildings facing each other across Greenhill Crescent. On the east side were the design and development departments and the equipment stores, while the other site housed the personnel offices and manufacturing shop floor. I spent a week in development, before being moved to a bench in the test department. Here I made sure that various printed circuit boards were working correctly, and tried to find the cause of any faults they may have had. About eighty people worked in this large open planned area as the radio played inescapably through speakers on the walls.

I had difficulty in explaining ETOPS to the people I worked with. TOPS courses were generally intended for unqualified school-leavers, and when I told them that this one was graduate entry they asked if I had in that case just left school. Even when people knew that I had studied Physics at University, they assumed that my studies had included a great deal of electronics. No, they

hadn't, I tried to explain. Yet I couldn't blame them for not being able to grasp the nature of the course; ETOPS defied even our comprehension.

Terry Hayes came to see me one afternoon. He met first with one of the managers, then pulled a chair up next to me and asked a few prepared questions. What sort of tasks had I been given to do? Could I see myself doing this for any length of time, or even for all my working life? No, I most certainly could not, I replied. I tried to imagine coming here day after day, year after year, leaving home before the sun had risen, and returning at nine o'clock, again in darkness. It was unthinkable. That would not be being alive. It was only the knowledge that I was there for just those few weeks which gave me the strength to keep going in each day.

'That's interesting,' said Terry. 'All the others said that as well.' He wrote something in his notebook.

I wasn't completely blind to my future. I did think about it, and each time recoiled with the cold shock and horror of my own prescience.

When Terry had left, the test department manager asked me what I envisaged doing during my spell at Digital Electronics. I couldn't answer him. I had been sent there because it was part of the course. I

had no knowledge of what the underlying purpose was. When they had asked Hayes this, he had apparently been very vague and evasive. It seemed that he did not know either.

It was the end of the summer. Yellow leaves and sycamore helicopters lay on the wet pavements, and the mornings became darker and cooler. A violent metamorphosis was upon the world.

My travel difficulties were compounded by a bus strike which meant that on some days after work I had to take a train from Watford West station to St Albans, and from there a bus on the restricted service to Welwyn Garden City. And one morning I was forced to travel into London by train, then, after a tube journey from King's Cross to Euston, back out again to Watford. Hot and tired, I eventually reached Digital Electronics at around eleven o'clock. Nobody there was very concerned about my late arrival. They weren't paying me and knew that I had a long way to come each day. 'I understand you're working for us for nothing,' one of the managers once said to me. 'What a generous chap you are!'

I knew of a place, a secret, hidden field far from the cold, bleak world of concrete, steel and death, where

holy manna had rained down from heaven to Earth. One Sunday I gathered over a hundred liberty caps there. A line of oak trees screened me from the busy main road, and I found myself alone under the stretching blue sky, on my knees in the long, wet grass. With my fingers I bent back the blades time and time again, until I saw the little tawny jewels gleaming in the dirt. I found that the earth around cow-pats was alive with mushrooms; it had rained the night before and some of the fruit bodies had grown to a diameter of over half an inch. It was as if nobody else knew of that place. As I gathered my harvest I truly believed that I was performing the single most important and holy act of humankind's tenure on this world.

On the evening of the nineteenth of October we were to meet in the Union bar. Each Tuesday night during the industrial experience period, when we did not see each other daily, we would normally convene at the Hatfield Arms opposite the station for a drink and to discuss the tribulations of our respective companies. I so looked forward to those gatherings, almost running with happy joy across the twilit park to catch the bus from outside the hospital. My stomach still felt unsettled, and I had to restrict myself to just two pints on each of those

evenings, knowing that otherwise the next morning I would feel very ill. In fact, the nausea I constantly suffered, aggravated again by the renewed pressure of the long days of travel and labour, was at its worst between my waking and midday. I felt my volatile health hanging by tenuous, frayed threads.

But that baneful night, in the week before the final term of ETOPS began, we decided to go up to the polytechnic instead. Deprived of sleep and freedom, I was feeling ever more tired on returning home each night. Walking back from the town centre bus-stop I would pass the Chinese restaurant in Woodhall Parade, from where I often bought a take-away meal to eat in my room. I stopped off there that evening for the last time.

The two foil dishes stood uncovered and steaming on the formica desk-top before me. I opened the wardrobe and from the floor beneath the hanging clothes picked up a large piece of tissue paper. I placed it on the table, sat down and started to remove the dried mushrooms and drop them in the curry. After three days they had turned dark brown, their hard, shrivelled heads sticking to the paper. I must have placed well over fifty fully grown mushrooms in the dish, mixing them into the sauce

with the white plastic fork. I ate my Last Supper.

Alighting from the bus at Hatfield town centre, I stood in the dark, chill night and looked up at the swarm of fiery orange street lamps tangled in the sky above. Double rows of burning lights converged upon me from all directions, and I felt I was floating at the hub of a vast spinning galaxy of sodium. How bright these wildly careering flares seemed. I began to laugh with a strange intangible joy as I walked down what had once been Cavendish Way.

Before me stood a great cliff of crumbling stone, its almost sheer face lit by fires of purple and scarlet. I looked skywards to the summit and saw a castle of glass, an unearthly, maledictory glow exuding from the silent turrets and battlements fixed against a firmament of impossibly brilliant stars. I began to be filled with a curious disquiet, and looked around for a way to run. But there was nowhere except through the doors behind me - the locked, impregnable gateway to the past.

I found myself standing within a hallway. Every floor tile and wall panel shone with turquoise and violet light as I walked through the door of the bar. Suddenly all was dark and silent. Death and decay permeated the empty room. If there had ever been

people there they had long ago departed the world, leaving nothing behind but the scattered ashes of their profane conversations, long forgotten and sucked as dust into the stale, dank air. I knew no one there. A tremendous fear overcame me.

What was I to do? I looked down along the endless corridor and saw great swathes of variegated colour being twisted toward an all consuming blackness. In desperation and horror I ran out into the blind night and searched through the mass of voices and hidden faces for someone that I knew. I began to walk the long road back to the station.

Two or three times that day at work, the mindless music we all mandatorily listened to had included an inane song that had somehow lodged in my head, where it had been looping endlessly all afternoon. *...zoom, take the day away/the moon and stars came out to play/one look and my heart went boom/flying high through a neon sky* . . . Over and over, ceaselessly and uncontrollably, this vivid tune continued in an absurd juxtaposition to the ferment of my soundless screaming.

There were short wooden posts around the town centre car-park, and I sat down on one, breathless and exhausted. I felt a terrible pain in my chest, my overdriven heart straining with exertion and panic. I

thought I would die. I thought I would die and remain conscious. I thought that this fire would stay with me forever. The long, intricate chains of sentience which we call thought were disintegrating; my mind became a molten morass of appalling confusion and orderless event, displaced irrevocably in time and space. I amplified my entire being, then exploded.

So on I staggered. Down Old French Horn Lane, away from the furnace of traffic. Along the narrow path between the parallel lines of high garden fences, leading through to a group of a dozen garages. Then over the footbridge to the railway station. I paced the platform restlessly beneath the white floodlit glare. Two girls were sitting there, unaware of the seething psychic chaos within me. I wondered, if I begged them for help, might they be able to do something? But this could not be, for one coherent thought still remained inside of what I had become - the knowledge that I was quite alone and that nobody and nothing could offer me salvation or sanctuary. No creature alive heard the dreadful, hopeless ululation of my fragmenting mind. I looked down at the cold, shining tracks and realised that there was only one way in which the pain could be stopped. But even death was something

impossible - I now existed beyond any shell of humanity, and my destruction could be no more than merely physical and therefore of no affect on my fireball of consciousness.

Outside Welwyn Garden City station the storm still howled; the molten night ran in a raging torrent through the streets of the town as the glowing sky collapsed against the roof-tops. I got into a taxi waiting at the rank by the station door. My imperative concern was to reach my room as soon as I could; I did not believe that I would survive the long walk to Cole Green Lane. The driver tried to talk to me, but I sat rigid next to him, only answering distractedly and curtly.

'Handy, living next to a pub!'

I nodded and looked away. I gave him five pounds for the one pound fifty fare and burst out of the cab and ran across the road.

Passing the door of the lounge where they sat silent and motionless before the television, I wished, more than anything, that I too were a part of their world of cosy, red table-lamp glow and passive disengagement. Upstairs, I shut myself in my room.

There, in that place which was all that remained of the shattered cosmos, I sat on the bed and fought to cling onto the flotsam of the cataclysmic deluge.

The plastic shopping bag in which I carried my folders and pens lay on the eiderdown alongside that morning's Guardian. I tore out a sheet from a pad of notepaper and began to write in frenzied desperation. A jet of words was sucked from me onto the page by the tempest; I was scrawling fragments of tales I did not know, of people and worlds alien and immensely distant. But the fountain pen in my hand was all I had left to hold on to; everything else in Creation had been consumed by the pit which had opened up below me, drawing me in ever deeper. I stood on the rim of the volcano's summit caldera, blinded by unbearable light and unfathomable darkness, trying to turn away from the intense rising heat. This was the furnace of what we truly are. Falling here, introverted and unreachable, I had passed my most hidden memories, the most deeply buried refuse of living. I had borne witness to all that we keep within us, the satanic, obscene, vulgar decay in the crypt of the soul. I had opened Pandora's box.

But further still, deep down in the miles of raging fire, lay our most fundamental essence, the ultimate truth of what we are.

I looked upon it.

CHAPTER 27
THE RAINBOW

Baby, the creatures that cross the sky,
Between tree and tree, from land to land,
Black against the bright blue light,
Swift and distant
Like the dreams we wake from,
Like the questions we seek and which fill our hearts,
Lifting us so high upon the sky
That we are afraid to ask them,
Have stolen their lives from the great shining world
In which we,
Tiny and new,
Catch our own fleeting breath.
And can you,
Baby,
A child lost in this vast land of colours and wonders,
Believe that there is anything,
Anywhere,
Other than magic and miracles?
That you have not been born of the impossible sky?
Or that I do not love you?
We will walk over the grass, so cling to me tightly,
And I will hold and carry you into the garden
Where the flowers,

Dwarfing the span of your outstretched arms,
Are as brilliant sapphires, amethysts and diamonds,
Burning like suns
Among the cool and wet green leaves,
The dark, crumbling earth
And dense shadows and weathered wooden fences.
They raise their faces to us
And their fire meets in a rainbow
Arcing high over our heads,
Falling upon us in golden, shimmering flakes.
Little one,
This land is God's own garden,
And we,
Beneath the weeping, magic rainbow,
Are holy, blessed children,
In sacred, eternal lives.

CHAPTER 28
NEMESIS

On the day that Paul and I prepared the barbeque in his garden the darkened evening sky seemed cast in iron, and that cold, massive firmament and the ponderous, discoloured Earth were in mutual opposition, as vast magnetic poles forcibly pressed against one another in a titanic confrontation. The monumental power of the universe coursed through all that I was. I could see the figures of giants, a mile or more tall, rising up from beyond the horizon and walking towards us, their shoulders stooped beneath the ceiling of indigo clouds. We were tiny and helpless.

The two of us unloaded a new fridge from the hired van into the house, then we moved the barbeque grill out from the kitchen onto the patio flag-stones. That evening we again gathered at Paul's for another social event.

Thus ETOPS continued, and I too somehow remained connected to the course and the people, despite having destroyed so much. I was still being asked to join them on night-long jaunts to Reading, London and Stevenage, when we would tour the pubs in those localities and sleep on friends' and

relatives' floors if we had driven there. I was shown tremendous and unwarranted patience and cordiality.

My ulcer had gone, blown away by what had happened to me. But the shell of what I had become was beset by other dreadful traumas. I felt a pain in my heart. My right thigh hurt, as if the major blood vessels within it had hardened and were now brittle, constricted passages that could crumble and break with any pressure. My head felt gripped in a crushing vice and I experienced a great weakness, close to fainting, each morning before we ate lunch, the meal seeming to raise my blood sugar level just enough to keep me alive. All the time I felt such a deep, unnameable fear; I was being devoured by the ravenous swarm of terrors which I had released from within myself. Each heartbeat tore violently at my sphere of consciousness.

I endured episodes of unbearable confusion which threatened to disintegrate my thinking forever, as if the memory of that night had been ingrained indelibly in my scarred mind. Frightened, silent, unable even to laugh, I channelled all my remaining energy into maintaining a facade of pretence, a duplicitous act, around my every word and gesture. Only in my eyes did remain the truth of the war I

was fighting, of the dreadful emptiness that had descended upon the world.

I spent a lot of time that year travelling by train. One of the stations I often passed through stood on a raised bank of ground, overlooking an adjacent multi-storey car-park. When the train stopped I could look straight through the hollow, empty concrete skeleton, and imagined in terror that I was staring at my own damaged mind, filled only with black shadows and deathly silence.

My spiritual life had ended. The universe had been reduced to blocks of colour and stray pieces of strangers' conversations, backdrops of plastic and crepe paper. I could feel nothing other than the unending psychic pain, and thought with cold horror that maybe I would stay here for all eternity. There was no way in which I could stop my mind, burning in constant free-fall around the swollen sun.

I waited at the bus-stop opposite the Hilltop as the setting red globe lit up the western clouds from below, and they shone like torn, violet streamers, the slowly dimming embers of the vanquished day. The blue sky beyond them deepened and the world was lost to the night. A chill spread through me, for I felt that all hope, meaning and wonder had died, and I remained alone and unheard within the empty shell

of what had been.

All my soul's riches had been destroyed. I often wondered what I would have done had my landlady walked into my room that night. I think I would have killed her.

Who can tell from where within us the lust for living wells? What is it that forges our will to be? For something deep inside me still remained, refusing to accept that the apocalypse was either total or final. Drifting upon the raft of the barely recognisable vestiges of spirituality, I chose not to die.

The game's golden age had passed years ago, its spirit forever scarred in the furnace of the cultural upheavals the western world had undergone at the end of the sixties. Now only memory and legend remained of a time when football captivated the hearts and souls of a nation, when it still possessed a magic and wonder, when it still *mattered.*

Andrew met me as I walked out of the tube station, waiting as we had arranged amid the swelling throng in Gillespie Road. A thousand people filled the street and the North London air was alive with noise and anticipation. For seventy years, we and

our forebears had passed these same dark terraced houses on countless match days, each as unique and unrepeatable as that cold, bright November Saturday. A billion conversations were now lost forever.

On a tide of red and white we queued for seats in the lower tier of the west stand, then walked up the steep wooden steps into sudden light and colour and looked out upon the vast, immaculate, unblemished green. The teams from Arsenal and Everton took the field.

The autumn sun dropped over Islington and the rows of floodlights along the stand roofs spluttered alight, pale yellow and magenta slowly turning hot and white.

The game ended in a one-all draw. We joined the long and strangely silent line outside Arsenal station, the smell of burning tobacco blown into our faces by the cold wind of the descending night.

Andy and I took the tube to the West End and, in the shadow of Centre Point, sat in The Angel's welcoming warmth and talked about ETOPS.

'We've only got six weeks left,' I reminded him. Time's inexorable march had taken us almost to the end of the course.

'I know,' he said, disbelief in his voice, and clearly

troubled at the thought. ‘Do you have anywhere to go yet?’

I did not. And he?

‘I’ve no idea what I’m going to do . . . I don’t know at all.’

Our lives are our own; we belong to nobody. We will not follow nor be led, for only we, as autonomous individuals, have the right to steer the course of our lives and decide upon what we are to say or do. The purpose of society is to facilitate the liberty of the individual, and so each of us must, therefore, work towards fuelling such a corporative force. Our most fundamental moral obligation is to humanity’s progress and survival.

Stuart spent that week with his friends in Glasgow because he chose to do so - a part of the personal destiny he was creating involved missing five days of lectures and copying the notes from us afterwards. Stuart controlled what he was. But the following Monday morning he had not returned - the chair and desk at the back of the room between Chris and Prakash were empty. At tea-break we thought he might have arrived late and be waiting for us in the Union, but still there was no sign of him. Stuart rejoined us five minutes after the start

of the first lecture of the afternoon. He had not shaved for two days, his hair was uncombed, and tired, dark skin hung beneath his eyes. Steve Potton, who was taking the class for Communications, paused and looked at Stuart, coldly wishing him a good afternoon. We looked away and tried to stifle our sniggers; Stuart was in a state.

A pack of dogs hunted Stuart down. He had run across the deep meadows, heading for the sanctuary of the woods, but found his way barred by towering hedgerows and putrid ditches gouging wide, intransgressable gashes in the ground. So he turned and staggered gasping into the setting sun, fleeing with the east wind in his back. But the hunt was now at the gate before him. All around him the crazed barking of two dozen slavering hounds grew ever closer and louder. Stuart stopped and fell to his knees. His head, bowed and hidden in his arms, disappeared slowly beneath the waves of the long, dark grass. There was no appeal. There was no recourse to reason or mercy.

Edward Lewis officially announced Stuart's expulsion to us in room four the following morning. Potton stood solemnly at his side and we too were very quiet. We were shocked, appalled and angry

that this decision had been taken in this way, without warning or precedence.

‘We regret having to take this action, but under the circumstances we felt it to be necessary,’ said Lewis, choosing his words so that we would sense that we were being implicitly warned, that he was alluding to our own positions.

Stuart had been sacrificed. They really believed that they had demonstrated to the MSC their willingness to discipline us in order to complete the course within its parameters. They were prepared to do anything to ensure that they kept the MSC’s custom and would be asked to run the lucrative ETOPS again next year.

We suddenly realised that the department was depending entirely on our compliance. The true power lay in our hands.

‘That’s the last straw,’ said Alan quietly. ‘How could they do that? As far as I’m concerned, this is it, I’ve had enough.’

‘They needed to blame someone, and Stuart was a convenient scapegoat,’ said Paul. ‘They shouldn’t have thrown him out like that - what he did was up to him. He did nothing wrong.’

The slow, relentless cycle of the year had almost turned full circle. How much the world had

changed in that time since our interviews. What had happened to all that we had known and cherished, all that we understood, all moral law we lived by? What had we become? We burned in flames of hatred and betrayal.

'Does anyone here think that completing this course will enable us to get jobs?' asked Andy.

'I think it might,' I replied, 'but only if we're prepared to do ETOPS type work for the rest of our lives. I'm not.'

'Well, that's right,' agreed John. 'An HNC is not an additional qualification to a degree. Employers are either going to regard us as graduates or as school-leavers.'

'I think that whether I complete this course or not, I'll still end up mending broken wires for a living,' said Andy morosely. 'Apart from the money they've paid me, I've received nothing at Hatfield except degradation and scorn.'

'We've no reason to stay here,' Alan reiterated. 'They need us, not we them.'

Suddenly, I became aware of the slowly burgeoning revelation of a common spirit, an embittered regard of ETOPS which had taken a hold in all our hearts. Which of us would be the first to speak of the action we knew, tacitly but ever more

clearly, that we must take? I didn't believe that the others would listen to me - I who plagued their world, who had only spite to offer them in place of friendship. How could I lead them in a suicidal act of vengeance?

Yet our enmity with the polytechnic and resentment of what they had done to us felt so strong at that moment. Something bound us together in single-minded purpose and unity. I spoke tentatively. 'There's something we can do for Stuart.' They looked at me and knew what I was going to say. 'We can hurt them so much, but it'll require us to be together all the way.'

After a while, Steven softly murmured one word. 'Retribution.'

In those dark autumn days the cold, grey sky drained all colour from the distant horizon where the fields and cottages of a far and silent land lay. They turned the inert hue of the hopeless, blank airscape and disappeared for ever, while the biting north wind blew through the damp streets and over the furrowed, naked fields.

A faint pall of smoke clung to the air, invisible and heavy. Afternoon bonfires far away, stifled beneath the oppressive sky, dispersed clouds of burning

bramble and straw over the land around, until the bitter tang in the atmosphere was inescapable and perpetual.

There were so many leaves, brittle flakes of yellow and brown, lying upon the cold grass and blown into drifts in gutters and against fences. Beneath the oak trees in Bishops Rise I stood and looked up at the dark, clutching branches, watching each leaf that fell spiralling onto the bare earth at my feet. It was a time of death and decay, what had once been life now being reclaimed by the eternal, unforgiving planet which span ineluctably through time and space. For the same soil that consumes the dead brings forth all that lives, each grass blade, each dandelion, each acorn and man. Only through our fleeting transience can we be at all.

Soon it was winter. Darkness fell early now, the mornings slipping directly into the brooding, misty twilight. Yet still there remained isolated spells of light and burning colour. Long shadows were thrown across the dewy grass by the low sun barely warming our frozen, blue hands as we walked towards the poly in those final days. We were living through the last hours remaining to us.

In the early mist of morning we stood among the trees overlooking the waking polytechnic and

watched the flat-roofed maze of brick and concrete as it glowed orange in the sun that rose slowly over Hatfield. We would never again see the interior of its drab, forbidding architecture, nor would our souls be taken from us by the purgatorial horrors perpetrated in those rooms.

All eleven of us were there, united and unafraid. It was the Monday of the last week of ETOPS; we were to sit four final exams before leaving that place forever. And we had acted as if we were planning to take them. We missed no lectures, still asked questions in class and thanked Terry Hayes for wishing us good luck and, yes, we would see him next week. It was all a lie.

We took turns with Alan's binoculars, looking down at the electronics department windows and waiting.

'I can see Hayes and Lewis,' said Andy, peering through the black tubes and adjusting the focusing wheel with his middle finger. 'They're talking in the office . . . there are still another fifteen minutes before the exam's meant to start.'

Their nemesis was almost upon them.

People walking their dogs passed by behind us. A mongrel, the same golden brown as the crackling carpet of leaves it scampered through, barked and I

turned around, looking into its wide black eyes. I crouched down and stroked its silky head, and from a distance a woman's voice called the dog's name. Its bushy tail wagged in furious joy as the panting animal's misty breath rose into the air, its dripping tongue hanging from its open mouth, pink and flattened. I turned again to my friends, my stomach tight, and felt a cold, alarming drop of sweat suddenly run down my ribs.

Andy passed the binoculars to John. There was Carol Willis, who was to have been invigilating the exams. With great concern in her eyes she mouthed silent words to Ed Lewis. We saw them leave the office.

It was ten o'clock and the exam room was empty. Other students were arriving, starting the last week of the autumn term. We watched them walking down the grassy hill and descending the concrete steps alongside the Union. People, alone and in twos or threes, left the building and hurried down the pathway behind the main block, their voices and footsteps borne by the chill wind to where we stood. And still we waited for that upon which we could rebuild our crumbled lives.

And then Terry Hayes walked through the door at the bottom of the steps and stood outside, staring up

the hill towards us. He shielded his eyes with his hand and we weren't sure whether he could see us there or not. So we moved away from the trees, and stood exposed and flagrant. Hayes cut a plaintive figure, tiny, motionless and uncomprehending. For it was really us, he was sure now, silhouetted against the cold, dazzling sun, a hundred yards from him, turning away and walking across the meadow and into the fire. At that moment he did not believe or feel. But did he understand?

There would be no ETOPS course next year at Hatfield Polytechnic. Only the aftermath, the enquiries, the finger-pointing. Desperate attempts at explanation and exculpation to their funding bodies and to all who knew of the culmination of the events of that year. In turn, the polytechnic would reappraise the position of the staff who had been involved with the course; how could they justify their role in such unprecedented mass academic failure and surrender? Shamed before their colleagues and staff from other departments, to what extent could they credibly implicate the MSC in their stuttered excuses? So many careers, including those of Christine Hurst and Richard Kingsley, were to be damaged and destroyed. They had brought us here to learn of capitalism - to be pitched into the

competition of the ubiquitous interpersonal fight for survival that was their world. We had given them what they wanted. And we had won.

I walked ahead of the others for what seemed to be miles, until I no longer recognised the place where I stood. I turned to look back but they had all gone, along their own paths and lives, and I remained quite alone. The world was silent and cold, and amid the ruins and confusion my life began.

I was twenty two years old.

CHAPTER 29
SNOW

In the freezing night,
Through the fleeting portal of sleep,
In a starburst angels descended and stole us away.
Abandoned, we awoke
To a transmogrified, silent Earth.
White winter blanketed the land,
Complete stillness hushed the shocked world
Not daring to breath.

Afternoon,
Motionless, grey.
My black, cumbering gumboots break the surface of the snow,
Sinking deep,
Spraying white powder from the wound.
I stand beneath the crucified elm
By the bridge that straddles the deep ditch,
Today almost levelled.
Long shadows streak the fields beyond,
Island after island in a sea frozen over,
Dissolving far away into a pale, yellow sky.
The cold stings my lungs and face;
My breath rises in swirling white clouds.

The solitary blackbird’s song
Like a cry of fear,
Of pain,
Is sung for no one.

Again, night falls,
But the darkness shines,
The dead land is aglow with pale fire
Consuming the smooth snow waves
Freezing to hard ice beneath the orange sky.

CHAPTER 30
FLOWERS IN A ROOM

After the breakfast things had been washed up and dried there still remained the dusting and hoovering. Helen knew she should have made a start weeks ago, but there are always so many other problems that rise out of nowhere, cluttering up time, that intention so often stalls and is forgotten. She paused for a moment and looked out at the garden through the opened window. Why hadn't John mowed the lawn? He said he would last Sunday. If it rained that weekend it wouldn't get done for yet another week.

Helen dragged the vacuum cleaner into the lounge, knocking the heavy machine against the wooden door frame, bruising the paintwork. She sighed, running her finger over the dented glossy surface as if she could smooth over the damage. Perhaps it wouldn't show there.

She unravelled the mains lead and plugged it into the wall beneath the table on which the flowering aechmea stood, between the mahogany bookshelves and the hi-fi stack. From the kitchen the deep intermittent rumble of the washing machine vibrated through the walls of the house, then suddenly

drowned beneath the hoover's roar as Helen began to laboriously scour the carpets. She stopped to run a damp cloth over the tops of the tables and chests of drawers, and along the edges of the picture frames on the walls. The prints were of townscapes, impressionist sketches in line and wash of high streets and market-places, where people were but fleeting, suggested shapes within the busy, animated compositions. In none were there scenes of open, rural idyll. There were no children.

Helen heaved the pile of wet laundry through the back door into the garden and began to hang the sheets and clothes on the washing line. At last, spring was beginning. The morning had arisen, warm and bright, and the blue sky was almost wholly devoid of cloud. Helen could see but two patches of tenuous white, smeared just above the distant west horizon. A sweet breeze caressed the new leaves on the trees leaning heavily over the fences, and from the hidden world in those shady branches a profusion of delirious birdsong filled Helen's garden.

Flowers were bursting into colour all around her - vivacious yellow daffodils, crimson tulips, snow-white crocuses - and the plum tree was spangled with pink blossom. Sunlight glinted on the

greenhouse roof and the long, wet grass around Helen's feet where she stood pegging the shirts and pillowcases to the cord stretched diagonally across the lawn. Spiders' webs, beaded with shining dew, had been draped like tiaras by the night over every shrub and rose bush, and in the shadow of the plum the black surface of the pond was strewn with twigs and vivid petals floating like magic fairy boats on the still water.

John had accepted with alacrity an offer of early retirement and this was now his last week at work. She supposed that his colleagues would somehow mark the occasion, buy him a gift, perform some valediction; but she knew that her husband did not want to stage or be involved in any celebration further than that. For those years were now finished and behind him, and at last he could shed them forever, along with all that they contained, all the hurting past, the endless agony of remembering. They would be with each other now for the final years of their life together.

Helen pushed open the door to David's room and walked slowly inside, standing at the window for long, silent minutes. Perhaps it was time she changed the bed linen again. And maybe it would be best if they kept David's shoes and anorak in his

wardrobe from now on. I'll bring them upstairs later this morning, Helen said to herself. They had lost their son twenty four years ago.

There was something on the eiderdown and Helen tried to pick it off. Dog hairs? She and John barely thought about Scruff anymore. He had lived for eleven years after David had left them, but that was all so long ago now. They never even considered buying another dog; it was easier to forget and not try to recreate what had been. Perhaps, in retrospect, they should have moved home. But Helen realised that they had never actually knowingly passed through any sort of Rubicon when they could finally let slip all hope and accept their loss. After all these years, deep in their subconscious worlds Helen and John were still searching and waiting.

John was speaking on the phone to Sales Manager Howard Dunstan, his left hand over his ear as he strained to discern the faint, distorted words above the office hub-bub, the ceaseless chatter and row from the printers and photocopiers. Behind him traffic noise drifted in through the open window from the street below.

They spoke of deadlines, meetings and selling

things – the only things they ever talked about, day after day, year after year.

John barely cared now. Whatever happened on Friday, he wouldn't see or need to be concerned with the consequences. How utterly meaningless it had all been, how stridently we pursue that which is quite irrelevant to living. A hundred thousand pointless conversations, and they tell me that is a career, thought John.

He tidied his desk slowly, removing nothing of his own to take with him, then emptied his briefcase, piling the papers and files neatly on one side of the table-top for the subsequent incumbent to use and distribute as he wished. He suddenly felt quite startled by the finality of this act.

They bought him a silver-plated inscribed tankard and a large card, presenting them to John in the pub during the lunch hour. And after all the farewells, after the last heartfelt handshake, he found himself alone in the rush-hour queues, driving home through the late afternoon heat, quite unable to grasp what the world had done to him.

Saturday morning dawned. The sun was already high in the sky when John opened one curtain and blinked sleepily in the early daylight. So what now?

he asked himself. He feared that time's arrow would fly out of control, accelerating ever faster until it met Death's concrete wall springing suddenly from the gloom of this blind alley. Perhaps the worst of John's ravaged life was only now about to begin.

There was so much to do. I will make a list, he thought, of all the things I must accomplish, all the tasks I need to perform, and cross off each one as it gets done. In this way I will be organised, and not let one moment of experience, one single drop of my remaining life's potential, slip by and be lost. I must make each day as long and as rich as my humanity allows.

John could not see that rapture and wonder could never be regimented in this way, that to delineate one's entire future inherently involved planning for life's ending.

Memory grew upon John's and Helen's lives' bleak ruins like choking ivy, suckers probing deep into the crumbling masonry of their childhood hope and joy, until only a dense, tangled facade of dark green leaves remained where the bright marble temple of spirituality ought to have stood. Life edged ever forward, a string of glanced pictures, fragments of intercepted, snatched conversations in

shops and living rooms and streets and parks, all conspiring to remind them of and replay the day that they could never begin to forget.

Everything was so hard to do; every small task, word or daydream seemed to trigger a chain of thought that eventually led to the centre of their agony. Each time they became trapped like this, John and Helen could only stop what they were doing and try to somehow throw off the suddenly suffocating images, then begin anew.

Sometimes in their dreams, on another world, unique and eternal, their little boy lived with them in the pebble-dashed bungalow on the crest of Church Street.

Through the starless night twin headlight beams lit the broken white line that coursed past the car in a continual volley along the centre of the narrow, dark lane. At each turn of the winding road tall hedgerows and looming trees, torn violently by the sudden light from their silent, invisible stillness, turned and rose over John's and Helen's Metro in a ghoulish, haunting roar.

Open fields stretched for miles around them, but the world was lost in the great blackness that funnelled the tiny car through this gallery of

colourless leaves and twisted trunks. There were breaks in the living walls that opened out as portals onto deepest space.

For endless miles their journey continued, seemingly drawing them no nearer to any town or major highway. At intervals of ten minutes or so they would pass small cottages, their doorways lit only, if at all, by dull orange porch lanterns, their curtains drawn over dark windows. Midnight had long passed, and Earth slept.

Up ahead something moved. In the bank of grass a fox froze and stared with hollow, burning eyes at the approaching light and horror. Then in one brief moment the animal flashed across the tarmac, plunging into the dark thickets and disappearing.

Inside the car John and Helen felt warm and insulated, watching their passage through the eerie night as if it were somehow someone else's journey. Their faces glowed faintly by the clusters of green and red that lit the dashboard before them. Helen switched the radio on and began to scan through the stations. She leafed through snatches of whispered voices locked in debate, jarring opera and contemporary jazz, eventually leaving a soft, languid female voice singing to the accompaniment of a solitary piano.

‘How much further is the main road?’ asked Helen for the third time, pulling irritably at her seat belt and squirming to try and find a more comfortable posture.

‘It can’t be more than four miles to the town,’ John told her, ‘then about twenty minutes to home.’

They had visited their friends Judy and Ian in their secluded village in the county’s flat northern wilderness, leaving there rather later than they had envisaged. John had drunk too much wine and wanted to wait until he was sober enough to take the wheel, conversation and laughter had flowed and time had rushed past, unnoticed.

‘The car needs washing,’ Helen observed, peering at the dirty edges of the windscreen where the wipers did not reach.

Tomorrow, thought John wearily to himself. He said nothing, only reaching up to adjust the rear view mirror.

There is a deep, sonorous bang, and immediately the vehicle is bucking violently. Helen’s head knocks hard against the roof and she is thrown forward. They spin uncontrollably through the darkness, the headlamp beams sweeping like a twisting beacon over the dense foliage at the roadsides. John’s arms

are jerked by wild, powerful forces that have possessed the steering column. The rear of the car lifts up, and they look down into sudden fire as the wheel hits forcefully against John's chest.

It is silent.

John and Helen stood by the side of the ditch, and in the torchlight looked at the shredded rubber around the rim of the front wheel. The passenger door window had shattered, and earth and grass had been gouged up into the vehicle that lay embedded on its side in the deep channel running alongside the road. They could hear the radio still playing and Helen started to cry.

Other than the weak, darting torchlight and the extant headlamp shining through the long, deep, grassy furrow, John could see no light anywhere. They had not passed a street lamp in ten miles, and there were no glowing windows to be seen along the lane, nor, as they stood quite still and held their breaths, listening long and intently, could they hear any other vehicle. An owl hooted from a far-off, unseen wood.

'We'll just have to wait,' muttered John at the sky, 'and flag the next car down.'

The intensity of the torch beam was fading fast.

John knocked the lamp against his hand, trying to remember how many years it had been since he had replaced the batteries.

'I'm cold,' sobbed Helen.

The driver's seat had a white, fleecy stretch cover which John removed so that they could wave it as a bright flag in someone's headlights.

John was surprised at his own calmness and resignation. It was as if he were acting in a play and all the night's events were somehow predestined and inevitable.

It was past two o'clock in the afternoon when the couple, tired and hungry, trudged grimly up the front steps to their home. Inside, the curtains were all drawn, and as John walked from window to window, tugging them apart, Helen sat down at the kitchen table, still in her coat, and cast her bleary, red eyes around the room, not knowing what she should do.

One of them, she couldn't remember who, had switched on the television many hours ago. The sound was turned low, almost inaudible, and meaningless pictures flickered on the screen. John sat in his arm-chair reading the Sunday paper, and

Helen stood quiet and still in the doorway, looking through the lounge window at the birds singing earnestly on the telephone wire.

In time she turned away and walked through the hall into the back garden.

Next door, Mrs Martin was watering the rose beds and vegetable plot, and the two women greeted each other with smiles over the fence.

'Good morning!'

'Good morning . . . what a lovely morning! It's like summer already!'

Helen said nothing. Summer had ended long, long ago.

Evening drew in. The persistent ringing in the hall was abruptly broken.

'Wendy!'

Their daughter had lived in Kensington for over a year now, telephoning home when she could. She had been promising for such a long while to visit her parents, if only for a few days. Could she drive down next weekend?

Helen was still smiling when she had put the phone down and told John. Happiness was so rare and precious to her now. She looked over John's shoulder at the weather forecast on the TV and saw

an array of little dark clouds moving across Ireland and Wales, poised to reach the rest of Britain by mid-afternoon tomorrow. Well, she thought, they'd had nearly a week of sunshine, and it was quite possible that the storms would pass by the weekend.

The night was hot and restless, stretched and bursting beneath the starry sky as if laden with promise and treasure. How bright the garden and trees seemed. The whole world was glowing with a pale radiance that came from the air itself, waking each leaf and twig from its slumber and into a magical, nocturnal paradise.

'How extraordinary . . . how beautiful,' breathed Helen as she looked out from the bedroom window. She hadn't been able to sleep, and yet now, spellbound, she felt herself slowly drawn into a lucid, crystal dream, vivid and wondrous.

She raised translucent marble hands up before her face, white beneath cold, ethereal moonbeams.

It was Monday morning, and in the street outside, children were walking down to the junior school at the bottom of the hill, chattering loudly and laughing in the sunshine. It was so painful to see them, so happy and alive, so young and carefree.

Even after all these years Helen could not bear to watch them pass by, and now John would have to look at them too. Helen gently called him into the kitchen at the rear of the house for breakfast.

The weather people were quite wrong. This was going to be another glorious, blue spring day.

Eleven o'clock. Helen touched the window. Cool, smooth glass met her fingertips. She pulled her arm back, fingers still stretched wide, and saw the moist imprint of her hand caught like a spirit on the clear pane. She turned and looked across the room, at the wild streaks of light and shadow, of colour and darkness, that hung in astonishing ribbons from the walls and across the furniture that seemed to be as solid and immovable as granite. The room was a great, echoing hall in an enchanted, cloud-borne city, and the floor tiles she walked upon were the Earth's grassy, forested hills and dales, far, far below. She swept back her long hair, and felt her fingers running through spun gold.

As Helen looked down along the hallway towards the front door, she thought she could almost make out a still, shadowy figure outside, at the base of the steps leading up.

This is neither life nor dreaming, she thought.

Then bright light flooded the passage, for the ceiling had turned to radiant blue sky, from which brilliant butterflies, of every imaginable hue and patterning, descended with the warm air that spilled from heaven above.

Helen held her unsteady arms out at her side, fingers gently brushing against the wallpaper and the cupboard door as she took one solitary step forward, slowly, timidly. Beyond the glass, someone stood silently at the threshold of their home. The door bell chimes sang out loudly; three pure, perfectly pitched tones pealing with a boldness that shook Helen, filling her with a sudden fear and hesitancy. She moved one pace nearer and stopped. Another step and she found her hand resting on the lock. Through the gap in the half opened door she finally looked out onto the garden and driveway.

When the momentary disorientation of suddenly confronting the rolling panorama had passed; when focus and perspective had snapped back into kilter and the spinning welter of shape and colour had again assumed some measure of comprehensible meaning; when Helen had regained mastery over her still tongue; then she became aware that another person stood close to her, with imploring eyes desperately seeking out her own gaze, and tiny,

clasped hands aching to be held in hers. Helen saw him standing there, a little boy, no more than seven or eight years old.

'David?'

CHAPTER 31
FOREVER

At summer's sudden end, the soft grey and white clouds gather in the infinite sky, borne upon a cool, dry wind that trails autumn but days behind. Perhaps there will never be another summer and the coming winter will entomb the world for ever. For I cannot feel, nor hope for any future. All these years, what have they given me? In the end they have only brought me here, to this place of waiting. My final act.

Waiting and remembering. Where have all the people with whom I have journeyed, however briefly, gone? Once alive and real, they have become but scars upon my life. Not one remains. Even imagination lies still and wasted across my heart. There is nothing ahead.

And in the sky above me, where white mountains rise and tumble, drifting on transient courses between the chasms that lie beyond the edges of Creation, there is only cold, empty air. Even birds dare not climb the invisible streams to where all space has been violently purged of the numinous.

It was there. In the cloudscape for an instant. A light behind everything. I am sleeping and for a

second I almost awoke. My dream broke and let through what really is. But too slowly did the eye and hand of my soul reach out towards something I had not time to comprehend. And it is gone.

On impossible airborne universes, where I had once commanded marble palaces and radiant gardens to rise, hope survives.

Can we reach out?

Touch?

There is something beyond the forests, above the highest mountain peak, that we can barely know.

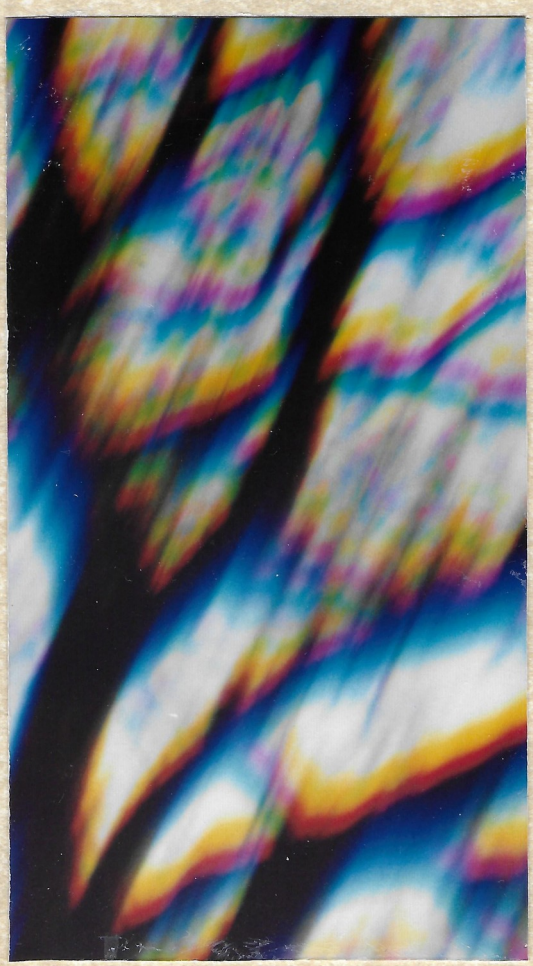
In each such spark that settles on our blind eyes,
Falls upon our silent tongues,
That eludes our stretching fingertips,
We bear witness to the hour of Creation.

God, caught in a fleeting moment.

I went to the Garden of Love.
And saw what I never had seen:
A Chapel was built in the midst,
Where I used to play on the green.

And the gates of this Chapel were shut,
And Thou shalt not, writ over the door;
So I turn'd to the Garden of Love,
That so many sweet flowers bore,

And I saw it was filled with graves,
And tomb-stones where flowers should be:
And Priests in black gowns,
Were walking their rounds,
And binding with briars, my joys & desires.



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