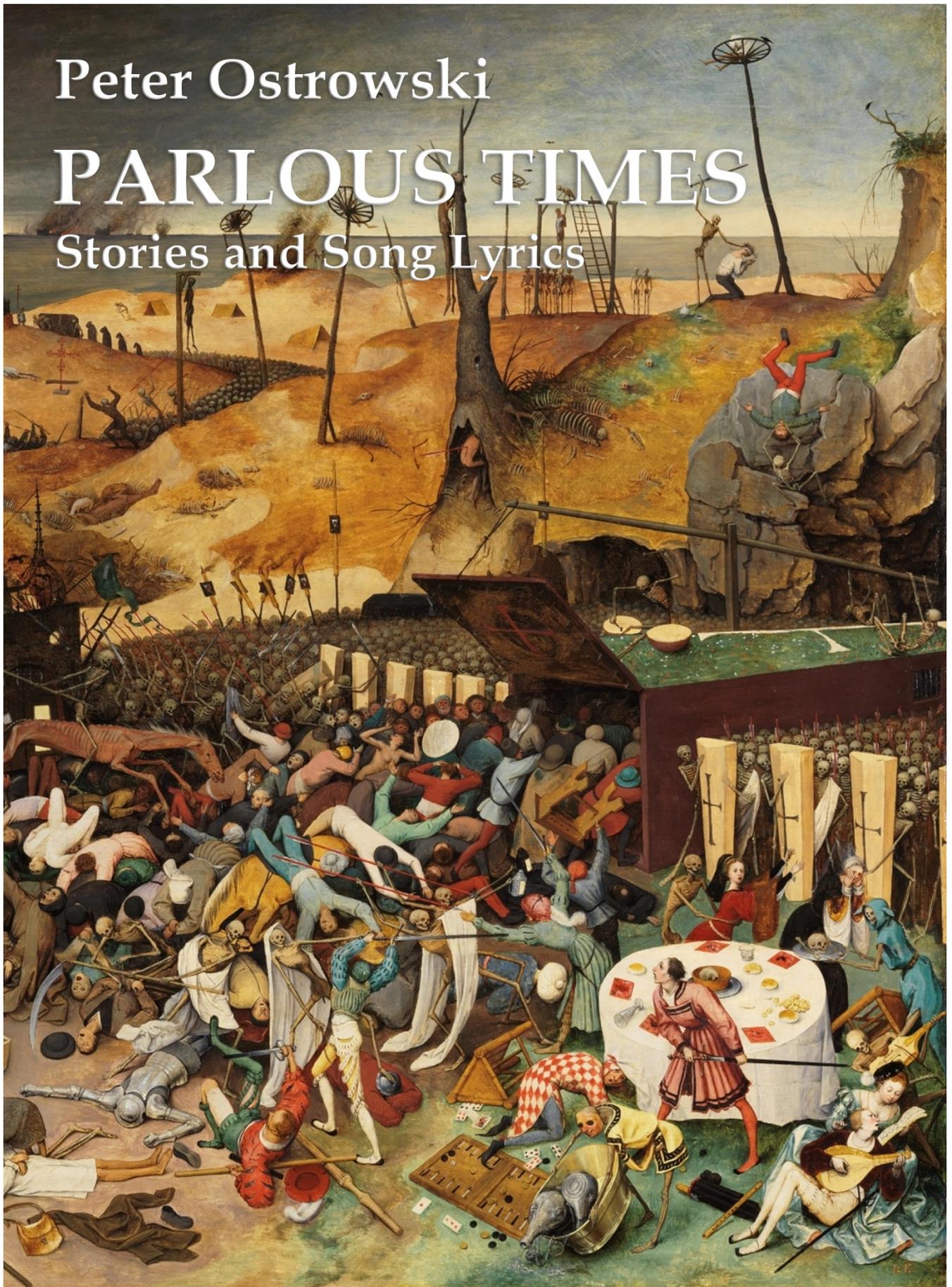


Peter Ostrowski

PARLOUS TIMES

Stories and Song Lyrics



PARLOUS TIMES

Peter Ostrowski

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Introduction

Parlous Times is a collection of short stories and song lyrics. It should be noted that the lyrics are specifically song texts not yet set to tunes, rather than poems.

The work was begun in 2018 and completed in 2020 which, to remind future readers, was the year the Covid-19 pandemic began. As I write, normality has been suspended, every nation is in some degree of lockdown, and deaths are nearing a million. We live in continual danger of infection, in a world of masks, gloves and social distancing, and any medical resolution or subsequent long-term economic damage are still uncertain. A number of pieces, therefore, were written in the shadow of these times.

However, my hope still is that the songs will be sung and the stories entertain.

Peter Ostrowski

October 2020

Contents

Charlie	6
Reynard's Song*	12
Flight 93	14
Godwards, William Blake*	24
Jerbourg Point	26
My Time Machine*	37
Rottweiler Lights	39
Dammed	44
Twm Sion Cati*	50
Never Never Land	52
The Battersea Barge*	59
The Middle Of The Garden	62
Geology*	104
Bunhill Fields	107
Land's End*	110
Rayleigh Station	112
Small And New*	117
How Wide Is A Piece Of String?	119
Influenza*	128
The Cave	130
Torquay	136
One Winter's Night*	143
Omega	144

*Song Lyric

PARLOUS TIMES



Charlie

The sighing and whispering grew ever louder. Dry earth crumbled under my feet, puffing up clouds of dust which drifted across the brown rocks as the four of us descended the path to the beach and the sea. The ocean clawed at the sand and stones with white, foaming fingers, before releasing the land, drawing breath, then once more grasping at the shore.

Beneath towering, imperious cliffs, we stepped onto the hot sand the tide had not yet reached. And here, at last, sheltered from the warm salt breeze that had been tousling our hair, in this place alive with the clamour of gulls' calls and the hissing water, we sat ourselves down among our heaving rucksacks and bright towels.

And then they told me, on this most beautiful of days, that I was not well.

They called me Charlie. The years had taught me that I was somehow different from other people, without ever understanding exactly how. My family experienced the world around us in ways incomprehensible to me. 'Look there,' my mother would say. I didn't know what she could

mean. I could feel, breathe and hear, but the images of the places I came to were forged from sheer imagination. Yet though I could not see, no one ever spoke to me of my blindness.

Something enclosed me, carried me; I could not choose where I walked. And it was a mystery to me how others were able to decide on and realise destinations.

And always that voice, with me forever, wherever I was, whomever I was with. Even in my solitude it was there, persistent and inescapable. Yet I myself was dumb.

A deep and coarse guttural rumble, it never spoke directly to me, never acknowledged my presence. As if it considered my existence to be inconsequential. My friends and family made it clear they cared about and loved me, but each time they started to involve me in their stories and lives I invariably heard that disdainful, threatening voice, arrogant and crazed, talking for me, masquerading as my own. A voice emanating from all about me, yet somehow strangely disembodied. I was quite sure there was no one there.

For the last year or more my happy life had started to become beset with ever more frequent

hospital visits and endless examinations. All around me, quiet murmurs, a sense of others' concern and unease, began to haunt my days. I felt no pain nor had any idea why all these people wanted to see me, why they spoke to me with such unprecedented kindness. I wanted to know what was so very wrong with me.

A gently sloping path from the car park led through ferns and high brambles, emerging onto the grassy edge of the cliff tops. Here we sat, weary yet exhilarated among the lengthening shadows, on a wooden bench facing out on the receding sea. High above the glistening beach, its green weed and its rock pools, we gazed down on the places where we had been paddling, scrambling and exploring.

They said I had something growing inside of me. How could this be? The doctors, and then my own family, explained over and over how this thing was draining me of my life, how it was weakening me day by day. How it would soon kill me.

And they called it a twin. My twin. Vestigial, parasitic, feeding on my own body, sucking it dry. And so then I thought of the perpetual voice, how

it overwhelmed me, infiltrating my entire being. How it sneered and cursed spitefully with every breath. I thought of my lifelong helplessness and silence, and I knew now what had taken my tongue and eyes. They told me this creature had to be removed.

The road home was narrow and hilly. One window in the car was open, and the rush of cool evening air kept me from falling asleep. An hour passed and the rattle of all the other vehicles around us, all the constant stops and starts, told me we were back in the town, our journey nearly finished. And soon the sweet, blissful smell of the honeysuckle around our gravelled garden path drenched the air. I heard my father's key in the door lock.

I felt my life was just about to begin. I would become all I should have always been. Perhaps I'd be able to see, to run. I would speak. Night after night I dreamed of my imminent release.

We don't miss that which we've never known. We are all partially formed, yet our malformation, our incomplete faculties, our differences, become normal for us when this is how we have always been. It's only when we see the cards others

around us have been dealt that we feel the full horror of our lives.

Sedated as I was, the bumping of the theatre trolley on which I lay seemed to grow gradually softer. At the end of a long, long hospital corridor we came to a stop and waited for the lift. Doors slid open and the turmoil around us died away as we ascended a couple of floors. I listened to the porter's rapid breathing, and I thought I could hear a whispered conversation somewhere. Then it seemed to me we were crossing a narrow stone bridge, tranquil and quiet, pulling to a halt at the edge of a vast meadow. Countless bright wild flowers shone from among the long grass.

The last voice I heard was my mother's. 'Bye, Charlie. Love you. See you soon.'

Heavy, dark clouds had been building over the town all morning, and now finally they turned black and the rain began to fall in large, hard drops. The walls of the hospital, a looming monolith among the churning traffic, deepened their grey concrete tones as they were lashed by the downpour. Lights seemed to brighten in the long rows of serried windows. Yet within

minutes it was over; ever widening patches of blue sky freed the sun, and yellow light burst over the wet streets, blinding drivers and shoppers heading southwards along that main thoroughfare.

Slowly, Charlie began to wake in the bright, noisy recovery room. He opened his eyes. Two figures were standing over him.

‘Charlie.’

He turned his head towards the sound.

‘Can you hear me?’

He barely nodded, then summoned up the breath to whisper yes, his faint voice a deep and coarse guttural rumble.

‘It’s gone, Charlie.’

Reynard's Song

Did I come into the world
Or did this world find me?
Thrown upon a long, white beach
By the waves of a stormy sea.
There was someone there
When my eyes first opened,
As I lay in half-light, cold and bare.
They would love me, feed me,
Then gently lead me
On the morning we first left our lair.

Chorus

Follow the path through the woods,
Across the cold stream,
Pass through bramble tunnels,
Run down the barley hill,
As far as the eye can see
This is our sweet, sweet home.

And this place beyond was brilliant heaven.
Colour overwhelmed us.
Red and black in the great green world,
We journeyed Eden's paths.
Someone moved behind the fences,

I ran towards their sound and smell.
There was a scream, a stone flew past me,
In heaven I first learned of hell.

Chorus

Bridge

Devils came to paradise, beating down its door.
Demons within demons roared.
Helplessly from far away
We watched in unbelieving horror.

A leaden silence chilled the place
Where once the world had been.
Only churned brown earth remained,
Only devastation seen.
No insects crawled, no birds sang,
The grass and trees burned and razed.
And our den whence we each new day ran,
A hollow pit, an empty grave.

Chorus

And did I pass from the world one morning,
Or did the world leave me?

Flight 93

Fear transcends all else. A survival instinct instilled in us through billions of years of evolution, acute terror, when it strikes, overrides every other emotion or plan we may have. Whether torment, an annoyance, maybe even deep despair, all will be blown away immediately by the experience of sudden horror. As we stare into death's fiery eyes, our being is reduced, from flesh, blood, intellect and spirit, to but one word repeated over and over: Live! Live! Live! All our concerns and their resulting actions are precipitated by this one primordial scream.

Yet deep fear, seemingly all-vanquishing, may on occasion find itself pitted against other extreme anxieties. If we are only able to run from these conflicting threats to our existence in opposing directions, then we appear to face a paradox. Yet the outcome is not in fact strange in any way. For the greater fear always consumes the lesser, along with all else we feel, think and know.

The kicking to the back of his seat became harder and more frequent, the little boy's frustration

growing wilder, his face becoming redder. Yet Slater only turned round the once to look between the headrests and receive a petulant glare and another defiant kick through the upholstery. Slater showed no more than an amused curiosity. The glare should have been his. He turned back round quickly, his eyes now shut and his breathing deep. Wet hands, white-knuckled, squeezed the armrests.

So why hadn't Slater's terror of flying overridden his need to take this flight? Until now, all his work conversations and meetings took place face to face, or at least by telephone. Mostly these were in Slater's own office, the company's boardroom, or with clients across Newark - a trip that would normally be made by car or cab. He had never before been asked to fly to the other side of the country in this job.

Slater's work fed, clothed and housed his family. It sustained his life. So when his two great fears locked horns, the victor would inevitably be the most immediate threat to his life. The lost job and its income – in stark terms, survival money – trumped any future fear of being launched over the highest clouds inside a steel tube.

And so Slater had asked his colleagues up in the office to arrange his flight reservation.

The sea of white cloud was almost too bright to look upon. A darker spout erupted from the rough blanket miles below them, as if something had shot up from the Earth and pierced the bubbling layer of vapour. Slater could clearly see the far distant curve of the Earth where white turned to blue.

All three men stood up together. They had been sitting separately, but were now striding purposefully through the first class section at the front of the plane. They each held a knife and had wrapped red bandannas around their heads. Quickly, before any other passengers even began to comprehend the situation, one had a stewardess in a headlock, a blade to her throat. For only the crew knew the entry code to the cockpit, and as she opened the door two of the men pushed through it, the other briefly remaining outside, loudly yet calmly addressing the passengers.

‘Sit. We have bomb. We take plane and return to Newark. Now, sit!

Then he too entered the cockpit, shutting the door behind him.

The two pilots barely had time to look behind them before the intruders, steel daggers flashing, began to bark their orders.

‘Turn the plane! Turn the plane! We fly to Washington.’

The captain shouting back ‘Get out of here! Get out!’ gave the co-pilot the seconds he needed to switch the cockpit microphone to broadcast directly to Air Traffic Control. As the other three planes struck their targets in New York and Arlington, the government’s response to the knowledge of the fourth hijacking would be swift and unrestrained.

The pilots and flight attendant lay dead. The six passengers up front in first class had been forcibly moved to the rear of the plane, while a fourth man had entered the cockpit and taken the controls. As the left wing dipped drastically, the bed of clouds rotated rapidly to the right, and terrified yells and screams rose above the engines’ drone.

‘God, we’re going down!’

But they were turning about, heading now into a blinding sun.

Three dozen people huddled together at the far end of the aircraft, believing that they were flying back to Newark on a plane carrying a bomb. But there were phones fitted to the sides of the seats, and as desperate calls started to be made to families, it became clear that they were riding on the fourth suicide mission of the day. There was no bomb on board. Flight 93 was the bomb.

It was Slater who approached the first class dividing curtain, peered through the narrowest of gaps, and saw two of the hijackers, one standing, eyes shut, and the other seated, yet animated and spitting words in a tongue incomprehensible to him.

It was evident they had to attack immediately or die. But what weapons did they have there at the rear of the plane? Though they outnumbered the terrorists, it was their captors who were armed. Slater looked around at the tear-stained, whimpering faces and made a rough mental count of how many of his fellow passengers would be able to take part in the imminent battle. He realised that it would take a very long trawl through their collective hand luggage before finding anything which could be somehow

weaponised. There was nothing in the toilet. In any case, someone on a phone, frightened and babbling, was already locked in there. The small galley had its stock of cutlery. Yet Slater knew the blunt plastic knives would be next to useless. But there was a water boiler; he had seen the flight attendant moving it on its trolley minutes before the hijacking. Eyes turned to Slater as he walked back down the aisle towards them.

‘There are two. The others are in the cockpit.’

‘Can anyone fly?’ someone asked.

‘I’m a pilot,’ came the immediate whisper.

People began to stand, grouping around Slater.

How had they managed to bring knives onto the plane? How had they concealed them, so that at least three had evaded the security checks? The man in the dark blue jacket, Harland, sat in the very rear seat, shouting into his phone loudly enough to be heard straight away by the hijackers in first class.

‘Mayday! Mayday! Hijack! Help us!’

Within seconds the curtain in the gangway was ripped aside and the two men in bandannas

marched through the compartment towards Harland, their weapons raised and eyes blazing. But they had not even time to start speaking. Two of the large cardboard coffee cups, in their plastic cradles with handles, were almost placed, not thrown, in the terrorists' faces as they homed in on Harland. Boiling water struck their eyes, rushed into their noses and mouths, then ran around their necks. As they both screamed, their hands at first went to their faces, then flailed, fists clenched, as they were jumped on and, with ankles kicked away, pushed to the floor. One had dropped his knife. The other held on to his until, with his forearm caught against the base of a seat, three kicks broke his wrist. This was the blade which silenced them both.

To Slater, the cockpit door seemed impenetrable. Reinforced, heavy and thick, the lock unbreakable. With the strongest men in the group at his side, he pushed against an immovable slab locked from the inside. The hardest blow they could deliver would be from the man-mountain Kowalski. The others moved aside to allow him a clear run, and a flying kick rammed the lock. Then again. And once more.

Kowalski leaned forward panting, despair in his eyes, the battery seemingly futile.

And then Slater noticed that the thin gap between the door and its frame did seem substantially wider than it should have been. He kicked again. Then Kowalski flung his boot at it. Slowly, the seal was breaking.

The plane suddenly lurched to the left, sending people falling into the seats, some striking hard the wall and windows. They hadn't prepared themselves for this manoeuvre by the terrorists, trying to throw the passengers away from the door. As the aircraft straightened, then dipped even harder to the right, bloodied hands gripped the headrests, and the lockers above. The plane levelled again, and Kowalski managed to grasp two ceiling brackets, one either side of the aisle, pulled himself up off the floor, and volleyed the door with both feet. With a bodily strength of extraordinary power, born of this desperate attempt to shake death's hand from his shoulder, Kowalski broke the lock with his fifth blow.

Only one of the terrorists was able to fight to keep the door shut. His partner was at the controls, Washington targeted, their place in heaven assured. But one man could not repel two

dozen battling for their lives. The moment they broke through, the plane nose-dived; the hijackers had had forced upon them the decision to end their mission twenty minutes short of its planned goal. As their inclination grew rapidly steeper, Slater and Kowalski fell downwards through the cockpit door. The hijacker had fallen back too, the knife in his hand slashing at air as he fought for his balance whilst trying to kick back against the bodies surging onto him. Slater gripped the man's right arm. Kowalski's punch, hard to his head, was followed by another to the stomach. There would have been no point in trying to force the pilot to level the plane. He was dragged from his seat by the neck and arms, and Carl Williams lowered himself behind the wheel of the plummeting aircraft.

Slowly, Williams began to pull out of the dive, until after long seconds the sky slid into view from the top of the windscreen. As the plane started to regain its lost altitude, Slater searched for a microphone or radio, some way of contacting Air Traffic Control.

Two F-16 fighter jets, scrambled from Andrews Air Force Base, pinpointed their target high over

the Pennsylvania countryside. Their directive was unambiguous; only the order to abort would halt the attack now. And the order did come, as Flight 93, its tail fins shot away, plunged seven miles from a perfect early autumn sky over Somerset County. As the plane began to turn onto its side, Carl Williams, beaten, finally let his arms slip from the wheel. Silent now, the defeated heroes clung to whatever immovable fittings they could.

‘People,’ mused Slater. ‘Humanity’s greatest mortal enemy... people.’

Godwards, William Blake

William Blake was born in 1794.
The revolution bore him on its first great wave.
A sky blue Stratocaster
In his lithe engraver's hands,
At his back the psychedelic fire
Of Will's electric band:
Urizen, knocking on perception's door,
Backstage at The Marquee
Were signed by Polydor.

William studied science at University
To try and understand eternity
And break the mind forged manacles
Of ignorance and dread
And spread this light on Newton's dark sea bed.
A complete bilateral spirituality,
Blake set out to change society.

What we would call a trip,
To William was his life.
Each day a prayer, an odyssey, a dream.
The universe was cast from his imagination,
And God each man
Whose eyes were blessed to see

A world in one tiny grain of sand
And in a wild flower heaven.

Wandering Jerusalem's oak-lined streets,
The starry vault above, gold beneath his feet.
Godwards, Godwards, Blake.

By '67 nearly every record bought was his:
A marriage between heaven
And a Godless music biz.
Tired and redundant, The Beatles called it time.
The world changed. The soul transformed.
It didn't fade, we didn't fail,
We're building paradise still.
Aquarius, Nirvana, call it what you will.
It didn't fade, we didn't fail,
We're building paradise still.
Aquarius, Nirvana, call it what you will.

Born on Broadwick Street in 1948.
Godwards, Godwards, Blake.
Godwards, Godwards, Blake.

Jerbourg Point

For a long time Adam Clarke took pains to clarify that the lone excursions he made to places such as Guernsey were not really holidays, but more working trips. People were just being friendly, of course; they were asking if he'd had a good time, as one does. But Adam soon came to see that it was easier and more polite to simply thank them, make some exclamation as if happy memories had been stirred within him, and tell them yes, it had been wonderful. And only then maybe add that he'd managed to get a lot done. There was work and there was work, in a world where many people saw only labour and leisure.

It was now three years since Adam had last stayed in St Peter Port, at the hotel on the hill. Why did he call it that? All the hotels were on the hill; the ones nearest the marina affording a leafy view of the ferries and cruise ships inching their way through the harbour. It had been a warm, rainless September, Adam remembered, cast in gold, rust and sapphire. In this short time he had completed over a hundred sketches in pencil or oils, sharing the stone waterfront seats with nervous yet hungry gulls, following the

coastal path south, high on cliff-tops wooded or exposed to the Iberian wind, and descending between old stone houses, along steep steps leading down to the brown church spires and the dazzling blue beyond. Back home, the final paintings were realised in Adam's studio, photographed and then, frustratingly infrequently, sold through galleries or to dealers. Mostly, though, space for the pictures was found on his own walls, or those of relatives and friends. And then there were all the ones forgotten up in the loft.

Adam wondered for how many centuries had Petit Port bay been only accessible by boat. When had the almost vertical zigzag of steps been cut into the sheer cliff that wrapped around the sand? It was a drizzly school day, and the wide, wet beach was empty. Yet there was a long neat arc of animal prints leading from the base of the ladder to the edge of the sea. A dog had been walked in the early morning light, eventually ascending the stairway to rejoin the trail at the summit, long before Adam had arrived.

Petit Port was a large triangular expanse of sand. At high tide the sea could nearly reach the foot of the concrete steps, running back and forth

over the smooth round stones. Yet when the water had retreated the great yellow beach stretched out for more than a hundred yards, with the shoreline at least as wide. Rocky outcrops, caves and pools lay exposed.

He was surprised to see ducks on the beach. A mother and four ducklings splashed in a water-filled hollow in the sand, seemingly untroubled by Adam's slow approach. His pencil darted expertly over the opened sketch book, a persistent wind tugging at the white sheets. Within five minutes Adam had drawn two pages of the birds, animated, pensive; brief moments of their lives captured forever.

It was a strenuous walk back to the top, a couple of benches along the way providing welcome rests. Adam then followed the track up to the road, turned right and walked to its very end, past the Doyle Monument and the line of leaning cedars, as far as the little roundabout in front of the Hotel Jerbourg. The car park to the side of the building was almost empty, but there was a refreshments van open, from which Adam bought a bottle of water and a cherry flapjack, putting them away inside his rucksack.

From there a rough path descended to a small peninsula extending out into the sea, at the tip of which stood a mysterious white cubic building. Adam stopped to sketch the view, then began to walk down to the promontory. As the trail levelled out, he paused and stood looking at the white hut. Just a short way now through the undergrowth ahead, and then a quick scramble over bare rock to reach and hopefully identify this strange flat-roofed structure before him.

But it seemed that nobody had walked that way for a long time. The track forward was lost, strangled by vegetation. Adam studied the wire fence and bushes, then unfolded the map he took from his pocket. A footpath was clearly indicated, reaching the very end of the narrow strip of rock where the building was marked. Routes change, footpaths fall into disuse, maps aren't always accurately updated; Adam was aware of all this. He began to draw the angular structure, its bold outline juxtaposed against the great fractured rocks around it and the grey sea and clouds beyond. He'd hoped to get closer, yet knew that often the most interesting compositions presented themselves unexpectedly.

To his right, Adam noticed more steps leading down, the apex of a rusty handrail to one side. Looking over the edge of the cliff, he saw another beach, a tiny cove, shingled and devoid of sand, the sea lapping at a labyrinth of dark brown boulders. It looked an exciting world to explore. No one else had ventured there that morning; he was quite alone as he started to carefully follow the uneven steps down to this new place. The light rain became a little heavier. The tide was out, but it was turning.

Adam stood on the grey and pink floor of stones, the sea at his back, facing a tight, rock strewn channel leading up to the vertical face of the low cliff blotched with tufts of moss and grass, and clumps of bright green leaves sparkling with tiny yellow flowers. Many of the rocks were stained with an orange lichen spreading into the dark grids where the weathered stones were cracking and crumbling.

The largest fallen boulders left narrow high walled passages between themselves, shaded and damp, encrusted with sparse groups of white barnacles and limpets. Adam stepped slowly over the puddles and seaweed, continually prepared for each footfall to be torn from under him, arms

outstretched for both balance and to hold onto the sides of the stone corridor, gripping the cold, gnarled rock as best he could. The path led to a small shallow cave. Adam sat himself down awkwardly in the entrance and looked back out at the sea, as thin white waves rolled in over the gravel. To his left, at the end of one rocky arm, the small odd block with its single green door and one narrow window could be seen over a long dark band daubed along the length of the outcrop.

Brown seaweed, dry and flattened, lay plastered over the stones in front of him, drawn out into strings lying parallel to the shoreline. And humanity had also left its mark in that place, as it does everywhere. A round orange buoy, still attached to a few feet of turquoise nylon rope, lay wedged into a rocky corner; both were faded, battered and thrown into this dark recess of the island by long forgotten storms, untold years ago.

Adam spent the next half hour sketching the gneiss pillars around the water's edge. Knowing that the tide was returning, he pulled himself onto his feet, books and pencils put away, and started to make his way back to the steps leading up to the hotel. The rain was falling hard now.

In Adam's mind the whitewashed beacon out on the rocks represented the general direction he should be heading in. But this beach was a stone maze; he couldn't take his bearings until he'd stepped out onto an open patch of shingle and was able to look about him. The gap Adam laboriously crept along seemed familiar. Was this the way he'd come? He wasn't sure. Now he was through, and looked around for the steps he had earlier descended.

Adam Clarke stood before a wide sea rushing over his boots, a cold, deep, clear barrier suddenly blocking his way. For a moment he tried to make sense of where he was, what had happened, why he could go no further forward. He had it in his mind that the stairs began beyond the rocks fifty yards ahead. But there was no route there.

Horror paralysed Adam's breath. A blood rush prickled his face. The tide had risen and flooded the beach. He hadn't noticed.

Now naked panic drove Adam's actions, his heartbeats suddenly rapid and powerful. In many situations he might have stayed calm, been able to order his thoughts rationally, to pause and consider his predicament. But all sense had been

overridden by the one prominent thought throbbing in Adam's head: the tide was still swelling; if it were yet possible to wade through the water and reach the steps, then he would have to attempt this immediately. In minutes – or, as Adam's racing mind imagined, seconds – it would be too late. The bay would be impassable, and he would be trapped at the back of the beach for many hours after darkness had fallen. Perhaps the ground would be totally submerged, and he would need to climb up onto the boulders to escape the imminent deluge. Adam stumbled into the sea. Three desperate steps in, the chilling water was already at his chest. The ground here fell away too fast; Adam could only swim to the escape point. Even through his blind staggering, he saw this could not be an option. Weighed down by his trousers and jacket – waterproofed, but only against the forecast rain – along with his backpack, heavy with painting equipment, and the camera and coin-laden wallet in his pockets, it simply was not possible. How many decades ago had he last swum, anyway? Soaked and freezing, Adam lurched heavily out of the water, back onto the safety – albeit possibly temporary – of the dry

shingle, reassuringly firm beneath his dripping frame.

Adam began to think once more. This was horrible. What had happened, what had he done?

He became aware of a sound, a sizzling, a granular hissing. It wasn't the rhythmic breathing of the sea - his gaoler, his newborn nemesis - or the urgent caprices of the wind driving in from the Channel, spraying rain into his face. The noise was steady and seemed close by. In his jacket pocket filled with seawater, Adam's new camera was bubbling and smoking from its shorted battery. Swiftly opening the compartment, he pulled out the burning cell, now too hot to hold, too badly corroded across its terminals to be used again.

Adam slowly turned about, surveying the tiny bay. Could there be any other...

For a second or two he felt nothing. Impassively, his eyes followed the line of steel posts and the rusty handrail silhouetted against the sky, disappearing beyond the crag high above the beach. The stairs were there behind him, still many yards from the incoming water. Relief overcame him first, closely followed by a helpless anger.

There was a phone box in the car park, shelter from the growing rainstorm. His camera was damaged beyond any repair or drying out. He removed the memory card, a fortnight of photographs, wrapping it tightly in an absorbent page torn from the phone book. His backpack was still dry inside; it had only been immersed for a second or two as Adam had marched hot-headedly into the brine. He secreted the card away among the pencils and brushes.

A stream of seawater ran down the aisle of the bus. Adam began to shiver now that the water was soaking up along his shirt and jumper as far as his neck. Surely he hadn't yielded to yet another calamity, a further blight on his life, one more catastrophic, poisonous memory to assail him episodically for as long as he breathed.

But as the bus bucked and droned through the narrow Guernsey streets, Adam began to contemplate further. It was always other people who drove these nails into our hearts, who tattooed confrontations onto our minds' eyes. Yet Adam had been alone all day. No one else had been involved in his scuffle with disaster. Even the natural world, today centred on Jerbourg Point, had simply behaved as it always did, day

after day, throughout millennia. There had only been Adam there, and the whole traumatic drama had been entirely his own stupid fault.

A peace began to fall on him, and Adam felt warmer, closed eyes picturing the sanctuary of his hotel room, dry clothes and the welcoming glow of the Starfish Tavern.

My Time Machine

My time machine whirred into gear,
We hurtled backwards year by year,
Landing to see England's ice retreating.
The glaciers were nearly dry,
And valleys that were left behind
All turned green beneath the sunlight beating
On the new land, on the lakes and hills,
On the forests taking root.

My time machine bucked up again
And now flew forwards, landing when
Latin types were building long straight highways.
The forests had been felled for farms
And ploughshares all were turned to arms.
I couldn't love this world and went on my way
Through the centuries again,
Past the changes wrought by men.

My time machine crashed down to Earth
Six hundred years before my birth
In this village of three streets and dozen houses.
Wanting then to look around
The early days of my home town
I pulled on an old smock and leather trousers.

A regular medieval bloke
Until they heard me when I spoke.

My time machine controls got stuck,
And less by judgement, more by luck,
I came to rest mere decades after leaving.
Back and forth I jumped in vain,
Unable to join this time again,
This period when I was already breathing.
I may not live at my own side,
I'm trapped forever on this ride.

Rottweiler Lights

It should all be black. Everything should be black. Midwinter, midnight, mid-sleep, no stars or moon to be seen through the heavy clouds deluging the streets with cold rain. Yet the room is aglow, a white, violent light penetrating the thin curtains, even leaching through closed eyelids. A bright vertical line cuts into the wall, projected through the gap in the drapes. Seemingly daubed there forever, or at least until a dawn which I will never witness anyway from the bathroom or kitchen.

But to edge the curtains aside just enough to peer out at the world beyond would be to look upon the naked heart of the halogen blast, to witness the blinding white skewer stabbing us in the eyes, shattering the night, violating our home and our dreams. If we can sleep at all it is under immense concrete slabs, each breath we take sucking in the horror of what we have become.

Exhausted, distraught, I try to cook a breakfast. The eggs seem rancid. The bacon grey. Ten minutes pass before I realise the kettle is still silent. A fuse, the element? There's no

time to investigate; I have to leave. Closing the door, I turn to face the stinging rain.

Ascending the hill, marching headlong into the downpour, there seems to be a dark mass before me, a silhouette against the distant street lamps. It is growing, rapidly, like a giant bat flying straight at me, a black sheet, a hole in the night. Then it turns away at the last moment, just as I stop and freeze. A bike. A cretin on a bike. No lights. No care or empathy. When these idiots are actually supposed to have bright lights, they don't.

Even pedestrians are coming straight at me. Surely, you walk on the left, the same side you drive on. But there are so many people – in fact it's nearly everyone – stuck to the right. Some move over, some keep ploughing on. I have to either evade or confront one anti-social thug after another. For God's sake, where's the logic?

Up Station Avenue the night colours ignite once more. Instead of a subdued orange, keeping the streets lit just well enough for people to see where they're going, the council has tried to change night to day. LEDs do use less power, but there's no reason they have to be this fierce white. An orange filter can be put over the lamps.

People, sane people, want darkness and they want to sleep. Yet clearly we also want to feel safe at night, and this in fact is the problem society has made for itself – this is what needs to be addressed. Nothing will be solved by simply creating this dystopian carnage, compounding our spiritual ills.

Another black-clad berk pedals past, from behind me this time. I had no idea anyone was there; I could have moved to the right at one crucial moment and been struck.

Finally, I climb wearily onto my train. Someone in the next seat stares glazed-eyed at his phone, fat thumbs waggling. Slouched, knees bent, filthy wet trainers shoved against the seat in front of him. At least whatever he's listening to is being funnelled into his head through earphones. Yet even this small mercy is to no avail, as further up the carriage someone else's instrument is blaring out a miasma of distorted, tinny beats. Then it stops, and as the train slows at the next station I watch with relief as the shell-suited MC rises to disembark. The guy with the earphones, feet still up, stays put. It's only now that I hear *shika-shika-shik-tsss-shika*.

Outside once more, the rain seems even heavier than before, the sky darker. I make my way towards rows of blazing Rottweiler lights wedged into the eaves of bungalows, my hand held out as an inadequate shield before my eyes. I'd be able to see my way more clearly if there were no lights at all. These beams travel in straight lines. Put a hood over the lamp, so that only your own property is illuminated; there's no need to blind anyone three streets away. If the inside of the hood is mirrored, then these driveways and lawns will be even more brightly lit, because no light will be lost. The town's night skies have always been bleached blue or yellow, as long ago as I can remember. It strikes me that never in my life have I seen the Milky Way.

I pass a parade of shops and a car pulls up alongside the kerb. A man steps out from the passenger side, onto the road, and an umbrella quickly spreads. Then the driver's door is thrown ajar, as another shadow, black against the shop windows, whistles past my shoulder. I can do nothing as this shape smashes into the opened door at speed. The only immediate sound is the cracking of the hinges as they're forced back.

Then the bike and rider crash to the shining ground.

As Friday the Thirteenths go, the one in December 2019 had started particularly badly. It was as if the end had begun.

Dammed

A bright green perfect lawn, unblemished and flat as billiard table baize. Freshly mown, each grass blade uniformly short and lush; an immaculate carpet bordered by rose bushes and apple trees.

A house, post-modernist, flat-roofed, glass walls and black doors. Three storeys, each displaced to one side, creating a precarious stack.

And just beyond the fence the concrete dam towers, sealing the canyon, its concave sloping might terminating in a barely visible rampart three hundred yards above. At its base, in a small clearing among the firs and boulders, stands Hugh Stevens' home.

Hugh had numerous friends in the nearby villages and the town fifteen miles away. Far more than he deserved, he sometimes thought. He was looking forward to seeing many of them that afternoon, at the first garden party Hugh had held in the horticultural splendour of Glan Sevin.

Around the central lawn, the flower beds were lined with regimented lines of yews, every one sculpted into a sharp cone taller than a man, each an exact copy of every other tree in the row, all

standing a precise distance apart. Except, however, for three at the far end of one path. These had been sliced in half, one horizontally across its length, and the others sheared off at an angle. The three flat cut surfaces described a circle, an ellipse and a parabola - the conic sections. A mathematician's joke, one supposed.

It was late morning and people were beginning to arrive, the driveway at the front of the house steadily filling with cars. Claire was here, recently settled in the neighbourhood, a new life ahead of her. She stood with Hugh by the small marquee shading the drink and food from the warm September sunshine.

‘What a view!’ She stared upwards at the vast commanding dam dwarfing Glan Sevin and even the surrounding forest. ‘What’s the black line?’

Black line? ‘Where?’ asked Hugh.

Claire pointed, holding her straw hat, prettily circled with a yellow ribbon and bow, with her other hand as she tipped her head back to look high up the wall of the dam.

She was right. A dark zigzag, just a few feet long and barely visible at that distance, had appeared on the face of the structure. Hugh had never spotted this before, and wondered whether

they were seeing some sort of shrub growing in a fissure in the surface. It had been a monumental engineering project; the dam wasn't going to be completely smooth.

Hugh recognised a newly arrived couple by the gate. 'Linda! Alan! The drinks are all laid out. The food's just about ready!'

The crowd in the beautiful garden rapidly grew. Thirty, forty, and a dozen small children running and screaming, fascinated by the goldfish weaving through the green weed in the pond.

Then Hugh's gaze drifted once more to the heights of the dam wedged between the two mountains. Monolithic, unnatural and menacing, the concrete wall rolled down from the sky to Earth. He looked again at the strange lines Claire had noticed. They seemed so much more conspicuous now; darker, thicker, longer. He realised that it was a crack, and it was spreading. Slowly, the dam was breaking.

'This isn't really happening,' thought Hugh, and he believed his own words.

For the next hour, the garden party continued joyously, everyone loud and laughing, the food, beer and wine rapidly dwindling. The ever hotter sun had crossed half the sky since the morning,

and now shone on the dam and mountains obliquely, bringing out all relief on their surfaces much more distinctly. Then Alan Torrence noticed it, and he too asked Hugh if he knew what this could be. The fracture was now yards wide, and had meandered almost to the base of the dam. Many arms had branched off from the gash, some splitting the top edge of the structure. The whole catastrophic breach remained a solid, impenetrable black.

All Hugh's guests were looking upwards now. Someone turned off the music.

How much water was the dam holding back? How many billions of tons? If it gave way, surely all life within a mile would be destroyed. Glan Sevin would be atomised, and all else – cars, lawns and bodies – would be irrecoverable beneath the deep mud left by the cataclysmic deluge.

And soon the spreading blackness consumed the entire dam. What miracle, what horror, was this? There was no concrete, grey and flat against the rocky massif; no shining water beginning to spout from the broken wall; no avalanche of fragmenting masonry plunging onto them from

unimaginable heights. Just deep, featureless, total darkness.

Hugh Stevens watched a pair of white butterflies dancing together over the sunlit garden. He wondered if they were aware of what they were doing, if they were conscious in the same sense that Hugh was. If indeed he or anyone was aware and conscious. But, he thought, unless there were some definite mechanism in a brain or any matter which caused awareness, if consciousness were impossible without this mechanism, then where did one draw the line between sentient and insentient matter? Such a line would be purely arbitrary. It was plainly ridiculous to claim that a stone could be conscious, but neither would anyone consider there to be any level of complexity of matter at which it becomes sentient. If we ask ourselves which arrangements of matter are conscious, starting with humans, then applying the question to monkeys, rats, slugs, amoebas and stones, somewhere along the line we would no longer identify any awareness. But by what criteria would we judge an object to have the power of thought? In the absence of any evidence for the identification of a mechanism

which creates consciousness, the scientific thing to do is to not believe that such a mechanism exists. This was an example of...what could he call it?...an arbitrarily stepped gradated continuum.

A small fissure or infinite blackness? What was the difference? The dam could never collapse, just as Hugh Stevens could never die.

Twm Sion Cati

At Ystradffin, on Dinas Hill,
Above the rocky gorge
The Towy thunders through,
Thomas Jones of Tregaron
From his hidden cave planned his next move.
The sheriff of Carmarthen
With six men rode out to take Twm.
The sheriff of Carmarthen
That same day returned alone.

Chorus

Twm Sion Cati, Twm Sion Cati,
Robbed the rich and kept it.
Twm Sion Cati, Twm Sion Cati,
Owed no debt to the rugged hills of Wales.

A farmer came to Cati's house
To claim back the bull which Twm had stolen.
A beggar (he thought) held his horse
And soon Twm was riding to the man's farm.
He showed his wife the horse and whip
And said there'd been disaster,
But when she gave him money
He sped east to London town.

Chorus

Twm Sion Cati was a highwayman,
A conman and a pirate of the Brecon Beacons.
With an arrow fired so true
He'd pin his victims to their saddles unharmed.
No one ever spoke of heroes' deeds he'd done.
Twm Sion Cati lived in a society of one.

Chorus

When he married Sir John Price's daughter Joan
His days of villainy did cease.
He came to own many acres,
He came to be a Justice of the Peace.
Twm Sion Cati died
A man admired and respected,
With no irony or contradiction
In his view of the world.

Chorus (x2)

No one ever spoke
Of any heroes' deeds he'd done.
Twm Sion Cati lived in a society of one.

Never Never Land

I used to think that everyone lived in a castle. Ours has brightly shining turrets rising high into the night, with little square windows winking from the grey walls, revealing a warm orange glow deep inside our home. Haunting coloured lights, casting eerie shadows over the trees, buildings and paths, illuminate our world.

And beyond this kingdom of colours, mysterious inglenooks, dim towers and shadows, there is a universe of darkness. It is a darkness studded with tiny lights. A darkness strung with distant fiery chains. It is a darkness through which evanescent giants walk. Yet many of us can never see them. 'Look with the very edge of your vision,' we tell people. Then we too try to turn our eyes to these spectres again, and there is nothing there.

At the end of each night, as faint blueness has barely begun to glow in the east, we retreat into our homes of rainbows and towering stone, and sleep. As the next night begins, as we emerge from our blissful dreams and awake back into our wondrous lives, we can sometimes catch the

darkening hues in the west, peppered with far distant beacons.

Being alive is joyous, a bubble we dare not touch for fear of it bursting. And yet we do ask questions about how everything came to be. Unanswerable questions. Though we cannot comprehend the world we live in, cannot understand how it works, we do not delude ourselves with false answers. We are happy; I hope only that we are happy despite, not because of, our ignorance.

Red and blue light on high walls, and yellow on flat stones in the damp earth, led me over the narrow, looping footbridge to the steep worn steps rising up to Lori's castle. She was waiting under the open portcullis and we both ran down to the stream and the gently splashing waterfall.

The path then ascended alongside the water, beneath purple boughs hanging low over our heads, until we reached an open sward, its ethereal bushy edges barely defined in the gloom. By starlight we crossed the grass to a crumbling stone wall, woven with ivy, and pushed against the heavy oak door before us.

There were no castles in this part of the land. Beyond the wall was a village of small homes, many made in the hollow trunks of wide squat trees, or under mossy barrows, each with a single door, window and crooked smoking chimney. Lori and I knew well the people living here. Dan and Rona in their little green hillock with its garden of herbs and roses, the low white fence around it, often came to the firelit evenings down by the great pool where the waterfalls emptied. Gala, from the broadest, sparkling red-capped cabin at the end of the path, sang the colours of the world into being.

And then we found ourselves in the wood where each leaf above us glowed and shook, lighting our way along the dirt track.

Our world had no name. There were no other places anywhere to differentiate it from, so everything that happened was always “here”; there was no reason to specify that. Except, I often thought, when contemplating the surrounding dark, on the cold nights when the giants showed themselves.

They must come to us from the distant lights. Could those be their home fires? Sometimes I believed I could see some of the tiny flames

twinkling, as if I were seeing their reflections on a liquid surface. If this were so, then there must be a vast body of water far away at the base of the hill, to the south of this place. Perhaps the stream ultimately met with this great ocean.

We passed down the street of pumpkin homes, bells and burning candles, haphazardly arranged on multi-layered shelves of rock from which black water ran down to join the stream. Then we looked up to see enormous orange Chinese lanterns, smouldering deep inside and hanging from two huge, spreading trees. Each had tall rectangular windows cut into its paper walls, and each slowly turned in the cool breeze.

New people had entered the world, living peacefully in the house now before us, the house made of coloured blocks and with a tall thatched roof.

‘Lori,’ I asked ‘when did you meet these friends? How long have they been here? Where did they live before?’

Speaking to them had made Lori happy, that’s all she knew.

Soon we were sitting with Si and Elly, before the hypnotic fire inside the little wooden bricked

cottage. They gave us tea to drink and large, round, crunchy biscuits to eat.

‘New neighbours don’t arrive often,’ I told them. ‘But over the years people have come to join us. Only now and then, but there have been a few.’

‘Yanda, in the lodge at the edge of the wood - I think she came to live with us most recently,’ suggested Lori.

‘Yes, I believe so. But it gets so hard to remember. After a while it seems that we have all been here always.’

More tea and conversation took us deep into the night.

Then Lori asked ‘Have you seen the giants?’

Si and Elly glanced at each other and were silent for long moments.

‘We have, yes.’ Elly smiled.

‘I’ve been glimpsing them for years,’ I said. ‘But they rarely come here. Usually I see nothing but the blackness and little lights. The stars that dance on the water – do you think the giants live there?’

‘They always seem silent,’ said Lori. ‘But if you watch their faces, it’s as if they are speaking to each other, only we can’t hear their voices.’

And I sometimes feel they're walking past our homes slowly, in order just to look at us.'

'Who are they?' I wondered.

Si looked uncomfortable. Elly's eyes were fixed on the straw mat under her feet.

Then Si began to explain to us as best he could who he and Elly were.

'We're both slowly forgetting about the lives we led before we came to this hillside, but while we still have some memory of how we arrived here, I'll tell you as much as I can.'

We looked at Si expectantly. The two of us were enthralled, suddenly excited.

'Elly and I have been here before. I know this was a place we'd always loved. It had a name...'

Then Elly looked up and spoke.

'Listen guys, it's ever harder for us to recall everything, but we know that we were once giants. Our land here exists as a tiny pocket in a far greater, perhaps infinite, place. We called this the South End, which I suppose implies that it was itself part of a wider realm. And there is an immense expanse of water beyond the great pool; it's actually the mouth of a many mile wide river that flows from the west.'

‘All that the giants are able see are our castles and lights. They can only imagine us,’ Si added.

Was that what we were? The visions of people we had once been? Our own dreams?

We looked out through the latticed bay window in Si’s and Elly’s home, to the distant water beneath the firmament of bright stars burning in their billions. We saw the long chain of lights stretching a mile or more out into the newly discovered sea. At its end a clutch of buildings shone white.

‘I think we called our land “Never”,’ said Elly, beginning to forget.

The Battersea Barge

At Vauxhall, the Thames, steel grey and flowing
Between banks of black mud and concrete
Draws the cold rain and wind into its tow.
In the last of the daylight we cross Cringle Street.

Moored at the quayside,
By the wooden pier's pillars,
We pass all the houseboats
As we walk on the boards.
A place dense and strange, as in a child's dream,
A place which we know
From so long, long before.

We laugh, we curse,
Things only get worse,
So we've come here to lose ourselves,
Forget about life.
I can see the lights
Of the Battersea Barge burning bright.

And what we now witness is jarring and hurtful;
We look through the room
And see no one else came.
There were places to go, people to talk to,

Adventures beyond this April night's rain.
You didn't play.
You had nothing
To give
To an audience of three.

Chorus

All these miles, these long, hungry hours,
The joy of creation,
The power of the song,
The hopes that we have as our journeys begin,
They're wasted,
Destroyed,
They're lost in life's darkness,
They're dreams,
They're nothing at all.

How far had I travelled? I told you Essex.
It seemed somehow nearer than Southend on Sea.
I left with free CDs, a ticket for next month,
And a weight in my heart
Which would always haunt me.

I thought of you there still
As my train raced through darkness,
"That's showbiz," you'd said. Life is a sod.

And as it rained harder yet
As your friend drove you home,
You whispered,
With head in hands,
“God...”

Chorus

We're here, we're gone,
We fight to get on,
So we've come here to lose ourselves,
Forget about life.
I can see the lights
Of the Battersea Barge burning bright.

The Middle Of The Garden

i)

The train began to slow as it passed the golf course lawns streaked with the long early morning shadows of tall poplar trees, the dewy grass glowing orange in the low sunlight. Then the undulating landscape suddenly flattened into an expanse of grey tarmac as the Express pulled in at the station serving the adjacent airport. A sparkling glass tower rose above the row of waiting planes.

George Forester, professor of genetics at the university, carried one overnight bag over his shoulder and a briefcase in his hand. He checked in at the British Airways desk and ascended the escalator to the departure lounge.

Forester had the feeling that the conference would be like no other he had ever attended. Pressed into his seat, the rooftops diminishing below, he wondered why Copenhagen came to be chosen for this international meeting. Was security higher there? What was the secret that was to be unveiled to such a select group, anyway? This urgency, the reluctance to disclose

any more than a cursory, evasive overview of the whole conference's subject matter, seemed puzzling and disconcerting. He had no specific contribution prepared, expecting more to listen than to speak. Was this to be a conference or a revelation?

‘They managed to bring you on board as well!’ Forester and Brandenburg shook hands in the Phoenix Hotel foyer, their first meeting since the symposium in Basel almost two years ago. The German specialised in gene editing. And then the mystery deepened. Brandenburg nodded furtively at a man and woman standing by the lifts, their luggage at their feet.

‘That’s Monique and Jacques.’

‘Are they here for the conference? I don’t think I know them. What fields do they work in? Chemistry, biology? I know they’re not geneticists, are they?’

‘No, they’re not,’ Brandenburg replied tersely. ‘They’re here for the conference, but Jacques is an economist and Monique has written book after book on sociology.’

The French delegates entered the lift and the door slid shut behind them.

‘Why are we here, Brandenburg?’

Morten Blegvad collected together and straightened his notes with a brief tap on the lectern, moved away from the podium and descended the steps at the edge of the stage. There was no applause, simply a babble of concerned murmuring. The one element of the lecture which stood out most clearly in George Forester’s mind, despite the enormity of the consequences of what he had just heard, was in fact a short allegorical aside: What is a tap made of? One might answer steel, chrome, a little plastic. Well, that’s true; there’s nothing wrong with that answer. But if you leave it running for long enough the sink will overflow - given time, flooding your kitchen. A whole reservoir, miles away, could enter your home through that small conduit, and in theory the entire street could be flooded if you are careless. In such a tragedy, nobody will claim that a tap is made of steel and chrome. All anyone will see and flee from would be water, water, water. Yet it would still be absurd to claim that a kitchen tap is made of water.

Over coffee, Forester and some of the people he knew through his work discussed Morten Blegvad's pronouncement. Could it be true?

'I'll be very interested to see the paper when it comes out.'

'If it comes out.'

'It'll be peer reviewed like no other publication before.'

'Genes for spirituality and, what did he say, anarchism? It's an almost amateurish oversimplification. If it had been anyone other than Blegvad up there he wouldn't have lasted five minutes before the hall had emptied.'

'A gene for capitalist acumen. Imagine amplifying that. That's what I find frightening.'

'But even when genes for specific human traits exist, they often need the right nurture to become activated.'

'To be fair, I don't think he really had the time to fully explain many of the technical details. As you say, let's read the paper.'

A genetic code for making a key to the door to God. Was there really a tap holding at bay an infinite reservoir? A reservoir of what?

*

Forty six floors up, Lionel Westgate stood before the wide north facing window – an entire glass wall - of his private office. He looked down upon a vista of an autumnal London, the bright river curving through the conurbation of brown and grey buildings below. And he imagined that all this was his. To him this was no flight of fancy; he really believed that the city he surveyed was truly his dominion, and that he, Westgate, was king, the most powerful man on Earth. And therefore the most successful, for everyone who was not Westgate had failed. He took his wild imagination to be fact, yet he had not the imaginative faculty to realise that hardly anyone wanted to waste their life being like him.

Money in itself no longer mattered to Westgate, except in as far as it bought him the deference and power which made him what he was. The power to control public opinion. The power to keep humanity numb, tame and obedient to Westgate. He turned away from the window abruptly and walked out into his P.A.'s office, then through into the long wood-panelled corridor. He could almost feel these people, these feckless weaklings, cringe and fawn as he passed among them. A small cohort of confidantes he

would address by their given names. Everyone else, if he deemed it worth his while knowing who they were, by their surname. And he, in turn, didn't much mind what people called him. Either Mr Westgate or Sir would do just fine.

It had begun to rain, and by the time Westgate was ready to leave for the meeting at the Guild Hall it became apparent that someone, prepared to get wet themselves, would need to hold an umbrella over Westgate for the short walks to and from the limo. It was a fifteen minute journey by road and seated in the back he lit a cigar and took a phone call. Outside the venue the car door was opened for him and he stepped out onto the wet pavement and began to hurry the fifty yards to the main entrance steps, the umbrella holder scurrying at his side.

The foam hit him hard, knocking his glasses onto the kerb before they disappeared beneath a thick white tide spreading out across the street. The powerful jet continued to fire at the men, rushing from the attacker's shoulder-strapped weapon. A man lay on his back, while a crumpled umbrella was blown tumbling over the parked cars. Trying to clear the foam from his face, Westgate, bent double and staggering,

stepped on the very edge of the kerb, slipped, and he too hit the pavement violently. Three people ran fast towards the alley on the opposite side of the street.

*

Cream coloured walls, one window with the blinds down and half closed, three large bright lights in the ceiling. People in uniforms, bustling, whispering, shouting, have now left the delivery room. The monitors attached to the mother have fallen silent. A crackling radio continues to quietly play.

Baby Sydney is finally with us. Awake, alive, the rudiments of perception and awareness stirring within yet one more miracle on this Earth.

What is this place? What will he achieve in his tenure here? How will he change it? Sydney is the very first. Still to become a man, but a new kind of man. The first to be tethered to the numinous by an umbilical woven by the wilful intercession of Man.

He looks upon the world and begins to cry.

*

Soon, the world learned of the ways in which humanity could change its very essence. A planet-wide temple, a spiritual utopia, could be created within a handful of generations. When the dark-minded had died off, the new people could set their sights for the stars and beyond, unhindered. Yet many found this vision of the future horrific. The world was as it was. A society in which everything has a value equivalent to its price in a free market was built on human nature, not human choice. We have been given this economic model, this way of organising human endeavour and activity, through an inevitable process of natural order, and to imagine that we can do anything to alter the way we interact with one another is laughable. How will our children survive in a world where everyone is preoccupied with abstract feelings and ideas: trees, flowers, Gods, whatever it is these anarchists are crowing about? The very stuff of life, the impetus for the earning of a living, would be neglected and lost beneath the welter of airy-fairy, pseudo-hippy bullshit. You can't eat a novel. A painting is only worth the profit you can sell it for. Otherwise, what's its point? Cities would crumble, production would

cease, society would collapse. Human success is equivalent to human production, and the success of production is equivalent to its price. Socialism is something used sparingly and covertly, just enough to prevent the many from revolting against the few.

Spiritual people - the artists, the anarchists - on the other hand, saw this whole revolution in genetic engineering as the stairway we had to climb to become so much more than we were at that time. The new age which dreamers had envisioned for centuries had at last almost dawned, and we were predestined to shed our human husks. Our changing was ineluctably prophesied in our very souls. Yet even this dream shone beneath black clouds of terror. The anarchists knew that the capitalists would be trying to instil a stencil of their own vile, and now amplified, commercial acumen into their offspring. And in the present market-driven world, the genetic revolution taking place within private labs would surely be market-driven too. And who would be the first to be able to afford to manipulate the genomes of subsequent generations? It would be the rich – the already successful merchants, money-men and media

controllers. The new knowledge and, most importantly, the means of applying it, had to be made available to all, otherwise humanity would ride headlong into a holocaust of mindless commerce and the evisceration of the Earth's natural resources by the limitless production of anything which pays, its only reason, its only justification. This freedom from market forces had to be fought for hard. Yet how could we measure anarchism's success? Would it be an inner victory, manifested as heightened spiritual states deep within the individual, or were they really seeking the achievement of a great societal change? Socialism had a multifaceted manifesto, contrasting with the single dark tunnel of blind capitalism.

The protests began to turn violent, a portent perhaps of times to come. Peaceful anarchist demos, characterised by placards, banners and songs, were met with the capitalists' vitriol and attacks by police along with, one suspected, the army in police uniform. Ever more frequently, city streets around the world became blocked by barriers of overturned, burning cars. Clouds of tear gas swirled around shop fronts and offices.

Sirens howled; crowds ran; flaming, smoking projectiles flew through the air.

And each group protesting was fighting for something completely at odds with the aims of the others. It seemed no one wanted the revolution as it had been presented to us, yet the voices proclaiming what the people did want were lost in the melee and pandemonium of this mad, tangled Babel.

John Tait returned from work to find his street closed off, his neighbours who had been at home that day standing in groups one side of the police tape stretched across the road. Clearly irritated, they waited with arms folded or hands in pockets, staring towards the police operation halfway up the evacuated avenue. Every so often one of them would turn on their heel, mutter something to no one in particular, aim a kick at the ground, before turning round again and sighing impatiently. The late afternoon was turning colder and it looked to John that many of the people would have dressed more warmly if they'd known how long they were going to have to wait outside. But what was everyone waiting for?

A police officer approached the bemused John Tait and asked him whether he lived in the street.

‘Number forty nine,’ he answered, his tone apprehensive. As he gazed up the road, the realisation dawned that the large black van was stationed immediately outside his own house.

There was a bomb in the building. John’s questions about where it was, how it had been found, who was responsible, were all disregarded, tight-lipped officers guiding him away from the twisted tape.

John’s eyes were still fixed on the walls and windows of the semi a hundred yards away, when the sudden all-consuming whiteness slammed his pupils shut before he could even blink. By the time the sound of the explosion reached him, John was already blind, his hands not yet starting to reach instinctively for his face. Throwing himself to the ground, he listened to the thunderous destruction of his home until the final flying brick had smashed into the windows across the street. There was silence, numb and brief. And then the screaming began.

Minutes passed before questions began to flood his mind again. Why had he seen no police or bomb disposal personnel near the house?

There was just the one empty van. Who had alerted them to the device, and why would they? Seconds before the blast, why had one policeman taken a radio message, moved behind a wall and shut his eyes?

John Tait turned over restlessly in his single, sagging bed. A far distant thunderstorm rumbled outside, although the rain which had been dashing the window had ceased falling almost an hour ago. Well, it seemed an hour; John had no light with which to check the watch he had left on the bedside table. Even the glow filtering through the thin curtains was not enough for him to read the time by.

Now homeless, John was staying in a tiny spare room at the home of his friend and fellow activist Lucy. She was under their enemies' radar, they were pretty sure, for the time being anyway. But how long could he remain hidden there? Should he only venture out in disguise? He and Lucy never left the house together. Even if they were going to the same demo or meeting, they always arranged to go by different transport routes. The work was the most important thing in the world and John refused to be stopped. Or at

least, he was determined to achieve as much as possible before he was stopped.

John, Lucy and their friends and colleagues were natural anarchists. They were rare humans, fighting to realise mankind's future, but created in this way through billions of years of natural biological processes. John often wondered what the engineered, amplified anarchist spirituality would feel like. Would the world be more beautiful, would its colours be brighter? Would his anger at injustice burn yet more fiercely?

The first engineered children were now five years old. John knew they were being raised through a nurture, if not ideal, at least the best this time and place could offer. Yet they were still kept at arm's length from humanity, their genius hidden. Each time a teacher questioned how such articulacy and depths could exist in someone so young, the child always mysteriously moved away before the truth became apparent. This in itself was damaging to them, as much as unrestricted exposure to the world was. They were trapped in this intractable paradox, their lives shaped by a compromised, gilded cage.

Alone that afternoon, John lay back and thought about worlds spinning around the distant

stars, some far away in unreachable galaxies, others secluded islands dotted across an impenetrable ocean of time. He imagined their snow peaked mountains, their clouds, the colours of their skies and sunsets, their forests, their cities, their superhuman societies. Yet what was most thrilling to him was the belief that there was still yet more, far beyond his imagination and understanding.

The practicalities of capitalism ensure there is a natural limit on the number of entrepreneurs, magnates, moguls, sharks and thugs who are able to rise to what they see as some kind of summit, where they stand atop their accumulated billions, controlling the destinies of nations. For example, designing and manufacturing computers is not a problem for a company with a modest financial outlay. After all, there will always be sufficient numbers of intelligent, skilled engineers who aspire to such work; many companies would be able to produce computers. However, to be able to compete against the already established leading brands, a new manufacturer would need a very substantial budget from the start, long before they have made any profit. And as for operating

systems, browsers, social media platforms and so on, it's extremely difficult to prevent one company, one man, from monopolising the market, stifling any real consumer choice.

As the genetic revolution started to change a generation, children began to grow into adults preternaturally obsessed with enterprise, business and untrammelled wealth and power. Their lives had no other goal, and the dream they followed had to be realised in full. For anything less than world domination could not be countenanced, nor accepted as being at least partial success. The mutated horror inside them which passed for a soul or aspiration would never accept such an outcome as being anything other than a complete failure in life. Yet the world could not accommodate more than a very few successful businesses, most of these people soon ending up thwarted and frustrated in their ambitions. And hence amplified too would be the despondency that followed, the unbearable shame and oppressive weight of an existence wasted. The work itself had never been important, personal success in a warped, loaded game being the only criterion for gauging life's value.

By fair means or foul, the neo-capitalists had to achieve their highest imagined glories or face a mental ruin, a psychosis so extreme that it would invariably prove to be unsurvivable.

Wesley Cardew was one such man, turning to face his life's crisis head on, refusing to acknowledge the inevitable. He felt strong again. For days he had been asking himself why he should be the one to die. Why his own tinpot firm, facing administration within a month, should go to the wall. And now he had his answer: his demise was only certain if he allowed it. If these smug pretenders, wannabe world kings, their only talent to have been in the right place at the right time, want lives based on competition, then they can compete against a gun.

'I will not die,' Wesley Cardew hissed. 'I will not lose.'

Thus the genetic wars started, hundreds prepared to end their own pain in a final despairing murderous act.

*

Nigel Digby's day was going well. So far, it had not been any different to last Monday, or any

other Monday as far as Nigel could remember. His world was small and safe, just the way he liked it to be. The simplicity of his life was something Nigel was constantly thanking God for, and God in turn, he was sure, was smiling down on Nigel.

Although to him his life seemed straightforward, others saw Nigel as a mosaic of contradictions. He seemed to divide humanity into three: his betters, those he considered his underlings, and a small group of peers – family and a few friends. And it was second nature to Nigel to behave in ways he unquestioningly believed to be entirely appropriate towards members of each of these social classes he identified in his mind. He simpered, sneered or grinned inanely as the moment required. The world had a natural order, and Nigel was happy to relinquish all volition and drift helplessly with the current of something far mightier than him. And yet at weekends he worked voluntarily for charitable organisations which provided aid – medicine, food, even helping with drug rehabilitation programmes – to the poor of countries far more capitalistic and authoritarian than his own. Some puzzled over the way he

freely swapped personas. But if anyone were to have approached Nigel about his role in the world, in all likelihood he would not have understood their question.

How could such haughty, supercilious arrogance and servile, forelock-tugging deference to imagined authority co-exist inside one person? This was not a paradox Nigel would ever contemplate or even recognise. To him, there was no problem. He knew his place, and he saw himself as being immovably central, anchored to something he blindly accepted. Our social structure was permanent, Nigel told himself, irrespective of history's contrary evidence. And even if men could change the world, it was risible to believe that such an accomplishment could be achieved with help from the likes of him. Anyway, what change did we need? What was wrong with things the way they were?

So Nigel continued to live out his days as if they had no value or importance. His empty life remained inanimate. He existed only for the benefit of his betters, and this gave him the satisfaction of knowing that he was fulfilling his role in the world. Nigel was a good man.

*

Another new baby opened unfocussed eyes, hair still wet and matted, blue skin waxy and bloodied. Helpless, beautiful, universal. The life ahead a sacred promise, its potential unrealised and vast. Jade was identical to every child entering this place, every saint and sinner, every dictator and artist. And she slept, for the genes which would one day drive her single-minded, lascivious, ruthless greed, for this short while remained dormant.

ii)

Humanity was at war. Thirty seven years of births moulded to a vision of perfection that existed in the minds of the rich, had created a subspecies of a hundred thousand individuals more dead-eyed shark than human. And there wasn't room for them all. The capitalist system encouraged and facilitated their attempts to accumulate wealth and power, but it could not allow more than a handful to actually succeed. An army of bitter, resentful, vengeful, thwarted

emperors in desperation began to fight the world. At least, they would have formed an army if they'd been organised. But they were feral individuals, and always had been, for whom any form of co-operation was anathema. They were waging their wars against the entirety of the human race.

Even so, eventually some of the capitalists did begin to get organised. Perhaps they had to have had some sort of social awareness, a kind of intelligence which those beating at the gates did not. Maybe they needed a small measure of humanity to have got as far as they had. In fact, many of their number were not genetically engineered; they were traditional right wing, entrepreneurial humans. So the billionaires formed a cabal to protect their mutual interests, their already accumulated wealth and privilege. They were the ones who could afford to form and maintain armies, to fund spies and assassins, to be able to keep the angry multitudes at bay and defend all they had. And they achieved it through the fundamental tenet of socialism: co-operation. They saw no irony in this. After all, they were simply buying what they wanted and needed, as was their right.

And this was the reason Ray Sutherland was running, fast and scared through the High Street. He had recognised the two men and knew they had come to the town to take his life. Gasping, he reached the narrow alley leading to the market and finally found himself among the throng of shoppers and rows of stalls. Yet he couldn't lose himself in this crowd forever; the killers would not be afraid to complete their mission in front of witnesses if need be. Ray stopped and looked around. At the far end of the market place he saw a brick archway. He believed it led to the entrances to the flats, and beyond that ran the canal. Head bowed, Ray pushed through the bodies and colours. Passing under the arch, he found himself alone on the path between the two towering buildings. It was a long, straight track, and the canal and tow path at its end were nearly a hundred yards distant. Ray was exposed here. Then he saw a woman leaving one of the blocks of flats, the coded door closing behind her. He ran at her and thrust his arm into the narrowing gap between the door and jamb. He barely heard the faint 'Hey!' behind him as he entered the hallway and turned into the stairwell. Reaching the first floor he staggered to the lifts and pressed

the button, waiting well away from the windows as his heart pounded. Thankfully, seemingly only seconds passed before the battered, scratched panel slid open. Ray dived into the lift and rode to the fourteenth floor. His actions were simply instinctive; he had no idea what waited there or what he was to do next.

Pressed to the shadowed corridor wall, half an hour passed before he heard the lift arrive with an ominous chime. Ray could have started to run back down the stairs, but he was too tired of running. Everything was over now. Even his life's work – the guidance of humanity's future – seemed no longer important. In any case, he could now hear heavy footsteps ascending the stairs.

Whether Ray Sutherland was an anarchist, drone or capitalist wasn't important. Human society was locked in a civil war and only complete destruction, a true end to history, awaited.

Capitalists were killing both anarchists and the drones whose minds anarchists had turned. Anarchists in turn were fighting to prevent the genetically manipulated creation of more capitalists. But when the anarchists started to

kill, it became clear that all civilisation was doomed.

Soon, the Earth would be at peace, silent and eternal, thought Ray.

iii)

Dawn had not yet broken. The eastern sky was beginning to lighten, the white fire of Venus still hanging over the trees, discernibly a crescent, yet soon to be extinguished by flaming clouds and a bright, unbounded blueness.

Den Peters looked down upon what had once been the city of Bath. The Avon surged below him, swollen and brown, the tops of Pulteney Bridge's three arches barely visible above the seething surface. The line of shops along the top was crumbling and ruined, the yellow limestone now blackening and hung with ivy and brambles. The whole city had been subsumed by a forest growing over the few Bath Stone buildings still standing, an occasional light patch revealed between the conquering trunks standing as sentinels and the great green awnings of foliage. The city had truly become a jungle over these

past decades. Constant flooding had forced the last few people who managed to survive in this region up onto the higher ground such as the hill on which Peters now stood. But now he needed to descend to the streets of the town, if they were still identifiable, and search for where the Roman Baths had been. He didn't expect to encounter anyone at that level, which was just what the anarchists hoped, the reason why the whole project had been created in abandoned, screened places such as this. The only threat he faced was from the animals set free and starving in Man's ruins. Peters hoisted his rifle further up over his shoulder.

The thought crossed his mind that the trail and entrance to the baths, in the years after the Romans had left Britain, when the building lay forsaken and destroyed, must have looked not too different from the lost, dystopian, secret greenery which Peters hacked through today, two thousand years later, civilisation ended and humanity on the edge of extinction.

Peters found himself looking over a steep precipice, tall trees rising from a deep pit. This must be the place. He saw the rows of fluted pillars below, the remains of red brick walls, even

a small area of tiled floor. The stench of sulphur rose from the hole before him.

He had been told of the path leading down, and he could see it now, a gap in the undergrowth where the earth lay flattened, lined with stones and gravel. There were many strong branches to hold on to as he descended, the light diminishing, the air growing palpably colder.

Then he stood before a low iron door studded with rusting rivets, dark behind the twisted sinews of exposed tree roots. Breathless, turning to look back up the muddy trail, Peters waited patiently to be identified on the camera hidden above the entrance to the anarchist compound, the centre of the great and desperate project which would save humanity.

The windowless room was the most brightly lit space Peters had entered for the whole of his long journey. Caroline and Paul brought in food and drink, and after no more than brief welcoming pleasantries left Peters alone for the night.

He slept the sleep of a man who had known only a tent, hard cold ground, and wind, rain and darkness for a fortnight. The next morning, by the time he had got up and found the dining room,

all ten members of the permanent work force were just finishing breakfast.

‘You made it, Den,’ said Paul, carrying his tray back to the kitchen. ‘We were so glad to see you last night.’

‘We’re able to survey the surrounding area for many miles,’ Caroline told him. ‘No one followed you.’

‘Please help yourself,’ a man in faded but clean grey overalls invited Peters, offering him a tray and empty plate. He sat down to eat the first hot meal he’d seen in weeks.

It had taken decades to construct the underground bunker, and the activists were as certain as they could be that no one outside their circle knew of its existence. And this was how it had to stay if their work were to have any chance of succeeding. It was the most important thing in the world, the most crucial project in all history. It would take just one turncoat, one infiltrator, one traitor to destroy mankind’s future.

At around midday Caroline and Paul took Peters to witness that which he had only previously heard about, the secret place in the vaults beneath Bath. A spiral staircase led down two levels, from where the three entered a lift and

plunged deep into the Earth. Then the door opened and they stepped into what Caroline called the hall. Peters had been told so much about this place, its immensity and sheer majesty, yet still found himself wholly unprepared for the sight he now beheld.

The cavern, a hundred yards wide and high, receded into a murky distance where four long lines of yellow lights converged. There seemed to be a wall of some sort at that far end, but one couldn't really be sure, the remote depths of the hall too dark to be clearly seen. The atrium was filled with long rectangular structures, stacked one upon the other, all disappearing into the gloom along with the lights on the floor and ceiling. The gaps between these machines formed a number of long parallel corridors and shorter passages running the width of the hall. These must be the pods, Peters realised, many hundreds of them, each holding one individual. Adults, children; each instilled with a potential spiritual life of tremendous, unprecedented magnitude. All held in stasis, waiting to wake into a future world and lives of perpetual communion with the numinous. But this world they had been made for did not yet exist.

Civilisation lay all but destroyed, oblivious to their patient slumber. Capitalists and drones still survived in the shrinking cities, armed with nuclear arsenals, desperate and hostile to any life other than the grotesque symbiotic embrace they had entered into, accepting that they needed each other to continue their piteous existence.

In the silent hall the anarchists slept, dreaming of the Utopia they had been created for.

Few of the facility's original designers were still alive. The war, the assassinations, and endemic disease, had wiped out so many. To keep the silo, and another fifteen similar places around the world, operating, new people were being recruited all the time in various professional roles. Higher education had been reduced to an arcane underground network, most university campuses now decayed to ruins. Peters' background was in Biochemistry, and when he had learned all he could about the suspended animation of the future citizens, his task would be to keep the machines running, one of a team of specialists. None of them knew if it would be their generation which finally turned the machines off and released the now dormant

population into a perfect, green, waiting world. Would they live to be part of a civilisation which cared about its own destiny, whose individual citizens, although diverse in profession and temperament, were nevertheless united in their obsession and dedication to their highest common goals, striving towards the impossible, groping at the future?

Den Peters had been working at the facility beneath Bath for three months when William Draeger joined the team. New recruits were identified, approached and assessed by the world wide anarchist resistance network, and it was directly through this organisation that people like Peters and Draeger came to tend the sleepers. The greatest risk the movement faced was infiltration. Every possible care was taken, but there was always the slightest chance that enemies of the cause could pass through the filters.

Draeger was quickly accepted as a valued and popular member of staff in Bath. He was an electrical engineer, and his understanding of the equipment in the hall was expert. His interests and conversational subjects spanned a wide arc,

and his colleagues always found him interesting and rewarding to spend time with. The one topic he turned away from however, changing the subject, becoming suddenly busy and needing to leave the room, was the fundamental reason why they were all there – anarchism.

The war had almost destroyed global communication. There were still satellites in geostationary orbit around the planet, but they were available to no more than a very few users. To gain access to space communication was the only way to have any control over Earth's fate. The world's anarchists had their own satellites, sending necessarily infrequent and encrypted messages to each other. Occasional technical problems suspended the communications network, but these lulls were always temporary and were invariably fixed within a day or two. But for the last fortnight now, the airwaves had been silent, and no one at the base knew what the fault could be. Petersfield in Manchester tracked the satellites. Personal contact with them revealed that the instruments remained in orbit – tracer signals were still being received. Yet somehow the messages groups like their own were trying to send to each other were being

blocked. Their work was being sabotaged, their existence now known to those they were fighting against. These foes were somehow receiving information about the anarchists; their plans, their equipment, their members.

‘Any ideas, Will?’ Peters asked him when they were alone.

‘It’s hard to tell at this end. All our equipment here is working fine. Manchester would need to sort this out.’

‘We are in trouble, you know,’ Peters stressed. He was irked to see Draeger simply shrug.

By the time the lights went out and the first warning shots were fired it was too late. The dim emergency lamps were on a separate circuit and stayed on, and it was by this faint glow that Caroline spotted William Draeger on a high gantry, two bags of equipment and tools across his shoulders. He ignored their calls, marching resolutely into the darkness at the end of the hall.

Den Peters and Paul Knight found torches and tried to head off Draeger by a little used side passage outside the main cavern. What was he doing? They asked themselves this, but clearly they both knew the answer, just were too afraid to

voice it. Draeger was that which they had feared all these years. The outsider, the saboteur.

They followed Draeger by his fleeting shadows and darting silhouette, until he stood fixed in their torchlight against the dripping walls of a black chamber from which the only exit was through the tunnel down which Peters and Knight were advancing on him. His rifle was lying on the ground alongside the bags he had brought, about ten yards away from both parties. Everyone stood frozen, eyes locked on their respective adversaries. Draeger moved first, lunging at the gun. The split second before Peters started to dive forward made just enough difference, and Draeger's hands were on the weapon, his finger on the trigger; then bright blinding light, the monumental crack spearing the men's ears. As Peters and Draeger grappled they fell onto a short metal staircase, tumbling down to the landing. The rifle slipped through a gap in the structure and they heard it clatter onto the steel decking far below them.

Both men sat panting for breath, Peters looking down on Draeger from a higher step.

‘It's done,’ whispered Draeger.

‘What is this? Who are you?’

Peters' mind steadfastly refused to believe what Draeger then told him. It could not, must not, be true. 'The bombs are now detonating at every anarchist sleepers' silo on Earth. Soon there will be no more of you. And everyone else is finished anyway; the capitalists cannot live the way they have been recently. They're all going to kill themselves. Civilisation is finished. If anyone somehow survives for a few years longer, they will hardly be fit to be called human. Everything's over; Earth has been freed of us. Nature will finally be unburdened of our destruction and poison.'

Peters sat in bewildered silence for a long while. Then when he spoke, horror shook in his voice. 'This is insane. You would end everything people have worked for and built over hundreds of thousands of years?'

'People?' mused Draeger, slumping further back against the bannisters. 'People... oh right, I know. Pink things that get in the way.'

His arm bruised and bleeding from the fall, Peters stood painfully and began to descend the steps towards Draeger.

'Where are you going, Den? The bomb's primed and ready to explode. Sit down – there's

nothing you can do. I was hoping to get out of here before then, but if it's not to be, then that's the way it is. There won't be anywhere to live anyway.'

'Do you really want to do this, Will?'

'As I said, it's already done.'

'We're trying to build a paradise on Earth. You can join us. You could be a member of this world.'

'I'm not an anarchist.'

'Utopia is for everybody. All types. Diversity is a society's lifeblood.'

'I've tried. I don't fit in with you people. You won't have me. I don't share your deepest beliefs and you've always looked down on me. And the capitalists would only use me or discard me, depending on whether I'm of any benefit to them. I'm a drone. I have no control over my own life. I have no reason to be here, and neither has anyone else. Although I'll never see it, I can only dream of a world free of Man.'

'You don't really believe that.'

'How do you know what I believe?'

'I know you're human. I know you had dreams and aspirations when you were young, and that some, at least, can still be realised. I also

know you're quite wrong about anarchists rejecting you. Civilisation still has a future, one in which all who seek a society founded on co-operation will be embraced, welcomed and valued. You're with us, Will; you always have been.'

Silent minutes passed. Draeger's head lay buried in his hands, the darkness around them seeming to slowly deepen.

'Where's the bomb, Will?'

It was a surprise to Peters when Draeger promptly stood and started to walk down the stairs into the darkness at the floor of the cave. 'The powerhouse.' He beckoned Peters to follow him.

Paul was no longer with them. Peters was sure the gunshot had missed everyone and could only hope there had been no ricochet which had struck Paul.

The impaired lighting threw the colossal shadows of the layered scores of sleepers' pods onto the rough hewn wall, and it was here in this half light they at last found the steel door to the engine room, the beating heart of the entire complex. Inside, steps led down to the sunken floor and the machines still steadily roaring.

Their torchlight darted across the breeze-blocked walls of the room.

‘Where, Will? It’s not too late.’

And then they saw the water. The room was flooded to a depth of six inches. Draeger became upset.

‘I knocked the pipe. It wasn’t leaking when I’d left it.’

He waded into the water while Peters remained in the opened doorway, wondering what the exact reason was for Draeger’s concern. Which instruments was he worried would be affected by a possible short circuit?’

‘The entire array of pods could be disabled if the crucial electrical supply is lost,’ shouted Draeger.

Peters listened carefully to the sound of running water, barely discernible above the machinery noise throbbing through the room. He stepped down onto the flooded floor and tried to scan every recess, his torch beam set to as wide an angle as possible. And then he saw the source of the leak.

‘Will! It’s just a tap left on. To your right.’

There was no breach, no impending deluge. The flow now stemmed, Peters watched Draeger

splashing over to the far side of the room, stopping at a large metal crate in the corner.

‘The timer control panel is on top.’ If that box were full of explosives there must have been enough to blow the whole complex to kingdom come. ‘I can’t get up there,’ Draeger told him.

Peters shone his light directly at Draeger. He was covered in blood. He now held his right hand clamped in pain across his left shoulder, and for the first time Peters noticed he was limping through the water. There had after all been a ricochet.

The case was six feet high, and Peters pulled himself on top, dragging Draeger’s tool bag up behind him.

‘Unscrew the panel,’ Draeger instructed him. The one panel was right there in front of his face, and Peters removed the bolts and slid the plate aside. Coloured LED lights glowed among the exposed wires and circuit boards.

‘Are we turning this thing off?’

Draeger sat himself on a low shelf of instruments and remained quiet for a time, his eyes following the ripples running across the black water at his feet.

‘I don’t know. What’s the point? What’s the point of anything?’

‘Be a part of the new world, Will. You said yourself that the capitalists have been using you. As soon as you have served your purpose, as soon as you cease to be beneficial to them, they’ll drop you. There will be no place for you and me in their so-called society - they don’t even believe there can be any such thing. To end everything you have ever been, blown to pieces in a black, wet cellar which no one will ever discover, no one knowing your fate or even remembering you or the hopes you had, the excitement in living you once felt, the love and friendship you have given to people; this is the greatest loss any of us can ever incur.’

‘I’m not sure all that applies to me, Den.’

‘It’s true for everyone, however deeply this truth may be hidden.’

Peters lay face down on the cold metal, staring at the tangle of electronics, trying to penetrate Draeger’s mind. Bluff, double bluff, screeching u-turn, hell bent destruction plan; which it was, he could only guess.

‘This is a hostile, loveless, psychotic place,’ Draeger whispered.

‘It’s what we make it.’

‘We don’t have the ability to make it what we want.’

Peters cut to the chase. ‘What do I do?’

‘You can’t disable the timer once it has been started.’ He looked at his watch. ‘We’ve got about an hour. We can only cut the wires. There should be a blue one and a black one. Cut the blue first. If the black wire is cut or disconnected before the blue, the whole thing will go up immediately. Cutting the blue and then the black will disable the bomb.’

Peters found the cutters in the bag of tools. Mind racing, heart pounding, he tried desperately to sift through the few cold facts and myriad subjective psychological analyses of Draeger’s actions, to try and squeeze some logic out of all he had lived through that afternoon. Had all the other compounds been obliterated already? Had Draeger been informed they would be and believed it, or was he simply lying and acting alone? Peters didn’t know. Anything could be happening above ground. And was Draeger still set on his mission to end civilisation? Had Peters recognised that it was Draeger’s confusion which drove him, not any idealism? Had he accurately

recognised the pain and tears in the man sitting in the water below him as deep regret, a change of heart? Did Draeger want to live, or to die along with everyone else? Perhaps in fact cutting the black wire followed by the blue would disarm the bomb.

And what had Peters learned in his own life? He struggled to decide a course of action which would not invalidate everything he'd been through all these decades. If Draeger were to be believed, then the anarchist fight was lost. Moreover, the remaining people would soon all kill each other. It was quite possible that he and Draeger were in effect the last humans on Earth. And if there really were just one other person in the whole of creation, what sort of hellish world would it be in which that lone fellow citizen were sworn to destroy you, to not be trusted, to be feared? This was unconscionable; one could not live out the remainder of one's life in this way.

'Cut the blue wire, Den. You're right, we can rebuild civilisation. I want to live.'

Pictures had been forming in Peters' mind. He suddenly visualised the small town he had been brought up in, red-roofed cottages rising up the leafy wooded hillside, bright in the afternoon

sun. This was the idyllic world he yearned to return to, the world of joy and certainty snatched from him a lifetime ago; all thought of what was about to befall him in the next seconds dissipated.

He gazed into the hole in the bomb. Safe and happy in his childhood home, Peters cut the blue wire.

Geology

Past the years in their layered billions,
Risen warped from long dry oceans.
Through dense strata crushed by mountains,
Geology's ages pull us down, down, down.
Into our Earth's frozen history,
We're falling through into a time
The globe was red and black and when
The world was seeping magma.

I am the briefest spark of light and life,
Ten years old,
Learning all these things inside this classroom.
I need more than the English and Maths I love,
I want to know about the planet
And find out all I can about my home.

But I'm alone in this school,
There's no one else here.
My one friend moved away.
I still play football, "he" and marbles.
Yet long to be a scientist one day.
But they won't teach classes bored and restless;
The many must outweigh the few.

The teacher's keen if disappointed.
Tomorrow a question will be put to you.

On the surface of this Earth,
Filling valleys, strewn on hills,
Smoothed by tides upon the beach,
Lie broken pieces of the world.
They're there to see, to touch and hold,
Heavy, dirty, cracked and cold,
Beyond all human comprehension,
Unimaginably old.

Sometimes these rocks split in two
And ancient graves become unsealed.
Creatures which once ran and flew,
Crawled and swam are then revealed.
Turned to stones their shells and bones,
High up mountains, deep in lakes.
Ghosts frozen for all time,
Scattered in the aeons' wake.

And so this question we were asked,
One morning shortly before play:
Would we miss Geology,
Be sorry if these lessons stopped today?

Raise your hands, he asked us then,
If you'd like a class again.
Would it sadden anyone
If this subject were now done?

I shot an arm up in the air,
Shaken, lost for what to do.
I looked around at the others there,
Assuming they felt like this too.
But not a single hand was raised
On that darkest of all days.
Cold horror filled my heart
As my young life was torn apart.

I'm now a rock, a marble seam,
A fossil in some hellish dream.
The world has once more turned to blood;
I'm something crawling in the mud.
Where is any other soul
On this spinning piece of coal?
Where are all my dreams and plans?
I am this stone.
I'm not this man.

Bunhill Fields

In Bunhill Fields last autumn I sat for a while before William Blake's grave. How crowded this very lawn had been a year ago at the unveiling of the new tombstone, two hundred people listening to poets and artists speaking of the inspiration they had taken from the man's works. The inscribed Portland Stone slab, laid flat in the damp earth, had been bordered with scores of candles burning in delicate glass vessels. Before people's careful feet, flowers had been laid on the grass. Lilies and roses, in posies and bouquets, some standing in enamelled vases, exalted William's rediscovered resting place. His words, chosen by the Blake Society, were now his epitaph.

*I give you the end
of a golden string
Only wind it
into a ball
It will lead you in
at Heavens gate
Built in
Jerusalems wall*

Now here on this overcast working day, a light rain soon to start speckling my coat, the breeze sporadic and gentle, the burial ground was again the timeless oasis of peace at London's heart. Office workers read books over their sandwiches and water bottles, while children chased pigeons onto the muddy lawn as their mothers halted pushchairs on the cracked flag-stoned path. Behind me sprawled centuries of limestone graves, dissolving in the acid rain, illegible. All the while the engines thundering down City Road hammered against our tranquil bower. Yet their roar failed to intrude on that sacred place, seeming instead to form an overarching, insulating shell enveloping and guarding our little garden in heaven.

A plane tree, just a yard or two to the left of the new stone, towered over me. Its scaly, flaking bark, still damp from the night's rain, was coloured shades of green and brown. Yet the longer one looked at the patterns wrapped around its thick girth, the more the variety of hues became apparent. One began to see yellows, purples, blues and reds etched along the contours of the fragmenting surface. The plane's trunk rose straight and high, erupting far overhead into

a tangled canopy of dark branches and golden autumn leaves.

As I sat on the wooden bench before the grave, gusts of wind stroked my face and leaves began to fall from this tree with its roots wrapped around William Blake's bones. The great plane had fed on the artist's body over these last decades, drawing his very atoms up into itself, growing to become, at least in part, Blake himself.

The poet professed his belief that the soul – the infinite world of the imagination – and the body were not separate, not independent. And now here before me stood this magnificent, beautiful natural structure, as great as any artwork human hearts and hands had ever constructed.

I watched the dry, brown leaves continue falling. And then one, broken away from Blake's tree, alighted on my chest. It fell on me gently, yet felt somehow guided. The coat I wore was unfastened at the front, my white shirt open to the air. The breeze picked up, yet the leaf remained secured, clinging to my heart.

Land's End

We reached the cliffs at last.
The gulls were calling
As we felt the fierce Atlantic gale blow.
Stood at the edge,
Afraid of falling
Onto the cracked rocks
And the foaming sea below.

The Cornish sky above
A clear and brilliant blue.
A voice that sang of loss and love
Filled this place where I first met you.

Chorus

Land's End, the road stops here.
Our land ends at this windswept point.
Land's End, barren and remote.
Land has ended;
We can only journey now by boat.
The boat we build cannot be,
It's an impossibility.
The mast and sails tall and strong,
The hull three hundred cubits long.

And now the stormy sea we sail upon
Pulls us on and on and on and on.

So we set to sea at last,
Sixty years on raging waves.
Only glimpsing land from miles afar.
Our destination now forgotten,
Our lives a rosary of days,
Our God the East wind, our compass stars.

The flaming sky above
Spreads from that fire in the West.
The voice singing of loss and love
Calls from that distant land where we can rest.

Chorus

Rayleigh Station

I learned his name was Gary.

I'd seen him before a number of times, speaking to any stranger who looked as if they might possibly listen, anyone who didn't resolutely avoid eye contact and pretend they were reading too intently to be aware that the man in the grey hoodie had singled them out. Anyone who might in turn speak to him. Tonight he was at the train station again. Nearing the platform entrance, I saw him in the yellow light, confronting a wary, tiny-bike mounted youth. Fascinated by the boy's hair, Gary had found ingress to a conversation.

He loved his fantastic dreadlocks. 'So thick. So cool.' Startled eyes fixed on him. 'Wonderful, really impressive.'

Taken aback, cornered against the ticket machines, the object of his attention tried to gauge whether he was being mocked. But there was no insult, no aggression. As I passed them the boy edged away, straddling his bicycle and looking about him for the friends he had been awaiting.

Speckles of rain began to fall as I found a bench at the end of the dim platform. Then the shouting began, drawing steadily nearer. I watched his approach, thinking he must be using a hands-free mobile, white earphones hidden beneath his cowl.

‘Rayleigh. On the platform. Meet me on the platform. Why can’t you wait? I’ll be there in ten minutes.’

Gary had now reached my bench next to the Prittlewell sign. I was expecting him to redirect his polemic at me, yet he continued walking, receding into darkness with slow, ungainly steps. I shut out his discourse and began to study the last few crossword clues from that morning’s paper.

But he turned round and came back. As I looked up I saw, shuffling through the puddles before me, a troubled man, not yet middle-aged, curled hair not yet greying. If he had in fact been on the phone, the call was now finished.

‘Mate,’ he started, ‘do you know what really gets me about the world? The homeless people everywhere. In the High Street, in the park. I’m really lucky; I’ve got a small flat of my own I can go home to. They have nowhere. And do you

know what? This is what really makes me angry.’ Please don’t get angry, I thought. ‘They’ve converted that old office block, in front of the courts, to flats. But they’re all really expensive homes, for rich people only. If they’d made them affordable places then all the homeless in the town could have been housed there. Nobody would need to sleep out on the streets. But it’s all about money in this world. How much you can make. People don’t matter.’

The rumble of the approaching train grew louder.

‘Tell you what though, it’s cold.’

I felt I needed to say something to him and managed ‘The temperature’s dropped over the last few days.’

‘I’ve got this hood,’ he said, pulling it further about his ears. ‘It’s probably not as warm as your hat, mind.’

I stood up next to him as the bright windows flashing past us began to slow. We entered the same carriage by different doors and as I found a seat he walked down the aisle and shut himself in the toilet.

Then the shouting started again. ‘The platform at Rayleigh. Five minutes, that’s all.’ A

tremendous crash rocked the carriage. A kicked wall, a smashed door, who knew? The woman seated nearest to the cubicle lifted her head from her book and with concerned eyes looked around at the other passengers.

It seemed longer than usual before our train pulled into Rayleigh station. Gary lurched from the toilet, still muttering, and navigated his way past the outstretched legs and baggage, leaving by the doors behind me. I peered through the reflections and rain droplets on the window, into the gloom of the platform, and saw his figure, lit weakly from behind.

‘You’re here, mate!’ He held his arms out to someone before him. I couldn’t discern who was there. He crouched down then dropped to one knee, arms still outstretched. I expected a child to appear, his mother behind, but still saw no one in the darkness.

‘Come here, you!’ He seemed so happy.

A signal sounded and the doors slid shut. I could still barely make him out as he stood up and walked on towards the station exit. Whom had he met, I wondered.

As we began to inch forwards my curiosity pressed me to the glass. The train would pass him before he had left the platform.

Then I saw my friend, trudging slowly, hands deep in pockets, head bowed, his eyes fixed on something far below the black paving slabs. Quite alone in the cold January evening.

Small and New

Small and new, I cried.
Around me happy faces shone.
Above, a wide blue sky,
Beneath me the soft blanket I lay on.
One cold January night
Took my breath, they found me white.
I died alone,
In my wake a family's grief.
I left this world so soon,
My happiness intense and brief.

Another candle sputtered light
Until its flame grew bright and sure.
The cosmos lay before her that first night,
As for every child omnipotent and pure.
Walking out into the hostile streets,
Swaddling clothes became her winding sheet,
Ending life alone,
Between the gutter and the bins.
Through no fault of her own,
Yet steeped in the world's sins.

He searched for magic in this mundane place,
He sought out beauty in all things,

He pushed against the limits of this human race.
Body crushed, his spirit soared on holy wings.
And as the boy becomes the man,
He holds on tightly as he can
To his childhood and the sacred lands
He's dreamed of all these years,
To the heaven cradled in his hands,
To the music he still hears.

Not special;
Simply wading through
This quagmire of solicitude.
Somehow alive in parlous times,
Somehow to oneself still true.

How Wide Is A Piece Of String?

I've no idea whether it was a madman I met, or God. He claimed to be neither, as I suppose he would. He also told me he wasn't really there. Well, in that case he wasn't really there the previous day either. Today, though, he really isn't really here. The little table by the wall and displaying sepia prints of Derby Road a hundred years ago, at a push able to seat two knee-banging diners, stands empty. A red and white vinyl tablecloth is draped squarely over the wooden surface, and the salt, pepper and sauces stand tidily grouped together to one side. The Mountain Grill cafe is half full this morning, but no one will sit at the old man's table. I keep thinking about all he told me. Never in my life have I listened to such an incomprehensible oration and yet still been left with the exhilarating conviction that I have witnessed the revelation of the universe's fundamental truth.

A yard wide aisle separated us that morning. I saw him leaning over to me out of the corner of my eye and thought the man in the navy coat was going to ask me to pass him something. But no,

he wanted to know how wide a piece of string was.

‘Which piece of string is that?’

‘An infinitely long string,’ he answered without hesitation.

I thought about this for a while, as much about the reason for his asking me this as the question itself. I was hungry and hardly in the mood to field senseless comments from odd-balls. But as I looked up at him I saw something, intelligent and fiercely bright, burning in his grey eyes. I was somewhat taken aback, and attempted to give an answer.

‘Well, if it’s a string about, say, three millimetres thick, then it will be more or less three millimetres along its entire length.’

‘Yes, as you say, more or less. There will be variations in its diameter over its whole length. But there will be an infinite number of these variations over the infinite length of the string. Unless there is some limit imposed on the size of the variations, there will be places along the string where its diameter becomes very large. In fact, there must be an infinite number of spots where this width is infinite.’

‘What is this infinity?’ I asked him. ‘There’s nothing in physics which is actually infinite. The concept of infinity is just a mathematical tool used for solving certain problems.’

‘What you mean is that humans have never encountered or identified infinity.’

‘But the manufacturing process for this infinitely long string must set some intrinsic limit on the diameter of the string it is producing. If nothing else, it will require infinite time to produce this string.’

My friend had begun to smile ever more broadly as I was speaking. ‘Exactly,’ he said. ‘You’ve made two very profound points.’

I had?

‘The creation of any infinite quantity in nature can and must be prevented.’

It has?

‘Anyone who truly understands the ramifications of the existence of anything infinite in the universe will dedicate their life, using their entire being, to stopping such a phenomenon from coming to pass.’

Why?

The damp morning was brightening, and the street outside had begun growing busier. I

watched the shapes of the passing cars and shoppers through the steamed up glass front of the cafe. The muffled sounds of grinding engines, people shouting, motorbikes roaring, rang round the small brown room we sat in.

I began to eat my breakfast, hoping this would be the end of the lecture. Or was it perhaps some sort of questionnaire?

Why was he telling me all this? It was almost as if he felt it was important that I understood these things. If so, he wasn't being successful. If there were some sort of point, I was missing it.

And then he told me of the things which would be inevitable – which come to pass an infinite number of times – in such an infinite universe. Heaven would be infinite. But so would hell.

That word again, over and over. I was being pummelled by what was beginning to seem to be mere sophistry. It was hard to grasp concepts and form mental images in a model where everything was infinite. Not just extremely big – infinity was something completely different.

In such a universe – a multiverse in fact – everything and anything must exist, even things which locally would be considered impossible.

From the point of view of any individual, that person would not be able to die, they would be immortal. If the universe branches into an infinite number of paths every split second, then there will always be courses where almost certain impending death is averted by seemingly the most unlikely events. A miracle cure is found just in time; a fall from a tall building is cushioned by a tractor pulling a hay-cart at exactly the right moment (in a city centre!). The conscious mind must necessarily always follow the route where it somehow survives; we cannot “know” that we are dead. Moreover, minds will come into existence which will be in eternal bliss. But the horror of this reality is that there will also be minds trapped in eternal excruciating torment. And there will be an infinite number of these conscious entities. In an infinite universe all roads lead to hell, and it is real.

His argument seemed flawlessly logical, however much this irritated me. But what could we do to change the way things were? Humans pitted against the multiverse. We had no chance. Anyway, how can we tell if the universe is really infinite?

‘Do we know if these minds in hell really do exist?’ I asked him. ‘And how can we help them?’

‘They would be eternally isolated. To join their world we would have to be them,’ he answered.

‘How do we do that?’

‘We don’t need to try very hard. If there is but one mind incarnated into everything that lives, then we already are them. For ever.’

This wasn’t a conversation I would normally expect to be having over breakfast in a suburban greasy spoon. Yet I found myself realising that in minutes my mood had gradually turned from annoyance to fascination. Even so, despite all this, I was having great difficulty in picturing or accepting hell. I had my health and really no more than minimal mildly nagging worries. We were in peacetime, the town prosperous, people outwardly content. Unfortunates did sleep in doorways, knives and guns ended lives, I sometimes saw people’s tears; but I could turn away from all this, not having to bring others’ sufferings into my own life. The prospect of an eternal hell seemed unthinkable on such slow-burning mornings.

I started to drink my tea. ‘Well, I hope the cosmos isn’t infinite then.’

‘My friend,’ he said a little wearily, ‘hope is not enough.’

‘But how can we do any more than hope? What are we, masters of the universe?’

The old man smiled at me. ‘Not masters. Perhaps drivers.’

This was getting silly. Some daft stranger was talking rubbish at me, and I was hanging on his every word. I finished eating, pushed my plate away and picked up my mug. ‘What am I driving exactly?’

‘We’re not all drivers.’

I saw that he meant that I wasn’t but he was. And I began to feel that the only unbelievable aspect of this whole meeting was the fact that I believed him.

There was silence between us for a while. He was waiting for my next query. It was as if I were sitting a test; would I ask the right question? I contemplated and concluded that there were three I could possibly ask: Where was he driving, why was he telling me all this, and who was he? I opted for the second.

‘We have to scatter clues across all Creation. We can’t tell you everything directly – even if you understood us the scale of the horror would be unbearable to you. But we need you to know that something is being done. You’ll require this knowledge in your future.’

He was using the word “we”, pushing me into asking him the third of my possible questions.

‘We are that which prevents infinity.’

‘But nothing’s infinite,’ I told him once more.

‘Exactly. We ensure that it cannot be.’

‘So was there infinite hell before you started this work?’

He shook his head and told me ‘Your question is anthropocentric. It has no meaning.’

I found this response a little galling. How could I learn anything more about his world when the language I used, the scientific axioms I daily relied on to make sense of reality, were no more than naive and laughable nonsense?

‘How are you doing this? How are you holding this cosmic tide back?’

My tea was cold by now. I was alive. I was dead. I had never been. I was tiny. I was infinite.

‘What is your name?’ I called across a space that had become a cavernous hall.

He told me.

Influenza

This time next year,
If we are even here,
Will this all be forgotten,
Or will it hang like a pall
Over our blighted bodies
As we each, stricken, fall?

Will the horror and tears one day end?
Will this spiritual numbness turn back to joy?
In a year, in a lifetime,
In what is left of our lives,
Will the Earth spin again?
Will the sun once more rise?

Brown and grey,
Blue, green, gold.
We navigate the seasons,
But now sweating through winter,
Then in summer stone cold.

Some say
(Though who can truly know?)
The plague spawned in Spain,
Then like a black scarf bound the world,

Crushed its breath,
Till fevered brains in their millions
Were snuffed out in death.

Who can tell?
Perhaps it came via Spain
From Hell.

The Great War is finished,
A war to end war.
Armoured tanks rust in French fields,
Gunfire's no more.
Yet we wait still for peace,
Only to find peace is reserved
For the butchered and glorious
Lost forever in deep earth,
Finally happy, at long last abed,
Immune to the pandemic raging
Through the broken, tormented world overhead.

The Cave

Behind Laine, there was only darkness and Angerstein. A perpetual, metronomic dripping echoed hollowly all about them. Far away, water coursed, or perhaps a wind blew, a muted roar at the edge of their universe. As ever, it was cold.

Laine and Angerstein sat back to back on solid limestone chairs. Neither had ever seen the other.

Their seats were immobile, carved from the cave itself and sited just inside its yawning threshold. If they'd stood and stretched their arms upwards, the roof above would have still been yards out of reach.

Laine sat facing the world outside, yet seeing nothing of the actual cavern other than the mud and rocks on the floor before him, while the ragged rim of the entrance arched overhead, dark against the grey clouds.

From their hillside high above the valley floor, Laine looked out onto miles and miles of pine forest swept into a hazy distance, where a band of pale violet mountains bordered the world. Outside the cave there was a steep rocky drop to the raging river, ribbons of foaming water

weaving among the boulders. Whenever the skies cleared, Laine fancied he could see through the blue to infinity.

Late each afternoon the sun dropped into view on this vista, reddening and slipping behind the mountains. The far clouds blazed in fiery colours, gradually darkening until coastlines and land masses seemed to form in a pink sky. Then everything became lost in a deep, murky indigo, imperceptibly turning to a uniform blackness upon which a thousand stars began to burn.

Blackness was all Angerstein could ever see. For him, infinity was where the passage ahead extended to. He did not understand what the sun was, only that when it was at his back he could see a little deeper into the damp tunnel.

They hardly spoke these days. Each had become tired of the utter incomprehension felt at anything the other had to say.

‘What’s it like among the trees?’ Laine quietly asked.

‘What trees? There’s nothing there! Trees? Clouds? Why do you keep coming out with this nonsense? Show me this sun. There’s nothing anywhere but an endless borehole.’

In silence Laine mulled over this outburst for long moments. He shook his head. ‘This is no borehole,’ he said to himself, and watched a sparrowhawk hovering motionless above the fell.

The dripping continued, more loudly and rapidly than ever before. Angerstein squirmed uncomfortably in his stone chair, grunting and muttering, half-listening to Laine start on another of his ludicrous, rambling fantasies.

‘What do you remember of the time before we came to this place, Angerstein?’

Angerstein at last pushed down on the solid, wet armrests and sat up straight in his seat.

‘Before? There is no before, Laine. There’s nothing to remember of any mythical time when we weren’t here. This is the whole world; we’ve always been here.’ Angerstein let out an exasperated sigh. ‘Your view of reality is just bizarre,’ he murmured.

Several of these long cycles of varying brightness passed. “Days”, Laine called them. Yet again, any attempts at conversation had ceased, and the sounds of water and air were all they had to cling to.

Eventually, Angerstein hissed ‘What are we doing here?’

There was no response; silence hung in the chill air. Yet it was an odd sort of silence. Then in a sudden, stunning blow the realisation came to Angerstein that he couldn’t hear anyone else breathing.

‘Laine!’ His voice reverberated around the stone chamber.

Horrified and panicking, Angerstein attempted to do something he had never in his entire life dared even contemplate; at least not in the debris of his life still somehow held in his memory. Angerstein tried to turn around and look over his own shoulder.

But he couldn’t do it, completely at a loss as to how to instruct his body to perform this act. Angerstein knew that neither of them could ever look upon the other; yet the stark truth was that Laine was no longer seated behind him. Laine had stood up. Laine had stood up and walked away into deep, silent darkness. There was nowhere else he could have gone, for nothing else existed.

Half of Angerstein’s world had been taken and he found himself facing never-ending

solitude. To be immortal, yet half-dead forever, terrified him and he knew he could not bear to live the life that had suddenly been laid before him.

He'd never before thought it possible, but if Laine had left the world, then it must surely be feasible for Angerstein to do the same. How, he had no idea; it would require yet another unimaginable and prohibited physical feat.

Yet suddenly he found himself on his feet, his eternal chair behind him. He had risen effortlessly. And now he staggered forwards, stumbling, his boots sliding on the rocky floor. Angerstein fell twice before managing to reach a wall, holding onto it with both hands while taking slow, tentative steps, believing he was following Laine. His panting, ever faster, echoed through the now total darkness.

'Laine!'

Continuing to inch further into this numbing, wet underworld, Angerstein tried to imagine some alternative path he could take. But he couldn't visualise any such route, for this unexplored gloom was all he had ever known. Slipping again on the slime beneath his feet, Angerstein stopped.

He clung to a vast passageway he couldn't see and inhaled sharply and deeply.

'I'm frightened, Laine,' he whispered, and felt the cold finally penetrate to his bones.

Torquay

We'd spent the morning batting a dead goose over a net, and now finally had the chance to raise our faces to the sun, breathe in the sea air and contemplate the significance of what we had been doing. It was late April, and vivid daffodils were blooming over the steep lawns below the hotel. Avis and I walked around the marina, a jungle of tall masts and rigging, bright sunlight sparkling on the barely rippling water between the yachts. Our first two matches in the South West England Veterans' Badminton Championships had resulted in comfortable victories, and now we both felt the exhilaration of our success, some sort of satisfaction or happiness; whatever it is we're supposed to feel. Or perhaps we actually felt nothing, simply having avoided the frustration and future haunting memories of an exercise failed, one in which we, for so many possible reasons, had fallen short.

Each boat moored here on the English Riviera had a name. I wondered what stories, what time-worn sagas, lay behind these monikers. In many cases, perhaps someone's whole life had been distilled to a single word or phrase painted on a

vessel tentatively feeling its way along the edge of the Earth's oceans, borne on winds driven from a great blue sky.

Delaina, Sundowner, Lady Essex, Dubbles, Janine.

Yet right now they were all just sleeping shells, rocking gently in the sunlit harbour, waiting for the time they next ventured onto the waves, a time when they became the shelter at the centre of someone's world, a time when they would truly be again.

On an area of grass, trees and criss-crossing paths, a family with a small dog were playing in the dappled sunlight. With their parents standing close to a hooded pushchair, a boy with red hair and two older girls, twins, were kicking a little rubber ball across the lawn, while with each punt the dog, black and white, its lineage complex, chased after the flying projectile. As the ball reversed its course and soared over the dog's head, he halted and leapt upwards, then ran towards the next child's kick only to be thwarted again in the same manner.

'Gordon!'

The green ball bounced along the path towards us. It came to me on my right foot and I

kicked it high into the air. It landed on the patchy grass, before rolling into a flower bed where Gordon was finally able to bite down on it and run.

After the boy had prised it from his jaws, Gordon's eyes remained fixed on the toy as he vainly jumped up each time the man in the blue anorak teasingly raised it just out of reach.

On so many occasions I've cursed badminton, wishing I'd never picked up a racket all those years ago. Opponents cheat, partners are incompetent, officials don't understand the rules, floors are slippery, lights are blinding. Yet I continue playing because that's what I do. Almost as an addiction, we carry on, the trauma of our failures only ameliorated by the imagined promise of future successes. In any case, if I gave up the game, the space freed in my mind would only fill up with some other of life's pains. The soul abhors a vacuum, and if you can't fill it with anything good, it will open itself up to the horrors of the world.

They say sport keeps you fit, that it nurtures both body and soul. We hear of the healthy lives we can live through regular exercise and, undeniably, there is truth to this philosophy. A

rapidly thudding heart, straining lungs and an engine of muscle locked in a brutal cycle, exhilarate, detoxify and impart a lasting strength to these husks we inhabit. Yet always people overlook the immense physical damage sport can inflict on its participants. Players carry injuries; sometimes wounds are so severe that we cannot continue to play, be it temporarily or permanently.

Decades ago I had slipped on water leaking onto the court through a sports hall roof. My right foot had slid sideways, and as my body dropped down it was the left hip joint which violently dislocated, tearing tendons, muscles, nerves, ligaments and God knows what else as I hit the floor hard. I lay still for a while as the other players gathered around me. Then gingerly I stood and tried walking, slowly moving my hip, now starting to grow numb, until I believed I would be able to finish the game. And so, as the years passed, the untreated damage started to wear the joint, pressing on nerves, until an occasional and slight viscosity of movement in my left leg on cold days turned into a permanent sore limp and irrevocable inability to cover the court as I used to.

The ball came to us again. Avis caught it, and as Gordon bounded towards us she dropped it on the ground, giving it a little poke with her toe into his path. Gordon was moving fast and skidded on the sandy footpath as he tried to snatch at the emerald orb slowly rolling past him.

This part of the Esplanade passed high above the beach. The tide was in, and we heard the waves crashing against the Victorian stone wall and seething over the shingle and sand. The barrier at the edge of the quay comprised a series of thick iron posts, painted black, linked by two sets of chains swaying a little in the forceful wind carrying the sea spray. We stepped onto a wide boardwalk spanning the marina.

I always admired Avis's concentration on court. Intense yet unflappable, never prepared to lose a game in the most common way – mentally. Avis didn't have arguments with opponents. One look, as if saying 'Do you really want to behave like this? At your age?' abruptly ended any nascent disputes. Our last game of the day was scheduled for much later that afternoon. I wondered whether a break such as this, in play, environment, mental concentration, was really conducive to a continuation of a player's standard

of performance. Yet I could see that if one had made a bad start to the competition, then perhaps a re-ordering of thought and psychological application could only be beneficial.

Pandora, Calypso, Themis, Rite of Spring, Dream On.

As the wind across the harbour picked up, I became ever more aware of the cacophony about us, beginning now to drown out the gulls' shrieks, the rumble and hooting of the cars and buses, even the screaming of children on a seaside weekend. For the aluminium masts were chiming, slapped rhythmically by the rigging waving in the gale. We paused our conversation as the pealing overwhelmed our voices.

Reaching the far end of the walkway, we saw that Gordon and his family were already there on the quayside. They had followed the road along the water's edge, and we had each arrived at the clock tower, now indicating mid-day, at the same time.

Another of Gordon's balls, this one larger and orange, came skipping towards us.

'Mine,' I called out, as if we were back in the hall going for a shot.

The ball approached slightly from my left, at such an angle that to kick it back I needed to lift my leg to one side. Then I bent my knee, fixed my eyes on the incoming target, and concentrated on delivering a sweet, precise impact. A sharp pain shot from my hip, passing through my knee and dissipating around my shin. By reflex my kicking arc was drawn back into my body and the sliced ball span away to my left, hitting the ground by the safety barrier. Gordon sped across me and the ball bounced again, clearing the chains and falling from view below the edge of the harbour wall. Gordon followed, never hesitating, never considering anything other than retrieving the tumbling sphere before him. This was his goal in the game he was playing. This, to him, was winning.

Then Gordon was gone, into the sea twenty feet below us.

One Winter's Night

One winter's night the sky began to bleed.
Crimson rivulets ran between the stars.
I looked up at the centre of the wound to see
Midnight's blackness peeling,
Cracked and scarred.

We were living through Creation's final days,
Bearing silent witness to
Apocalypse, the end of time and space.
At Hell's gates we waited,
The chosen, damned and Godless few.

Swollen and full, a copper moon
Among exposed and whitening rafters sailed,
Glaring coldly at a world to succumb soon
To this morbid pestilence,
This coffin into which we would be nailed.

Now there's nothing overhead,
Not even the grey of a sunless vault.
Our lowered eyes seek out the lost and dead.
And for once,
We know,
It's no one's fault.

Omega

I suppose our great change, our emergence from a dark, primordial age, truly began when we set out to explore and understand the twin phenomena of time and mind. People, as we were then, would muse on the seeming impossibility of existence. Bewildered, they navigated unexplored philosophical trails, some perhaps much like the following contemplation.

In physics, magnitudes of all the many various phenomena we perceive are measured using only three quantities, known as dimensions: mass, length and time. In fact, most of the things we try to quantify are measured in units which are combinations of two or three such dimensions. For example, velocity is the distance an object travels in unit time. We give these and other more complex units names – knots, coulombs, Kelvins and so on, but they can all be shown to be wholly comprised of these fundamental qualities.

Mass and length are easy to visualise, of course. We know what it feels like to pick up an

object. And we can imagine looking at something in front of us and gauging its size.

Yet the third of these dimensions, time, is something very different indeed. We can form no mental picture of what it is we are actually measuring. That in itself doesn't mean that time is not a real physical quantity, but nevertheless one cannot but wonder whether we are imposing our narrow, naive and primitive view of the universe onto reality. We feel time "passing", but what does this really mean? We cannot measure it directly, only as something relative – the period between cyclic events such as the vibration of an atom, the emptying of sand in an hour glass from one chamber to the other, the orbit of our planet around the sun. How would it appear to us if, for reasons unspecified, one of these periods changed? It would be as if a clock - for essentially that is how we would consider any such mechanisms - had sped up or slowed down; we would promptly notice that there has been a deviation in this one time measuring device, because it would suddenly start to differ from all other clocks in the world. But what if every single clock we have were to alter, and by exactly the same amount? Highly unlikely or not, if this

were to happen we would have no immediate way of knowing. The only way to discern such a change would be if it occurred in a localised region of space, however large. If we were to move outside this region and look back on it, we would then realise what has happened, and conclude that either all the clocks in that region have changed speed, or that the speed of time itself has been altered compared to the rest of the observable universe.

One of these time measuring devices is the mind. We appear to observe an apparent, yet entirely subjective, “speed” of time. This feeling – it is no more than that - provides no measurement of time in any way. We know that on occasion time seems to fly, or maybe drag, depending on our own mood, preoccupation, excitement, boredom and so on. But the most significant mechanism by which we believe we are perceiving a flow of time, whether we subjectively judge it to be slow or fast, is the mind’s speed. The brain is a network of neurons, and it creates thoughts through the electrical firing of these cells. The speed of thought (to which our perceived speed of time is inversely proportional) is essentially the rate at which

these neurons pass information between themselves. If we have a high speed of such brain activity, creating a large number of thoughts in, say, the time it takes for the sun to rise and set, then it will appear to us that days are very, very long. If we can write a book in the space of a day, then this period to us would contain the equivalent life experience of an interval perhaps many hundreds of times longer for someone who thinks more slowly. Conversely, very slow thought will make it seem that the universe is rushing past at breakneck speed. Crucially, it must be understood that the speed of thought, in itself, has no bearing on intelligence. Exactly the same thought process may be performed tardily or rapidly. In each case, the subjective experience of thinking will be the same, only the rate at which the world outside unfolds appearing different.

The whorl turns beneath us. A bright, spinning top, arms of stars arcing out from a fiery centre; a disc of burning gas, seemingly solid, with every part having the same rotational speed. We see the galaxy diminishing as we rise from a bath of colours our forebears could never see nor even

imagine, lightly touching each stellar vortex and moving on to the next; a bee flitting from flower to flower.

There is no normal speed of life. We have slowed our thought rate a billion fold, and today our neurons take inordinate ages to fire. The slightest mental activity which we can possibly identify as a thought lasts so long that we can easily spend a single private recreation period watching a solar system be formed out of eddying dust, before being destroyed as a supernova. Yet thinking comes quite effortlessly to us. Our minds are so powerful that we have designed and built the spacecraft we sail in, the Omega; a feat so great that there are many who proclaim her to be the crowning achievement in the whole history of our civilisation. Others would of course argue that the creation of our towering, decelerated intellect was in itself our most significant advancement.

The Omega courses through space at near relativistic speed. The ship's velocity, together with our almost stilled mental processes, work to make interstellar – indeed, intergalactic – travel practicable for sentient minds. And only in this way is our mission possible. We have no need for

any form of suspended animation as we make our journeys between targets. We don't feel the boredom of interminable, creeping progress lasting, as far as our subjective selves are concerned, many individual lifetimes. We don't plan for generations to pass before we arrive at a destination. From the ship's windows we can see cascading stars racing past, like snowflakes in a night sky, falling onto our upturned faces as we look up at the street lights above us. We are able to experience space travel with much the same ease as, ages ago, we would feel when taking a train ride.

Particles strewn through space, which could destroy the Omega at the speed we hurtle at, are instead captured and used by the ship itself to constantly effect repairs and ensure regular maintenance. The Omega is forever new.

And we too are immortal.

We move from galaxy to galaxy looking for life, our computers discovering and tracking planets on which vegetation is seen to flourish. Invariably, as we watch, in a sudden burst of electromagnetic radiation – TV pictures – the life we are studying ceases for one brief moment,

before greenery, now silent, returns. This happens time after time, on planet after planet. We search for the rare worlds where the electromagnetic burst is not followed by a short discontinuity of life. For here, the races which sent out these signals have ridden out and survived their self-inflicted threat to their very existence, and progressed to create a vibrant, evolving civilisation. As we did.

Sometimes our minds manifest as distinct entities. Mostly, there are between five and seven of us. It depends on our varying circumstances: the rate at which we have been observing civilisations destroying themselves; the size of the intergalactic atrium around us; the shape and colour of the galaxy immediately astern of the Omega.

At other times, having touched another mind strong enough to welcome our voice, sufficiently resilient to withstand our glance, able to gain from our meeting rather than suffer cataclysmic damage, we on the Omega coalesce as one. A single heartbeat trawling a vast cosmos.

If we stand far enough back, the universe appears to be a froth, a mass of tightly packed

bubbles. The stars rotate in galaxies, but the galaxies themselves are not randomly scattered but clustered. And even these collections are gathered into yet larger super-clusters. Finally, we see that these super-clusters are strung out upon the surfaces of such cosmic bubbles, leaving vast orbs of near nothingness filling Creation.

So we travel on, drawn along these narrow streams. We have no planned destination; our only hope is to discover where a possible destination may lie. More likely, we are seeking things along the way. As many travellers, we are simply bound for our own hearts.

Lately, it seems that the galaxies we encounter have been turning ever smaller and darker. We are finding fewer and fewer civilisations on planets or within craft they themselves have created. The universe is growing older and the stars are turning to embers. Long, long ago, when sentience on our world had barely begun, one of the units we used in our attempts to quantify the passing of time was our planet's period of rotation around the sun. A year, we called this. To us, this measure of time seems very different to how our forefathers experienced it, but we can still use this scale to define the

current length of our odyssey. We have been travelling aboard the Omega for two hundred trillion years.

And now the growing darkness has become total. Black, silent and dead. Chemical reactions are no longer possible in this universe stretched to countless times its size when we first gazed out upon its depths. A few photons flash past sporadically. There is no one else left. We are alone.

The universe has always had an undercurrent. Forces of a physics undreamed of by our ancestors writhe and scratch at the curtained window of a night that at first glance appears to be composed of sheer nothingness. But here today, with the cosmos aged and barren, it seems to us that these powers have almost stilled. Even at our accelerated perception of time, only very careful and patient observation identifies the slow, torpid movements of these strange processes. We try to create mathematical models of how this state has come to pass, yet a fundamental explanation still eludes us. So we leave this investigation of what is happening, and

how, to our insentient computers. We study their output only cursively and dispassionately.

The machines have been amassing this data since we began our mission, analysing what has been increasingly evident is a signal, a message. A voice.

We are being welcomed to the end of the world, as is every voyager out here in the depths of this dying universe. The arms of friendship, stretched out wide before us, belong to an entity thinking far, far more slowly than even we are. Before its eyes we must seem to be the briefest ephemeral spark of blue-shifted light.

And now, finally, we hear words being spoken. This is not a God, not a Creator; it calls itself The Gatekeeper, and our journey has brought us to this portal at which it waits.

‘Friends, you appear to be stragglers! Rest; there’s no further for you to go.’

Again, we attain our highest state – the single entity. I didn’t notice it happen. I suddenly see that we have always been just one, and the fractured, discreet personalities we have dressed in for all these ages were dreams, vague memories of our dimly remembered origins.

‘Please, the real world is waiting. Follow me.’

It is warm. I am laughing. I know only beauty and all-enveloping love. Both are perfect and infinite.



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