Dismember the Past

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Abstract

This thesis is a creative literary biography, or historiographic metafiction, of the life and works of writer and composer Anthony Burgess (1917-1993). The text consists of two synchronous narratives: a fictionalised account of Burgess' life as a writer, charting his time as a struggling would-be composer in 1940s Britain through to his celebrity as a writer in 1970s America; and an academic exploration of literary biography, historiographic metafiction, the spill between these two genres, and Burgess' engagements with these forms, through the lens of Bakhtinian literary theory. These narratives run concurrently, interrupting, informing and influencing the other, in dialogic engagement.

This text synthesises academic and biographical research with speculative fiction, much like Burgess' own works of historiographic metafiction, including *Nothing Like the Sun* (1964), which shares a similar fiction/academic lecture form: *Abba Abba* (1977); and *A Dead Man in Deptford* (1993). The thesis also seeks to respond to Burgess' Confessions – *Little Wilson and Big God* (1986) and *You've Had Your Time* (1990), and other writers' biographies published after his death – Roger Lewis's *Anthony Burgess* (2002) and Andrew Biswell's *The Real Life Anthony Burgess* (2005). Burgess' life as a husband, son and father is dramatised, alongside his prodigious output as a writer of over thirty novels.

In his critical text, *Shakespeare* (1970), which came six years after his creative biography of the Bard, Burgess claimed that 'every Shakespeare-lover who has ever lived' has the right 'to paint his own portrait of the man'. In this manner, this thesis presents not a 'definitive' Anthony Burgess but a 'possible' or 'partial' Burgess, in dialogue with the many other 'Burgesses' already in existence and those that may follow.

Preface

The title of this novel does much to indicate its contents, a dissection of the life and works of the great writer and composer Anthony Burgess (1917-1993), presented as detailed snapshots from his seventy-six years. This essay is proof of its final conclusion, in that I find I am compelled to respond to Burgess, even a Burgess I have constructed. Therefore, I have set about dismembering my own prose, my own recent past, as a means to offer insight into the work; to present the Bakhtinian heart that beats within.

Bakhtin said:

> There is neither a first word nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context (it extends into the boundless past and the boundless future). Even past meanings, that is, those born in the dialogue of past centuries, can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all) they will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent, future development of the dialogue. At any moment in the development of the dialogue there are immense, boundless masses of forgotten contextual meanings, but at certain moments of the dialogue's subsequent development along the way they are recalled and invigorated in renewed form (in a new context). Nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will have its homecoming festival. (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 170)

By offering a discursive analysis of my own creative endeavour, I intend to save some of my process from the ‘great masses of forgotten meanings’ and help further my reader’s understanding. This academic enquiry has been situated within the primary text, illuminating those parts of my work that may otherwise go unheralded. Or, to use another metaphor, I have unscrewed the back of the timepiece to reveal the clockwork mechanism.

There are three works of biography on Anthony Burgess already in publication, Roger Lewis’s 2002, *Anthony Burgess*, Andrew Biswell’s ‘response’ to Lewis, *The Real Life of Anthony Burgess*, in 2005, and Paul Phillips’s 2010 text, which focusses on Burgess’s life in music, *A Clockwork Counterpoint* (Ingersoll, 2008, p. xi). My novel responds to all of these works and, especially, Burgess’s memoirs, *The Confessions*, recognising Bakhtin’s assertion

that ‘any utterance, not matter how weighty and complete in and of itself, [is] only a moment in the continuous process of… communication’ (Morris, 1997, p. 59).

The task I have set myself is to disclose how Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin’s theories have steered my hand in creating a text that is itself a mosaic of other texts and a polyphony of voices. Bakhtin’s analysis of literary works has bestowed upon me many devices and techniques that initiated my own literary work. This is my investigation of them.

Finally, I would echo Caryl Emerson’s sentiment that:

> This book is dedicated to the lifesaving notion that no matter how our efforts or words may weigh in on the scales of Bakhtin’s Great (or even Small) Time, all is not yet said, done, lost. (1997, p. xi)

Dismember the Past

When I hear a journalist like Malcolm Muggeridge praising God because he has mastered the craft of writing, I feel a powerful nausea. It is not a thing to be said. Mastery never comes, and one serves a lifelong apprenticeship. The writer cannot retire from the battle; he dies fighting. This book is another battle.

Anthony Burgess, *Little Wilson and Big God*, 1986

Prologue

He flicks the pinched tip of his cigarette onto the Mancunian Way and watches as it is shot down by gobs of rain. He takes in the new shafts of concrete that punctuate the skyline. Somewhere in all this brutalism is John Wilson's home. Overhead, illuminations advertise an asinine, gurning radio disc jockey. Aloft like some great apiarist, his gaudy image punctuates the grey. The drone of inching cars, the drone of the city itself. Looking out over the streets below, he dreams of living out his life as an enigma, present only as two words on a dust jacket. *Apis Bombilius.* The dense traffic parts, syphoned off towards Princess Parkway. The taxi circles, Hulme high-rises, Trafford mills, Church of St George, Potato Wharf, and on to Knottmill.

So much concrete, you sense it setting around your feet. The *Manchester Evening News* building, busy bit of brutalism on this Manchester morning. And there's John Rylands Library, Gormenghastic, hidden in plain sight. He taps the partition glass, *anywhere, here,* pokes a crisp five-pound note through the grille and stubbornly waits for change. They can tear down all they want and build whatever they fancy to replace it, but Manchester can't shift its own smell, its own skin. It's all rouge and blusher on pockmarks. His feet hit the paving with steps punctuated by the crackle of broken glass.

We're just this way. It's a pleasure to have you with us, Mr Burgess. Anita, the assistant manager, walks slightly ahead, setting a pace that she intends to be met.

A pleasure to be here. He stops to take in his surroundings, *this is all very impressive, I must say,* and starts off again to catch up with Anita.

They pass the tills and the recommendations, he scans the shelves, noting the new print of *The Sword of Honour* trilogy complete with Cyril Connelly endorsement, but can see no works of his own. Above, a sign directs shoppers to the various sections of the shop. Beside an arrow pointing up: *Crime, History, Art*. An arrow pointing straight ahead reads, *Toilets and Fiction.*

Burgess nods towards the sign, *that sounds a fair combination, doesn't it.*

Anita briefly assesses a sign she passes every single day. She thinks nothing of it now.

Toilets and Fiction, he muses.

In a room off the main floor a couple of tables have been draped in black cloth. Beside the entrance there are two piles of his new book, hardbound.

Can I get you anything? Anita smiles, checking her watch.

Tea. A good cup of English tea.

How do you take it?

Five bags, left to stew well. A drop, and I do mean a drop, of milk.

Another polite smile and she is gone. Burgess lights up, using the pot of a wax plant for ashtray. A tall lad with a look of Larkin straightens out the stacks of books. He then rearranges them, fanned across the table. He tuts, stacking them once more. It is, Burgess thinks, incredible what people will do to occupy the mind.

He sups at the insipid brew; too much milk, not nearly enough tannin. They pride themselves on a good brew up here. In his experience, they do everywhere. The Welsh are particularly proud of their tea-making prowess. Sitting alone, nursing piss-weak tea, he feels undignified and indignant. This is exactly what he had planned to avoid. He made sure to be late but failed to account for the difference between Monte Carlo and Greenwich Mean Time. Too long out of England, too long out of the provinces. And now here he is, alone. Bloody Heinemann and their — he spits tea — marketing strategies.

Hello, Mr Burgess. He can see, just barely, above a stack of hardbacks and paperbacks, the top of a man's face and head. A spire of words held stable by hands at the base and a chin at the apex.

What do we have here?

I was hoping that if I got first in the queue I might persuade you to sign some of my other books, if you could.

With pleasure, with pleasure. Have you waited long?

Not too long, no. The books, Anthony can see from a quick scan, have been arranged in chronological order. *Time for a Tiger* is laid before him first, followed by *The Enemy in the Blanket*, *Beds in the East*, and so on.

They tell me, he tells the man, distractedly thumbing to find the title page, *that if you sell these things they're more valuable if it's just the name. My name, that is.*

There's a sudden, almost violent stop. He holds out his hand to receive what he assumes will be *Devil of a State*.

I would never sell them.

Who's to say what the future holds, though. Burgess feels the weight of his own words, faced with the tower of his past.

I couldn't. The man appears to be playing out the terrible circumstances under which he would have to sell this prized collection.

Shall we keep going? A copy of *The Worm and the Ring* is placed before him. *Not an easy book to get your hands on. Where did you—*

A place in Alnwick.

Alnwick, indeed. Well. He signs.

I enjoyed MF, the man tells him.

I'm so glad. Nobody else did. Only book I take pride in, as a matter of fact.

The collector seems to bite down on this admission like a fish on a hook. He examines Burgess' face, looking for a tell. *Is that true?*

True? There is scrutiny in that question, in that look. Is this a piece of valuable Burgess information? The book will have to be read again, will have to be put under significant examination, this statement in mind.

Is everything all right? Anita wears a smile only an imbecile would take at face value. The queue has been forming and the queue is beginning to get restless.

A collector, Anthony tells her, to clear up any doubt.

If I could ask you to keep it to five items, sir.

Just this one, then. The man takes a hardback from the pile and presents it to Anthony.

He looks it over, *this isn't one of mine.*

Could you. Please?

But this isn't mine. I can't sign someone else's book.

Anita is lifting up the remaining books, out of order, four in each hand. Flustered, the collector grabs them from her. Books slip from his grasp, from Anita's arms, falling to the floor. He's on his knees, cursing and scurrying to collect up the books and check their

condition. The tower reformed, the collector raises it and himself up, saying, *take good care of yourself.*

All the best, Anthony says.

Underneath his own name, he signs dedications to Sarahs, to Brians, he shares best wishes with Ians, Dimitris, Dianes, a Roger. As he gets into the rhythm — flipping two pages in, asking for whom, and signing away — he has to remind himself to look up, that a connection, a real conversation, is what they have all queued for. A youngish woman asks how he finds Manchester now. He gives her the old eye contact, the rehearsed parted-lipped pause, and pushes his hair from his forehead. That's right let them have some of that acerbic wit they've all come for.

Well, of course, my Manchester is the Manchester of internal segregation lines — class, race, religion. But today, the city is a united cause. God bless Mrs Thatcher.

They like that. God bless Mrs Thatcher. You could pay no attention to the papers, stay out of the country for years, and still rely on the collective resentment of the powers that be.

This, for instance, raising his hands up to the building they sat-stood in, *was Kendals in my day. A bazaar of household goods, soft furnishing, and electrical appliances. I was brought here on day trips, while other children were taken to the zoo. We'd wander the aisles, my stepsisters and me, staring at all those foreign objects. Now, of course, this is a home for books, which I think is a very worthy enterprise for a building. I like to think of bookstores and libraries as my second homes. A part of me always remains (as long as I'm still in print).* Very good, let them believe there is always a bit of him here in the North, even if the man himself is drinking Aperol cocktails on the Monte Carlo seafront. Book signed, the woman gratefully thanks him and moves on. Anita puts down a fresh mug of tea, thick and the colour of the Bridgewater Canal.

How's your hand going?

Oh, my hand's all right, but I'm forgetting how to sign my name. I start writing the title and then it sort of slips.

Any Old Burgess, she says.

Yes, something like that.

You're our Jackie. An accusation. A disbelieving statement. Somewhere in there is a question. Anthony looks up at an ancient man, a practically dead man, who peers back through sunken eyes. He knows this look well, the bloody Mancunian glare. Think you know something, pretentious bastard, it said. The words *bookstores and libraries are my second homes* repeat, growing increasingly louder in his mind. The undead is flanked by two others.

All three dressed in shades of brown-beige. Polyester coats, pockets torn, stained at the cuffs and neck. Man-made, then, not figments.

He holds his nerve. *I'm sorry?*

Our Jack. I'm your cousin, Bert. Albert Dwyer. This is our Agnes' usbint. The relic beside nods his pale leather skull. A foolish gawper, more disturbed by the amount of learning that besieges him than this impromptu family reunion. Anthony nods politely and turns to the third of this timeworn triptych. A woman, rippling with layers of skin, beady eyes peering out. The fat has softened her wrinkles somewhat, though has done nothing to hide her years.

And who, smiling at her now, *is this?*

Wull, our Agnes, in't it. Of course, it is. *Do thee not 'member us, Jackie?* That fucking name. He had crossed continents to escape the smear of *Our fucking Jack.*

I'm sorry. It's, well, I wasn't expecting you. Should I have been expecting you? What did they want? Money, he supposed. But for what, why, was money owed? They could not expose anything he had not already revealed himself. Maybe they thought it only right that the pretentious bastard should put his hand in his well-tailored pocket and draw out a few crisp notes for them what got left behind. That'd be right. Drag them down what thinks theys better than the rest.

Agnes saw it in't paper. You bein' here, like.

Well, I must say, he says, words failing him.

Our Jack! Our Bert whistles. Not impressed, more of a case of what the hell happened.

Elsie died, Agnes pipes up. John saw the comic scene immediately. This geriatric woman (his very own stepsister!), reeling off every name of everybody she could think of what had died since the last time she'd seen their Jack.

Well, John says, *it was. What a surprise to see you all. Bert, Agnes, ehm?* The relic nods receptively to Ehm.

Shall we wait? Bert says.

Wait?

For you finishing? Tom's Chop 'Ouse is just rount corner.

Ay, John says.

We'll get you a pint in, Jack. For old times and that.

Relic Ehm lights a roll up and John watches as they expire in a cloud of smoke, towards the Natural History department.

Apparitions spent, an unsigned book is placed in front of him. *And who are you then,* he asks, *me daughter? Some long-lost niece?*

What had they, he signs and hands the book over, come here for? Forty years must have passed, flicking to find the right page, since the last time he'd seen any of them. He had assumed, *thank you for coming*, that they'd all be dead by now. But here they had stood. The murmur in the room, the sound of the city outside starts to converge to a dull tone, at *440 hertz*. He grasps a book by the spine, *who should I make it out to*? He signs, John Wilson. He stares at the page. Any old Wilson. The words are an aberration. John takes his pen and draws a picture beside the name — sunken cheeks, double chin, bags under the eyes, hair manic, swiped to the right.

I'll get a fresh one, Anita says in her cheery, not cheery manner.

John pinches the top corner of the page and pulls, tearing the first stitch. He tears again and again— scythe, scythe, scythe. John fucking Wilson.

Part One

The Wilsons left behind a garden littered with empty gin bottles and journeyed south. Llewela had clung on to Lalage from the moment John suggested they couldn't possibly take it with them, and she was carrying her now, yowling and on heat, while he dealt with the rest of their luggage. His wife sat in abject silence, any reply to John's enquiries came directly from the cat's whining mouth. There had been a phone call, Llewela's mother and father. Things had been said, mainly on their end. She had cried at first, then cursed them, and then cried again, cursed John, cursed their marriage, cursed herself, cried on John, and cursed God in heaven. But there had been promises made about forgiveness and new beginnings and the sanctity of marriage. Aboard the *Willem Ruys* they would begin again, as husband and wife. John could not wait to board. Before the taxi came to a halt he had opened the door and grasped at suitcase handles.

While Dutch stewards got on with the task of welcoming the passengers, the crew got on with preparing for the voyage. They were South East Asians, Indonesians, Thais, Chinese. Not permitted to greet the passengers, they greeted all with accusing stares. In the cabin Llewela tipped the contents of her suitcase on the bed. She pulled out an expensive dress, light blue with lace trim, a gift from her mother, and proceeded to undress. The cat, she had been smilingly told, was to stay in the hold the entire journey. She wasn't going to forgive that in a hurry.

How are you feeling? John asked. Llewela unfastened one bra, let it drop to the floor, and fastened a fresh one. He moved to touch her naked side. She pulled away and hitched the dress over her head, turning so that he may zip it from the back. In the mirror, she tousled her hair and applied rouge.

Let me get my suit and, John said, *we'll take a walk on the deck.* The door closed behind her. Diligently, he unpacked some socks and underwear, and changed.

John found her, glass in hand, treading the wooden border between carpeted dining area and parquet dance floor. She lit a cigarette and surveyed the officers' bar, blowing smoke as she went. A sea of potential enemies. Other passengers were filtering in now. Brash, chatty, these were return voyageurs, serial seafarers. A string quartet struck up, *String Quartet Op.59 No.1.* He watched her for some time. Llewela swayed to the staccato of the violin. The players were not up to the task set by Beethoven, but she swayed nevertheless. John recognised this behaviour in her. She was a child, petulant and in need of protection. While John felt time's drag, Llewela saw nothing in age, felt neither old nor young, and gave not one single shit how a woman of her years should behave. Men, dressed in their ducks and tuxedo, took drinks off trays carried round by ignored Indonesian waiters, who scowled menacingly at passengers. Llewela smiled at everyone, raising her glass to well-tailored British and uniformed Asian men. She held her hand out to two passing officers:

I'm Lynne. That's my husband, John. The men smiled and moved on. Everyone ignored her, or so it seemed to John. So it seemed to Lynne. She lifted a fresh glass of yellowy champagne and dropped her empty glass onto a passing tray, causing the rest to topple. Champagne ran down the waiter's arm, down Lynne's dress, onto the shimmering dance floor. A Dutch member of staff, something like a maître d', came over bearing a hand towel and foul words for the foul-faced waiter. Lynne looked suitably irritated but gave a wry glance to the Dutch man gently dabbing at her arm. She was led away, raising her glass to John as she passed.

Waking with a fresh hangover, John longed to be alone with a few pieces of music manuscript paper (blastedly forgotten), a couple of pencils, and a rubber. He breathed heavily on the cabin's porthole and drew out the theme. Staccato eighths, C to D to, G, B, mirroring the arch of the glass. He wiped the notes out, gave fresh breath, and marked circles with his fingertips, adding to each a rising straight line. He took to writing on whatever he could find, with a blue inked fountain pen lifted from an officer's quarters. The back pages of what little literature the boat had to offer, he filled with lines and dots and Latinate expressions like *prestissimo*. He learnt a bit of Dutch too, surprising officers and crew alike with his ever-growing vocabulary.

While John held aimless conversations in stilted Dutch, Lynne gave out winks and found herself regularly caught between deckhand and bulkhead. Her days now spent feigning seasickness in their cabin. At around two she would groan herself out of bed, crapulous, dry tongue clacking against the roof of her mouth. Water or good strong English tea was required. But Lynne could only ever find half-drunk bottles of Indian Tonic. She drained these and

disposed of them through the porthole. Back under cover she dreamt of an almighty collision, the ship sunk by a thousand bottles of Schweppes in the form of an iceberg. She was ill, John knew that. But sympathy runs short when symptoms get neither better nor worse, especially when they imitate veisalgia so deftly.

At sea, time is as fluid as the water one sails upon. Days blurred. He would come too, imagining he was back in England, in his stepmother's house. That smell of stale bitter beer clung to him. How long had they been aboard? Eighteen days, perhaps five weeks.

He found himself unable to stomach the meals he had enjoyed most when first aboard; suet pies covered in thick beef gravy, coronation chicken—quite the thing, even for socialists dreaming of a republic—honey-glazed ham, pea soup, rabbit stew caught in his throat. He found himself longing for what the seasoned sailors referred to as *foreign shite*—chilli heat and rice pudding without the cream—which revealed hidden complexities he was more able to tongue and swallow. Not that his bowels felt the same. When not drifting solemnly within his mind, John Wilson was shitting sorely into the head of the boat. For John, the state of literature on board mirrored the state of sustenance, meaning that familiarity bred contempt. He picked up a well-thumbed *Of Human Bondage* and peered down at what his body had conjured up. Sitting, reading of words he'd been so regularly served, John wondered if it wasn't these his body was rejecting.

He dressed to eat alone, once more, and watched as Lynne snored heavy fumes into their cramped cabin. The dining room was thronging with passengers dressed to the nines. This was, of course, a rarefied members' club, in which only they were welcome. The women were beautiful in sequinned or satin dresses, their hair curled and shaped. Eyes darkened, cheeks rouged, elegant. John was welcomed to a table by Ronald Roland, a huge brute of a man. Had he been born in Harpurhey, Ronald would have become a bare-knuckle fighter. As it was, there had been, John was told, a lot of rugby in Ronald's life. They met one evening in the Captain's quarters, when John and Lynne were still on their best behaviour. Ronald had taken to John, not that John understood why.

The only real man we have, of course, is Ben Britten, Ronald had announced. A conversation about what they would miss of Britain had become what was best about Britain, which had morphed into what the British did better than other nations. Ronald had almost single-handedly driven the conversation.

What do you think, John? asked Sandra, an attractive brunette, giggling a little. What does he think? John thinks anyone who considers Britten to be finer than Elgar beyond reproach. Never mind a man who thinks art runs across territory lines.

He thinks: here she comes, Ronald nodded. Lynne slid, with unintentional eroticism, into a seat vacated by one of Ronald's associates and growls the last of a conversation she had been having with no one in particular. *Good evening, Mrs Wilson.*

Ronald, she bowed elaborately.

You've missed dinner, John told her, managing to defuse most of the irritation from his voice.

Not to worry. Well, Lynne made herself comfortable, *what are we talking about tonight, then?*

Music, Ronald replied.

John boring on again. She lit one of John's cigarettes with Ronald's matches.

Musical genius. Composers from across the globe, Ronald interjected. *Plenty of Germans, Italians, few French, quite a lot of Austrians for the size of the place. Of course, there's no Chinese Beethoven, is there. Not many English either, mind.*

None that you've heard of, Lynne pointed out.

You'd think if they had one, Ronald took a pull of his pipe and waved it around like a baton, *we'd have heard of him, wouldn't you.*

Stupid thing to say, Lynne said. *So, what if there's no Chinese Beethoven? You think the Chinese are claiming there's no genius in England because our vases aren't up to much cop?* The music came to an end and, as the game demanded, the table froze.

My favourite is Debussy. Where's Debussy from? Belinda attempted to change the course on the conversation.

Frog, isn't he, Ronald said, clearing his throat.

Do I mean Debussy? Who wrote Thingy in Blue?

Gershwin, John answered. *Yank. I admire Philip Warlock, I had the chance to meet him in—*

What about Africa, Ronald? Lynne took a drag, *any composers of note from the dark continent, you can think of?*

Piff, that'd be right. Ronald held his pipe up, waved it, then made a circling motion above the table. Across the deck, an Indonesian waiter bowed and walked to the bar. *What African has ever seen a viola, ha!*

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor. Lynne placed the name on the table for all to excogitate.

Well, yes. I mean. British mother though, wasn't she? Not full coloured.

Not what? It occurred to Lynne, as it had occurred to John, that the colonies were the natural habitat of men like Ronald Roland. She glared at him, openly, while more drinks were placed upon the table.

Sod it. John stood, stubbed a cigarette and scraped his chair legs back. The whole group, Lynne included, watched as he marched over to the band. He arrived with gusto but waited patiently while they finished a gentle waltz. As the pianist thumbed through sheet music, John approached. There was a long drawn out mime, which appeared to be John haggling a price for the piano from its player. At first the musician demurred, but John called a waiter over, more miming was performed, and all seemed to be settled. The waiter left, stage left, the pianist stood, shook John's hand and followed. John took to the stool.

He ran his hands up the keyboard, foot firmly on the damper. It was like a rolling wave, breaking into shards of ocean spray. His fingers ran along again. The question was what to play. He was so damnably sick of the table talk, he had just needed to get away. This had seemed like the best place, his back to the lot of them, in the comfortable embrace of the pianoforte. Of course, this wasn't itself a pianoforte, but an Albert Fahr upright. John took a breath, gave his hands a gentle rub and rested them on the keys.

The little finger on both hands strike at the same moment, three octaves apart. The sound is almost discordant, although they are the same note. The right finger strikes again, while the left hand moves to the centre of the keyboard, hits a chord and moves off again. John's body sways, his hands shift like undulating water. Sharp raindrops strike the hardwood floor, others hit heavy into collecting pools. As he plays the pools deepen, the whole room being submerged in water. The ship rocks and the water that has collected flows from one side to the other in a gentle, growing wave. It feels as though each table is a row boat, lost and turning on the open sea. The water level is rising, there are no oars and no direction to pull if there were. John himself feels the call of the below. It all ends abruptly.

Dry hands applauded. John smiled, though only to himself, and played another Satie: *Sarabandes No.1, in F Minor*.

He's very good, one of Belinda or Sandra said to Lynne, who smiled gratefully in reply.

He's very good at all sorts is John. You should ask him about his books.

Books? Sandra asked, taking the bait.

The last chord rang out. The table broke out in applause. John stood and took a bow, shook a few hands, and walked towards the table.

Bravo, old man, Ronald slapped John on the back, as he sat down.

Well done, John.

What a talent, Belinda said, the tone of it catching Lynne's ear.

I was just saying, John, about your talents. Tell them about your novels that you've written.

He sat beside her, her back turned. *Yes, well, not really. Just something to pass the time—*

Not published, I should probably clarify. You can't buy them. But he wrote them, all the same, even the second one.

Sandra said to Belinda, *I'd love to write a novel, but it's where to start that's the problem, isn't it?*

He only started writing because he got barred from the Bell, Lynne continued.

You got us barred, you mean. John lit a cigarette, tossing the match away in impotent anger.

Lynne said, facing away from the table, *I knew Dylan Thomas, you know. Used to drink with him. Used to— long time ago, during the war. Dead now, God love him.*

The waiter brought more drinks, placing several hi-balls on the table. *Can I get you anything else?*

You're fine, duck. You go on. She seemed lost in her own thoughts.

Belinda said tentatively, *that really was lovely, John.*

Do you compose too? Sandra asked.

John warily watched Lynne before saying, *as a matter of fact, I do. Small ensemble mainly.*

A composer at our table, said Belinda with great delight. *Is that why you're travelling to the East? To be a composer?*

Lynne turned herself towards them, repeated the word, each syllable coughed out. Flecks of Jenever glistened on her pursed lips, which John saw as semitones. *Com Pos Er* standing in for Doe, Ray, Mee. *Is that what you are now, is it, Jack?* Before she could say more,

Well, no, John said Belinda, *I'm taking up a teaching post. I'm a teacher. But I aim to compose.* He dare not look Lynne in the eye.

Play something of yours, Sandra cooed.

Yes do, Belinda chipped in.

Well, if he's doing that, Lynne polished off another glass, *I'm going to have to get extremely pissed.* She reached a slender arm towards John's cigarettes, peeled one out with dexterous fingers and pointedly waited for a light. John struck a match, raising the tight flame towards her pouting lips. The fire quivered, she blew it out and waited again. He dropped the match and struck a second time, the soft flame throwing her features into sharp relief, the

curve of her cheek bone, elegant nose, a shadow beneath her sensual lips. Lynne placed her cigarette into the flame and took a deep drag, exhaled, and turned her back once again.

He watched from the twin bunk as Lynne snored heavy fumes into their cramped cabin. That body of hers within reach, naked and pliable. He wanted to be inside that body. Not to fuck it, like a man, but to feel it from the inside, to be connected to the central nervous system; touch as she touched, taste as her tongue tasted.

Clumsy, unkempt, John regarded his body as an enemy. He and Lynne, John thought, made up one person. He the mind, she the body. Split before birth, John, the mind, had found himself carried around within a piece of rancid meat that shat and came and grew fatter, paler, more worn as time went on. His body did nothing that his mind demanded, while Lynne was given a slave-mind that did only what her body desired, namely to sate and exceed its great lasciviousness. Mind and body fumbled separately, leaving only one satisfied. Before sleep, or maybe already dreaming, John saw his mind killed by aneurysms and Lynne's body wrecked by appetite.

Rising from his bed, John stood in front of the full-length mirror. Staring at his own greying flesh, John saw he was not the mind to that body any more than his body would satisfy her mind. She could think, whereas John could only experience sensuality as an outsider, outside of her. They would be away from the restraints of Britain soon. Her body would be released, his mind too. He hoped.

John lay on a sunbed in long trousers and long-sleeved shirt, surrounded by sunbathers. Music, he told himself, was mainly of the mind. Within him burned a great symphony. Or, if not a symphony, then something more manageable. A guitar quartet, perhaps. At the back of a collected work, John picked up where he'd left off yesterday, setting Kipling's poem Mandalay to music. Work, that's what it felt like.

With vocation, John begins whistling the woodwind, humming the strings, and ba-baaing the brass. Crashing down on timpani, conducting and tromboning with either hand, harrumphing and umphing away to himself, John caught the melody first and words second

Ship me somewhere east of Suez

Taken aback by quivering female voices, he manages to paarumph on without missing more than a single beat.

where the best is like the worst

Belinda and Sandra sit up from their loungers and opened their diaphragms. One, he doesn't know who, hums and whistles his viola melody from and whistles a few days earlier;

the other, he doesn't know who, harmonises using a modulated version of the now discarded oboe solo from a week or so before.

Where there aren't Ten Commandments an' a man can raise a thirst

Their voices encircle one another like dragonflies across the pond back in Banbury. He sees them all miniature, riding atop a Water Boatman, John with a Drum Major's mace in hand, twirling and stomping along.

For the temple bells are callin', an' it's there that I would be-

A crowd now. The women—wives of British officers—stood to better expand their pelvises, for this is where real singers sing from. John is up too, sort of skipping and jolting like a marionette in need of fresh strings and oil. Clapping. Clapping!

By the old Moulmein Pagoda, looking lazy at the sea

Three men, one whom had helped Lynne to bed early in the trip, take up a counter melody

On the road to Mandalay,

And now the women

Where the old Flotilla lay,

Together

With our sick beneath the awnings when we went to Mandalay!

John hears rather than sees the collective intake of breath before

On the road to Mandalay,

Where the flyin'-fishes play,

An' the dawn comes up like thunder outer China 'cross the Bay!

Those who don't sing harrumphed or hummed, whistled, dum-dee-dee-dum it or whatever else. If the ship's horn had parp-parped the last flourish of notes John would not have been surprised. The applause is spontaneous but quickly self-conscious. They were, after all, applauding themselves, a British transgression if ever there was one. Eyes shifted from shifting eyes.

The crowd parted for afternoon tea and no more of that thank you very much. John smiled, a little stiff, at the officers' wives and collected his jacket. In the doorway to the dining room, Lynne stood blowing smoke over a half-drunk Jenever. She smirked, downed her glass and headed back to the bar.

That night John sat alone in the dining room. He watched his fellow passengers with cursory interest. The room had all but emptied. He stubbornly sat, asking the waiter for a fresh glass,

though he had long grown tired of drinking. I could go a find her, he thought of his wife. I could search her, John thought, and necked another gobful.

Are you having fun, John? Who? Belinda, smiling and, John supposed, glowing. She and Sandra had been on the floor all night, switching partners until the final few men gave out, then continued with each other. He nodded and smiled, not too sadly he hoped.

Sandra joins them, spinning into a seat, advocaat and lemonade spilling as she goes. *Dark horse*, she smiles at John. *Cheers*, she says, spilling more advocaat.

To John, cheers Belinda. Something rubs against his calf making him half remember Suky. Through the linen, John feels the tight weave of pantyhose. *Are you tired, Sandra?* Belinda pushes her toes along the ridge of his thighbone.

Only if you are, Belinda.

They wave to another guest, standing to leave the bar for bed, *na night*. Drunk, of course, Christ knows it isn't just Lynne putting it away.

She likes you. Has since the first day we heard you humming that tune. Loves a man of music, Belinda does.

She does too, John.

Dining room empty and everyone on board already sleeping it off, John finds himself between a pair of willing bodies. He expects to see titillation on their faces, the British so blushing and base when it comes to sex, but these are refined women; their look is confident and determined.

Sandra takes Belinda's hand and they lead each other towards the berth. John picks up his cigarettes and matches, following. Carefully negotiating the stairs, he reaches the doorway to the sleeping quarters just as the two separate. He begins after Belinda, whose hand lingers at the end of the passageway.

This way.

Sandra repeats her call and he tries to follow. They run rings around him. Sometimes together, sometimes apart, they appear in doorways, just a leg caressing the frame. Slumped against the bulkhead, concentric circles fill John's head. He wants them too badly to believe it will ever come to pass. Hands move over his shirtsleeves and down to his hands. Hot breath on his skin, his breath on another's.

Where's our cabin? Sandra asks, which means it is Belinda who kisses him. She pulls away, he stumbles to pull her back. Identical corridors lined with identical doors, John is Alice chasing at least two white rabbits. Lynne is here somewhere, behind one of these doors, dream-speaking *off with their heads*, no doubt.

It all looks familiar, Sandra laughs.

There. They pull him into a cabin much like his own and close the door. John has had recurring visions, like regular epiphanies. Fingers inches away from their first touch of a piano, he had imagined himself a congenital maestro, the keys alive through him and he alive through them. His father had played and, he assumed, other Wilsons before him. Why not John Wilson virtuoso? His hands struck no gold that day. So too with art. He picked up the brush and pictured photorealistic beauty. He stroked the brush and uncovered no talent worth moulding. Within the moving towards and first touching a woman, John saw a sexual existence both tender and animalistic. He knew how to kiss a woman, her body. That point on the neck and the perfect pressure to apply. His fingers would glide as they did not over piano keys. His touch would be sensual; firm with a hint of gambol. Knowing where the pleasure point was, John would caress around it, both teasing and enticing. When he fucked them, they would come. He would ask them to describe the sensation in the same amount of detail he had given to the making of it. Moving inside them, faster and faster as they cried out words too ordinary for such pleasure, both would come together. But his first real encounter had been a brief fumble with Lynne down a cobbled alleyway. He feigned gallantry when, before she could even get a button loose, it came to a premature end.

Belinda and Sandra guide him, and he lets them. What he has been told and told himself about British women proves otherwise. When he is too forceful, they ease him and whisper *gentle, gentle*. When too languid, they sigh and moan *more, more*. John comes and continues, his body so filled with the pleasure of it all. His thoughts turn from Belinda to Sandra, from their hips to their breasts, he spins as though still lurching round the corridors of the ship. As he twists, John sees Lynne, her naked body out of reach, turning from him as it so often does. Eyes too overwhelmed to focus, John releases his inner-grip and falls into, for perhaps the first time, his present.

Head cocked on her own shoulder, half-drunk bottle of tonic in her hand, Lynne felt consciousness' needle. Consciousness said, we need another drink. Lynne would, if she could, oblige. Not just yet. Her eyes clamped down by mascara and, Christ, was it tears again? How long had they been on this vessel and how much longer would they remain? The thing creaked and jerked more than ever. What misery was this miserable fucking journey to lead them too? She wanted to be sick. The whole cabin jolted and shifted on God knew what waters. Lynne's eyelashes peeled away from each other, great curtains raising to bring the scene into focus.

John, who was coming again, clapped eyes on fiery Lynne and withdrew from groaning Belinda. Body and mind in disarray as usual, John continued to convulse, drenched with a kind of elated terror he never imagined one could attain from sex. A perfect blend of absolute pleasure and total, abject, horror.

Don't mind me. You carry on. Lynne batted at discarded tonic bottles in the hope of finding a few drops more. She necked one and threw it back in with the rest. Lynne moved down the bedsheets and hitched up her nightgown.

Come on then. She smirked at John, licking a bubble or two off her lips, *show me what you've got*.

Christ, John thought. He was alone with her now, would probably be alone with her for a long time to come, he supposed. If only anything was worth the bloody effort. He got himself above her, unsure whether she would let him in or cut the damn thing off.

Go on, John. She was enjoying it, gripping his arse, leading his rhythm. She likes it, he told himself. The thought of me with someone else, the pleasure of another. And she did. Too much for John who had finished just as Lynne got going.

He rolled over, barely on the bed. Lynne coughed heavily then fell silent. *Lynne, I didn't mean to*, he started, but she was asleep once more, her breath shallow, the bedsheets stained crimson beneath her.

John dressed and set off to find some steward or other. On deck Belinda and Sandra's deckchairs were conspicuously empty. The crew called and jostled, preparing to dock. Beyond, John saw land.

Where are we? He called out.

Singapore, a deckhand spat. And John saw that it was.

Opening *A Dead Man in Deptford*, Burgess's fictional biography of Christopher Marlowe, the narrator, Jack Wilson, poses the problem of how much of another's life can any other person know or personally bear witness. Wilson, an unheralded actor and playwright who 'observed [Marlowe] intermittently', uses the example of 'a philosopher who spoke of the cat that mews to be let out and then mews to be let in again. In the interim, does it exist?' (1994, p. 3). The

narrator's point is that in this interim period, the philosopher can well assume that the cat is 'fully and corporeally in the world down to its last whisker'. While he may not have seen the specific actions of the cat when it was out of sight, or trapped in the box, its actions can be extrapolated from past experience. Therefore, as long as the narrator's extrapolations of Marlowe's unseen moments — private conversations, solitary reflections — do not conflict with, but rather coalesce with, what has been seen, invention does not undermine reportage. Burgess confirms this position in the introduction to *Nothing Like the Sun*, writing 'the exterior biography is probably correct, and the interior, or invented, biography does not conflict with it' (1964, p. 2).

Wilson uses the thought experiment of Schrodinger's Cat to prove that in order to record the actions of a being you do not, necessarily, have to have been present. But in this analogy a larger conflict is revealed. Jack Wilson is a narrator who can both know Marlowe in the Sixteenth Century and Schrodinger's theory, presented in 1935. Rather than the example of Schrodinger's Cat proving Wilson's thesis that any amount of first-hand observation allows for supposition for what went unseen, this opening passage presents one of Anthony Burgess's central motifs in his fictional biographies: 'So, I suppose it happened, but I suppose only' (1994, p. 276).

Burgess has two targets in mind when he makes this claim. Firstly, the reader is being asked to read with wariness, with suspicion, this presentation of Christopher Marlowe. But more broadly, and more importantly, Burgess asks the reader to be suspicious of *all* accounts of lives lived and events past. If Jack Wilson cannot exist on a plane that encompasses both the lives of Marlowe and Schrodinger, then neither can Anthony Burgess, whether he is writing a traditional biography or a fictionalised account. While the cat can be moved in and out of the box, the past is always contained, always inaccessible. In his Author's Notes, at the end of his Marlowe novel, Burgess asserts that 'the true truth – the verità verissima of the Neapolitans – can never be known' (p. 271). If this is the case, then conventional biography, which is centrally concerned with 'truth-telling', is, for Burgess, less equipped to tell the stories lives (Hamilton, 2007, p. 220).

In the final chapter of *A Dead Man in Deptford*, the narrator muses on how his real name was printed in Shakespeare's *First Folio* rather than his character's name, Balthasar. Wilson states:

> In the comedy of *Much Ado About Nothing*, by some inadvertency, I enter with Leonato and others under my own identity and not, as it should be, the guise of Balthasar to sing to ladies that they sigh no more. So a useless truth obtrudes on to a

> more ravishing lie. I would say finally that, as the earth turns and the truth of summer and the lie of winter interchange (interchangeably set their seals), so the bulky ball of history revolves, and what a man dies for may become the thing that dies for him. (1992, p. 269)

While he may not have died for a cause in the same way Marlowe, in this version, at least, dies for England, it is clear that Burgess lived for fiction and what a man lived for becomes the thing that lives for him, the thing that lives on, beyond him. This 'useless truth' — that Jack Wilson played Balthasar in *Much Ado About Nothing* — obtrudes on the 'ravishing lie' that is Burgess's novel. This is one example of Burgess's works of historiographic metafiction. Linda Hutcheon, who coined the term, defines historiographic metafiction as works 'whose metafictional self-reflexivity (and intertextuality) renders their implicit claims to historical veracity somewhat problematic' (1989, p. 3). In all of Burgess's biographical and autobiographic writing, his historiographic metafictions, Burgess obtrudes upon fact with fiction, truth with lies (Biswell, 2005, p. 213).

In several of these texts, Burgess uses the narrative device of a future reader visiting upon a past writer, with significance placed on the time between. Jack Wilson — revealed towards the end of the novel as a pseudonym for Anthony Burgess — exists in the Twentieth Century, but through his engagement with Marlowe, exists too in the past. This device is also used in, amongst works, *Nothing Like the Sun*, *Abba Abba*, *Inside Mr Enderby*, and *The End of the World News.*

Lynne had woken in a stark white room. That's about right, she'd thought, dead. Her white-sheeted bed stood in the middle of a row of white-sheeted beds. The air smelt of nothing; not a single other soul alongside her. She tried to remember how she had got there but couldn't even work her way back to leaving the boat. Memory crackled and whitened, like those wilderness places moved through while tuning a transistor.

One narrow bed replaced by another, one nebulous room replaced by four more characterless walls. An empty room in an unknown building, in a country she could only comprehend as a negative. It was not England, not Wales, not Europe, after that her

knowledge ended. Yet the silence, the cleanliness – her own cleanliness – and the comfort aroused some long-lost point in her past. A blank canvas, Lynne shaped the room into a palimpsest of rooms. Her childhood bedroom in Blackwood, early morning, waiting to hear the sound of her father's voice in the next room. Rhys Evans' room, sparse in the way all bachelors' rooms were. The flat she had taken when she first arrived at university, so neat and tidy, a picture of respectability. The room her father brought her belongings into, blank, insipid; Lynne found herself turning to the window to check she really was no longer in Bedwellty.

Her mother had made such a fuss, all that way. Still wrapped up in her wool coat, she could barely lift the cup from the saucer so shaken were her hands. Lynne and her father tried to be reassuring, Manchester was a safe city for girls, the university was only a brief walk. But nothing they said would help. It was as though Lynne's mother had seen some premonition. Violence lived in cities such as these.

It was not just violence that turned Florence's hand to trembling. There was sex out there in the city streets, and a floor and a bed and a table in here on which to have it. Her mother's tea gently vibrated in freshly unpacked China, just as that letter had quivered so that Lynne could not make out a word. But she knew. He had written to her, had begged her not to leave him, had begged her to let him come to Manchester too. A letter posted through her parents' front door. Couldn't anyone keep anything to themselves, for crying out loud?

It was put through the door, her mother's voice tremored like tea in China.

Mother. The letter was put down. Lynne saw enough not to want to see more.

> *You lay upon me, Mars observed, and procured your own orgasms. I sweated though you did not. You raised yourself at climax and briefly sang at the ceiling—*

The fucking fool. She had warned him not to make any fuss. Fuss was one thing, but this — laying bare their nakedness, their intimacy — was betrayal. She had been fourteen when Rhys had first led her beyond Saint Sannan's, beyond the graveyard, to a quiet spot beneath an oak tree. She saw how hard he tried in his persuasion. Lynne pulled down her plain, schoolgirl knickers and kicked them towards him, quick to see that he could take whatever it was he wanted from her. Better she decide what she was willing to give away.

It had been an infrequent thing. Rhys would sometimes be waiting across from the school gates, waving her over and walking on before she caught up to him. Her father could not find out. It would destroy him. Not just the scandal, the headmaster's slut daughter; they had always shared everything, there were things Lynne knew about her father she was sure her

mother did not. This was a betrayal of his love for her. Lynne kept the affair a secret, which meant, mainly, keeping Rhys's impulses in check.

When she turned seventeen he asked her, which she laughed off. By this time, he had got himself a little cottage on the outskirts of the village, and Lynne, her parents so trusting, would barely have to offer an excuse for spending a night away from home. She would not marry Rhys Evans. He had kept her for this long and would have her no longer. He scoffed when she told him that she was applying for a university place. It was beyond his comprehension that she would leave Bedwelltry. Reality set in when her parents held a leaving party in the church hall. He'd tried then to make a scene, the selfish bastard. Lynne and Hazel, her sister, pushing him from the hall. Hazel keeping watch, Lynne doing the talking. She was seventeen, older in some ways, while he had degenerated into a boy.

That letter hadn't been an attempt at reconciliation, but a last plunge of the knife. It had followed her to Manchester, the pregnant air that sat between father, mother and daughter proved that, and now it had found its way here.

That spare silken body, the pert breasts, the mane like gold foil.

Lynne made light of their goodbyes that day in Manchester, watching her parents drive off back to Blackwood, back home. There had been many goodbyes since. To London, during the war— her mother's mind filled with violence once more. Her fears reignited when John uprooted them to Banbury. And again, when Lynne had gone alone to tell her ageing parents about their next move. Malaya meant nothing to them, just a shape on a map. Thank God. If violence lived in Manchester with her, in London and Banbury too, then at least it was a British violence, which, like British sex, is comic and done out of drunkenness or desperation. What violence did the East hold? They had said goodbye as though it were terminal. Perhaps it was. After all, this was purgatory for all she knew. And if it was, then so be it; purgatory was as good a place to arrive as any.

They stood at the foot of her metal framed bed, dressed as on that day in Manchester. Her father smiled, he had always had a smile for his Llewela. Lynne's mother refused to look at her bed ridden daughter, focusing instead on the bedsheets, white and untainted. Clad in a tweed overcoat, heavy and restrictive in the Eastern heat, she shook her head and clutched her purse. Lynne could not take her eyes off her mother's coat. The cotton sheets that had been so cooling began to itch, rough and woolen on her skin. The heat of it smothered her, sweat poured before she could push the sheets from her body. Between her thighs was thick with sweat. Her father led her mother out. Lynne gripped the metal sidebars and watched them as they faded, like everything else, from view.

A Chinese nurse blinked into focus. Blurred and faded, expanding and contracting, she held a vast crimson rose. White walls framed the white clad woman and petals of red. She held it in both arms, taking some of the weight with her hidden torso. Lynne had heard about the alien wildlife of the East, from John, no doubt. Cool air blew over Lynne's naked legs. Relief, Lynne felt soothed by hands she had longed, all her life, to feel. She saw then the magic of the East. Flowers and women of great beauty and strangeness. Dragons, no doubt, were drifting on that breeze, which so comforted. The body and mind must acclimatise to talking reptiles and elixirs made from tigers' spleens, fat men, bellies painted gold, atop puff clouds like night watchmen on chimneypots in the war. The old life, the sure footing of Europe's pavement and stone, of Welsh soil which had always held her feet to the ground, was gone. Her feet were free to walk in regular floating motions, carried on a soft breeze.

The nurse was speaking to someone else, just out of view. Lynne tried to shift her body to see. The nurse turned to hide the cumbersome flower before leaving the room completely. Flowers of the East, Lynne thought.

A doctor, she heard a faint whiff of South Wales under his affected Oxfordshire, stood at the foot of the bed. *How are we today, Mrs Wilson? You've given us all a fair old fright, I have to say.* He thumbed papers held in a buff-coloured file. Blighty came back into the room, into her life. He took coy, lascivious looks at her naked skin. His top button held his Adam's apple firm, a choke chain, his fat face balanced atop.

It's so sad, he started, *the decline from a sheltered and provincial childhood to a non-life*, he eyed between her legs.

Lynne couldn't speak, couldn't breathe.

Blackwood, I know it well. Lynne saw her nakedness grow and amplify.

I see it so often nowadays. Women getting fat on pints of beer, neglecting to do the washing-up or dusting. Allowing themselves certain adulteries. He watched her carefully, as the nurse reappeared and shook out a fresh sheet over Lynne's body.

Lynne's crisp lips peeled apart, her tongue unfurled like butterfly's wings from chrysalis. She gratefully accepted the glass the nurse held gently against her bottom lip. The liquid turned baked sand to supple wetness.

This isn't Banbury, now, he chided, *and in your state, one had better remain hydrated. And not your sort of hydration.* He went on, *I've examined you thoroughly, I know what's what here, you know. I've seen it all before.*

But I'm better now.

You've lost a lot of blood. Dysmenorrhea. He reeled off the menu. *Excessive muscular spasms of the uterus, which cause cramps, hormonal changes, mood swings, vaginal bleeding*.

She knew all this. Had had this for years, since the war. Since American GIs had followed her. There'd been blood, alright. Dysmenorrhea. It sounded like one of those words John used a little too loudly in conversation.

The bleeding has slowed now, but not stopped. He placed his podgy hand on Lynne's foot and gave it a rub. Lynne caught the sympathetic eye of the nurse, who seemed to shrink from the doctor's speech.

John found a city that was not dissimilar to his childhood home. Manchester is something like a port town, in that the ship canal made it a kind of inland port. Just like Singapore, Manchester is a crossroads. People may stay for years, for their whole lives, but it's obvious, if you are willing to pay attention, that everyone in Manchester is, in some way or another, passing through. The whole of the Malayan peninsula was something of a crossroads. A crossroads between East and West, China and India, Northern and Southern hemispheres. Manchester itself is the crossroads between England and Wales, and England and Scotland, between North West and North East. At one point, still in recent memory, it was the epicentre of the cotton trade, Cottonopolis they called it. John enjoyed thinking about Manchester from this distance, it was like reminiscing about a long-dead violent relative who could do no more harm. Time dulled the aberrations leaving nostalgia, which is a type of curation. That afternoon John had his first vision of the East.

Women, from the West and East, walked by in American stockings and suspenders. Eurasian, Malaysian, Chinese, Tamil. Single women hunting in packs for men just off the boat. He drank bottles of warm Tiger beer, ate fried rice and tiger prawns, and paid the price for an hour in a bed on Bugis Street, where he fell, like Dylan Thomas, into sleep and the arms of woman who had reason to expect more.

He returned to his room the next morning and slept more sweetly in the double bed. Raffles was everything John had expected from a hotel and never, thus far, received. He sent for sheet music and, his request unsatisfied, used the edge of his stolen Kipling to line the blank pages he received in lieu. On the balcony, a JPS smouldering, John began to sketch out the Malayan symphony he foresaw becoming their national anthem.

He was stood drinks at the Long Bar by men with three shoulder stripes or three-piece suits. They asked him whether he thought the Empire would hold and John took take a heavy breath, letting the air exit as a resigned sigh.

Treachery, they see it as. We upped and left, you see, gave them over to the Japs. Not our fault the other side were so bloody cruel, but how can they see it any other way? Disaster, largest capitulation in British history.

You're quoting there, I think. John waved the interruption off.

Three years is a long time for a grudge to fester. And now, now they've been promised freedom of a sort. What the Empire needs to do is stop being bloody afraid of being the Empire. Countries begged to join. They will again.

All empires fall eventually, John. The man raised his glass, which John returned.

He was carried out of the Tangin Club, resting his weight on the shoulder of a newly made friend. He felt himself traverse the streets as though he were a finger drifting over a map. Corners were taken in an arch, he hooked John's arm and pulled him round, slingshot like. They skated along Victoria Street, whose ornate embankments, planted with an artist's eye, stood before scaffold-clad breezeblock walls. Then they were back inside. They must have been inside, someone was ordering more drinks. Always more drinks. He began humming a melody he could sense but couldn't quite see.

John woke in a deep leather armchair. The side of one arm dug into his back, the other held his right knee aloft. He daren't open his eyes. The air was thick with his sweat and the bite of alcohol's morning remains. There was no perfume. The air carried the faint smell of surgical spirit. A Chinese woman stood before him. She smiled, bowing gently.

You would like some water, she half asked, half told. John took three heavy drafts, before he realised he was seated beside his sleeping wife.

She was better, had been better yesterday, only no one could find John Wilson to come and collect his belongings. The Welsh hepatologist went through Lynne's condition while checking John's.

You look as bad as she did, he said, his thumb pulling down on John's lower eyelid. *She needs plenty of liquids, not,* he paused, *Tanqueray*. He took John's pulse and placed a wooden stick on his tongue. *Lots of water. Add salt to your meals. Plenty of red meat.*

John rolled his sleeves back down and shook the doctor's hand. *Well, thank you for taking care of my wife*.

What good it will do, the doctor said with no humour.

Lynne was subdued. John kissed her on the cheek and clasped her cold hand between his hot fingers. She wanted for nothing except to leave. Without a fight, without a word from either, John had drawn the curtain around the bed. Lynne remained still while he lifted the

sheet from her and rolled it down over her feet. He lifted her body forward, which held itself limply, head facing down. The rags placed between her legs were crisp and white.

Lynne slept off a day's rehydration, while John watched, at the window of their carriage, the lights of rubber plantations and the small towns of Malaya passed by. To the eye she was a dead weight. John knew that she had lost all forward momentum that, as they shunted north and further into darkness, the mechanism inside had stopped.

The landscape of Malaya was the work of an obsessive-compulsive god, all straight lines and recurring patterns. Rubber trees, with their little drinking cups, single-filed into the horizon, up into the mountains, and down towards the Bernam River. Sungai Bernam, John corrected himself. River is a prefix here, like Sir or Madam. Jalan Bukit Kerajaan meant Road Bukit Kerajaan.

John took out his pen-staved paper. The landscape whispered notes and themes, a xylophone tapping out a pentatonic melody. Distractedly, one eye on the great forest outside, the other on Lynne's subdued frame, John marked the page in quick rhythm. Kuala Kangsar, that was their destination. He repeated the words over and over in his head, until he had the notes perfected: G A C B, Kuala Kangsar.

The train all but emptied at Ipoh. Indian men moved close and frenetic, laughing and corralling one another. Chinese men, cagey, lost in thoughts from another time, moved with grace ahead of their graceful wives, daughters, and sons. Malays, in no hurry, stopped to blink at a sun they only now seemed to notice. Then there were the British. The impatience written large. Impatient with porters. Impatient with wives. Impatient with the sun, with each other. John surveyed those alighting as several pieces of music played all at once. Quick time, gentle waltz, bombastic symphony, and something new, a local rhythm and timbre John had yet to hear first-hand. Their own porter was a welcoming and accommodating brown-skinned man. John held out their tickets which were met by smiles and waves of follow.

Where are you from? John asked.

Yes, yes, yes, the reply came. Behind, Lynne fanned herself with a wide-brimmed hat. She was bright red on sallow white, like a plucked chicken whose skin had been tenderised by kicks and punches.

John took huge gulps of the cacophony that surrounded them. How many languages were being spoken in just that one building? He would like to have counted. They followed their porter into the creamy white of the train station. Marble pillars, regimented as rubber trees, rising from marble floors that sparkled under large arched windows; John thought of dirty Euston or, worse, Manchester Piccadilly, whose grubby façade was more that of an indoor flea market than a gateway to the world. John wanted to run his fingers down the walls. He wanted to touch the floor beneath him with bare feet. The sweating throng within did nothing to disrupt the building's calm stoicism.

They were asked to wait, which they did. Lynne sat on a spiral staircase while John hungrily lapped up the scene. An official who spoke good, if accented, English told them their train would be there in one and a half hours. Lynne emitted air through tight lips and gave John quite the filthy look.

Connection in thirty minutes. Hungry for food? they were asked.

I think we could eat, couldn't we, darling?

If, she lifted herself up from the step, *it's not boiled bloody rice and hot sauce.*

English food, yes? This way. Only very nearby.

They followed him, John assuming he was a deputy station manager or similar. The porter did not follow, instead he set off back the way they had come.

There goes the fucking luggage, Lynne hissed. John turned to object but was met with the deputy's toothy smile.

We take care. Already taken care. John smiled at Lynne who did not smile back. They were led into a dining room where, thank God, empty English travellers were being served full English breakfasts. The deputy bowed and stepped away. John went to get them plates of bacon and egg, Lynne went to get them Bloody Mary chasers.

In his review of *The Life and Times of Chaucer*, Burgess argues that 'when biographical materials are so scanty, as with Shakespeare… only a novelist — with his vocational intuition about all people laughing when they're tickled — can be trusted to make something out of little' (1986b, p. 254). Yet there is no universally agreed measurement for biographical

materials (stones? yards? gallons?), and no arbiter whose scales decide whether the material collected is *enough*. Is the measure word or page count? And would not a biographer with too much material face the equally invalidating act of leaving things out. This choice would be like a surgeon deciding which pieces of the patient to discard before sowing them back up. As Kenneth Burke puts it, a 'selection of reality', is itself a 'deflection of reality' (1969, p. 59). That is to say, anything but the whole truth is not the truth. Julian Barnes, in his novel *Flaubert's Parrot* offers an illuminating metaphor for the process of creating a biography:

> You can define a net in one of two ways, depending on your point of view. Normally, you would say that it is a meshed instrument designed to catch fish. But you could, with no great injury to logic, reverse the image and define a net as a jocular lexicographer once did: he called it a collection of holes tied together with string.
>
> You can do the same with biography. The trawling net fills, then the biographer hauls it in… Yet consider what he doesn't catch: there is always far more of that. (1984, p. 38)

A complete biography would exist in the same realm as Borges' cartographers, whose map of the empire is the exact size of the empire itself (Borges, 2000b, p. 37). These gaps are not the gaps of fiction but the gaps of biography, the gaps of history.

Writing his literary biography of Shakespeare (written six years after his fictional biography *Nothing Like the Sun*), Burgess states:

> What I claim here is the right of every Shakespeare-lover who has ever lived to paint his own portrait of the man. One is short of the right paints and brushes and knows one is going to end up with a botched and inadequate picture' (1996, p. 9).

The point Burgess makes, subtly, is that every Shakespeare loving biographer is short of the right paints. Catherine Belsey, in *Critical Practice*, makes the argument that if we accept the 'post-Saussurean concept of the primacy of language' then we also accept that no 'one discourse is more "scientific" than another' (1980, p. 63). That is to say, the paints and brushes a conventional biographer uses are no more correct or accurate than those selected by Burgess. All biographies are, in essence, inadequate pictures.

What can any person truly know of another? Michael Holquist, a pioneer of Bakhtinian studies, succinctly explains that each of us is self-contained, living a 'unique, unrepeatable existence as a particular person in a specific social and historical situation' (1990, p. 28). And, as Belsey makes clear, 'meaning is never a fixed essence inherent in the text but is always constructed by the reader' (1980, p. 58). I am not Anthony Burgess. I can only encounter his life and his works through my unique position and reader. I am unable to offer anything but

an incomplete version of Anthony Burgess. Or, at least, a partial version of Burgess. We can never be the other, only our self. Moreover, art, as I suppose we are at liberty to define literary biography cannot be, according to Bakhtin, life: 'When a human being is in art, he is not in life, and conversely' (1990, p. 1).

No one is in a position to document dead time and the lives that will forever be contained there. I have turned to the conventions of literary fiction due to an inability to write with authority about a place and time I have never encountered (no matter how real those places and those times have become to me now). As Burgess states, when a writer presents facts through language, we can be 'persuaded that what he writes is generally true, though it must be demonstrably true only of himself' (1992, p. 292).

They were met off the train by Mr Howell, Jimmy to his friends; Mr Howell for now. The principal of the Malay College, Mr Howell preferred to meet all his new staff members off the train. *Better to be met by a friendly face, I say,* he said, sullen, checking his pocket watch. In the car John's leg tapped along with the bumps in the road. Tapped in the style of an impatient child. He could barely focus on Howell's mechanical tour guide mutterings.

Howell had either fallen out of or never loved Kuala Kangsar. He talked of it warily, scowling as they passed the town's busy shops and market. John pointed out people and buildings to no one in particular, perhaps to his own memory for future consultation. Howell watched Mrs Wilson, sullen but not without a certain attractiveness. She didn't point, barely even looked; Howell thought she would fit in well. He leant forward and cooed over the cat Lynne carried in a plastic container. It looked half dead, fur matted through incarceration and heat. Why bring a bloody cat, he thought. It'll run out into that blasted jungle and be got by the pigmy natives or an ape or the hidden Chinese, who would take it hostage as a British interloper.

They'd been shot at in this very car, the Howells. On their way to play bridge at the club in Ipoh, they'd been shot at from the trees. Shot near, at least. Howell dreamed of burning the forest down. Through the smoke, a thousand charred trees and a thousand more burnt Chinese

bodies would lie. The town was out of Howell's control, but the trees, within their sinuous branches, were another realm entirely, were the enemy.

Your place will be ready by Thursday. In the meantime. Howell opened the car door and made his way up the path to his house. John got out, took Lalage under his arm, and helped Lynne out of the car. They stood in front of a perfect Welsh garden. Laburnum garlanded the entrance. A rhododendron, wilted purple flowers with browned tips, was surrounded by dying daffs. Lynne buckled, grasping John. The cat flew from under his arm, off into the East. John struggled to get Lynne to her feet.

It's the heat, he told her, inching her up the garden path and into the Howell household. He closed the front door behind them. They were back in Tredegar. Back in Moss Side. Back in Banbury. In the hallway hung a Constable knock off. A horse and cart moving slowly through a shallow river. The paint looked wet to touch. John perched Lynne on the stool and went to find Mr Howell.

Mrs Howell fixed him with a stern look. *Jim. Mr Howell*, she corrected herself, *is dealing with one of the staff.* She pushed a door closed, where voices had begun to raise.

I'm John. He held out his clammy hand, which she reluctantly shook. *My wife, Lynne. She's a bit faint, with the heat. Could we have some water?*

Mrs Howell went straight into the hallway, muttering *poor thing* and *let's get you settled*. She gestured for John to help, and they brought Lynne into the sitting room. It was a facsimile of Doug Rose's sitting room. At least, John immediately pictured Rose and his wife sitting on the brown and grey knit three-piece suite. While Mrs Howell tended to Lynne, calling into the kitchen for water and a damp towel, John became increasingly angry. How dare they come all this way and play at little England. Little Wales.

Lynne was put to bed, a divan, where she slept surrounded by flock wallpaper and sun-warped oak furnishings. Meanwhile Howell dealt with Ah Hun, his Chinese cook, who had been caught marinating chicken's feet by a scandalised Mrs Howell. She shuddered as she retold the story. *Dirty yellow claws, not even scrubbed.*

The girl, a petite Malay, brought them a breakfast of sumptuous fruit, carved to reveal the beautiful contrast of skin to flesh. John ate much, while Lynne stared out at their new beginning.

I must write home, she told John.

Of course. There will be plenty of time for that. How do you feel?

I need to let my sister know where I can be contacted. Should anything happen.

Lynne—

They must have paper and envelopes. Ask him.

Look, let's just get settled in and then we can, but she had drifted out of the conversation, her hand gripping a piece of guava. He would get her paper and a pen to write home. He would do whatever it took.

John made his way out, walking towards what he thought was the centre of town. Palms lined the road. There was no pavement, and he saw no one else walking as he made his way down Jalan Istana. Howell had warned John about Chinese insurgents. Several times, thin branches became rifle barrels, became branches again. Malay gardeners, leaning languidly on rakes or against walls, waved hats over their closed eye. Short oriental women hung sheets in the gardens, beat rugs with beaters. Chinese cyclists, their trousers drawn up and billowing around their knees, passed in silence, staring. The heat was punishing. John wiped a wet sleeve over his sodden brow. He felt cleansed. His body sweated out the past. At one point a group of official-looking cars came upon him and he had to drop down into the storm drain. Grasping at thick, plasticky grass blades, he pulled himself back onto the road and carried on.

After twenty or so minutes, he came to a grand entrance way. This must be the royal palace that Mrs Howell had been so keen on. Two Malay guards eyed John suspiciously. *Selamat petang*, he said, deferentially. They ignored him. Beyond the gates, another grand white edifice. All the buildings in Kuala Kangsar were white as sun-bleached bones, topped with terracotta roofs, like upturned plant pots. There was something breath-taking about its simplicity, the newness. Their cottage in Banbury had been a tumble-down affair. None of the floors level, the brickwork crooked, each brick its own mix of red, brown, orange and black. And the cottage next door a totally different ramshackle creation. But here, each building sympathised with the next. All children from the same mother. John murmured *selamat petang* once again and went on his way.

A little further on he came across another palatial place. A sort of two-tier wedding cake of a building, atop a Norfolk flint hillock. And then, to his right, the Perak River. Huge and the colour of stepmother's tea, it seemed incredible he hadn't sensed its presence. John would not have been surprised to have seen some great leviathan rise from the gloom, a whale shark clamped between its teeth. He was struck at how it reminded him of the Irwell River, that dirty slash of water that cut Salford off from Manchester. The river took him back to childhood, leaning over Salford Crescent, watching the murky flow below, an upturned pram creating swells that undulated out towards the shore. Manchester and Malaya. Kuala Kangsar

and Kearsley, Cheetham Hill, Clayton. Not a cloud in the sky, yet he could feel the soft drizzle of Lancashire.

You alright there, pal?

John turned into the chest of a policeman's uniform. He raised his head and was met by a monstrous bulk of a head. A thick, lopsided moustache under a flat, crooked nose. The policeman had a generous head of unkempt hair, much like his own.

We were a bit worried you might be thinking of jumpin' in, like. He nodded to his partner, a handsome Indian man.

I'm just. What was he just doing? What was there to explain? *I haven't seen the town yet.*

A new arrival, eh.

Yes. I'm a teacher, at the college.

Posh little pricks. The policeman rolled a malformed fag, tobacco spilling out of both ends, and bent over to receive a light from his partner. *Kids and teachers, both.* He laughed, too loudly. *Name's Don. This here is Ibrahim, or Ibra.* Don held out his hand, fingers yellowed from tobacco and turmeric stains. John shook. *They call me Lofty, on account of my high opinion of myself.*

Lofty, from John's vantage, could have been seven feet tall. He smiled and sucked deep on his disintegrating ciggy, while his friend looked on with gleaming but incongruous eyes.

Fancy a lift anywhere? The car was regulation police, John assumed. Ibrahim had not moved from it, his hand resting on the hood.

That's very kind, but I'd quite like to walk.

Suit yourself, Lofty said, climbing into the passenger's seat, his knees rising above the dashboard. Ibrahim, still assessing John, pulled the car away and off towards the town.

He heard the town before he saw it. The streets leading here had been almost empty, and no wonder. Throngs of people made their way over crossroads that John could barely make out. Underneath a large, ornate clock tower, Malay men is various overalls and uniforms smoked cigarettes and spoke loudly, neither in angry nor humour. Women walked in groups. Chinese women with baskets filled with produce; Muslim women wrapped in thick cloth, the sight of which made John sweat all the more.

Over the bridge, which crossed into the town proper, trishaws cut up brown Daimlers, children chased after gunmetal Austin A30s. He walked over the Kangsar River wondering what he would give to this place and what would be given. He had arrived in the East and, somehow, had been welcomed. Could a Westerner, a colonial officer, become a great

Malayan son? He was not sure. He looked at the decorative arches, four of them, proclaiming Kuala Kangsar *A Royal Town*, all in shimmering white. He would arch between the East and the West. The theme returned to him, agitated strings, a single oboe dancing above them.

He stumbled upon the market. Standing, swaying, staring at a thousand caged birds, each more beautiful than the next. He ran his hands over fabrics, oriental, Asian, and African prints overwhelmed him. The women wrapped in similar fabrics overwhelmed him. He watched the women who worked behind the stalls and the women who perused them. He had never seen such an array of women before. It seemed as if each woman was of her own race. He could see them watching him too. He smiled, *selamat tengah hari*. Some replied in kind, others said nothing and bowed their heads from his gaze.

Surrounded by so many voices, so many languages made his head spin. The constrained top notes of Hindi, shifting from treble clef to bass octave and back again. Chinese staccato hits, interspersed with bent notes, rising from major to sharp. Malays speaking like plucked strings over a bowed note, in an endless refrain. The scale runs of Tamils, each sentence tumbling to a gentle rest. He tried to imagine their lives, who had their parents been, where did they live, who did they live with? Were they happy? What did they enjoy? Did they wonder about him? It made him giddy to think of how little they shared in common. Two white women walked by, followed by a dark-skinned girl, no more than fifteen, head bowed. They looked at him with an unconcealed disgust, as if he was spying through a hole into a place men should never enter. He grinned at them, boldly.

Selamat tengah hari, he sang. They tutted, sped up.

He came upon a food stall and realised he had not eaten since those few slices of breakfast fruit. The dish was some kind of fried bread, freshly made and cooked in front of him, with a ladle of a thin yellowy-green sauce. *Suka mencuba*, the man asked, pointing at the oily pan.

Sila, sila, John replied. He received the dish and ate it in just a couple of mouthfuls, tearing with fingers and teeth at the soft, grainy bread. It tasted like potato cakes and English muffins, but with spice and heat. He ordered another, exaggerating lip-smacking and finger-sucking. He felt absolute freedom. Here he was, away from Toiletts and Wilsons and Isherwood-fucking-Joneses. Away from the beady eyes of Banbury gossips, who knew as much of your intent as they did your actions. Could you imagine what he might have become had he been born here, in the East? If he had been nurtured in a place as vibrant as this.

Wilson. Here. Lofty elongated himself out of a bar and beckoned him in. *In you come.*

He arrived back to find Lynne in the kitchen sharing a cigarette with the housekeeper and cook.

Has Mrs Howell been back? he asked. Lynne stubbed out her cigarette.

Missus is out all day, the housekeeper informed him.

I thought we might take a trip into town together, get a feel for the place. Go for something to eat. I met a— Lynne left the room as he spoke. He followed her into the hallway and watched as she took the stairs to their room. He turned and gave the housekeeper an embarrassed smile. *She's tired*, he said. John had nowhere to go. It would soon be four, Howell would be home.

Twenty minutes passed. John opened Howell's drinks cabinet and found nothing worth drinking. He drank anyway, a slug of vermouth in a cut glass. He should make enquiries about their lodgings and see if he could obtain a small advance on his first month's wage. They would need to buy things. Furniture, a fridge, God knew what else. He heard footsteps coming down the stairs, the front door open, Lynne's voice. *Where to?*

Outside, Lynne was taking it all in. A woman, younger than them, waved in the polite manner. Lynne started down the road, while John waved back.

Are we expected to live round here?

I assume so. It doesn't seem so bad. Jimmy says most of the teachers live in the area.

You stink. You could have changed.

I can do now. Why don't we go back, and I'll change my shirt? But Lynne was moving forward, away from the Howells.

On Jalan Istana he hailed a trishaw. The boy freewheeled down the hill and into town, while Lynne tried to hide her excitement.

Do you want to have a look around? We could take a walk along the river.

I just want a drink, John. I've been on my own all day.

John called over to the boy, who came to a halt, the town just ahead. On a small patch of grass that led down towards the river, Malay boys who had been playing football stopped and looked on at the couple. *Selamat petang*, John nodded. No older than ten, the boys looked at the ground, embarrassed. John saw that it was Lynne who embarrassed them. They would have rarely seen a white woman, let alone a blonde. Lynne enjoyed the moment, catching their eyes as they glanced at her. John lit cigarettes, passing one to Lynne, and they began to walk.

I'll ask Howell about an Amah.

A what?

A housekeeper. Lynne looked at him with ambivalence. *It's the thing, here. And a cook too.*

And what will I do, John?

They had reached the bridge. He looked over at the raging Penang River, the palms, the forest beyond. *Lofty was saying there might be a car for sale. You'll meet him. We'll make good friends here. We could see about that. With my wages, we should be alright. A car. A house-girl and a cook.* The trees retreated. The water below churned brown, furiously shifting. *This is a new beginning, Lynne. I'm going to get on with composing. I think I've got the beginnings of an orchestral piece.* John reached out to take Lynne's hand. *What is it you want, Lynne?*

She was somewhere else, lost in the flow of the river. He crossed over and headed towards town. She threw her fag end over the bridge and crossed the Irwell from Salford to Manchester.

And what will I do, John? She asked.

He kissed her, her breath ripe with beer and pub food. *We'll be all right,* he said.

They had it all ahead of them, someone short on imagination had said. John had recently finished his degree, Lynne would soon finish hers. He had written a dissertation on Christopher Marlowe, Kit. Lynne was writing too, on the French Protectorate of Morocco. They walked up Bridge Street and stopped, appropriately, at the Bridge Inn.

He brought over two pints of bitter. *You seem distracted.*

She took the glass and took a heavy draught. *My parents want me home.*

He drank, was about to demur, this was home, but he saw what she meant. *To Wales.*

Bombs on Manchester, she said, as a sort of answer.

It made sense. He was to enlist soon enough. *They've probably got a point. Why be here when you can be somewhere,* he tried to think of the word, *safer*.

She thought on that, taking his cigarettes from the inside pocket of his jacket and lighting up.

What is it you want, Lynne? He felt that this was a poignant moment, that she felt it too.

How should I know, she sighed.

The pub was almost empty, just a couple of blokes still in overalls throwing darts and the landlord tutting his way through a copy of the *Daily Mirror*. John felt a deep urge to get down on his knee. He wished he was already enlisted, uniformed and booted, his hair plied down with pomade. He could hear the swell of strings as he dropped, taking a ring box from the

pocket just below his name tag. Lynne's eyes would well at the sight of the ring, nothing to fancy, this was wartime, after all. He would kiss her, she would lean into him, his knee bearing both their weight.

Lynne took a note out of her purse. *Get a couple more in, John.*

What about us, Lynne? She was about to reply, but John said, *how about we get married? You and me. The war might well be over by the time you go home and I get drafted. We could stick together. I'll get some work pianoplaying, composing.* He thought she might interrupt but didn't. *And, and, we can travel, if that's what you want. It doesn't have to be in Manchester. I don't mind where we go. There's nothing for me here, not really, anyway. Nothing I'd miss that couldn't be replaced.* He was rambling, he knew it.

Thank you. She put her hand on his.

For what? He suddenly felt very alone.

For asking. She stood. *I'm going in there,* nodding to the ladies, *get them in.*

John sat, fiver loosely in his hand. That had been, he understood, a no. But she had not said it aloud. She would need time to think. There was so much to think about now, never mind proposals of marriage. Never mind love.

She came back, kissing him on the cheek. *You'll stand by me, then?*

Of course, Lynne. Of course, I—

I'm pregnant, John.

His mouth dropped, his pint almost followed.

Before you say anything, I want you to listen. She looked around to see no one else was. *I can't have my parents see me pregnant out of wedlock, and they'd never forgive me if I got married without them knowing, so as kind as your offer is, it isn't a solution. The way I see it, the only option is for me to go somewhere else. Find a job or something like that. Deborah is up in Preston, I could stay with her for a while.*

This was all too much to take in. Preston? A job? A baby?

I'll have the baby, then we'll see. I can't think of everything, but I can do what's best for me and it now.

Is it mine?

I would like it to be yours, John. If you would like it too.

They sat in quiet for a long while, until the landlord called time, after which they walked in silence back to the flat.

Preston? John asked.

It's a possibility. There are others.

He slept well that night. A dreamless sleep that felt heavy, almost smothering. When he woke he knew that he would do whatever Lynne needed. He felt no fealty to her parents. He saw that an unborn baby is easier to hide than one that must be carried and clothed and fed, he had no alternative plan. He would go to war, she would go somewhere safe, and afterwards they would unite as a family.

Okay, he said, then got up to make a pot of tea.

But the baby had been lost. Lynne had stayed in bed one morning complaining of stomach ache, and when John came home she was drunk and struggling with the cap of a bottle of pills. She couldn't articulate in any way what was wrong, not to him. And when he grew impatient and told her it was always the bloody same with her, she grasped at her stomach in a kind of desolate ache. She beat her hands against herself, while John yelled out what the bloody hell do you think you're doing and peeled her hands back and up into the air. She raged against him, twisting her wrists he held in his grasp, contorting her body to face him and screamed and wailed and show him how it felt inside. She wore herself down, until she was lay on the living-room floor, with John sitting in the armchair still gripping her wrists. Finally, he gave her two pills and a glass of tepid water with which to wash them down.

The Penang River continued its endless journey below. Lynne had come round, woozy and holding onto the rail. He wanted to take her hand, but he could see she grew quickly impatient, standing on a bridge that meant nothing to her, looking into a river that mattered just as little. They walked without a word spoken. As they came to the police station John saw the familiar figure of Lofty Dunseley.

Don, John called over. *Don,* taking Lynne's arm and leading her across the road, *I'd like you to meet my wife, Lynne.*

It's Lofty, Don said, *pleased to meet you.*

Likewise. They shook hands, hers tiny in his.

We were just about to get a drink.

I know a place. Lofty stretched out his massive arm before them, *Follow me*.

In a backstreet kedai, Lofty rowed bitterly with the owner. *Just take a seat, I'll only be a minute,* he told them, turning back to continue the argument. John and Lynne stayed standing, barely in the door. The place was empty except for the three of them and the owner, but they still felt uneasy.

Next week, Lofty kept repeating in various tones. The owner spoke in a mix of Chinese and English. John wasn't sure what dialect it was, perhaps Cantonese. Behind a curtain a

radio played traditional Chinese music. John had heard music such as this before, but somehow it had always seemed so alien.

Finally Lofty and the owner seemed to reach an agreement. He brought over three bottles of beer and ushered them to a table. *Eh, John, you couldn't get this one, could you?*

John drew out his wallet and took out what money he had. *How much?*

Lofty, belying his size, gently pulled a few notes from John's hand and gave him a wink. Lofty paid. John looked over to the owner who was all smiles now, bowing delightedly at John and Lynne. *He's a dirty bastard, that one,* Lofty growled, taking his seat.

Various acquaintances of Lofty's passed through, mainly other policemen, some British, others Indian and Tamil. Lynne was on fine form, ordering gin and tonics mid-sentence, mid-story, regaling Lofty with tales of London during the war and Manchester in her university days.

At ten o'clock, Ibrahim joined them. He seemed surprised to see a woman. *This is John's wife, Ibra.* Ibrahim nursed his beer, making sure he was not caught watching Lynne. *I was just telling them about the car*.

Ibrahim nodded. There had been a lot of talk of this car. After being caught driving back from Ipoh with a skinful, Lofty had been banned from driving police vehicles. Ibrahim had had to drive him around for the past two months. What money Lofty had, Ibrahim knew, gone on the buying of booze and paying off debts for booze bought on tick. There was nothing left for either the purchase or running of a car.

I was saying, said John, *that neither me or my wife drive.*

You drive, don't you, Ib. Like a nice drive out.

Main aisa nahin kar raha hoon, Ibrahim spat, diverting his eyes from Lynne. *Main jaana chaahata hoon.*

Lofty moved in, tight to Ibrahim's ear. *What the fuck are you going on about?* His breath hot and heavy, thick with cadged cigarettes and warm beer. *Mujhe yah chhod do, alright.*

John recognised that something was amiss, that Ibrahim might lash out and topple great Lofty off his precarious perch. Lynne, he saw, had a tight smile on her face. She enjoyed all this. Lofty wiped the residue from the corners of his mouth, still inches from Ibrahim's face, and planted his empty bottle on the table. He gave his friend a robust pat on the back. *Adhik peene!* He called, standing, towering over the group.

More bottles were ordered, more money taken from John's wallet. The alcohol had loosened Ibrahim up. Lynne asked to see his hands, moving her own over his. Her husband did not seem to notice, or to mind if he did. But Ibrahim pulled his hand away when John

started to sound out a loud, aggressive tune, arms flailing like he was stirring invisible spoons into invisible pans.

Give it is rest, John.

A rest, semibreve, then, dat, dat, dah, da, da, dah. He continued, verbosely, correcting himself, mimicking brass and violins.

Apakah ini? Ibrahim asked Lynne.

John twatting around. She watched her husband, glaze-eyed. *He thinks he's Elgar.*

Lofty leant in, *what's this he's singing?*

One of John's little tunes. Ignore him, he'll stop in a minute.

No, I quite like it. He a music man then, is he?

I have seen before. He is, Ibrahim tried to think of the English and came up short. *Mrtakon se baat kar rahe.*

Lynne turned to Lofty. *What's he say?*

They watched John waving his lit cigarette like a wand. *He says, he's communing with the dead.*

In the second-hand copy of *You've Had Your Time* I purchased, I found a folded-up obituary from the *The Independent*, published six days after Burgess' death, written by Malcolm Bradbury. Bradbury describes Burgess's output as 'an unstoppable monologue', yet this description better resembles his public persona rather than the novels Burgess wrote (1993, p. 3). Rather than monologic, Burgess' works are an interwoven Bakhtinian dialogue. Monologue, after all, is 'speech that is addressed to no one and does not presuppose a response', whereas Burgess certainly intends to incite response (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 117).

Burgess' works are not only examples of dialogic texts, they are also heteroglossic. He is both the educated and well-travelled author, Anthony Burgess, and the scholarship boy from the interwar slums of inner-city Manchester, John B. Wilson. The name change represents the multi-leveled voices within the author and those that he is associated with, who also inhabit his works.

When writing about Burgess it is impossible to get away from linguistics, from the languages that he spoke and that surrounded him. Not only Malay and Italian, Burgess speaks the language of music, the language of literature. Holquist defines heteroglossia as 'many languagedness', a facet of setting a piece of writing in several times and places (1990, p. 1). Bakhtin is not only thinking of different languages such as English or Malay, but of a whole plethora of different registers:

> social dialects, characteristic group behaviour, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of the authorities, of various circles and of passing fashions, languages that serve the specific sociopolitical purposes of the day, even the hour (each day has its own slogan, its own vocabulary, its own emphases). (1981, pp. 262-263)

Anthony Burgess cannot help but slip into the Mancunian accent, a voice that is, ultimately, the first his language was swathed in. Languages, the types of language one speaker can speak, are fluid rather than fixed. Language for a writer is active, is all-pervasive. The novel tends to struggle with the voiceless. Those characters who are voiceless, like Bertha in Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, are also largely physically absent too. It is in the novel's very nature to be symphonic, to offer a range of voices. It is the opposite to the monologue that Bradbury alluded to.

Geoffrey Aggeler, one of Burgess' most laudatory critics, called Burgess' fictional biography of Shakespeare, *Nothing Like the Sun*, his 'finest achievement so far in the novel', and asserted that his 'rendering of Elizabethan idiom is faultless' (1979, p. 79). While Aggeler no doubt wishes to praise Burgess he fails to see the heteroglossic element of his work. The novel is not intended to be read as a faultless rendering of Elizabethan England, but as an intentionally flawed depiction. Indeed, Burgess claimed that the idiom used was 'not completely Elizabethan English; it's rather Joycean' (Ingersoll & Ingersoll, 2008, p. 79).

Aggeler and many other critics, Burgess laments, 'failed to see that the story of Shakespeare's love life was presented in the form of a drunken lecture given to students in a Malaysian college' (1985, p. 1). These critics failed to recognise that there was a difference between the author's voice and the narrator's voice (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 263). Bakhtin too identifies this failing in literary critics and presents his argument in language pertinent to this study of Anthony Burgess:

> The 'traditional scholar' bypasses the basic distinctive feature of the novel as a genre.... instead of novelistic style he actually analyzes something completely

> different. He transposes a symphonic (orchestrated) theme on the piano keyboard. (ibid)

The narrator of *Nothing Like the Sun* is a Mr Burgess, though this is not the author Anthony Burgess, but an unreliable biographer. Mr Burgess is a school teacher in Malaya, giving a freewheeling lecture on Shakespeare on his last day working in the school. Indeed, this is his final day of teaching before he is to return to Britain (1985, p. i). Burgess, the narrator, gives Shakespeare's life a certain Malayan bent to directly counter his students' complaint that 'Shakespeare had nothing to give to the East'. Mr Burgess is putting on a show for his pupils and, thus, putting on a voice. Not only is he 'putting on' a voice or a range of voices, but he is doing it while getting steadily drunk on *samsu* rice wine. He is not an Elizabethan man and the character's interruptions of the text, 'Another little drop. Delicious. Well, then', are intended to make the reader aware of the heteroglossic edifice that Burgess has created (1985, p. 38).

Continuing to drink his rice wine, Mr Burgess gets more drunk and the narrative becomes more salacious. WS has a homosexual affair with the Earl of Southampton, falls in love with a Malayan prostitute, Fatima, and ultimately dies from the syphilis that has inspired his greatest works. It is revealed that Fatima has given birth to WS's son, who she says 'will go back, back to my country' (1985, p. 209). The implication is that any of those students present in Mr Burgess' classroom could be a descendent of Shakespeare, that the language of Shakespeare is in their bloodline. It is in this that Mr Burgess debunks the notion that the Bard has nothing to offer to the East, as part of him has always been in the East.

Burgess follows Shakespeare in having characters portray different voices and/or speak in numerous languages. For instance, Portia in *A Merchant of Venice* disguises herself not just in a lawyer's robes but with the language she speaks. Her ability to mimic another language, the language of law and regulations, allows her to pass as a man and convince the court against Shylock. Shakespeare is full of characters speaking in voices that are not their own. Burgess points out that the disputes around the Bard's own identity, his profession during the 'hidden years', stem from Shakespeare's ability to convincingly employ a range of languages, from sailor to schoolmaster to lawyer (1996, pp. 47-48).

Rahimah held her arms around him, at the bottom of his ribcage. She pressed her soft skin against his nakedness and breathed gently. *Hold me, John,* she said. A theme began to play, languid strings beneath a taut and anxious oboe.

I am holding you, he told her. It was a phrase he had taught her, she had misinterpreted the meaning. *You mean,* he said, *make love to me. Bercinta dengan saya.*

Rahimah looked into his eyes as he laid her upon the rugs and blankets that made up her bed. Strings swelled, woodwind rose through the chromatic scale.

Kenapa awak diam saja?

As he moved, Rahimah began mouthing words in Malay, muttering along with the motion of his body. *Saya suka merasakan awak,* she said. *Saya suka kamu di dalam saya. Bercinta saya. Bercinta saya.* Rahimah never spoke words like this, not to John. He had heard, at the outbreak of a fight, one of his pupils yell out *Aku akan bercinta dengan kekasihmu* and had extrapolated that *bercinta* was as close to fuck as the Malayan language got. The tempo increased. Andantino to Allegro, Allegro to Allegrissimo. Allegrissimo – Rahimah calling *bercinta* on every exhale – to Prestissimo and, suddenly, to Larghissimo. And rest.

There was semen on the bed, damp and agglutinative. He wiped himself with the thin white sheet that shone bright with morning sun. Lynne lay beside him, facing the wall, breathing heavily through her mouth, a low sck-sck-sck-sckur of air running over the lip of her eustachian tube. He let her sleep. She couldn't seem to get enough sleep ever since they had arrived in the East.

After dressing and making a cup of tea John went onto the roof. He sat slurping tea and eating the few biscuits they had left, watching and listening to Kuala Kangsar rise. Hawkers were arriving, just across the river. Trishaws ran suited officers towards the colonial offices. Chinese fishermen sat so still as to be statues. An abundance of life. A symphony in full motion. The whole town seemed held in by the surrounding trees. Swallowing the last mouthful of tea John made his mind up to leave Lynne. He would marry Rahimah. He would convert to Islam if it would make the marriage easier. He wanted to become a Malay, to be a child of this soil. She would make him happy and he would set Lynne free. Today, he told himself, I will do it today. The thought of it brought a fresh melody to mind, his Malayan melody. It would be written. He peered down to see the first lot of young boys rushing out onto the fields. Their mothers, like his own, distant memories.

He checked on Lynne. There was a distinct weight, a heaviness, held there in their bedroom. John opened up a shutter a crack and let in some air along with the yells of schoolboys. He watched her sleep. God knows what time she had come in last night. It had

been going on for weeks. She had finally made some friends. But this meant driving to Ipoh or Taiping, it meant bridge society and cinema society, and a multitude of other societies set up to entertain the wives of British officers.

The background noise of boys came starkly into focus as he opened the front door. They boomed down the corridor outside the apartment. The staff nowhere to be seen, John watched them shriek and jeer.

Hentikan sekarang, he barked at them. This had become a sort of game. John would appear, shouting for stillness and quiet. They would grant him his wish, frozen like statues, until he put his first foot on the stairs, at which point they would instantaneously start yelling and running once more.

Saya memberi amaran kepada anda, he hissed. *Isteri saya sedang tidur.*

At this the children would put their fingers on their lips and make shushing noises, like the snakes that slid through the grounds. With every one of John's footsteps the shhh would get louder, and louder, until their lips were uncurled as wide as they could go, their white teeth bared like a horse biting at the bit. As soon as John placed his foot outside all would go silent. The boys waited, this was the important part of the game. They would wait for John to make his way right, alongside the main building, then veer left by the gatehouse, at which point he would turn left back on himself, onto the road and down the hill into town. The boys stood at the first-floor windows and watched for John passing the King's Pavilion once more. He couldn't help looking up to see them standing, fingers still on lips. Just as the road curved round the hill out of sight, the boys would yell, scream and shout as loud as they could. It had been going on for weeks

At the bridge he stopped, as he always did, lit a fresh cigarette and watched the Perak River flow. It was brimming, the water lapped at the roof of the bridge. Ishtiqal had warned that it would flood, if not today then tomorrow.

By and by the Eldest Magician met the Man on the banks
of the Perak river, and said, Ho! Son of Adam,
are all the Animals obedient to you?
Yes, said the Man.
Is all the Earth obedient to you?
Yes, said the Man.
Is all the Sea obedient to you?
No, said the Man. Once a day and once a night
the Sea runs up the Perak river and drives the sweet-water back into the forest,

so that my house is made wet; once a day and once a night
it runs down the river and draws all the water after it,
so that there is nothing left but mud, and my canoe is upset.

In a half dream, children screamed out to her, children she could not see. Lynne knew that it was the schoolchildren, but between consciousness and sleep they also became babies trapped underground, buried alive. It was all she could do to tell herself to wake up. All went silent and then, a moment later, they let out a cacophony of yells and shrieks. Then silence again. Her mouth was so dry she could barely move her tongue. He lips cracked, she tried to lick them, only to split the scabs. The dream continued; she was stuck in a desert, alone. Somewhere below the sand were the bodies of trapped children. She got down on her hands and knees and clawed and clawed. But it was no use. Grains of sand in her mouth, her eyes, she felt exhausted, struggling for breath.

Yusof, she wheezed. Out there, somewhere, she could hear his voice singing softly. *Yusof,* this time a little louder. Lynne felt the world return – the walls of the bedroom, the mattress beneath her. She could hear him in the kitchen, already rattling pots and pans, chuntering to himself. Pulling herself up, back against headboard, she called again, *Yusof. Tolong berikan air.* Strange that water should be air in Malay. *Api* was fire, *angin* meant wind. She could not remember what earth was. Yusof came in, swanned in as he always did, tutting at the state he'd found her in. He placed a glass of warm water on the bedside table, took one more tutting look around the room, and left. In the hall he continued to half talk, half sing to himself. Lynne picked up the odd word, *menjijikkan* and *memalukan.* Disgusting. Shameful.

There was a loud knocking at the front door. Lynne took a mouthful of water and held it there, allowing her tongue to bathe for a moment. She then ran it over the ulcers that lined her mouth, sore to the touch. The knocking came again, louder still. When she ate, she would bite them, and they too would bleed. On the third knock, Yusof finally made his way to the door.

Dia ada di sini? Dia ada di sini? came their little voices. It was the same every day. Some of the boys waited until John had left before building up the courage to come and see her.

Diluar. Diluar, Yusof replied angrily.

Missus, missus, one of the boys called, the others giggling. *You are—*

He was interrupted with whispers of *sangat cantik.*

Saya tahu. Saya tahu. You are, he started again, *beautiful.*

She could picture the red of his cheeks. Ismail, she guessed.

Roh-roh jahat, pergi dari sini, Yusof screeched. She could hear his sandals slap against the tiles as he chased them from the door.

Apa yang berlaku? Mas asked, coming in.

Yusof followed, out of breath. *Setan kecil,* he replied.

Puan tidur?

Dia separuh mati, he replied, enjoying himself.

Yusof, kamu jahat.

Lynne had followed most of the conversation. Mas had asked if she was sleeping, Yusof had made some snide comment, Mas had told him off. It was the same most mornings. They were exact opposites, Mas and Yusof. One lived as an adherent to all the rules of her religion, country, and duty. The other lived by a code entirely of his own design, which shifted to suit his whim. Lynne had suffered through him when the first arrived, but now Yusof had become daily entertainment. He was in love with John, or at least that was John's contention. And no matter how much John bitched and moaned about Yusof, he never once talked about getting rid of him.

The door opened, Mas brought in a plate of sliced fruit and a glass of mango juice.

Good morning, madam. She helped Lynne to sit up and held the glass to her lips.

He said I was dead. Yusof?

Yusof a bit cracked, puan. Drink, eat. You have a fever. Here, Mas pressed her fingernails into the purple flesh of a manggis. The flesh ripped to reveal the white fruit. Lynne held it in her mouth. It was cold and the juice ran sweet and sour over her tongue. She held it there for a long time.

Mas went about the room, picking up Lynne's discarded clothes. She bore a look of permanent worry – her eyebrows repeating the curve of her brown eyes, her lips forever pursed. Lynne had grown a sisterly affection for Mas. Sisterly in that she both loved her and did not trust her. Lynne thought Mas held her in contempt, all that drinking and cavorting. While Mas looked after two households, Lynne could not even take care of herself. Yet Mas never showed even the slightest disdain for Lynne.

Cup of tea? Mas asked.

Lynne nodded. When the amah had gone Lynne climbed out of bed. John must have put her in a nightshirt. She peeled it off and looked at her body in the mirror. Youth had left her, but of course it had, she was thirty-four, after all. How long was youth meant to remain? Her paleness persisted even in all the heat. He appreciated her whiteness. At least, that's what he told her. *Perak sutera pada keluli,* he whispered, running his dark fingers over hers. *Sutera*

she knew was silk. *Gandum pada musim panas*, his hand in her blonde hair. He wanted her to be his wife. To leave John, what it would take to leave John. She hitched up a pair of knickers, pulled her nightdress back down and took her housecoat from the hook on the door.

Mas brought tea, a copy of *The Times*, a fresh pack of cigarettes, and the post. Lynne fanned the envelopes out. There was one from Hazel, her sister. Even the way she had written the address exuded antagonism. She shuffled the letters back into a pile and picked up the newspaper. Days old, of course, but then Britain and Malay were not on the same timeline – they received news from Britain's past, yet somehow Britain loomed in the distant future. Lynne flicked through the paper. Adverts celebrated the end of rationing. Christ, the war felt like another lifetime ago. Bombs falling on the grey bricks of London a distant cry from Communists firing from the greenery of Kuala Kangsar. Lynne read with interest the testimony of Mavis Wheeler, charged with shooting someone called Lord Vivian. It was quite a story.

Mavis had found the gun in the luggage of an American Colonel, who it sounded like she was having it away with before the Lord was on the scene. The Colonel refused to remove his luggage from Mavis' house, so she took the gun to her cottage, where there was a schizophrenic on the loose, burgling houses. Mavis said,

> *I took it down because bricks had been thrown at the door and I was nervous because of so many cases in the papers of women alone being attacked. I thought if I had the gun there I could shoot it and frighten anyone if necessary.*

A gun would come in handy, yes, should American soldiers come knocking. Mavis'd have to shoot. Have to kill them dead. She'd had an affair with this Lord, but money had been tight. She'd had to sack the hired help, they were living hand to mouth. Then one day she wanted him to read a poem but instead she shot him in the stomach. Lynne laughed. It was a laugh that cut through everything, all the pain, all the fog, all the bloody mess. If I was to kill John, that's how I'd do it. Call him into the room apparently to read some bloody poetry, and then I'd stick a bullet in him.

The trial was ongoing. The prosecutor asked her why police had removed her from the hospital after the shooting, calling her a *nuisance*.

> *I don't know. Do you mean I made a nuisance of myself there?*
>
> *Counsel began to put another question when Mrs Wheeler broke down. Her shoulders slumped, she dropped her head, put her gloved hands to her face, cried and sobbed, saying*
>
> *I was not a nuisance. I never was.*

But she was a nuisance, wasn't she? There was a trial and journalists, and no doubt photographers waiting like Chinese in bushes, and there was a Lord shot. Poor Mavis, probably in prison now. Poor Lynne, sent off to rot on a penal colony. For all of the suffering Mavis Wheeler was likely to face, Lynne couldn't help but feel a pang of jealousy. She was less homesick now than she had been, but it was still a void in the pit of her stomach. Time spent with Ibrahim reduced the emptiness she felt, which she supposed meant he made her feel more whole. She'd had this feeling before, though, and she knew that it would most likely lead to even more darkness in the end. Once John found out, and once Ibrahim came to his senses on marrying a white woman who didn't know the first thing about being a Muslim.

In town he shared a *selamat Pagi* with the kedai keepers and towkays. He turned up Jalan Kangsar, one of his usual detours. Outside Restoran Yat Lai, Rahimah was sweeping the step. She looked tired. Mat, her son, had been unwell and she had no one to help her care for him. The wives of divorce were treated cruelly on the peninsula.

John was beside her before she saw him. *Selamat Pagi, sayang*.

She looked up from her work, neither startled nor happy.

Apa khabar? Anda kelihatan letih, sayang saya.

She continued to sweep. She really did look worn out. *Saya baik saja, terima kasih*, she told him. *Saya perlu bekerja.*

Her towkay watched from behind the counter. He would not reproach John; John was one of his best customers. But Rahimah was treated badly. She must be careful not to give him an excuse to treat her worse.

Okay, okay, John tried to soothe her. She was close, he wanted to pull her closer. It was as though he could feel the body heat that she radiated towards him from her small frame. He thought about his dream, music returned, he could smell the sweetness of her body. *Saya akan jumpa malam ini, sayangku*, he reassured her. But she did not reply, going inside without a look back.

At the clock tower he met Yusof Tajuddin, a fellow teacher. Yusof had taught at the school even before Howell had arrived, under a headmaster called K. D. Luke, who had come in after the war. He spoke almost wistfully of the war and was obviously glad to have seen the back of this Luke. A headmaster worse than Japanese occupation. John had met such men.

Planning any insurrections today, John?

A misunderstanding.

Senior boys in the hall yelling merdeka, while brandishing arms. What is there to misunderstand?

A rehearsal for a play, nothing more than that. What Clarke saw was a scene from Shakespeare.

I wasn't aware Shakespeare knew any Malay.

They passed a white bandstand, on which some boys were sitting, passing around a single cigarette.

Buat jalan ke sekolah sekarang, puan-puan, Yusof gently requested. John followed his meaning. It was time to move on.

Very diplomatic, John said.

You have to, Yusof Tajuddin confided, *find a balance between discipline and respect. Some of these boys will go on to be politicians, business leaders. Some even,* he pointed out one of the boys ahead of them, *kings.*

Ahmad?

Indeed, yes.

So are we, then, to treat all our students like kings or all our kings like students?

We are their schoolmasters, but Malay culture requires our respect.

You mean, my respect. As a Brit. As a white man. Orang puteh.

Mat salleh, Yusof corrected. *Westerners.*

They crossed the road and followed the wrought-iron fencing that ran along the playing field. The school came into view now. It looked, framed by the green of the tree-filled hills behind, recently carved from marble and fresh alabaster. Its orange roof shone, almost radioactive against the clear blue of the panoramic Perak sky. John was reminded of the White House, Mat Salleh's house. All those pillars, the grandiose uniformity intended to remind one of Vitruvius. It was, he had to admit, an intimidating sight. As grand as the Royal Palace he had seen on his first day in Kuala Kangsar, the building was a statement, this school is as good as any in the West.

Eton of the East, Yusof said, catching John's thoughts.

Malay College of the West, John replied.

They continued, until John saw a group of pupils playing rugby. Closer still, he saw Howell, in shorts and long socks, calling after the boys with an accentuated Welsh baritone. *Get into it, lad. Drive. Bloody drive at them, then.* The boys, well presented, barely a grass stain between them, moved with grace in and around puffing Jimmy Howell. Jimmy to his

friends, Jimmy to John, at one point. Not for some time now. Not since the rumours of John fraternising with the locals got back to him.

Howell looked over as three boys fell to the ground, clutching at each other's pristine white shirts. *Get off him, Abu, you bloody clown. Azlan. Azlan, get up. You're not shot, lad. He barely touched you.*

Jimmy had taken John under his wing, introducing him to the drinkers at the Idris Club. It was the only respectable drinking establishment in the town, the rest belonging to Chinese proprietors. John had quickly grown tired of British men regaling each other with stories of Britain. He and Lynne wanted to experience what it was to be Malay. Ironic that their guide should be a seven foot white man called Donald Dunkeley. Lofty to his friends, Lofty to John.

Howell blew hard on a whistle and checked his watch. *Right you are, lads. In for showers. Quick, quick, then. Wilson,* he called, jogging exaggeratedly over to John and Yusof. *Wilson, a word.*

Good day, John, Yusof said.

Indeed. Thank you, Yusof.

Howell jogged past to the gate and John went to join him. *Good morning, Mr Wilson.*

Mr Howell.

Just wanted to check in. All that bother.

Yes. John would rather Howell had not known about all that bother. Abu watched John, as he made his way to the changing rooms. *Water under the bridge.*

Were it so, Wilson. I've had a word. Can't have these lads getting above themselves.

Above how?

Self-rule, that's what he was yelling about, wasn't it? Merde ça va and all that.

Merdeka, John corrected. *What you said means shit okay, in French.*

They should be sodding grateful, so they should. All we've done for this country. He had a habit of talking like this when no one else was in earshot.

It was nothing. It's good that they express themselves.

Express? You'll have them running a-bloody-mok, talking like that. I've written to his parents. Merdeka, indeed.

Don't do that. Please. He's a good boy, good grades. He only did what I asked.

Accused the British of keeping his people down. Told you he'd like to kill every white man in Malaya?

I asked for their understanding of Julius Caesar. Abu offered a reading that the other boys could understand. Caesar representing the British, and Brutus the Malayan people. It was a well put—

While holding a makeshift sword. Mr Clarke thought he was about to strike you down.

I was playing Caesar. In context, it was all—

I'm not interested, Wilson. Howell went quiet. He had already written the letter; he hated wasted time. *He's a good scrum-half, I'll give him that. Be a shame to have to drop him for disciplinary matters. Right,* he started to walk towards the school, *on your head, Wilson.*

John followed. Lynne had been on at him to speak to Jimmy again. In for a penny, he thought. *I've been meaning to ask, Jim, eh, Jimmy. When do you think other arrangements will be made? For mine and my wife's living situation, I mean.*

Leave it with me, Wilson. These things take their time. He stopped at the main entrance. *Anything else, while we're at it?*

It's just that, it's Lynne. The boys are so noisy, and it was never the agreement that we would live in the prep school—

Howell put his hand on John's back. *These things take their time, Wilson. Bide yours, now, mind.*

I will let Lynne know you're dealing with it.

Howell patted John's back once more and headed down the corridor.

At Lofty's insistence John had hired Ibrahim as their driver. He would drive them to Ipoh and Taiping, where they would go to the casinos and cinemas. Some days the four of them would take drives out, with a picnic to share. There was no doubt that it was dangerous, but Ibrahim seemed to know the roads and had friends in the surrounding villages. Then John started a book club for some of his colleagues at the school. After that there came Malay lessons for John and English lessons for the Malays he had befriended, until it seemed like he had to be somewhere every night.

Ibrahim would drive Lynne to the cinema, wait in the car and return her back to Kuala Kangsar, where they would meet John in his favourite kedai. But there had been a problem with the car one night and Lynne didn't make it to Ipoh. She was flattered, really. A handsome police officer, albeit transport police, attracted to her. Not merely attracted, in love. Or so he had told her. Who could tell whether the words that left a person's mouth articulated what they had in their heart. *Saya sayang awak.* She knew what the words meant, but what could they mean to her? When he said them, she made him repeat again, slowly.

Cakap perlahan-lahan.

Saya, Ibrahim pointed to himself. *Sayang,* he placed her hand on his chest. *Awak,* he held his palm out. Then he said, *aku mahu menolong kau,* and repeated the movements. He was drunk. They had shared a bottle of gin and a couple of bottles of beer, bought with the money John had paid him. He stared at her with such urgency that it made her breathless. She couldn't hold his gaze, it was all too much for her.

Rumah sekarang, she said, in what sounded like thick valley Welsh, against his Malay. Home, it was time to go.

But he didn't move, just repeated, *saya sayang awak.*

Yes, yes, she agreed, climbing from the bed.

Listen, he said sternly. *Me love you.* He was like the little boys that came to her daily with phrases learnt in English to impress her.

Just take me home. Rumah, Ibrahim, rumah.

Like a child, he had done what he was told.

Inside his classroom the boys waited patiently. They were used to John's lateness and thought it some kind of test. John faced them, intending to get a sense of the overriding feeling. They looked sullen, but then they always looked sullen. Abu did not, however, look sullen. He looked ready to go again.

Right. Well, John rolled his sleeves further up his damp arms, *I feel we should recap on yesterday's—I will call it what it was—performance.*

Some of the boys glanced over to Abu.

Julius Caesar. The great Bard, Shakespeare. I asked you all to consider how Shakespeare writing in Elizabethan England about ancient Rome could tell us something about today, in 1954, here in Malaya. Now, he strode back and forth before the boys, *you were not too forthcoming yesterday, until Mr Bakar was a little too forthcoming.*

Sir, Abu reacted immediately.

Now, who else, other than Mr Bakar, for now, has an opinion.

John scanned the room. No one, it would seem, had an opinion.

Well, he continued*, do we agree with Mr Bakar's analysis that Caesar represents the British and Brutus represents the people of Malaya? Do you, Sabit?*

The boy thought long and hard. *Maybe.*

Maybe, he says. Well, gentlemen, that has cleared that up then, hasn't it? And what about you, Wathiq, do you agree with Mr Bakar's reading of the play?

He too thought long and hard. *Caesar wants the people to be happy.*

Yes, go on.

But he also wants to have all of the power.

Is that like the British, do you think? Is that what they are interested in?

The boys all turned to Wathiq, the tension in the room dropped, but grew in Abu. *I don't know. My father says that the British have done many great things for Malaya, but there is no more for them to do.*

I want to study law in England, Ahmad chimed in.

And that will be made possible because of Britain's presence in your country?

I think maybe, yes.

Anyone else?

When Caesar is killed, though, the people all fight each other.

Go on.

Brutus and Mark Antony were friends but then they become enemies. Brutus is punished for what he did and that man, the poet—

Cinna.

Cinna, he is killed, even though he did nothing.

Are you saying that people may be hurt if the British leave?

The boy thought, is that what he was saying? *I'm not sure.*

The British hold us back. Finally, Abu had heard enough. *Of course they do.*

Ah, Mr Bakar, would you like to come up and speak.

No.

Come on, you can take the class from here.

The boy looked around at his sniggering classmates. He reluctantly got to his feet and slowly made his way to the front.

Now, what were you saying?

We are held down by the British forces. Malaya should be run by Malayans, it is our country.

So, you don't think Britain had anything to offer your country?

That is not the point. We are second-class citizens in our own country, unable to rule ourselves.

You believe that Brutus was right to end Caesar's reign then, whatever the cost?

There should be no oppression to any Malayan.

Oppression, John laughed. *Look at you boys. Sons of lawyers and doctors and businessmen. Some of your fellow pupils will be rulers of this country one day. You have no idea about oppression—*

No, Abu cut him off, *that is the point. If we are the sons of affluence and we are under the control of outside forces then all the people of Malaya are oppressed.* He looked at John, *while the British ruling class takes riches from our lands.*

John felt his blood rise. *You'll not put me in that bracket.*

You are a colonial.

I am a teacher. Listen here, he stood, *I went to school with boys like you. Boys whose mam and dad would furnish them with new satchels, new shoes, new shirts, fresh haircuts. Never need for nothing sort of lads. You pay for the privilege of a decent education, whereas I had to work for mine.*

The boys shuffled in their seats, Abu did not move a muscle. *You think we don't work?*

The bare minimum, maybe. But where's the desire? That need to learn and create, to take knowledge and do something with it? You boys'll always have it easy. He had said too much and was grateful Abu was no longer in possession of that wooden sword. *I just mean, you cannot know what real oppression is.*

Or you cannot understand what our oppression is, because you believe the British have a right to be here.

We've got off track here, back to Caesar.

And now you want me to be silent because I do not agree with you.

No, not at all. But this is a lesson on Shakespeare and on Caesar.

Which we are forced to learn by our British oppressors, using their tongue and not ours. Kanak-kanak Malayan hendaklah dibenarkan bercakap dalam bahasa mereka sendiri.

Sit down now, Abu.

Kami adalah masa depan Tanah Melayu, anda adalah masa lampau. We will chase you from our lands and be rid of the British. Merdeka!

Some of the other boys were fired up. They began to bang their desks.

Merdeka! Merdeka! they chanted.

Now, now, boys, John tried to calm them. *Now, please. Abu, back to your seat.*

Abu did what he was told, banging his desk as he sat. *Merdeka! Merdeka!*

The classroom door opened and slammed shut.

What in the name of all that is holy is going on here? The chanting stopped, the banging stopped. Jimmy Howell stood, face beet red, in front of the class. *Never in all my years as*

headmaster of this school, of all my years teaching, in fact, have I heard such a racket. Mr Wilson, would you care to explain? Perhaps there are a few boys in the school who we would be better off without.

Howell was trembling. Outside the classroom, other teachers peered in. John felt the sweat dripping down his back. The boys stared at him, all except Abu. Abu looked down at his desk, resigned to his fate.

I was— We were, Mr Howell— We were discussing Shakespeare and Julius Caesar.

Not this again.

And we have been working on a new version for the school, set in Kuala Kangsar. The boys and I, we were working on the scene where Brutus speaks to the Romans, only it would not be Brutus but a Malayan man, and they would not be Romans but Malayans. The room had never been so hot. John desperately wanted to open a window or run his head under a tap. Jimmy eyed him furiously.

My office, Mr Wilson. Lads, he turned to the class, *sit here in complete silence until I get back.*

He spun on his heels and left the classroom.

Dumbfounded, John said, *get out your, eh, get out your—*

The boys opened their desks and took out their books.

Page, eh, and turn to page—

They all turned to the same page.

Very good. He left, walking as if in a dream, towards what was certain to be a nightmare.

Come in and close that.

John did.

What the hell are you playing at, Wilson? We've already got the Chinese bloody revolution out there, and now you're after causing a school wide insurrection.

Jimmy, if I could—

Mr Howell, thank you very much. We've had our ups and downs, Wilson, but this is a bloody chasm that you've cracked open here, my man.

Yes, John could see that. Howell would never understand what he had intended, because Jimmy had no interest in anything apart from grades and rugby. That was the problem with this school all over. The reason why the boys didn't think for themselves, they'd never been given permission.

I just wanted to get them thinking.

Thinking? Thinking? At that bloody volume?

A school play, Jimmy. By the boys, written by them and performed by them, wouldn't that be a good thing? Give some of them an outlet.

An outlet? They'd burn the bloody place down, with you at the helm, Wilson. No, no, there'll be no plays. These boys only need to think about passing exams and getting on, why are you trying to put daft ideas in their heads, Wilson? Why, Jimmy lifted from his seat, *have I got twenty pupils shouting about bloody freedom at the top of their lungs?*

It got, John spoke quietly, *out of hand. I understand that. I realise that now.*

There was a knock at the door. Tony Broughton stood there with John's dispatch-case in his hands.

Very good, Howell nodded. Broughton put the dispatch-case on the chair by the door and left. Howell turned back to John. *Mr Broughton will take the rest of the class. I suggest you go and have a good hard look in the mirror. Because mark me, and mark me well, you are on thin ice here, sunshine.*

John left Howell's office with an image of slender ice cubes in a tall glass. To hell with Jimmy sodding Howell and his lack of imagination. To hell with them all. The boys would be worried, Abu more than the rest, that John would use them to get himself off the hook. He would not be their, he laughed at the word, oppressor.

Lynne went over to the living room window and let the cool air drift over her.

How are you feeling now, puan? Do you need anything?

More tea.

Mas went into the kitchen and was scolded by Yusof for interfering with his pots and pans.

Apa yang anda memasak?

Makanan tradisional Melayu, Lobscouse. It had been Lynne's recipe, not that he would admit that now. As far as Yusof was concerned, this was his own creation, based on an old family recipe.

What was it Ibrahim had said, *aku mahu menolong kau.* She knew *aku, I.* And *mahu* was *want*. What did he want? Lynne needed a drink. She was starting to sweat, and the doctors had told her that she must remain hydrated. What time was it? Early still. Jesus, she spent every day waiting for it to come to an end. The kettle whistled and Mas brought fresh tea.

Terima kasih, Lynne said.

Sama-sama.

From the kitchen came the wail of furious Yusof, crying out, *tiada kentang, tiada daging lembu.* The heavy front door opened and Yusof called, *puan, I go,* slamming it shut.

Yusof cracked, Mas offered.

Too bloody right. Apa beritanya? Lynne asked, thinking of Mavis Wheeler.

My son, Reheeq. He, bagaimana saya katakan? Dia seorang sarjan sekarang, seorang pegawai polis yang sebenar. Reheeq pegawai polis.

Police? He was promoted?

Promoted, yes. Today. Mereka mempunyai upacara yang hebat.

Upcara, Lynne knew, ceremony. She saw her opportunity. *Why don't you take the rest of the day. Be with your son.*

Puan?

Saya pergi, awak pergi. Finished, Lynne said. She gave Mas a wide smile.

Mas frowned and pointed at the floor, *lantai memerlukan pembersihan, puan.*

Oh, leave the bloody floor. Go, she snatched the mop off Mas and threw it into the pail. *Go.* Mas' eyes dropped. *I'm sorry. Saya minta maaf, Mas. Please, go and spend the afternoon with your son, with your family. Please.* She held Mas' slight hands in her own, which felt enormous, cumbersome.

Okay, puan.

Terima kasih, Mas. Terima kasih untuk segalanya. Lynne felt herself welling up.

Mas looked deep into her mistress' eyes and saw that there was a kind of finality to those words. *I leave you,* she said, holding out a package for John.

Lynne stood, unsteady, and walked to the bathroom. She checked the bowl for snakes and scorpions, then sat and stared at the wall. A lizard, which had been there for a few days, held a frozen pose on the door frame. She peeled the tissue paper from between her legs, pink and wet. It had got better these couple of weeks. Drink water, the doctor told her, and she had. Plenty of tonic. It was all anyone could do in this climate to drink enough. She'd learnt this lesson over and again, since the day they had been delivered into Singapore. They had both promised to drink less; she had promised not to drink at all. The promise ebbed in the heat and the sheer fucking boredom of it all, until Lynne would wind up back in a hospital bed, shamed by doctors because she should know better.

She pulled out a choice of dresses and placed them on the bed, a plain white one with a single flower embroidered, another of emerald and jade, and another with a Henry Moore print. From a shoebox beneath the bed, Lynne counted out 300RM, thought better of it and took 500RM, thought better still and took 800RM. It was more than she would need for a day,

and nowhere near what she would need for any longer. Where the hell would she go? She could disappear into the forest, to be captured by Chinese or aborigines. They could get the train to Singapore, she and Ibrahim. She could go to Penang and get on a plane. There were so many things to consider. She put some clothes and the money into a wicker bag and set it in the hallway.

She checked her teeth, yellowy and browning at the edges, in the gaps between. Foundation fell into the cracks of her skin and filled them in. She touched the marks left by teenage acne and remembered briefly an early morning walk to school with Hazel and her father. She ran her thumb and index finger down either side of her nose. Her father had called it noble, but on a woman a noble nose is a blight. No, I will not have it. For once, that voice can be silenced. Her hair down, greasy, she patted some talcum powder into her hand and ran it through. A bit of rouge, a bit of mascara, it would feel good to get dressed up for once. She looked handsome. Ibrahim would think so too. She would have to find him. The most obvious place was the police station. But that was the nuclear option, meaning the fallout would be wide and unfathomable.

Lynne? Are you here?

Lynne watched the horror creep across her face. The bag in the hallway. The money tucked inside. She put her dressing gown over the pretty white dress, ran a flannel under the tap and wiped the rouge from her lips. In the kitchen, John was slicing at the chicken from yesterday. She could do with a drink.

I didn't expect you back, she said.

I fancied the walk. He turned to her, looked her up and down in a way that made her grasp at the neck of her dressing gown, and turned back to carving. *Up then, I see.*

I was about to— She went into the living room and poured the rest of the tea. Cold, but she drank anyway.

I'm making sandwiches. Where is everyone?

Out. Mas had to go and see Reheeq. He's passed the sergeants' exam, she said. God knows where Yusof is.

John brought in two plates and handed Lynne one.

Never seems to be here when I come home. We are paying him, you know, Lynne. She ignored his bait. *This bloody place.*

Well, speak to Jimmy, if you're so sick of it.

I've been onto him this morning, John said, looking round the kitchen for something sweet. *Where's Yusof? There was a tin of peaches here, yesterday.*

Did he say anything about when we might move?

He's looking into it. Bureaucracy, he reckons.

I can't stay here, John. The boys, they're—

What?

They're at it again. I've seen them. This morning I looked out of the window and there was three of them— dirty little shits.

What were they doing?

You know what. Pissing. Pissing off the veranda.

He went to the kitchen window. Sure enough, there were several boys, no more than six or seven, cocks out, bare arses pushed towards the veranda, uncorking themselves over the balustrade. John watched them with something like awe. Their beautiful golden skin reflecting evening sunlight, their bodies supple and lean. This is their world and they own it.

They're at it now, aren't they, Lynne called from the other room.

He came in to join her. *They're just boys.*

They're disgusting.

I'll speak to one of the staff.

Again. You'll speak to them again. I hate it here, John. Please, speak to Jimmy.

I told you, I spoke to him already.

Speak to him again. You're too fucking soft.

John felt his blood rise. *Don't you bloody talk to me like that. Lying there in your sodding nightgown. You think I don't know what's been going on? I made it damned clear that we want this sorting. That I want this sorting. Soft, is that what you think? You haven't asked me how my day has been, asked me nothing, just lying there feeling bloody sorry for yourself. And I know damned well why.*

He stormed out of the flat and slammed the door. It was treachery, was what it was. She had promised to try. He walked along the hall and came to the row of boys still relieving themselves onto the grass below.

Put yourselves away and get back inside, he yelled. *Sekarang, sekarang, sekarang!*

His shouting brought out Mrs Vivekananda, eating seeds from a small container. The boys pulled their shorts up, buttoned themselves up, and ran down the stairs and onto the field.

What's happened, John? she asked in a calm voice.

Anda tahu apa yang berlaku. Anak lelaki itu melakukannya sekali lagi, he replied. *Those boys have been exposing themselves, micturating on the veranda.*

They are young, babies. We must give them time. What, she paused, *is micturating?* She looked in the direction the boys had gone and then towards the veranda. *Is Lynne not feeling well? We have not seen her today.*

She's fine. Sakit kepala.

She has them a lot. My sister has a remedy she swears by, I would be happy to—

Thank you, she'll be fine. Hydration, that's all it is. And a bit of quiet. Let them know they are not to expose themselves in front of my wife.

I'm sure that was not their intention.

Intent or not, let them know. And also make them aware that pissing, urinating, relieving oneself, micturating is prohibited everywhere except for rooms designated towards that end.

John left Mrs Vivekananda at the top of the stairs, steadily walking in the footsteps of the running youths. He got to the bottom of the stairs before he realised that he had left his dispatch-case back in the flat. Fuck it. Decisively, he about-faced and marched back up the stairs, Mrs Vivekananda still beaking at her seeds. John flung the door open, grasped his dispatch-case, knocking Lynne's bag onto the floor, and slammed the door behind him.

Selamat petang, Mrs Vivekananda cooed, as he descended the stairs once more.

Lynne sat in a kind of stupor, swilling cold tea to dislodge claggy white bread. Knickers, bras and ringgit notes lay strewn across the hallway floor. Hazel's letter with them. She snatched it up and tore it open.

Dear Lynne, she read.

I have not heard from you since my last letter. I am unsure, what with the distance and all, whether you received it or not. Mum is not well, Lynne. I know that we have discussed this, but it is more serious now than even we thought. The doctors have told us that Dad cannot cope. After a lot of talking, we have decided that, for now, they will have to move in with us. We will have to find the room. There's no other option now. You are too far away and unwilling to engage with what is happening to Mum, so me and Bill and even Ceridwen will have to bear the brunt. But we need to know when you and John are planning to come home. Mum might not have much time but Dad will need caring for when she's gone and I can't do this all on my own, Lynne. He asks after you and talks about you coming home. He'd rather be with you than us, what with Ceridwen and Bill's job keeping us in Leicester. Anyway, I'm sure you'll do whatever you want as usual. Just be clear that I can't do everything while you and John do exactly nothing.

Yours,
Hazel

Fucking Hazel. She should go home now, just to save herself from her pettiness. If Hazel wanted her back in Britain so much, she would have to put her hand in her pocket. Maybe, she thought, I could move in for a while, to get myself organised. She would share Ceridwen's room. Still only a baby, really, she wouldn't mind having her aunt to stay. Then Lynne would look for a house back in Tredegar, which her dad could move into too. She still had friends in Wales, people willing to help. But there was Ibrahim to consider. She would have to convince him to move with her. They would be together. She would be stuck with him.

John had twenty-five minutes before he had to be back, so he walked up Jalan Kangsar once more, to the Restoran Yat Lai. Rahimah was staring towards the door when he walked in.

Selamat petang, he said. *Satu botol bir, terima kasih.* John had never been entirely sure of the Malay College's policy on drinking during school hours. He certainly was not willing to find out today. She opened a large bottle of Tiger and brought it over. *Terima kasih,* he repeated, bowing in his seat.

Sama-sama, she whispered, returning to her position behind the counter.

Something was amiss. Where she had been warm, Rahimah was distant. The towkay was nowhere to be seen. He would be playing cards or dominos in one of the kedais. The place was empty except for her. Why would she not speak? He took a good mouthful of Tiger and got up to confront Rahimah.

Rahimah. Adalah sesuatu yang salah? He knew damn well there was something wrong. She did not respond or turn around. There were plates and cups that needed washing and that was what she would do. John was at a loss. He felt almost drowsy. *Sila bercakap dengan saya, sayangku.* But she would not speak. *Bercakap,* he repeated, standing at the counter. It seemed to be a border he could not cross. Ridiculous. Why could he not go to her now? He banged his fist on the counter, *bercakap!* He knew it was madness. It would only be a matter of time before it made its way back to Lynne, or Howell for that matter. Well, that's exactly what he bloody well wanted. He had had to hear about Lynne's sordid little trysts. Sealey, Hughes, even Webb was rumoured to have had a go. If he had to deal with the ignominy of being made a cuckold, then she would too. *Bercakap!*

Sila, sila, Rahimah repeated. Tears, he could tell, were rolling. Her shoulders heaved. *Sila,* she begged, blubbering.

He crossed the threshold and put his hands on her shoulders. *I'm sorry, darling.* She felt tiny under his palms. He had to bend to rest his chin upon the top of her head. She sobbed and inhaled as one, a shuddering noise reserved for children. In many ways she was a child. Pregnant as a teen, what did she know about adulthood? She exhaled a long drawn out sila.

It's okay. Baik. Baik. He ran his hands down her arms. She was skinny, taut. Her hair smelt of oil and Chinese spices. Her hands remained submerged in the washing up bowl. He dropped his hands into the water and drew hers out. With a soy-stained cloth he dried her fingers and palms. He turned her to him, wiping tears with his fingertip.

Untuk ini dan segala dosa dalam hidup aku, maafkan aku. She had, he knew, renounced God, but his words brought tears once more. He bent his head down to hers and kissed her lips. They had never kissed anywhere except in the confines of her bedroom. He felt her instinctively pull away but held her to him and she did not fight. Finally he took his lips from hers. He wanted to look into her eyes but they were closed tight.

Kenapa awak melakukan ini? she asked. He had often asked himself why. Why put himself and her through this? He didn't know, only that he had to. Perhaps it was fear of losing her.

Saya akan jumpa malam ini, sayangku.

Kenapa kau menyakiti aku, John?

Saya tidak, saya tidak bermaksud, but he had hurt her, he knew that. People were always getting hurt, that was just the way of things.

John kissed her again, more gently, on the lips. He turned to find the towkay watching them. Rahimah fled through the backdoor and locked herself in the toilet. John could hear her weeping once more.

Nǐ huì dédào shénme xiànzài, the towkay goaded. John did not understand a word, but he got the sentiment, he was done for. Somewhere a voice inside his head told John not to play the part of exposed philanderer. *Líkāi nàlǐ*, the towkay said, pointing at John and waving his arms.

John walked steadily back to his table, picked up the bottle of Tiger and drank. The towkay began to hit the toilet door.

Chūlái, he yelled. *Chūlái*.

John had wanted to be caught, it was true, but now, in the act of being caught, he wanted nothing less. Rahimah would be the one to suffer. When the dust had settled and Lynne had chalked this up to John trying to even the score, Rahimah would be made to pay. And what of Mat? Not just a fatherless child, but a fatherless child whose mother had been caught with an orang putih. John's stomach twisted.

Money was always an option, you could buy someone's silence if you were willing to spend enough. He made his way behind the counter and into the backroom. The towkay was slapping his hand on the door, which was held shut only by Rahimah's slight body. John grasped the towkay by the shoulder, *tolonglah, saya beli dengan duit*. The old man threw John's hand off, yelling something in Cantonese. But John would not be ignored. He grabbed him by the shoulder again and drew him round. John knew he could have a knife or anything, so many of the shopkeepers did.

Tolonglah, saya beli dengan duit, John repeated slowly. *Please, I will give you money. I will give you as much as you want.* There was money saved. It was not easy to spend money in Kuala Kangsar, even with the cost of the car, Yusof's and Mas' wages, a healthy social life, and regular money to Rahimah. His mind flitted to the box beneath the bed, all the money they had.

OK, the towkay finally said.

John followed him into the cafe, where he took out a pencil and paper. He wrote at the top: 債務. He then wrote a figure 10,000RM.

Ridiculous. 10,000 ringgit was something like £1,500. John grabbed the pencil and scratched through the figure, writing underneath 500RM. The towkay laughed, put a thin grey line through John's counter offer and wrote his own: 10,000RM. They continued to strike through one figure and replace it with another. John working his way steadily from 500RM up to 2,000RM, the cafe owner crossing out each new sum and writing 10,000RM.

By the eighth time John had had enough. *I could buy this fucking place for that. Here.* He wrote 2,500RM and circled it several times. *That's enough.*

The towkay took back the pencil and began to write 10. John could stand it no longer. He grabbed the pencil and threw it into the street. It was after one o'clock. There would be no money to give if he lost his job.

I've tried to be reasonable. If you don't want to be reasonable then so be it.

Zǔzhǐ nǐ de bèndàn shuōhuà, yīngguó rén, came the reply.

John took out his wallet and left 320RM on the counter. *That will have to do for now*, he said, pointing to his watch, pointing at the door. He collected his dispatch-case, the towkay cursing behind him, Rahimah still in the toilet. How long could she wait there? It would be busy soon, the locals taking their lunch after the midday sun had passed. Maybe Rahimah would have more luck bartering with the old bastard.

In panic, Lynne had put everything back as it had been — clothes, her passport, and the money. She sat waiting now, for whatever would happen next. From outside the door, she heard crying. The desolate sobs of a child. *Ibu, ibu.* The boys wanted to be mothered, and though she was wanita putih, she was the closest thing to mother they had. *Ibu, sila.* She was sick of the weight of others hanging from her – she felt she would soon be torn apart. John on her back, arms around her throat; Ibrahim on her front, arms around her neck; this boy, *ibu, sila, ibu,* trying to grasp her leg. Her mother's and father's heavy presence everywhere she bloody went. Could she not just have some fucking peace. She would give him a bloody slap and tell that Mrs Vivekananda to keep a fucking eye on the little bastards.

She pulled the door open. *What? What is it?*

He stood, head down, bobbing upwards with every heave and then slumping once more. *Saya mahu ibu saya,* he cried.

I don't know what that bloody means.

Sila, sila, he wailed.

Where's your teacher? Guru? Guru? He reached his hand out towards her, she pulled away. *You mard arse. Go and find guru, go on.*

Her words excavated a deeper sorrow within him. He was shaking, almost fitting, hyperventilating. Lynne held the door in front of her, a kind of shield.

Hey, ay, it's alright. Ay, stop that now.

Ibu, he managed in between desperate gulps for air, *ibu.*

His hands rested on the door, he was all but exhausted. Lynne bent, let the door fall open and caught him, his arms around her neck, elbows quivering on her collarbone.

Right, alright. There. Alright, she said. She meant to keep her distance, but he was in her arms, his small frame against her own. His legs wrapped around her hips. He buried his wet face into her shoulder and caught his breath. *Okay, you're okay now.* She pushed the door to with her foot and leant against it.

Ibu, saya mahukan ibu.

Ibu, Lynne repeated. *Mother.* Her hand ran through his thick hair. He smelt sour, she put her nose into his hair and took a long breath. *Ibu.* The heaviness reached her throat and before she could do anything to stop its trajectory it was in her mouth, forcing its way outward. *Ibu,* she found herself repeating, and *ibu* again, until it became a metronomic sound, along with the rocking of her shoulders and the rocking of the boy. He buried his head into her, she in him. He ran his boy's hands through her hair, both for comfort and to comfort. *Mum,* she gasped, and could not stop the tears and everything else from falling. She clung to him,

squeezing, her back against the door, the door taking both of their weight and the weight of their loss.

Tidak mengapa.

She had lost her mother.

Tidak mengapa, he brushed her hair with his hand.

She had lost her father.

Tidak mengapa, the boy had stopped crying.

She had lost her baby. *Tidak mengapa.* She had lost another and another. *Tidak mengapa.* There would be no children. Every morning she was reminded with red symbolism. *Jangan menangis*. And this would go on now and for ever. Daily reminders of loss, boys running in the hallways, babies in the arms of their *ibu*, the barrenness and flow of blood.

Jangan menangis, he repeated. He pulled her head from his shoulder and held her hair back in his hands. His face red, his eyes swollen and wet.

Saya tidak faham, she told him.

Menangis, he brushed a tear off her cheek with his thumb, *jangan,* he smiled and shook his head, rubbing the tear dry between thumb and finger.

Okay. Okay.

Lynne lowered him to the floor. He used his shirt to dry his eyes. She crouched so their faces met. The boy laughed, and so did she. This set her off once more.

Jangan menangis, he smiled.

Jangan menangis, she scolded herself.

He was beautiful. She would like him to stay and teach her more.

Terima kasih, she said, and she could tell he felt embarrassed. She eased up and opened the door. *Okay?*

Terima kasih, puan.

Bakhtin offers the image of two people facing each other, let us make them man and woman, husband and wife. They cannot see inside each other's heads, nor can they see through each other's eyes. Instead, each can see what the other cannot. The husband can see what is behind

his wife, can see the parts of her – her face, for instance – that she cannot see of herself (not without a mirror, at least). While everything I can see is due to my unique position, everything I cannot see is also due to the fact that I am singular, a closed individual. But these two people, Anthony and Lynne, let us say, can combine what they see and create a 'unified version' of themselves, in relation to each other (Holquist, 1990, p. 35). Through their understanding of each other, they better understand themselves.

But there is also a moment where one person can appreciate the other as a self, where we empathise with the other and 'see... it from inside in its own essence' (Bakhtin, 1993, p. 11). Beyond this empathising, we can look again at the other from the outside and see them as a whole, adding in all that we have seen of them that they can never see. From this knowledge, both the person within and the person without, knowledge we can never have of ourselves, comes art. Or, at least, come the novel. This 'objectification', as Bakhtin calls it, allows us to not only fully understand the other but to create an aesthetic version of them. This is the privileged position of the artist. There is, for Holquist, the authoring that everyone does every day – I author myself – and then this other rarefied authoring. Holquist explains:

> The ability of the artist in his or her text to treat other human subjects from the vantage points of transgredience, a privilege denied to the rest of us who author only in lived experience (and denied to artists too, when they are not being artists). The author of the novel, for instance, can manipulate the other not only as an other, but also as a self. This is, in fact, what the very greatest writers have always done. (1993, p. 32)

I never met Lynne Wilson. The only place anyone can meet her now is through her husband's texts. Even Lynne, as presented in *the Confessions*, can only find herself, her 'Malayan past', by asking her husband to read excerpts from *Time for A Tiger* (1990, p. 6). I have tried, however foolish it might seem, to look inside and outside Lynne Wilson and manipulate her into an existence where she behaves and acts like a self. If Andrew Biswell's *The Real Life of Anthony Burgess* is a repudiation of Roger Lewis's biography, I began to envision my version of Lynne as a repudiation of both the biographers' adherence to Burgess's depiction, which Biswell describes as 'vilify[ing]' of her (2005, p. 329). I would go further; Burgess is incapable of presenting a version of Lynne who can be understood as a real person, a true self. Lewis's biography develops the sense of Lynne as more a comic character in a novel rather someone who could have existed in real life. Describing Lynne's death, Lewis claims she was 'washed away on a tide of Tanqueray bottles' (2002, p. 103). Andrew Biswell's characterisation is much kinder, but Lynne is still the series of affairs, symptoms and sicknesses detailed in Burgess's Confessions (2005, p. 185). However, Biswell posits the

idea that 'without Lynne Wilson, perhaps there would have been no Anthony Burgess', though is unable to expand upon this, precisely because without Anthony Burgess, there would be no Lynne Wilson (p. 329).

When describing their preparation for leaving England for Malaya, Burgess presents Lynne as a vague extension of himself: 'We scrubbed... We travelled... We had reserved first-class seats... we had to stand in the corridor... we wandered the rainy town... we found a dosshouse... We dined on half-cooked sausages... We had expected to leave England in a little glow of monied glory... We were glad to be aboard the *Willem Ruys* and enter foreign territory' (1986, p. 371). While some of these are activities that can be shared between individuals, the final two clauses relate specific internal thoughts, and they are the thoughts of Anthony Burgess. Having adjudged Burgess to be a dialogic writer, I now present the counter argument.

Bakhtin says, 'the objectification of man's image is not pure substantiality. He can be loved, pitied, and so forth, but the main thing is that he can (and should) be understood' (1986, p. 113). Lynne is depicted, in the opening of *You've Had Your Time*, in relation to her literary husband. She asks her husband to 'fetch her fictional garbage from the public library', an innocuous judgement, perhaps (1990, p. 5). But this is followed by Burgess claim that:

> She used my ignorance of that scribbling spinster [Jane Austen] to trounce my own literary pretensions. In our cups I was catechised:
>
> 'How many daughters have Mr and Mrs Bennet?'
>
> 'Four, or is it five?'
>
> 'Who does Emma marry?'
>
> 'A man of decent education, appearance and income. I've forgotten his name.'
>
> 'What is the play that is put on in *Mansfield Park*?'
>
> 'Something by Kotzebue, I think.' (ibid)

These are not Lynne's words or even an attempt by Burgess to recreate her voice. Burgess presents a parody of the 'Ithaca' chapter from James Joyce's *Ulysses*, a novel that Burgess says Lynne had not read (1990, p. 211). Lynne is made to take on the role of Joyce's Molly Bloom, while Burgess plays the part of Leopold. She is portrayed as a voiceless drunk, dying slowly of cirrhosis and blood loss. She is not freed by Burgess' words, she is subsumed in them, she is assimilated. As Holquist states, 'transgredience, when it is used well, results in art; when used badly, it results in totalitarianism' (1990, p. 33). While Burgess revels in dialogue, great works of dialogue with Shakespeare, with Christopher Marlowe, with George Orwell, he is also guilty of imposing a monologue.

Burgess not only imposes his world view on Lynne, he also uses her real-life suffering for his literary ends. Take the section of *Little Wilson and Big God* covering 1944, where he is stationed in Gibraltar and Lynne is in London. Burgess uses the consequences of Lynne's attack by American GIs as a narrative device to delineate the passing of time. Newly arrived on the Rock, Sonia Brownell writes to tell Burgess that Lynne is 'sick now with perpetual bleeding glossed as dysmenorrhoea' (1986, p. 301). Pages later, as Burgess becomes accustomed to life on the Rock, Lynne writes to tell him 'the bleeding continued, and she was being dilated and curetted by a distinguished though aged gynaecologist' (p. 303). Towards the end of this section of the memoir, Burgess arrives back from war and 'the bleeding continued. Sex? The shyness of a two-year separation was bad enough; here was a physical barrier to be confronted with both frustration and relief… For Lynne sex had already been made cold and hence dirty' (p. 322). The conceit is remarkably similar to how Burgess utilises the chronotope of the river in *Nothing Like the Sun* and *The Malay Trilogy* (see p. 192); Lynne's illness is a point in time/space through which Burgess perceives his own existence.

It is not entirely true that Lynne only exists in Burgess's texts. In the archive of the International Anthony Burgess Foundation, I found, in the back of an uncatalogued school exercise book, a diary Burgess started on New Year's Day, 1955. Burgess keeps the diary for three days. On 11 January, Lynne takes up the task, she writes:

> Rather a long gap — diary just having been forgotten, but I shall try and keep it up at least for a few weeks now that school has started and I've time on my hands. Yusof has been going from bad to worse and spends all his time dying his hair, painting his nails etc. instead of concentrating a bit more on the job. More and more of the work has been falling on me and now he does not even remember to do what I ask — dinner last night just cold meat though I had given him detailed instructions for a hot meal. This added to everything else was the last straw, so this morning John told him he must leave at the end of the month. We are therefore now looking, (a) for a driver, (b) for a cook — I think a Chinese one would be a nice change (famous last words?). Life continues dull, though last Friday a doctor in Taiping offered to take me to Penang for the weekend. I got out of it tactfully though can't help rather feeling that a minor affair apiece might do us both a bit of good — give yer an interest as yer might saye. Weather hot, particularly at night. K.P. [King's Pavillion] bedlam with new kids of only seven — completely undisciplined — John with his hands more full. "Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay"'. (Wilson, 1955)

The quote is from Tennyson's poem 'Locksley Hall': 'Thro the shadow of the globe we sweep into the younger day; / Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay' (1996, p32). This short entry, along with others I was able to find, is the utterance to which I have intended to respond. Just as I have sought to create a credible Burgess, a man capable of writing his many works, so I have sought to create a credible character of Lynne, author of these words.

He wandered the corridors for some minutes, trying to organise his thoughts. When he arrived at the classroom, Bossall was at his desk, the boys reading in silence. John felt sick.

You look bloody dreadful, Wilson.

I'm alright.

Are you sure?

No, he wasn't, wasn't sure at all. *I think I've eaten something.*

You've been in Yat Lai. I've told you about that place. Have you seen behind the counter, disgusting.

It was all John could do not to vomit there and then. *Can you*, he started, but found he couldn't even open his mouth. He left the classroom as calmly as he could and, back in the corridor, bolted for the bathroom. On the pot, he took big glugs of breath. Fuck the lot of them. He would divorce Lynne and marry Rahimah. Convert, that was it. Before it could become gossip, before Howell found out, he would pack Lynne up and send her back to Banbury. Someone else could bloody deal with her from now on. Rahimah would have him, she would be glad of him. There was young Mat to think of too. Perhaps John could get him a place at the school, when he was old enough. He would take him on as his son. No more talk about going home. This was his home. His wife, his family, his place in the world. He wiped. There would be no teaching today. He needed a stiff drink and some time to lay his plans.

He reached the rubber tree surrounded by an ornate fence. Beneath, a plaque declared in English and Malay that this was one of the oldest in the country. John read the Malay. The tree was nothing much to look at, there were trees surrounding the whole town, but the sentiment was clear, what was once British could become Malay. This tree, which represented a moment of great change and prosperity, was a British tree, brought from Kew Gardens. A

great symbol of Malaya. It was possible. Across the road a fat, coffee-coloured man leant heavily against a dust-sheeted Mercedes Benz.

British man. Hey, British man.

John smiled politely and waved him off.

British man. Taxi? Where do you want to go? He heaved himself from his leaning position and threw his half-smoked cigarette into the dirt. *Show you the town.*

No, thank you.

Take you to Royal Palace. Take you to Ubudiah Mosque, he said, waddling behind John.

Tidak, terima kasih, John continued.

Take you to meet some local girls, British man.

Bukan hari ini, John said, and walked into the Idris Club.

Three Brits sat at the bar while a Tamil man cleaned glasses. John made his way towards them.

Good day, he said. *Anchor, terima kasih. And*, he addended, *brandy. Double.*

John sat in the corner, away from company. Two of the men wore linen suits, they looked like officials from a canned fruit company. The other peered over a week-old copy of *The Daily Mail*.

Did you hear about Philips?

Philips?

Dan Philips, works for Heineken.

The third man folded his newspaper, *Dan Philips? I met him in KL.*

Car shot.

No.

Car shot, driver took a bullet.

When was this?

Last night, coming back from Ipoh. Bloody yellow bastards.

How is he?

You know Philips, but the missus is in a state. She wants out. He came in last night, after the fact. Double brandies all round, of course. Left her to do the packing. Get it out of her system, I suppose.

Poor bloody Philips. How's the car?

Bit better ventilated. The other two laughed.

Dirty bastards. They're evacuating Vietnam, you know. Commies given the North. Give them an inch, I say.

How, John asked, *is the driver?*

The three turned around in unison. *You what?*

The driver, John repeated, *how is he? You said he'd been shot.*

How the bloody hell should I know how the driver is? He turned to his friend, *tapped.*

What did you say? John stood.

Go back to your drink, the *Mail* reader told him.

I said, you're bloody tapped. I'm telling my friend here that Philips nearly died and you're asking about some driver. Off your flamin' head, mate. He turned back to the bar. *Darky lover.*

The other two laughed.

Come here and fucking say that. John walked over and prodded the man in the back. *Get off your fucking stool and say that to my face.*

Steady on, pal, the other linen suit said, standing. *We're not after trouble.*

I'd say you are looking for bloody trouble. I'd say he's, he prodded again, *been asking for it since I walked in.*

Look, the friend said, *we're just having a quiet drink. Norm goes home tomorrow.* Norm didn't look round. He'd suddenly lost his voice.

Easy, old man, the *Mail* reader chimed in. *Let me get you another. Let's all have another drink.*

I'm not, said Norm, *drinking with no darky lover.*

John grabbed at the back of his jacket and pulled Norm clean off the bar stool. He had never been in a fight, not since he was a kid in Miles Platting. Not since they would gang up on him for going to a posh school. Norm landed arse first on the floor. He felt a hand on his shoulder and lashed out with a fist. The *Mail* reader went down, clattering bar stools as he fell. John gave Norm a good kick in the backside.

Say it again, you English bastard.

Norm was struggling to his feet, his friend was struggling to take it all in. The *Mail* reader dragged himself to his knees. John had hit him square in the jaw. He gave Norm another kicking, with that the friend came around, grabbed John by the throat and pulled back to have a good swing at him.

Knock his soddin' block off, Norm cried.

He was about to, his fist coming at John fast and true. John clenched his eyes shut, but the punch never landed.

That's enough of that, I'd say.

John opened his eyes to see Lofty gripping the man's arm, his hand still balled in a fist.

He's the one that fucking started it, Norm yelled, clutching at his rear end.

And I'm the one that's ending it. You, Lofty said to the man whose arm he held, *relax up, and sit down there.* The man obliged. Lofty turned to John, *how you going, Jack?*

John couldn't speak. Tried, but couldn't say a word.

How's about we all sit down and have a drink, eh? Lofty picked up two of the bar stools and helped the suited man to his feet. His face was swollen, John had got him good.

You know him? Norm said, eyeballing John. Before Lofty could reply, Norm went for John, grabbing him in a kind of headlock.

Now then, now then, Lofty lifted the two men from the floor. *I should put one of you in the bloody corner.* He turned to Norm, *sit. Right,* Lofty dusted himself off and turned to the three men, *which one of you is selling the car?*

Lynne lay in bed, still in her dressing gown, still in her pretty new dress hidden beneath. There was a knock at the door, followed by Yusof's tut tutting as he went to answer. Another boy, no doubt, looking for her to bandage a wound or clear up a graze.

Puan, Yusof said, just behind the door. *A man here.*

What man?

Brown man. He muttered something under his breath. *Kekasih kamu.*

Lynne took off her dressing gown and made her way downstairs. Yusof, wooden spoon in hand, watched Ibrahim intently. A stand-off. Ibrahim seemed impaired, as if Yusof had caught him off guard.

Terima kesih, Yusof. Yusof went reluctantly back to his pan of stew. *Sila,* she said, directing Ibrahim to the living room and closing the door behind them. She realised now that it was not Yusof who had disarmed Ibrahim, it was she. He would not look at her directly. *Minuman?* she asked, bluntly.

Yes. Minuman adalah apa yang saya perlukan, he said. She went to the kitchen and told Yusof to make two gin and tonics. Yusof eyed her excitedly. He was already formulating his report for John. *Puan bring man here. Puan and him drink your bottles, tuan.* She returned to Yusof, still standing to attention in his policeman's uniform.

Come through.

Thank you, Lynne.

You know John might have been here. She sat and lit a cigarette. *You look well. Sihat.* He blushed slightly.

Bercakap. Go on.

You sihat too. I need to, tetapi saya tidak tahu bagaimana untuk mengatakannya dalam bahasa Inggeris. My isteri. She will—

Just spit it out. Cakaplah.

Saya mengambil isteri saya untuk mempunyai bayi kami di Pulau Pinang. Saya akan pergi selama seminggu, mungkin lebih lama.

Pulau Pinang, you're going to Penang?

Dengan isteri saya. The door knob turned, Ibrahim froze. Yusof gleefully brought in a tray of gin and tonics. It was really all he could bear. He licked his lips. To be the instrument that prised John and Lynne apart was a great ambition of Yusof's.

Teruskan, she told Ibrahim. He watched as Yusof closed the door behind him. *You and your wife, teruskan,* she demanded.

Untuk mempunyai bayi kami.

Well, I don't understand what that is. She could sense that Ibrahim had hoped that she would make this easy on him. She would do no such thing. She took a drink. *Ulangi. Terangkan.*

Lynne, please.

Terangkan. Tell me what it means.

Bayi. He folded his arms and rocked them.

A baby.

Yes, Lynne.

You and your wife are having a baby?

Saya cuba memberitahu anda, tetapi bahasa Inggeris saya tidak bagus. Saya fikir awak tahu. Saya minta maaf. Saya tidak bermaksud menimbulkan kesakitan. Saya sayang awak.

She didn't catch it all, but she caught the end. *You love me? You fucking love me, Ibrahim?* She raised her voice and he turned to the door that Yusof was almost certainly lurking behind.

He made his way over to her now, bending down, practically on his knees. *Tolong, izinkan saya membawa anda ke tempat lain.*

Where?

Somewhere. Please.

She made him wait, taking a mouthful of gin and smoking the last of her cigarette. *Fine. Have you got the car?*

He nodded. Lynne stood and walked past him. She suddenly felt his hand grip her arm. He pulled her towards him and kissed her. He was here to end whatever it was they had between them.

Yusof stood at the kitchen door, half in and half out. He chose not to hide his look, and Lynne received it with a poisonous smile. To think he actually believed that John would throw Lynne out and take him in as his confidante. One day there would be a reckoning and it would not go well for Yusof.

Jumpa lagi, she told him. *Segera.* She wasn't sure how soon, but soon enough.

In the car, Ibrahim was quiet. He made her sit in the back seat and drove with purpose, eyes on the road, only the quickest glances in the mirror behind. He had wanted to drive out to Kampung Buaya, but Lynne refused. There were Chinese in those trees. Better to be seen in town alive than found in the forest dead. As Ibrahim drove towards town, Lynne could feel his discomfort. He took the first turn at the roundabout, so not to drive past the police station. Lynne wound down her window, lit a cigarette, and held her arm out in the afternoon sun. They would be noticed, of course, if they had not been already. A violent explosion ahead made Lynne jump. The traffic came to a stop. Ibrahim wound his window down and peered out to see what was happening. The town was awash with people. It was beautiful, there was no denying it. A sea of faces, each one a punctuation in the crowd. Up the road, a driver got out of a Silver Wraith, waving his hat driver's cap over the smoking bonnet. Lynne peered out to see if she could identify the passengers.

Outside a café a pretty young Malay girl served coffees to elderly Chinese men. Though she stooped somewhat, Lynne saw an innate elegance. Her skin glistened in the sun. She wore a dress far too nice for work, the white cotton spotted with grease and coffee. Ibrahim climbed out of the car and began remonstrating with someone down the road. The girl looked to see what the noise was and locked eyes with Lynne. Just a girl, really. Lynne smiled, gave a little wave. The girl responded in kind. Ibrahim was halfway up the road, shouting in Punjabi and Malay. Lynne got out of the car to stretch her legs, making her way over to the cafe, where the girl had just returned to the counter.

Do you have, eh, adakah awak. No, adakah anda mempunyai, Lynne looked to the girl for recognition of these words. The girl nodded, delighted to hear her language from white lips. *Adakah anda mempunyai gin? Gin and tonic?*

The girl shook her head. *Tiger beer*, she offered.

Fine, Tiger beer. Termina kasih. Di luar, Lynne said, pointing to an empty table on the street.

I will bring for you.

Very good, Lynne smiled. *Do you know whose car that is?*

The girl looked at the Rolls Royce, surrounded by Ibrahim, the driver and a few other men. *Someone important,* she said. *The Raja,* she laughed at the thought.

Lynne sat under the glaring Malay sun and lit another cigarette. Ibrahim was trying to bring about some order. Cars had tried to over and undertake the prone vehicle. A large truck filled with crates of Tiger beer had taken onto the curb. She took a sip of her own. The Rolls Royce had been moved to the side of the road, its passengers hidden by a drawn blind.

The girl brought out a bowl of nuts and tried more English. *Would you like anything else, madam?*

Thank you, I'm fine.

Please, you come and tell me.

I like your dress. Gaun, she pulled lightly at her own.

Thank you. It is from Ipoh. Very nice.

Yes. I have the same one.

Very expensive.

On the road, engines started up and car horns began to blare once more.

Lynne, Ibrahim yelled from down the street, and then, *Mrs Wilson, Mrs Wilson we can leave now, if you please.* His voice was fraught with worry.

Yes, yes. She drank quickly and took some change from her purse. *For you,* she said, putting a twenty-ringgit bill under the empty bottle. The girl said nothing. She stood like a statue, covering the worst of the stains with her arms and hands. *Semamat tinggal,* Lynne sang, as she got up from the table and back into the car. She waved as Ibrahim put the car into gear and drove on. The girl did not wave back. Malays often reacted badly to tipping, taking it as a slight, a declaration of superiority over them. To hell with her if she could not see the good in Lynne's actions.

Ibrahim continued up Jalan Dato Sagor, down a side street and out just beside the hospital. They drove down Jalan Raja Idris in silence, Lynne seething that she had left 20RM for the little bitch. On their right they came close to the college. Ibrahim glanced in the mirror and she knew they had shared the same thought.

He pulled up at a small kedai, far enough out of town that they were unlikely to be seen. He got out and opened the door for her. She was already lifting herself from the seat when he offered his hand. She did not take it. Ibrahim led, choosing a table away from the entrance.

Would you like coffee?

Gin. She called over to the young Chinese girl at the counter, *you have gin, don't you?*

Yes, yes, the girl replied.

And Anchor beer, Ibrahim added.

So, Lynne leant towards Ibrahim, *what are you going to tell me?*

Lynne. He took a deep breath, *Lynne, you and I, you and I can no longer be.* He wiped the sweat off his brow and exhaled. That was it. That was all he had to say and all that he had come to say. A huge weight had been lifted and Lynne could tell that he was pleased with himself. She took a deep drag and blew smoke towards the ceiling. He waited for her response. She waited for him to say more. Ibrahim lit a cigarette and tapped his matches on the table. Lynne waited. The cafe was empty except for the girl and two Chinese playing Go in the opposite corner. The only noise the hiss of a beer bottle being opened, beer poured into a glass, the glass put down on a tray, the tray pulled from the counter, the girl's feet across the floor, a Go stone placed on the board.

For you, the girl placed Lynne's drink in front of her. *Untuk anda*, and placed Ibrahim's beer on the table.

Termina kasih, Ibrahim said, waiting for the girl to leave.

She said, *kami tidak mempunyai bir Anchor. Ini adalah bir Tiger.* Her English was better than her Malay.

That's fine. Thank you.

The girl went and the silence returned. Lynne drank quickly. If he was buying she would drink as much as she could. One of the Go players started to mutter *bù hǎo de xuǎnzé* like a mantra. Lynne did not know what it meant, but the words somehow resonated. *Bù hǎo de xuǎnzé,* over and over. The player put another of his stones down, repeating the words.

Lynne? She had almost forgotten Ibrahim, sitting across from her, waiting to be absolved of all sins. *Lynne, please. Bercakap.*

What would you like me to say? She took a drink, *When is your baby arriving?*

Baby soon.

Yes, I know, when? Bila? Bila?

Saya pergi ke Pulau Pinang hari ini.

Hari ini? It hit her like a bolt. *You are going today?* Lynne finished her drink off. *Tolong,* she called to the girl, waving her empty glass in the air.

Saya cuba memperolehi keberanian.

She didn't get that, something about him trying but she wasn't sure what. They fell into silence again, the Go player continued with his mantra, *bù hǎo de xuǎnzé.*

What are you hoping for, Ibrahim? Would you like a little girl? You probably want a boy, don't you, ay? Progeny to carry on the family name.

Saya tidak faham.

I know you don't. I would have liked a baby, you know. A little girl. You should see my niece—

Lynne, please. Saya tidak faham.

—just a wee thing. Beautiful, really. We tried, me and John. I suppose I'm too old now, do you think I'm too old, Ibrahim?

Bù hǎo de xuǎnzé, bù hǎo de xuǎnzé.

I feel too old, that's the problem isn't it? You hear of these women who have babies when they're forty. Triplets, some woman had. It was in the paper the other day, did you see it? Could you face it, that's the question you have to ask yourself, could you face the sleepless nights, the incessant crying, all that? You'll have to, won't you. Do you think you'll be a good father, Ibrahim? Do you think you'll give your son a good life? Listen to me, your son. Well, you'll find out soon enough.

Ibrahim sat patiently, she dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief and listened, *bù hǎo de xuǎnzé, bù hǎo de xuǎnzé, bù hǎo de xuǎnzé.* There was nothing else to say. He had made his mind up, and Lynne had no ammunition to use against him that would not wound her too. The girl brought over a fresh drink, beaming.

Madam, she presented the drink like some rare flower.

Termina Kasih, and then, *could you tell me what he's saying?* Lynne pointed to the Go players.

He says, bad choice. He definitely going to lose. Mr Loo no good at this game.

Thank you.

The girl beamed, *thank you.*

Boleh saya pulang ke rumah? Ibrahim asked.

After this. You can take me home after this.

Go stones were swept from the board, Mr Loo took a deep, rueful drag of his cigarette and placed a black stone on the board beginning again. Lynne and Ibrahim shared a table but occupied different spaces. She would wish him luck, when he dropped her at home. She would wish him luck and wish to see him no more.

Hey British man, you want to meet girls?

The fat taxi driver had moved his car outside the club. John had washed his face and left Lofty to his dealings. One of them, the *Mail* reader in the suit, was an actual officer, a captain who had been part of a delegation to meet Sultan Yussuff Izzuddin Shah Ibni Almarhum Sultan Abdul Jalil Karamatullah Nasiruddin Mukhataram Shah Radziallah, otherwise known as the king of Perak.

Beautiful young girls, British man.

Robert Milton had been enjoying a quiet drink before taking the train to Penang, where he was to be joined by his wife. His jaw was not broken, but there was a great deal of bruising. John had apologised, of course, but he knew his time in Malaya was short. Once Milton reported what had happened to his superiors, John would no longer be a British Officer. There were always options. He could get a job teaching at one of the local schools. There was the Clifford School. He could speak to Mr Arumukham. Then he would tell Lynne he was staying indefinitely and tell Rahimah too.

Beautiful girl. Very pretty. Make you very happy, I think.

What a fucking mess. He took a pull on his cigarette. *Where?*

Not far. I drive maybe five, ten minutes.

And what would John say when Mr Arumukham asked why John had left the College, why he was divorcing his wife, why he was converting to Islam?

No. No, I don't think so. You can take me home.

Home?

I'll show you. John opened the passenger door and climbed in. He waited while the driver waddled round, heaved the door open, and dropped into his seat. The car lurched to the right. John slid.

Pandu ke Jalan Istana, saya akan membawa anda dari sana, John told him.

You speak good Malay, British man, he said, setting off towards Jalan Istana.

Saya cuba menjadi lelaki Melayu yang baik, John replied, and saw it was true. He would try to be a good Malay. He would try.

Lynne? He closed the door and saw she was no longer on the sofa. *Lynne?* He called upstairs. No answer.

Puan has gone, Tuan. Yusof minced into the hallway, a wooden spoon in his hand.

Gone?

She just, he flicked the spoon about, *gone.*

Where's Mas? Is she with her?

A man came, Tuan.

Lelaki apa? Yusof was enjoying this.

Handsome, brown man. Yusof put down the spoon and walked over to John. *He come and she go.* He put his hand on John's shoulder, massaging.

Not now, Yusof, for fuck's sake. Which fucking brown man?

There was a knock at the door. *Leave that,* John cried, *cuti itu!*

Yusof ignored his tuan and opened the door. The fat taxi driver breathed heavily, resting his weight on the door frame. All those stairs.

I'll be a moment.

Who is this? Yusof asked crossly.

None of your bloody business who this is. Kembali bekerja.

I have no work to do if you will not eat, Tuan.

John went upstairs and into the bedroom. The sheets were strewn, clothes everywhere. John tore at them, throwing dresses and blouses around. He checked the wardrobe. Well, she hadn't left him, not yet anyway. What bloody brown man? Someone who knew about Rahimah? Had the towkay talked already? Or Rahimah had told someone. There was, he knew, a brother. There was probably more than one. John checked that Yusof was not watching, he had a habit of peering around doorways, and pulled the shoebox from beneath the bed. It was all but empty, just 100RM left. He went back out to the hallway, Yusof still and the taxi driver stood in hostile silence. Why had she taken the money? To pay the towkay. To teach John a bloody lesson. From the bookcase in the bedroom, John retrieved his copy of *Hard Times*. He opened the front cover to reveal a wooden box with an inner lid, 2,000RM folded inside.

This man, John went back into the hallway, Yusof still looking the taxi driver up and down, *what did he look like?*

The handsome brown man? Oh, you know who. He is the one who drives the car.

I drive, now I want to be paid.

Quiet for a second, John said to the driver. *Ibrahim? She's gone out with Ibrahim?*

Tuan. Yes, with him.

She didn't say where?

She say not to tell tuan. She say she gone.

It all made sense now. *How long has this— Berapa lama mereka telah melakukan hubungan seks?*

Hubungan seks? Just hearing John say the words gave Yusof a tingle.

Yes, hubungan seks. Bloody hubungan kelamin. Bersetubuh. Screwing. Menyetubuhi. Jenis kelamin. Shagging. Hubungan jenis. Fucking. How long?

Tuan?

The fat man was laughing, Yusof, for his own sake, managed to keep a straight face. A while, John thought, it must have been going on for a while. Those trips to the cinema in Ipoh, alone in the car for an hour either way. Always late, always with a story about flat tyres and Chinese gunmen. Lying bitch. Did Lofty know? Laughing at him behind his back.

British man, the driver said, recovering, *you owe me fifteen ringgit. Thank you.*

No, no. We're not finished yet. Come on.

But Tuan! Yusof called, watching John walk out of the door, the other man lumbering behind. *Tuan, I make lobscouse.*

They turned off Jalan Kampung, into a group of shacks. Some made of bricks, with windows and doors, others made from wood, cobbled together out of whatever could be found. The driver pulled over outside a blue wooden one-storey house.

Her name is Gomati. She is— she was my sister-in-law.

Your sister-in-law? What is this?

You pay me now. 200 ringgit. I wait. You finish, I drive you back to town.

Are you sure?

Brother left. Don't know where. She need money. You help.

Help, indeed. John went to the front door. His gentle knock was enough to push the door wide open. Inside there was a simple living space, a table with vegetables and two pans, large cushions on the floor, a rag rug. Out of another door a girl appeared. She was, John guessed, fourteen.

S*elamat petang*, John said.

Selamat petang, the girl replied. She came to the door, looked out, and saw the taxi. *Come. Come,* she said, leading John in, closing the door. *You would like a drink?* There was a bottle of cheap-looking brandy on a shelf.

Ya terima kasih, John replied.

She poured a large measure into a dirty glass and handed it to him. When he took the glass she moved her hand over his.

Very handsome, she said.

And you are very pretty.

Her skin a deep black, studded with darker freckles. He studied her face and she allowed him. She smiled, tried to smile, but her eyebrows remained furrowed, uneasy. Her expression changed with every rise and fall of her brow.

Very pretty, he repeated. He took a sip of the brandy, raw in his mouth; the fumes curled up into his nose.

Her hand moved gently up and down his arm, slipping up the sleeve of his shirt. *What would tuan like? I can make tuan very happy.*

He thought she was probably right. Though her face was young, her frame slender, her breasts were full. He watched, as she breathed, their rise and fall. He lifted his hand to touch, to run his fingers along the curve of her.

And what, John asked, *is the statuary age of legal consent in your country?*

The girl smiles, putting her hand on his thigh. Yes, he thinks. She runs her hand gently up his linen trousers, along the ridge of his thigh bone, and inserts her fingers between his. She places his hand on her waist, when he does not move it, she does. He caresses her side, feeling the weight of her breast in his open palm. John is led into the other room. The bed is unmade, the room is sparse. She turns and stands in front of him. Only her arms and face are bare, but it is enough. Her body is supple, her eyes large and curious. She hitches up her long grey dress. Her legs, her hips, her waist, and those breasts. She runs her fingers down his chest and grasps the lowest button of his shirt, all the time holding his gaze. He is hard. Her hand brushes over him and he feels just how hard. Her eyes flit downwards, he thinks that she might grasp him now, but she doesn't. She continues to fumble with his shirt button. An act of seduction becomes more focused, becomes a task. He considers the possibility that this may be the first time she has unbuttoned a man's shirt. Her eyes fixed, her tongue pursed in concentration. Each time the button slips from her grasp, she begins anew with greater purpose. He pulls her hands away, down by her side.

Like this, he says, and opens the top button. *Like this*, the next, *like this*, another. He smiles, gentle, playful. *Like this, see?* The girl looks at the slice of white skin, white cotton curtains opening to reveal more. She steps away, her hands just where he placed them.

Like this. His hands sweaty, he fumbles and fumbles again. *Blast.* He grasps at his shirt, pulls it out from his waistband. The material clings to his wet back. *Won't be a*, he intends to say second, jiffy, or tick. He sees himself now. Not his reflection but he sees what this is, a white man in his late thirties groping around in a teenager's bedroom. He stops fumbling with his clothing. He stops entirely. She steps forward, putting her hands on his. John moves back, clearing his throat, standing in his stepmother's house, above the shop, watching the shop girl

they had moved into his attic bedroom. He is eleven, she is barely sixteen. The girl had, on many occasions, undressed in front of him. She had been clumsy, where she intended to be sexy. She had told him not to look away, not to be embarrassed. He could not concentrate on any one part of her, instead his eyes shifted from the fried eggs of her nipples, the devil's door of her stomach and ribs, the soft brown curls that rippled from between her legs to the edges of her pelvis. Then she would drag the bottom of her greyish bed dress over her, clumsily groping around for the sleeves and collar. All the while his eyes fixed on that part of her enshrouded by hair and entirely unknown. And always, before her head reappeared, he would turn away. She would climb into her bed, turning the light out. But not tonight.

Do you not like girls, Jackie? she asks, lifting his bedding up and drawing herself into him. He grips the hem of his shirt, as she pulls at the band on his pyjama bottoms and plunges her hand in. He was bald, his groin ached, his penis spasmed soft to hard, capillaries opening, fear fuelled him; lust, newly felt, turned his stomach queasy. She cupped him in both her hands, repeating, *Don't you like it, Jackie? Don't you like it?* Then she took his hand and put it between her legs. *Do you like this?* He shuddered when his fingers moved through the fine hair, and again when he touched her moist skin and she pressed his taut fingers inside her. He lurched, pulling her hands off him and his from her. He thought he might be sick or black out. They were sure to come in, his father and stepmother. They were sure to see what he was doing.

She tries to kiss him on the lips. He is conscious of his hygiene. His teeth have not been brushed. He cannot see his fingernails, but he knows them to be thick with dirt, black-tipped. He has not bathed for two days. She puts her tongue in his mouth and he retches. I'm sorry, he wants to say. He wants to touch her again, he wants out of this room.

Do you not like me, Jackie? she asks, moving the sheets away to reveal her outstretched body. His eyes follow a plum-coloured vein running beneath translucent skin. Her skin sags as she moves onto her side. The smell of sour milk makes him groggy. Her body so close and his stomach turns each time he thinks of touching her. If only she would take his hand again. He wants to say, I do like it, yes. I do like it. There are no words. He cannot stop himself from looking at that place between her legs.

You never seen a girl before?

He cannot take his eyes from that place.

Never touched a girl before? She runs her hands down through her pubic hair and slides her index and forefinger down. She groans, *like this*. He watches. She moves her fingers in a circular motion. *Like this*, sucking in the air and breathing it back out. His body contorts. The

tips of her fingers disappear inside. His stomach aches. His hard cock shudders. He feels the fluent rising. He pushes his shirt further down into his waistband. The girl has her head down. Her hands back by her sides, she appears younger than he was back then. He steadies himself and grips the still-fastened button. I must go, he means to say, but says nothing at all. He drops uncounted ringgit notes onto the kitchen table and leaves.

The sun bore down from the clear blue sky. Her dress was wet with sweat. The road to the train station dry and dusty. She walked alone, not a car passed by. When she got to the station, she had to sit down. At the bar she ordered a gin and tonic, drank it thirstily, and went to find what time the train to Penang was. She was an hour early. Sitting in the shade of the station bar, she cooled down. The tonic water helped quench her thirst, the cigarettes calmed her nerves. A young British couple came in. Just back from a weekend in Kuala Lumpur, they told Lynne. They were from Worcester. His company had just won a contract to build for the British and they were going to be in Kuala Kangsar for six months. They told Lynne they did not have any children but hoped to one day. They had not been married before, no, they had met in the last year of school and had married two years later. No, they did not know her husband John, and no, they had not seen an Indian man and his pregnant wife on the platform. They apologised and said they had to meet friends in town.

The station filled with passengers waiting to travel to Taiping, Kamunting, Bagan Serai, Parit Buntar, Nibong Tebal, Simpang Ampat, Bukit Mertajam, and Butterworth. Lynne walked onto the platform. Ibrahim was carrying two heavy suitcases, his wife leaning her heavy frame on his arm. All the packing and planning on top of their soon-to-be new arrival. But the worry could not hide Ibrahim's wife's beauty. She was not the most attractive woman Lynne had seen, but her eyes were striking, her skin radiant in the heat. They looked a handsome couple. Her belly was round but perfectly in proportion to her shape. It would not be long, anyone could see that. Lynne watched as she gratefully accepted a seat from a smiling Malay man.

When Ibrahim saw her, Lynne thought he might collapse. His eyelids fluttered, his mouth tensed as with rigor mortis. He had been unhappy, she knew, and found solace and companionship in her arms. She raised her glass to him and pushed her way back through to the bar. The barman presented the bill and Lynne fished yet more ringgits from her purse and dropped them on the bar. She walked along the platform as the train pulled away, as Ibrahim looked from his window. The air had not yet cooled, though Lynne thought the sun faded. She approached the ticket office, the light dropping a little more, to enquire about a ticket to

Singapore. There was a sleeper train to Gemas leaving tonight. From there she could get a connection to Singapore in the morning.

Return? the man behind the counter asked.

Her mouth was dry and tense, her tongue as heavy as the weight on her forehead, the lamps overhead dimmed. *Single*, she said, but the man did not hear. Lynne cleared her throat, coughed out *single.* She took a handful of notes and pushed them towards the blank-faced ticket seller. *Single.* She held her eyes shut for a second, the light in the room suddenly radiating. *Single*. Eyes open, the man had left his seat. Her ticket sat on the counter in front of her. Lynne grabbed it and turned and the lights in the office went out completely.

Somewhere out there, where the light still shone, Lynne could hear the sound of feet and voices, Malay and English, and someone grasping at the ticket in her hand. She held on tight and they gripped her fingers and prised them apart. If she could just have a drink, something to wet her lips and ease this headache. The voices echoed, sweaty fingers prised her clammy hand open and the ticket was gone. Lights out, Lynne waited to be rescued.

John walked up Jalan Raja Idris. He took a discreet look back and saw he was not being followed. The road stretched ahead. He knew there were a couple of little kedais round here somewhere. It was humid, he kicked dust up and it stuck to his clothing. He could just keep walking. The station was not far. A one-way ticket to Kuala Lumpur, Singapore even. He came to a small place, Ah Yau, with a large Tiger sign. Inside were four tables. Two Chinese men sitting at one playing Go.

Selamat petang, John said to the girl behind the counter. He threw his dispatch-case on one chair and himself on the other. She was in her twenties, dressed as close to the Western style as was acceptable. Her hair was twisted up, held with chopsticks. She nodded and brought over a menu, written in Chinese.

Tiger beer, he told her.

You are American?

British.

Oh, she said, and went to the cooler.

He quickly drank three Tigers and ordered another, along with some prawn noodles. He struggled with chopsticks, skewering fat pink prawns and crunching them down, rolling noodles around tightly held sticks and bringing his mouth to meet them before they fell back into the bowl. John took out his pupils' exercise books from his dispatch-case. He opened one and tried to focus on English words in scruffy handwriting. The girl passed and John waved

his empty Tiger bottle in her direction. He flicked to the back of the book and absent-mindedly drew a stave on the page. The pen stabbed between C and G in a loose circle. John hummed as he went. A Malayan melody, he told himself. The notes resembled a man, much like John, in Malaya. He drew ties between the crotchets and saw a scuttling movement, left to right. On the right-hand page John wrote:

Victor Crabbe stood before his form and knew something was wrong.

The image and the music sat well together. John drew out another few staves and continued the movement. A conductor, then. Waving his baton like a fiddler crab waves its right claw. Crabbe the conductor stood before his orchestra, made up of the many peoples of Kuala Kangsar. John jotted more notes and then wrote:

He scanned the faces, row after row, in a silence churned gently by the two ceiling-fans. The serious mature faces looked back at him— yellow, gold, sallow-brown, coffee-brown, black. Malay and Indian eyes were wide and luminous. Chinese eyes sunken in a kind of quizzical astonishment.

He saw now, very clearly, that the trouble he had been having with the symphony could be resolved in literature. The various influences on Kuala Kangsar, Chinese towkays, Malay drivers, British officers, Indian workers could be represented in a novel, rather than abstract notes on the page. Not that words were any less abstracted than musical notes, John muttered to himself. Writing with words first would, he suddenly realised, act as the foundation for the final orchestration. To hell with *Julius Caesar* in Malaya, this would be *Ulysses*, Kuala Kangsar standing in for Dublin, literature as symphonia, but towards the creation of music. The lives of the British characters moved in counterpoint to that of the natives— a different rhythm, an altogether different cadence. The Chinese and Malays were the backbone, the string section and brass, respectively. That would need to be worked on. There were the Eurasians to take into consideration. And the Tamils. The Tamils were the woodwind, he decided. His bottle was empty. Where was he up to? The woodwind? Surely the woodwind must be the women, women of all races. Rahimah the flute, Lynne the oboe, this Chinese girl ignoring his call for more Tiger must be the xiao. There would, of course, have to be parts written for Chinese instruments, Malay instruments too. He would have to see if he could get his hands on a karaniing, Indian drums too. He wrote:

The process of which he, Victor Crabbe, was a part, was an ineluctable process. His being here, in the brown country, sweltering in an alien class-room, was pre-figured and ordained by history. For the end of the Western pattern was the conquest of time and space. But out of time and space came point-instants, and out of point-instants

> *came a universe. So, it was right that he stood here now, teaching the East about the Industrial Revolution. It was right that these boys too should bellow through loudspeakers, check bomb-loads, judge Shakespeare by the Aristotelian yardstick, hear five-part counterpoint and find it intelligible.*

He was drunk alright, it was all flowing through him now.

John wandered drunkenly back along Jalan Raja Chulan. If he saw that bloody taxi driver again he'd give him what bloody for. That great big fucking tuba. He saw the old rubber tree just up ahead and thought that this too would be represented by the deep honk of tuba. The instrumentation would have to be carefully developed. As the words came, so too the correctness of instrument to part. You cannot, he told himself, crossing the road, rush this sort of project.

He necked beer and looked around the kedai, the very same one that Lofty had brought them to that first night in Kuala Kangsar. At the next table a group of Malays were drinking. Beyond them a group of young women, Malay and Chinese, were eating ais kacang, talking quickly over one another. John tried to focus on the rhythms of their speech, the melodies held within. Their voices ebbed and flowed. He turned to Abu's exercise book and continued to write, switching between musical notation on the left and words on the right. Starting from the back page and working in.

Like the Quran, John said, hoping not too loudly. *Like Analects*, he said, a little louder.

What are you writing?

John peered high up, leaning as far back as the chair would allow, and finally found, just below the ceiling, the face of Lofty. *Alright, Lofty, lad. It's a shim-phony*, John told him.

Lofty sat and took the book from him. *Looks like a story.*

It'sh and shtory and a shimphony.

Are you drinking both of these?

It'sh yoursh. I've got all thish. He took several notes from his pocket. *Have a drink. Have a drink,* he insisted, the bottle already firmly against Lofty's lips. *Have a drink with your pal, John.*

We'll have these and then I'll get you a ride home.

Bollocksh.

I'll get you a taxi. We'll just have these and one for the road. What do you say, John?

John climbed into the waiting taxi. Was helped into a taxi just hailed. Lofty carried him, arms under armpits, and dropped John onto the seat. *I've got money*, John said, searching for ringgits. *I've got no money. Will you take cigarettes?* He held a sleeve of Victory brand over the driver's seat. *Quanto al Boscolo, per favore?*

Lofty got out. Maybe he said something, some sort of goodbye, but John heard nothing. He was in a stupor, he was in reverie, he was in shock. Late becomes early, end seamlessly became beginning. He studied the driver's bulbous bottom lip, the flesh that hung from his jowls, his bare arm resting out of the window, smoking as he drove. The taxi weaves through vaguely recognised streets and newly forged roads. He takes in the new shafts of concrete that punctuate the skyline.

It's getting dark. It's getting late. Already late and now the morning is setting in. Already daytime and the evening soon to call. The driver indicates, turns onto a deserted road. They share a knowing look, a journey repeated over several nights. The driver rubs his fingerless gloves together, breathes warm breath into cold palms. John could close the window but instead lights yet another cigarette.

I want those seats kept nice and clean, the driver called back.

John focuses again on a musical phrase. Pound, wasn't it, said that poetry should be composed to the phrase not the metronome. Tick, tock, tick, tock. Time slipping away like rope between sweaty palms. How did that phrase go again? C to G, was it? A, shifting up one whole tone to B. No, no, it would have to be started again. The manuscript paper was screwed up, though not tossed from the window. And tapping a typewriter keyboard in the back of a Dormobile, was that a memory or was that something more than memory?

He flicked through Abu's workbook. Try as he might, he was unable to fix his eyes on the page. Focus on the one theme for now, the one composition. Words blurred crotchets. Drunk John Burgess. Pissed-up Anthony Wilson.

Wear'd you say again?

Princess Cinema. But, no, that was in Harpurhey, not Moss Side. *Prince's Cinema, I mean to say.*

There in't no Princess Cinema, pal.

Prince's, he corrects, and, *yes, just ahead.*

Nah, the cabbie retorts, in that Manc manner, his mouth remaining slackly open long after he's finished speaking.

Pull over, pull over.

Fuck's sake. He indicates.

The journey continues. What was that phrase, G to C, perhaps? Lost, posted to the Malayan authorities and never heard from again. In either sense. Forgotten, he remembers, and strikes a match. His cigarette smoulders in winter fog. Monet, wasn't it, thought London only beautiful for all of its smog.

Part Two

15 April, 1944

Dear John,

There is no easy way to write this, so I will simply tell you that Lynne is not well, not well at all. The night previous, I found her in a dreadful way. A group of men set out to rob her of her belongings, we hear that they were American GIs gone AWOL, and Lynne tried to fight them off. They say she will pull through but to look at her now is terribly upsetting. I know this must be shocking for you to hear. She is at St. Mary's Hospital, where they are keeping a close eye on her.

I have given my address above, should you wish to contact me for any further information, though I am not sure what else I can say.

Yours sincerely,

Sonia Brownell

A book of matches rested on a book of his own. His first, in fact: *Time for a Tiger*. Pristine condition. He blew smoke and the driver blew condensation. Strange that John, who had lived four years in the relentless heat of the East, did not feel the cold. His hand tremored, the cigarette tip flitted back and forth, but he felt nothing. The car turned off the A40 and drove past the cricket club. No one around, of course. It was too late, or too early for anyone to be walking these streets. He ran his fingers along his unshaven chin. That would need doing. And he would have to wash, change these clothes too. They turned onto Bath Street, the Tabard ahead.

You can pull over just here. Foolish, reflex reaction at the sight of a public house. He could have told the driver to forget it but leant over to pay. *For your trouble,* John said, dropping the copy of *Time for a Tiger* on the front passenger seat.

The window, the driver called back, without even a thank you.

Bollocks to the window, John replied, and gave the door a good slamming.

Did he expect the Tabard to be open? Enough to try the door, certainly. He pulled his jacket tight and grasped the plastic bag they had given him. The Turnham Green station he knew, though not why he knew, was a hundred years old, an ugly squat thing. There were rotting stems, leaves and petals from the flower sellers. Still in bed, John imagined. No one buys flowers at this hour in Chiswick. London is something of a dead place at this time. He knew of a club where he would be given access to various drinks, but that would mean another cab ride, the long journey into the city. He looked in the windows of butchers and cafes and grocers. All empty. No one lives in a dead place. At Chiswick High Road he waited for traffic that did not pass. He waited for a terribly long time, just watching the asphalt of the road, the fag ends and other detritus, pages of yesterday's newspaper, matches, bus tickets, a

child's shoe lodged in the grill of a drain. How had it got there? Had the mother not realised? He picked the shoe up, it was in tight, and crossed the road.

John tried another set of doors and found them, too, firmly locked. He placed the shoe at the entrance of the Baptist church. All houses frozen. The yellow of the bricks grey in the darkness. All windows frost-glazed. He had often walked by here, jealous of the size of these places. Big three-storey townhouses, he pictured having the top floor to himself, a room for writing, another he could sleep in when writing got too much. He lit up, a speck of warmth in the fug. The pristine white of the bay windows, like bandstands, like wedding cakes, like the pillars of King's Pavilion. He carried on, past Strand Antiques and the dry cleaners, on to Glebe Street. And, passing the dirty wooden garage doors, to home.

It wasn't his home, not in ownership anyway. Lynne had bought it with the money from her father's death. It was a Jones house bought with Jones money. She had not gone to the funeral, John had been sent in her stead. He had heard tale of voodoo doctors who, with just a few words, could put a curse on men that would kill them dead overnight. Lynne's sister's words had put such a curse on Lynne, and the curse of guilt had rendered her inert. She had lain in bed for two days on news of her father and could talk about nothing except for Malaya and that tape they had been sent some three weeks after Christmas. Her poor dead mother and poor father, now dead himself, singing hymns of new life and rebirth.

The temperature seemed to drop another degree but he stayed in the street looking at the bricks and mortar. The house in Etchingham was his, they couldn't claim otherwise. Fucking Joneses. Edward, before he was finally spent, would continually ask where his next teaching post would be.

No more teaching posts, John would tell him*, I'm a writer now.* And he would be looked over with narrow Welsh eyes, even though the bastard was originally from Preston. *Writing what?* The conversation would have to be had all over again, how John had written books and was continuing to write them, and he had been on the BBC, radio and television, to discuss his work. Even Lynne would tire of her father's reticence to believe that his son-in-law was an, inverted commas, author. He stubbed out his cigarette and put his key in the lock.

Haji barked shrilly, having been woken from deep sleep. The house, like the outside, was cold and dark. Lynne had called it their London bunker. It was a retreat for both of them. A retreat from the country of Etchingham for Lynne; a retreat from London society for John. No one came to Chiswick. He felt for the handle to the living room door and opened it, then switched on the standard lamp. The dog raised his nose, but not his mass, and sniffed at the air. The smell acceptable to his canine olfactory, he lay his head back down and slept. From

the mat, John picked up a heavy brown envelope. Several four-cent postage stamps adorned it, along with his name and address. The handwriting florid, written in thick felt-tip pen. John feared envelopes such as this. They rarely contained anything good and, more than likely, contained death sentences.

He went to the bar. This was the one bit of house improvement they had made, an ornate glass-fronted drinks cabinet with sideboard. More of a cell than a bunker, John thought, looking at the wallpaper, its pattern almost completely dulled. He poured gin and walked the few feet into the kitchen to get a bottle of tonic. They had been cellmates here. No need for ice. Every venture outside the cell took all the plotting of a prison break. No need, for that matter, for tonic to be in the fridge. John tore a half-typed page from the platen and held it to the light, an unfinished review for the book section of *The Washington Post*. He crumpled the page and tossed it.

He sat heavily, slammed down the glass, tore open a pack of Burma cheroots and chewed down hard, fishing matches from his pocket. He raised the head of the anglepoise lamp, straightening it so it loomed above him. The rest of the cell fell into shadow. *What have you to say for yourself, ay?* He tore open the envelope and drew out a thick wedge of paper. On the front, written in his own cartoonish handwriting, *WILL!*, with his name beneath. Beside was a drawing, a child's caricature of Droeshout's Shakespeare. Big, bulbous eyes, triangle nose, excessive forehead, wisps of hair above and below thin lips, dog ears for hair. John flipped the page.

> SCENE ONE
>
> From a leather bag, a hand carefully draws out a bundle of parchment, in raffish calligraphy the title: A COMEDY OF ERRORS, and the author's name: WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE.
>
> WILL peruses his work. He rises from his desk and leaves his house.
>
> In the streets of London, MUSIC BEGINS TO PLAY.
>
> Will is greeted by the many people he passes, wenches in bust-enhancing bodices, stallholders, ragged children, and wealthy courtiers.

WILL
Give the people what they wish:
Something trite and tawdry,
Balladry and bawdry -
Give the people what they wish.

WILL continues on, through the streets and into the GLOBE THEATRE.

WILL
Give the groundlings what they crave:
Bombast and unreason,
Dog and bitch in season,

The word bitch was crossed out. A note beside the line read: *Though the Bard should be bawdy, he should not be outright vulgar.* Skimming through, he saw that notes such as this one littered the pages. John fished out a note at the bottom of the envelope:

Dear John, I've had our script fixer take a look what you sent. Look forward to seeing what you do with it. Time is of the essence!
BC

A fixer? He coughed, felt his throat tighten and coughed again. A fucking—he scanned, catching a red penned *dull* and *not believable* and *Shakespeare wouldn't say this*—fixer! Rage pervaded his entire being to the tip of every nerve ending. These fucking Americans. Hrrrkkk, he tried to shift whatever was trapped in his throat. Throwing the script to the floor he drained his glass and got up to pour more. He drank, bent down, unscrewed the part-written *Washington Post* article, glanced, and screwed it up once more. He hawked and rasped. No good. John took a mouthful of gin to shift whatever was lodged there. He coughed and found he could not stop coughing. Spluttering, he stubbed his cheroot out on the space bar of his Olivetti. The smoke stung his eyes. Haji stirred in his bed, whining and licking his teeth.

Jesus fucking Christ. He slammed his empty glass on the desk. If he squeezed any harder, he knew, it would shatter into his palm and fingers. He would have to pick shards out and bandage himself up. John thought to himself, I would like to get into a fight. I would like to punch and be punched. These—he grasped the script up from the floor again—fucking Americans. Did they not know who he was?

Sixteen novels in thirteen years, Bill Conrad had whistled.

Eighteen, John corrected. *I published two under the name Joseph Kell.*

Did you hear that? Joseph Kell! Bill called, delighted. *Who the hell is Joseph, never mind. Eighteen goddamned novels in—*

Thirteen.

Eighteen goddamned novels in thirteen years. The women did not seem all that impressed. They were Hollywood women, eighteen scripts may have garnered more reaction, though it would have been fewer words, less work.

Delilah here, say hi, Delilah.

Hello, Joe.

It isn't Joe, darling, laughing, *this here is John Burgess. Delilah is quite the reader, isn't that right, sweetheart?*

Oh yes? What sort of things do you like to read? John took her in, long legs, miniskirted, long body, tubed.

Mainly short stories. Do you know Borges?

Borges? Why don't we get a drink and you can tell me all about it?

He skipped to a scene between Anne and Will. Their son, Hamnet, has just died. Will sings him a song about ambition and legacy. Will is distraught, as is his wife. She says that she would give her own life, gladly, that their child would live on. Beside these lines, the fixer had written *morbid and overwrought.* He also suggested that the whole dead son business be cut entirely from the script. *This is a musical, Mr Burgess, not a tragedy.*

He cursed himself, not for the first time, for selling the rights to *Nothing Like the Sun* for a pittance. And not just that one, he had sold a job lot of novel rights to callous film producers. The money gone on two weeks in Marrakesh and two weeks in Tenerife. There was the mortgage to pay too, Lynne having spent the money on gin and cider. He had had to invent another life for Shakespeare from scratch, and if he wished to be paid he must genuflect to the Yanks and the Yankee dollar. They wanted a musical in the style of *My Fair Lady*. Shakespeare as a lovable rogue, somewhat rough around the edges but with a heart of poetaster gold. Anne would be his adoring wife, keeping the home fires burning for her adoring husband. Shakespeare would, perhaps, be a kind of Cyrano, writing poems that his shy Lord Southampton would deliver to a fair princess as his own thoughts and desires. There would be much made of this fair maid singing from tall towers, while Shakespeare whispered

couplets to his kindly Lord Southampton on the ground. He knew what they wanted all right, and refused to write it.

He had hesitated, in his London agent's office. The pen hovered. John knew his novels had cinematic quality, he had written them that way.

He said, *perhaps we should rethink this. I have a feeling that—*

Christ, John, Lynne groaned. *Just sign the bloody thing. You have sown, now is time to reap.*

Had she really said that? It would be something of a coincidence, as John had been considering the possibility that Shakespeare had authored that very line in the King James Bible. Indeed, part of the libretto John had been working on would include the very phrase.

> *Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.*

There was something of Shakespeare in those words. They did not exactly flow in Bardic iambs, true, but it shared something of the sentiment and the plot of *Measure for Measure*.

He thought of another possible plot for *Will!*: the newly crowned King dressing as a civilian and joining the Lord Chamberlain's Men — he had a particular scene in mind, Chamberlain watching a rehearsal of the play, demanding that Shakespeare find someone with a more noble stature for the role of Vincentio. The role is cast, only the Bard recognising the true identity of James I. As director, Will teaches His Royal Highness a lesson about ruling and the King is forever in the writer's debt. It was not particularly bawdy, but subplots could be added. Perhaps Will would offer James lodgings above Mountjoy's shop of elaborate headpieces. There, in that attic room, the two could engage in royal buggery.

John had a good mind to write the whole thing and send it back to Conrad. *I await, with eagerness, the thoughts and suggestions of your script fixer.* He went back to the bar and poured himself more gin.

He fed paper into the typewriter. He wrote:

SCENE ONE

SHAKESPEARE SITS AT HIS DESK, QUILL IN HAND.

CLOSE-UP ON PARCHMENT. HE IS WRITING A SONNET, 'LET ME NOT TO THE MARRAIGE OF TRUE MINDS' (112). THERE IS A KNOCK AT THE DOOR.

WILL

Come.

BURBAGE OPENS THE DOOR.

BURBAGE

Sorry to disturb.

WILL

Come in. You are not disturbing much, only the turning of my mind.

BURBAGE

That is the very reason I have interrupted. You have been in here for days now. When was the last time you ate?

WILL

I cannot eat. When my parchment is full, so too my stomach.

BURBAGE

What is it you write? A new play?

WILL

A poem. A sonnet for my absent wife, expressing my continuing love.

SCENE TWO

A PUB IN STRATFORD.

THERE ARE MANY MEN DRINKING AND MAKING MERRY. OUT OF THE WINDOW, WE SEE A YOUNGISH MAN PUSHED AGAINST THE SIDE OF THE PUB BY AN OLDER WOMAN. THIS IS ANNE.

OUTSIDE, SHE KISSES HIM PASSIONATELY.

MAN
But Anne, what if your husband were to find out?

ANNE
He'll not know. All he knows and cares about is London and London life.

SHE KISSES HIM AGAIN.

MAN
Do you not love him?

ANNE
(laughs)
Does thou speak of love, youngling?

MAN
I only meant —

ANNE
I know what you meant, daft lad. I love him for the money he sends and for the life he provides. And I love him for the distance he keeps. Come with me.

SHE LEADS HIM OFF BY THE HAND, THE TWO LAUGHING AS THEY GO.

It was a scene he had played out many times before, only it had always been Lynne leading off young lovers. He had seen it with his own eyes. Lynne had travelled south and found herself accepted into literary London. London had not daunted her. She wrote to him about her many conquests. She had, so he gathered from one particular letter, slept with Dylan Thomas. Implied rather than explicit, but he had been regularly mentioned in her missives. Lynne, plumpish and in her mid-twenties, had taken up a job in the Ministry for Transport,

and quickly got herself, through a colleague called Sonia, in with the London literati, while John was stuck up in Warrington, waiting for the call to arms. John wrote back angrily, asking what exactly she had meant by this schoolgirl's code. He didn't wait for her reply, asking his Commanding Officer for compassionate leave, lying about a dead or dying relative. He was given the weekend, and wrote to Lynne in advance to let he know he was coming to London for a reckoning.

On arrival at her flat, John found Lynne beautifying herself with black-market make-up. He was told that she had been invited to a party and as the invitation came a little on the late side there wasn't time to ring John and tell him to cancel his plans.

You're going out, and I've only just arrived?

You've not been invited, no. Well, at least, not explicitly. She pulled her stockings up as she spoke, raising her leg high and lengthening it.

Lynne, we need to have words. You're not honestly going to go? He still had his haversack in his hand, standing by the bed in his coat and shoes, watching Lynne paraded round in underwear.

Would you mind all that much? It's not as if you'd know anyone.

Yes, I would mind. I would mind a great bloody deal. He gesticulated, swinging the bag onto the bed like the carcass of a cow.

I've travelled from Warrington, Lynne.

There's nothing I can do.

You can bloody well not go is what you can do. You're meant to be my wife, I'm meant to be your husband.

Molly walked passed he door, Lynne closing it in her face, saying, *listen to you! You sound like you're rehearsing a play, Jack. Look, I'll go and, if I can wangle you an invite, I'll call the pay phone downstairs.*

You will not. He threw his bag on the bed.

Molly called in, *I don't mind not going.*

She's a nosy bitch, that one, Lynne said.

John sat on the bed, spent, using his haversack as a pillow.

Well, suit yourself, she said. *I'm leaving in five minutes.*

He got a quick wash, his armpits sharp and musky, and put on creased shirt and trousers. They arrived at the Tube stop and John found himself, once more, a civilian. The party was at

a large house. It could have been the home of an ambassador or the PM himself. Lynne did no introducing and went straight to dancing in one of the parlours. She called John over, but he was in no mood for dancing, no mood for anything. What she yelled he did not hear. He lost her in the crowd.

John wandered the house, catching glimpses of conversations about Sartre, Saussure, Jewishness and the rebirth of the British nation. There were many tall, elegant women, all, it seemed to John, holding court on everything from poetry to Peace of Westphalia. He had never really been good around literary women. It was quite debilitating. He had a strong reaction whenever he saw photos of Virginia Woolf.

In the kitchen he found himself surrounded by the main members of this group. John recognised certain faces from newspapers and book jackets. T. S. Eliot, wasn't it, making vodka cocktails. He found a crate of Fuller's Chiswick Bitter and opened a bottle. Some of the men drank cans of Ballantine, an American beer. They swigged straight from the can and spoke in England's finest RP.

John felt a slap on his back. *Seen Cyril anywhere, old man?*

How would I know if I had?

Well groomed, with sharply angled features and steely lips, he raised his idiosyncratic eyebrow, *who've you come with?*

I'm here with Eliot, John lied. *And Auden.*

Auden is in America.

Well, then, he thought for a moment, *Thomas.*

You know Dylan?

Yes, we're very close. Like brothers, you might say.

You're lying. This was not said in censure, but enjoyment.

I, myself, am a poet of great note, John continued, not knowing what he might say next. *Are you a literary man?*

Not in the sense you mean. I fund literary men. Are you looking for funding? He drank from a Martini glass, keeping his eyes on John.

Certainly. Certainly I could do with a bit of funding.

Certainly.

I've a new collection called, it came to him, *The Pet Beast, that I am working on. A stipend would greatly relieve me of certain financial responsibilities and allow me to occupy my time in more,* more, *fulfilling endeavours.*

How much are we talking?

I shouldn't think I would require more than, he totted it up in his head, *twelve, maybe fifteen pounds a month.*

Very reasonable. He finished his drink, was about to speak again, when another man whispered something into his ear. *If you'll excuse me.*

Of course. John watched him leave, relieved it was all over.

The man passed Dylan Thomas on the way out. *Your friend's just there,* he winked over at John.

Thomas came over looking for booze. *We've met?*

John knew he should be angry at this feckless poet who had had it away with his wife. *I don't think so. John*, he offered his hand, *I, of course, know who you are.* Perhaps he should have punched Thomas in his pudgy nose. *I'm a great admirer of your work.*

Very kind. Friends with Peter, are you?

Great friends. From school. But he felt no animosity.

Well, la-dee-da. Thomas poured wine into his glass. The two of them surveyed the room. *See anything you like?*

John nodded, *I'm on leave from barracks. I can't stop seeing things I like.*

John saw Lynne come in, attached to a big-chinned man from the dance floor. He looked like an East End club owner or a Hollywood gangster, with mirrored sunglasses and camel-hair coat. His hair was slicked back, but kinked and uneven. It seemed they were arguing, but then she let out a raucous laugh. He filled their glasses with punch and Lynne cadged two cigarettes from a man who seemed pleased to see her. Lynne's friend placed his into a holder and bit down as he smoked.

That one? Thomas narrated, Lynne playing silly buggers, blowing out matches each time one was offered. *No, I'd steer clear of that one, if I was you. She may seem like fun from here but believe me.* He said no more. There was, apparently, no more to say.

I shall bear that in mind, John said. He watched on. Lynne was laughing, showing teeth, shoulders rolling. In that moment, he saw his wife truly happy.

Thomas said, *so, what are you? Painter, philosopher, philanthropist, philander?*

A pianoplayer, he said. *And a damned fine poet*.

Indeed. Well, Thomas loudly cleared his throat, *if I can have everyone's attention.* And he did, immediately. *This is John. John what?*

Just John is fine, he replied, his voice as low as a whisper.

Just John here is a great poet, the poet of our generation, I should think. What are you going to recite for the people, Just John? John stood, the room turned in on him, unblinking eyes unblinking at him. Lynne had reduced her laughed to a titter but couldn't hold back when she saw John's terrified face.

Thomas said, *he's ruminating.* Then, whispering, *just make something up, it's only for a laugh.*

I will, John cleared his throat, *I will recite*, coughed into his hand, *my poem*, took a swig of beer, *which is called*— expectant faces began to turn towards one another. John tried again to clear his throat, tried again to clear it with beer.

Bollocks, come on, Just John. Here, have a shot of this, from his jacket pocket Thomas took out a hip flask and handed it to him. John shakily unscrewed the cap, put the flask to his lips and gave it a nervous jolt. Warm alcohol rushed through his cheeks, throat, ears, nose, to the top of his head. *Now,* and again loudly, *Just John will perform.* But Just John said nothing.

Let's have it, Jack, Lynne called over.

He screwed the cap back on the bottle, coughed a little more, and handed it back to Thomas, who said, *well. Well, Just John is just a little thoughtful this evening, but if I recall correctly, I can give you one of his finest pieces. Does it go,* he turned to John for confirmation,

There was a young lady named Bright,
Whose speed was far faster than light;
She started one day
In a relative way,
And returned on the previous night.

Those assembled laughed, some applauding. *Applause this way, please,* Thomas said, patting John jovially on the back. *Just entertaining the troops, as it were.*

John picked up his bottle and nodded farewell. He made his way over to Lynne, who had draped herself again over the tall, handsome man.

Having fun? she asked.

Not particularly. And you?

Always, Jackie. She gave him a peck on the cheek. *I've got to pee.* And off she went, into the bowels of the house, John following.

He lost her down the hallway and continued to wander. There is no war on here, John realised. Theirs is a kind of dream world; they've been transported back to a London that never existed, where artists and flaneurs, like Orwell in Paris, write about empty Streets and

Squares. Everything is a metaphor, all is present and all is lost. All the men have gone off to war, yet here are all the men, imbibing unrationed Yankee beer, raising glasses with soon-to-be-widows, who sup bitter gins with slices of unreal lemon. The whole bloody world could be on its knees and this lot'd still be mocking them that takes Nazism too seriously. Idly complaining about what a bore it will be when they must return, cap in hand, to their dear old father for another few pounds of inheritance they feel they're long since owed.

John climbed the wide staircase up to the second floor. There was a kind of tuning up in his head. A piano ran through the Aeolian mode. He began to hum, wandering a long corridor. In various rooms he caught fragments of scenes: two men hunched over a desk with their backs to him, a woman reciting poetry alone, Yankee soldiers, cigars gripped between their teeth, playing poker, a woman quietly undressing on a bed, a man sombrely closing the door. The melody choked. He stood at that door for a moment, his hand pressed softly against it. Slowly retracing his steps, John attempted to regain the melody in palindrome. Down the stairs he went:

In the corner of an unoccupied room John found an upright piano. He tried to resuscitate whatever had stirred in him. The notes he hit rang false. There was too much thought, too little feeling. Debussy's *La Mer* and all of Stravinsky in gross distortion, reflected in black pools of stagnant water. He hit a couple of big, bawdy chords and closed the lid. On top of the piano sat several scores. From the pile he drew out *Lohengrin* and took it over the settee. Bottle empty, John used the lip as a kind of makeshift flute and attempted to whistle the Act I prelude. Deep breaths, long drawn-out blows. Ridiculous but amusing.

Are you having fun? John looked up at a brunette it was reasonable to describe as beautiful.

I'm, eh, yes, just haven't, he put the score down, *I'm rather tired after a long journey back to London.*

I had to get away for a moment. She placed a cigarette between two desirable lips and raised her light. She looked, John thought, like Vivian Leigh. Or Olivia de Havilland. He wasn't sure which, but certainly one of them.

Yes. The same.

I'm Sonia. She sat beside him and held her hand out.

He took it. *John. Don't know anyone either?*

I know everyone. She said it matter-of-factly, though forcefully. *I work with Cyril.*

Yes, do you. He felt intimidated. *It seems I'm the only person here who doesn't know Cyril.*

How is it you're here then?

I'm with a friend.

Who? She blew smoke and eyed him suspiciously.

Dylan Thomas.

Bullshit, you are.

We're old school friends.

You don't sound Welsh to me.

I had it educated out of me.

Liar.

I am, he said. *But only when I speak.* John lit his own cigarette. He watched as Sonia turned in her seat, looking for an ashtray. Picking one up from the side table, he presented it like a waiter would present a tray of hors d'oeuvre.

Thank you, she said.

He held the glass tray between them and switched his legs over, his knees inches from hers. More de Havilland, on closer inspection. The melody returned, refreshed, in Dorian mode.

Excuse me, she said, uncrossed her legs, stood, and left. It was to be that sort of night. No doubt she would be out there now, asking for help to remove someone claiming to be invited, claiming to belong. He supposed it was about time he find Lynne and get on with getting drunk and getting out of this place. He stood, brushed the ash from his crotch and bent to pick up *Lohengrin* from the floor.

Sonia was standing in the doorway with two glasses. From a cupboard at the far end of the room she retrieved a bottle of red and a corkscrew. The theme grew bolder, a single piano played with great verbosity and warmth.

You're going back in?

No, I was, just, he held the score up, *doing a bit of tidying up.* Sonia was the major sixth, shifting everything from Aeolian forbidding into rising anticipation.

Well, aren't you an excellent house guest. Open this, she handed him the bottle, *unless you're leaving?*

John hurriedly threaded the corkscrew; a chord struck, the cork came in one fluid pull. He poured the wine into the glasses she held out, both of them still standing in the middle of the room.

Cheers, John. They touched glasses. The wine was good. John checked the bottle, French, Côtes du Rhône Villages.

Good, isn't it. Cyril has good tastes. And the money to feed them. She sat on the sofa, straightening her dress.

What kind of man tidies up at a party where he doesn't know anyone?

She studied John's face as if the answer might be writ large upon it.

Catholic, she finally pronounced.

Guilty, he said, not meaning to make the ecclesiastical pun. Sonia laughed and he acted along, the comedian pleased with his punchline.

If it makes you feel any better, I'm one of the guilty ones too.

Educated?

Oh yes. A boarder of the Sacred Heart, Roehampton. And you?

I was instructed by the Xaverian Brothers.

Here in London?

Manchester, he said, though not enthusiastically.

A Northerner. I lived up North for a time. Liverpool. So, what has brought we two Northern Catholics to literary London during wartime, John?

He knew the answer was, for himself at least, his wife, but that wasn't the answer he wanted to give. *Do you know Lynne Wilson?*

Wilson? Not sure. I know a Lynne Jones. Blonde, quite tall, pretty.

Jones, was it? *Yes, Jones, that's who I mean. What about you, Sonia, how did you—*

You're John! How exciting. You know, Lynne showed me some of your poems.

He blushed. *Well, I—*

No, don't be embarrassed. They're very good. Have you ever written for publication? With a bit of work, I think some of the ones I've read, what was that one, she tried to think, *something about her heavy body.*

He knew the one. He had sent it to Lynne from Eye, Suffolk. The music playing in his head shifted into the scherzo. Two notes trilled as he spoke. *Now earth turns her heavy body about*, he quoted himself.

Yes, yes, that's the one. Lynne was very keen for me to read it.

I bet she was, John bet. Lynne enjoyed showing his literary scribblings to literary scribes. She must have hoped that Sonia would share the joke with Cyril Connelly.

Well, carry on, if you can recall it.

He could. This was real schizophrenia. Part of him raged at Lynne for letting her drinking friends read their private correspondence, the part that would recite verse. Part of him developed the cynicism of the scherzo into forward propulsion. This part would have kissed Sonia there and then. He hesitated, but began,

An hour before reveille, the matchstriking hour.

He pictured the words coming out of Lynne's mouth, standing at the head of a table in the Fitzrovia, waiting for the laughter to die down before she recited the next gelastic line.

Soon frost will leave the flat drab fields of beet

And before him, Sonia; her eyes softly shifted, as though she were reading from the page. Here was a beautiful, intelligent woman, showing interest in him and his writing.

And blue smile over the networks of barbed wire.

A woman who took his creativity seriously. Would she like to hear something of one of his compositions? The music that was forming as he spoke could be played to some degree of competence, if not completion. He angled his head to the piano in the corner of the room. *I'm afraid, that's all I can remember with any confidence.* He picked up the bottle and poured them both a glass.

Do you have literary ambitions, John?

Sometimes, he said, hearing the vagueness in his voice. *I wrote a great deal in university. Poetry and prose, for the stage too. Music is my passion.*

You play?

The piano, yes, but composing is where my interests lie.

Like opera? You mean librettos?

No, no, the actual notes played by musicians. That's what I do, play in the entertainment corps, 54th Division. I haven't written much recently, not unless you include the knockabout tunes I write for the band. But, he shifted in his seat, straightened himself, *I have an idea for a piano sonata in E major. Something uplifting.* His heart beat in triplets. *I feel, don't you feel, that what is needed is*— John was interrupted by a young man he hadn't seen before.

Don't mind me, he said, *just looking for some paper. Every piece I find seems to be full of words.*

Have you met Lucian, John?

Pleasure, John said, Lucian said. A and B trilled in dunamis.

Cyril wants a portrait. He says I can have no more wine until I fulfil the commission.

Lucian rifled through piles of papers, all filled with big, grey blocks of text, anathema to an artist. Sonia got up to look too. She picked up *Lohengrin* from the top of the piano and flicked to the back page. She tore it, and the back cover, clean off.

Here you go, darling, she handed him the paper. All music ceased.

Sonia, he beamed, and kissed her on the cheek. *I'll do one for you too. Come and find me.* And he was gone. *Lohengrin* violated, John violated.

Incredible talent. You know who his grandfather is, don't you? Did you see the resemblance?

John didn't. He saw only torn staves and the ripped name of Richard Wagner. She was looking at him, he sensed. *A literary ancestor?*

Freud. Yes, Sigmund Freud. Lucian's at Goldsmiths. We're keeping a very close eye on him. Cyril's obviously looking to become part of Lucian's legacy early on.

What had they been talking about, John could not recall, all these torn sheets of manuscript still tearing through his head. He became aware of the rising silence in the room.

So, you work for Cyril. As his secretary?

Sonia stiffened. The word had hit like fingernails down a blackboard. *I'm an editor. I select submissions, commission pieces, and edit what comes in.*

I didn't mean to—

Cyril calls himself the editor, but he's more a figurehead. No, that's not quite right either. Cyril is Horizon, but I make Horizon happen. If that's not too self-congratulatory.

I'm sorry. For saying that, I just. Well, I have never been— never before, I mean, attracted to Catholic girls.

Sonia laughed, thinking this a joke, but saw that was not John's intention. *What a funny thing to say. Do you mean that you can tell a Catholic girl because they are unattractive to you, or that once you find out a girl is Catholic she becomes unattractive?*

I've always thought it a kind of incest—

John, you're pulling my leg, surely.

My stepsisters are Catholic, my stepmother too. My own mother, not known to me, also.

Well, yes, of course your relatives were Catholic. That stands to reason. Incest! What would you have done before the Reformation? She laughed at the very thought, *considered all women your sisters and off limits?*

John felt the back pages ripped from him. Sonia could see that she had embarrassed him and said, *It's not your fault, of course, guilt laid on so thick will tend to pervade all spaces.*

She took a drink of wine, watching him as he watched her. There was a feeling of space and time shifting, their space closing, their time slowing, the space between them and the rest of the party expanding, time outside of the two of them practically frozen. *You said, never before.*

I did. I did say that. A note struck with dampener down.

Lynne's not Catholic, then?

C of E. Welsh Presbyterian. One or the other, or same thing. To you and me, anyway.

I don't think she'd like to hear you talking like this.

No. She was right. *No, of course not.*

Sonia lent over and kissed John gently on the cheek. *You're very sweet*, and she left. He poured what remained of the bottle. It really was very good wine. There was, he searched, nothing but the vague reverb of those final fading notes. Something had been stirred, though. Sonia Brownell had stirred something within him.

Sonia Orwell is another woman who has been poorly represented by her husband's biographers. In 2002, Hilary Spurling published her biography, *The Girl from the Fiction Department*, about the life of Sonia Orwell, nee Brownell, in response to 'attacks' made towards her in biographies about George Orwell. Spurling argues:

> She was depicted as heartless, greedy and manipulative in *Orwell: The Authorised Biography* by Michael Sheldon, whose view of her was widely disputed after the book came out… The same accusations were repeated in harsher terms ten years later in Jeffrey Meyer's *Orwell: A Wintry Conscience of a Generation*.
>
> This myth of the cold and grasping Widow Orwell, based on ignorance, misconception and distortion, had by this time acquired its own momentum. The real Sonia seemed to have been taken over by the fiction department. This book is an attempt to disentangle the truth before she disappears completely. (p. xii)

Spurling explicitly offers her work as a response to that which has come before. Indeed, much of how Spurling presents Sonia Orwell relies on the reader's awareness of the works mentioned above (Diski, 2002, p. 32).

The central issue her husband's biographers have with Sonia is that she is 'tyrannical, grasping and interested only in the income the estate generated' (Spurling, 2002, p. xii). Spurling offers another version of her subject, one who is not protective of the Orwell estate for financial purposes but because 'George [had] made Sonia directly responsible for enforcing his determination that there should be no biography' (Spurling, 2002, p. 100).

Sonia is presented in *Little Wilson and Big God* as a friend of Lynne's. Burgess says it is Sonia who wrote to him about the attack Lynne suffered in 1944. He comments that neither he nor Lynne 'could not foresee any connection between that lovely blonde girl, later to be ravaged through drink, and my reading of *Animal Farm*' (1986, p. 331). Yet Roger Lewis is not sure about this relationship. He doubts Burgess's claims to know Sonia, particularly as he misspells her last name as 'Brownwell' (2002, p. 330). Lewis offers further opinion:

> I'm dubious about the Sonia Brownell connection. It's as if Burgess found the other eccentric, volatile woman from Soho and Fitzrovia in that period and concocted the tale that she and Lynne would have been friends. Maybe they were — but Sonia… was famous for her literary salon in South Kensington (William Burroughs used to attend), and yet the Burgesses never went, nor were they spoken of there. Hilary Spurling, who is the author of *The Girl from the Literary Department: A Portrait of Sonia Orwell* (2002), and who was a personal friend of her subject, says that there was never any reference to Burgess (nor to Lynne) in any conversation or in any written material — a significant lapse. (2002, pp. 330-331)

I wonder whose lapse Lewis thinks this is? Perhaps, the lapse is with Spurling, who failed to steer the conversation in the direction of Anthony and Lynne Burgess, instead waiting for Sonia to spill the beans herself.

Andrew Biswell's biography, *The Real Life of Anthony Burgess,* is somewhat more accepting of Burgess' account. Biswell simply states that one of Lynne's friends was Sonia Brownell, 'who worked at *Horizon* magazine for Cyril Connolly' (2005, p. 89). The biographer mentions again, on page 107, that Sonia is 'Lynne's friend'. However, the part that Sonia played in their lives is contested, even in Burgess's telling of it, and Biswell admits that, 'as so often with Burgess, it is difficult to establish where the truth stands in relation to his fictions' (2005, p. 108).

The fact that Sonia never mentioned the Burgesses again in later life, nor were they invited to her social events could certainly be put down to the circumstances under which she wrote that letter to Burgess in 1944. If there was a relationship, then it would appear to have

ended around the time of Orwell's death. Burgess claims friendship, or at least acquaintance, with Orwell too.

He and Lynne were upset at the 'government's unwillingness to bend the rules of foreign exchange to get Orwell to a Swiss sanatorium', which suggests more than a detached interest in him (1986, p. 443). Burgess goes so far as to claim to have influenced Orwell, and the already acclaimed writer's work — it is Burgess' 'tins of Victory cigarettes' Orwell casts his 'noncommittal eye' over and that are accurately described in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1986, pp. 334-335).

Burgess's interactions with Orwell go further than drinking in the same pubs. His book *1985* is both critical analysis of Orwell's novel and a sequel-come-alternative version. It is in this text, published in 1978, where Burgess first recounts much of his time with Orwell, as the character of an 'old man', which is developed and added to in *Little Wilson and Big God* (2013, p. 15). I wonder if Orwell is one of the big Gods that Little Wilson has been set against.

Orwell became important for my reading of Burgess, for my *version* of Burgess, because *1985* offers the best explanation of his dialogic instinct. In the section titled '1984: An Old Man Interviewed', there is a discussion about the symbolism of Winston Smith's notebook. The 'old man' comments that 'the past is the enemy of the Party. Hence the past is real' (p. 24). Using his notebook Winston can write to the past, not the past of the Party narrative, the authoritative, centralised past, but an imagined past, a past of Winston's creation. The old man continues:

> We can talk to the past as we can talk to the future – the time that is dead and the time that has not yet been born. Both acts are absurd, but the absurdity is necessary to freedom. (1978, p. 24)

Burgess further suggests that 'the past does not determine the present; the present modifies the past' (p. 35). Perhaps, there is a third part to this statement: whoever modifies the past controls the present. If Winston can augment the past, then the narrative of the present is disrupted. The party controls the past, 'Oceania had always been at war with Eurasia', yet Winston's dialogue undermines this monologue, he is free to renounce the party's version of the past and thus changes the present (1990, p. 301).

Burgess specifically points out that Winston Smith is not writing to no-one. The act of writing is a dialogue. He is writing in response to the narrative enforced by the Party. Winston, fully aware that the party changes the past, comprehends that his writing turns the

Party's monologue into a dialogue (Orwell, 1990, p. 30). He is free to renounce the party's version of the past and thus changes his own present, his own future.

John woke with a start, still in his shirt and underpants. He was back in the barracks, shitting himself that his commanding officer was on his way for inspection. That his boots were unpolished was just the tip of it. Then he saw the bottle of half-drunk wine sat on the nightstand. An empty bottle stood in the middle of the floor, *Lohengrin* balanced atop. His wife lay foetal, facing the wall of her flat. In a half-conscious moment, a whole other life, from a parallel universe, played out. They had graduated from university and moved to London. John was a struggling composer, putting works by Gerald Manley Hopkins and John Keats to music. Lynne worked at *Horizon* magazine. In her spare time, she was translating *L'Invitée* from the French. Things had been difficult at first, but through the magazine Lynne had introduced John to a benefactor who wanted him to put the works of James Joyce in a musical setting. There was a frisson, the benefactor was ten years older than John and John felt, rightly, indebted. Was there any way to repay him? By making great art, he was told, a long-fingered hand on his shoulder. He stared at saurian features and found them not unpleasant; indeed, quite compelling.

The dream was punctured by Lynne's bowels sounding off. John tottered down the corridor to the bathroom, mould and fifth-ridden, and pissed thick, yellow micturant into the bowl. He found nothing in the cupboards worth eating, a few sprouting potatoes in the pantry. He made a pot of tea, pouring in dusty leaves from an earthenware jar, before he realised there was no milk. While rooting around the cupboards for Lynne's ration book he found a stack of clothes tokens labelled 'Blair'. He found nothing else. His stepmother's voice narrated along with every cupboard door opened, every drawer pulled out. *Bloody slut. Look at the flamin' fifth on it. She's a dirty little bitch and no bloody mistake.* The counter was sticky in several places. He pulled his pants on, put his regulation shirt on, and went out to find some milk.

By the time he got back the tea was stewed and stone cold. He found a copy of *Horizon*, which he skimmed looking for Sonia's name. In that glimpse of an alternative world, it had been Sonia who had been translating De Beauvoir, who had introduced him to his patron, who

had been his wife. The disappointment permeated deep in his groin. Treble notes fluttered. The pan bubbled, John poured hot water on the stewed tea leaves. He attempted to recall that theme, with Sonia as the natural sixth; Sonia as the leitmotif. It was no use. He needed to be in her presence.

In the bedroom, Lynne slept on. He took in a cup and a couple of slices of dry toast. *Lynne*, he shook her. *Llewela, deffro. It's past midday*. She pushed his hand away and shifted her body. *I thought we could take a walk. Hyde Park, maybe? Lynne? There's a cup of tea here, and something to eat.*

Lynne came through to the living room, very cross, very delicate. John had poured himself a glass of last night's wine. She ran the tap and drank down three glasses of water. She dropped onto the sofa beside him and caught a whiff of the stale wine. *Christ*, she wretched, *get that away from me.*

How are you feeling?

I just need a minute.

I thought we could—

I said, I just need a minute. She tilted her head towards the floor, hand clutched to her forehead, and took small sips of water.

He wanted to put his arms around her, but knew she would bat him off. *Can I do anything?* Her fragility was extremely attractive.

Just, exasperated, *one minute, that's all I want.*

John placed his hand, very gently, on Lynne's back, barely touching her blouse. After a moment she stood up and went out into the corridor and into the bathroom. Listening through the door, John heard her wash her face, grumbling and gargling. Next he heard her piss, groaning, and flushed the chain. He waited a second, not sure why he was there at all. Another resident, an older man, gave John a deeply sceptical look as he climbed the stairs to the top floor. There came the sound of retching from the bathroom. Coughing, spitting, more retching, and then the toilet flushed once more. Once the cistern had refilled he could again hear Lynne washing her face, gargling and spitting. The lock clicked, Lynne pulled the door open.

What are you doing?

I wanted to make sure you were okay.

She wiped her mouth with her sleeve. *Why don't you have a wash, you could do with it. And then we'll go and see about some food.* She went, closing the door to the flat behind her.

From the fridge John took out a packet of sliced ham which had turned. He tore the packet open and dropped the dried-out meat into the dog's bowl. He would have to go shopping. It was nearly 5.30am, and another few hours before the shops were open. In the bread bin, bread had started to grow spores. He pulled out the few slices left and carefully removed the greenish mould from one piece. This he put under the grill. The butter dish had been left out. Lifting the lid, he caught a rancid whiff. From the fridge, John took out a jar of piccalilli. When the bread was toasted, he smeared it in yellow relish and took a desperate bite.

His head ached. His bones ached, for that matter. Every bloody part of him wept and he could not sleep or think or stop fucking thinking and found himself again back in London, in Chiswick, yes, in the Globe theatre, in Baron's Court, in Fitzrovia, in the arms of Sonia Brownell, in the bed of his wife who had written to him to say that it was over, while he had been away in Gibraltar she had found someone else, a journalist or some such, who she would now live with.

Sonia's London, then. She cast her shadow upon it. She was waiting as he arrived back in the city to resolve, but not dissolve, his marriage with Lynne. He entered the Bricklayer's Arms to find the two of them deep in conversation. Lynne received John as though he had just popped out for cigarettes. A quick peck on the cheek, she told him she was just in the middle of something, and shooed him off to get a drink. Sonia smiled in recognition. He held her gaze and thought he saw her blush. He had not seen her for more than two years. She shone out as C, as he fought against Aeolian sorrow. No longer did she resemble a Hollywood starlet, she was far too much her own being. He bristled with jealousy, imagining what these years had been like for her, all these men that surrounded her, all their opportunities, while John had none.

A pint, John told the barman. He paid, lifted his drink, and surveyed the pub. At the other end of the bar were three faces he recognised, though only two he had met. The pudgy, punchy face of Dylan Thomas railed up at the thin, sallow face of George Orwell. Beside them stood Alf Jones, one of John's old friends from Peninsular Barracks, Warrington.

L-l-look who it is, Thomas said, as John approached.

John gave a wave and walked over, *long time, no*— a young woman passed John, cutting him off and embraced the poet.

Martha, oh Martha, the poet laughed. *Several drinks for Martha,* he bellowed.

Alf turned his attentions from Orwell and caught sight of John standing, suspended in embarrassment. *Bloody hell, how did you get here?*

John regained his composure and made the rest of the short journey. *I could ask the same.* The two shook hands.

Are you out?

Me? No. A week's leave. I'm stationed out in Gibraltar. Yourself?

Finished up. I took one in the leg, in Anzio. Italy. We were bringing wounded off the beach. 5th Infantry.

Nasty business.

You should tell me. Nastier than Gibraltar, I imagine.

How is it now? John nodded towards Alf's leg.

He lifted and gave his cane a wave. *I get by. My manners. Have you met Eric?*

No, no. John held out his hand.

This is John Wilson. John, Eric Blair.

Pleasure, John said.

Likewise, said Blair.

John's a— what are you now, John? He used to entertain us when I was stationed up North. Pianist and writer of amusing little things.

Well, John feigned shyness.

Whereas Eric here is a writer of unamusing big things.

That's your literary opinion, is it, Alf? Blair spoke distractedly, wielding a rolling machine and packing it with pungent shag. John took his Victory cigarettes from his pocket and offered one to Blair.

I prefer my own, thanks.

Thomas joined them. *Those pre-rolled sticks,* he took one and put it between his lips, *are a bourgeois conceit. We've met.*

Yes. John. Wilson.

Very well, Thomas smiled and drew his cigarette from John's match. *We are getting drunk, John. We are drinking to as many lost as we can remember—*

For God's sake, Blair interrupted, his voice blasted with static.

Certainly we are drinking for those we miss. Certainly. A toast. He lifted his glass. *More. More to drink.* And then,

There's a text and a photo, a garter, a drunk,

And a fair face you half forgot.

He clasped Blair's hand.

This is remembered when the veins are scrubby,

And the shellholed gums no longer pink.

Alf got more drinks and John felt part of something that was not war or waiting for war to arrive. He surveyed the pub, heaving with drinkers, spotting Cyril Connelly and Maclaren-Ross and God knew who else. He could look Thomas straight now, the sharp stab of adultery sufficiently healed. John listened as the poet spoke between mouthfuls of wine and spirits.

One, one, one image make, make, he drank, *makes another, in the ordinary dialectic process.*

What did this mean? John was not sure but was glad to be privy to this conversation rather than the usual pros and cons of Billy Wright or the rise and fall of Rawmarsh Welfare FC. Thomas lost his thread, took a draft, caught it again and continued: *In a poem, one, one image breeds another.* John finished his drink and waved the barman over to buy another. He felt a hand slap his back.

Your round, John? Blair coughed heavily into his hand, *I'll join you.* He set his empty glass on the bar.

One pint breeds another, John mimicked in ebullient Welsh.

Blair ignored this and said, *Alf told me you write.*

I did. University magazine, that kind of thing. I'm more interested in writing music.

A composer?

Trying to be. The war has got in the way. The barman nodded at John. *Two pints.*

One for Thomas too, and Jones, if he's still present. Blair scoured the bar but could not see their companion. *Buy him one anyway, surely one of us shall drink it.*

John cursed quietly and counted pennies. Bloody writers on writers' salaries taking drinks from soldiers forced to live on a soldier's pittance.

What sort of thing do you write? Big symphonies for the big symphony halls, I suppose?

I've mainly written—

Not what this country needs. All symphonies are opulent. This is no time for opulence. And then, *I can't stand these things.* Blair, suddenly gloomy, cast a glowering look over the pub, rowdy with literary jibber-jabber.

John was about to second Blair's sentiment but said, *Why do you come then?* It was a question as much to himself, though Blair was not to know that.

I'm lonely. His words hung heavier than the cloud of smoke that rippled overhead. Heavier than London fog. John tried a few times to reply, to change the subject, to make his excuses and retreat. *My wife,* John could already feel from the weight of those two words what would come next, *she died.*

I'm sorry, he was sorry, *to hear that,* he wished he hadn't heard.

Yes. She was a good stick. Blair coughed. *We adopted a son.* Oh Christ, John thought. *Now he has no mother.*

Out of the corner of his ear John could hear Thomas reciting, *on almost the incendiary eve,* intertwined with Alf Jones' vivid description of the sinking of HMS Janus. *A Fritz X bomb.* They were only feet away, *when one at the great least of your best loved,* but Blair had drawn some kind of wall around them. *A Heinkel He 111.* He could simply turn away. *Who'd raise the organs of the counted dust.* He could find Lynne and tell her it was time to go—*deepest down shall hold his peace. That cannot sink or cease.* He could do these things. *She sank within twenty minutes.* He could simply say excuse me and walk away. *All but eighty dead. In many married London's estranging grief.*

My mother, John started, barely aware he was speaking, *died when I was just a baby.*

It's a hard thing for a child.

It is.

Do you miss her?

Jesus, let it stop. *He'll bathe his raining blood in the male sea / Who strode for your own dead.*

Yes. Yes, I suppose I do. Perhaps not her, her I do not quite remember, but I miss the idea of her, I miss the idea of having a mother.

I come to these things to find Richard a new mother. Maybe someone will marry me.

John lit a cigarette, Blair turned his handheld mangle. *Strange wounded on London's waves / Have sought your single grave,*

Ah, well, a stepmother is a very different thing to a mother. One cannot substitute the other.

In your experience.

Yes, I suppose, just in my experience. My stepmother wanted a husband, not a son. She resented the one for bringing the other.

And resented you too?

John nodded and heard, *Your heart is luminous.*

Yes, I will be clear. Thank you.

When Alf introduced us, John quickly changed the subject, *I thought he'd made some kind of mistake.*

Mistake? Oh, you mean Blair? No, no mistake. George Orwell is the name of book covers, Eric Blair is who I am.

Why the pen name, if you don't mind my asking?

Family. The Blairs would not like to be associated with poverty.

No, I can see that. Perhaps if I ever publish a novel, I shall call myself Anthony Irwell, so not as to tar the Wilson name with success.

Irwell. Yes, very good. You write? They were here again, everything coming full circle.

Yes, John lied. *Do you have any pointers for a novice writer?*

Yes, Blair looked distracted, *head East.*

He patted John on the back, gave a short hacking cough, and took off across the pub to the table where Lynne and Sonia sat. John watched him arch his long body over the women, lowering his head towards their waiting ears. He found himself outside the crowd that had gathered around Thomas. Alf Jones was nowhere to be seen. John supped alone and cursed all those he had stood a drink. Blair had pulled up a seat between Sonia and Lynne. They laughed and he smirked like a child. He leant and whispered something into Lynne's ear. She moved her head closer, Blair's lips practically kissing her long neck. John caught on. Things on the Rock moved slowly, but here, in London, Blair was working quickly. His son must have a mother and Lynne was without child. Irritation rose in his throat, like Blair's incessant cough. He strode over to the table.

Is this seat taken?

Blair raised his face from Lynne's hair and said, *ah, Irwell. Ladies, this is Anthony Irwell.*

We've met, John said, pompously, *we've all met, haven't we?*

Sit down, John, for pity's sake, Lynne slurred. She was arseholed. John could see now, slumped against Blair.

This, John said, sitting, *is my wife, Lynne.*

Blair blushed, Brownell let out an involuntary giggle. *I had*, Blair started.

No, I expect you didn't. John took his cigarettes out and watched this Eric Blair agitate tobacco into his roller. *Here*, John slid over his packet of Victory cigarettes. Blair coughed and continued to fidget with the contraption.

How are you, John?

Very well, Sonia. You are looking fine this evening. This was intended to antagonise Lynne, but Lynne was too drunk to be antagonised by anyone other than herself.

Eric suggested a nightcap at his place, perhaps he would be kind enough to put you two up.

Blair placed a perfectly cylindrical cigarette between his lips. *By all means. I'm not far. We can share a taxi.*

Out on the street Blair helped John get half-sleeping Lynne into the cab. The driver was old enough to be Blair's father. He had been retired, but had started up again after the war broke out. He and Sonia had a long, drawn-out argument about the impracticalities of women

becoming taxi drivers. Sonia telling him that she would have no problem learning the Knowledge. John paid for the cab with a couple of packets of Victory cigarettes. They left with the driver tut, tut, tutting and carried Lynne up to Blair's flat.

Blair opened the door and directed John to take Lynne into the living room. The air in the flat was stale, as if it had been closed off from the rest of the world. John stumbled into the living room and dropped Lynne onto a nearby armchair.

Where's Richard? Sonia asked, from the hallway.

With Susan, Blair replied. *I'm making tea.*

Sonia came in and sat across from John; they both watched Lynne as she slept. *She's had a long day,* Sonia said.

A long night, I'd say. How do you know George Orwell?

John, I know everybody. Everybody of interest, anyway.

Of course you do. You even know me. There was far too much self-pity in that.

He asked Lynne to marry him. But don't worry, he asked everyone to marry him.

You?

Especially me.

But you've told him no. He felt a pang of jealousy.

Several times.

Blair continued his clinking in the kitchen, Lynne softly snored on the armchair. John stood and approached Sonia. *I've thought about you a lot.* He waited for her to reply but she said nothing. *I've wanted you since the moment I met you, Sonia. I,* Lynne stirred, muttered something and fell back asleep.

John, please.

I've been so miserable on that fucking Rock. You have no idea. You, thinking about you, is all that has kept me going. He had no idea where these words were coming from, but he felt compelled to make Sonia believe him. *Is there somewhere we can go?*

John, Sonia started to speak but he kissed her before she had chance, pinning his lips to hers and holding them there. He felt months of pent-up frustration so close to being released. Sonia pulled away.

I'm sorry, it's just— I intend to leave her, she intends to leave me. I had hoped, I still hope that you will— he felt the heavy weight of these words on his tongue. *Fuck it all.* He felt like crying.

Sonia poured herself a large brandy from the drinks cabinet and lit a cigarette. *I can't do this to Lynne.*

Do it for yourself. Do it for me.

John, it's not that—

Blair pushed the door open, carrying a tray. He placed it on the table and swirled the teapot.

None for me, Sonia smiled, turning her brandy glass.

John?

Not for me, thanks. John crossed his legs so that Blair would not see what was clearly present.

Suit yourself. Blair placed a strainer on the rim of his cup and poured thick brown tea from the pot. John suddenly felt a deep desire to drink Stepmother's Tea. Everything rationed, there was so much to want.

On second thoughts.

Blair poured a second cup. *Milk?*

A touch. John received the cup with joy. It was thick as tar and lip-smacking with tannin. He lit a cigarette and blended the two flavours in his mouth. *Northern tea*.

There's a spare bed, Blair told him. *I've put fresh blankets down.*

Thank you.

The three of them sat in a not-uncomfortable silence. Lynne every so often interrupting it with a whinny or snuffle. John tried to catch Sonia's eye, but she focused on her glass. Blair thumbed through a book on his desk and poured more tea.

What are you writing? Sonia asked.

Blair lifted two pages from his desk and held them aloft. *Why I write*, he pronounced. *The thing a writer should never write about, I am writing about writing.*

Can I read?

Only if you promise to keep your opinions to yourself.

Blair handed Sonia the pages. John saw that the desk was covered in pages. Pages under ashtrays, pages on top of books, inserted into books, on top of cups and plates. The tea had made John incredibly tired. The day had been incredibly long.

Sonia laughed as she read. Blair pulled a face and said, *it's not supposed to be funny.*

But it is, she replied.

And why do you, John let out a yawn, *write, Eric?*

Because I am vain, selfish, and lazy. Blair said this as a joke, then took up a pen and jotted something down.

I should get some sleep, John said, standing. *This morning I was in Gibraltar. I was in a war, as strange as that sounds.*

Blair helped him lift Lynne into bed. The two men shook hands. *I'm sorry for all that*, Blair said, nothing further needed to be said.

John lay, unable to get warm, and thought about Sonia. Jealously pricked once more, the thought of Blair taking her to bed. He got up, ready to sit between them and talk until sun up, the time for sharing beds over. From the hallway he heard the sound of keys being struck. The rhythm of it was like Wagner, immediate and aggressive. He stood in the living room doorway. George Orwell, alone, sitting with his back to John, a cigarette in his mouth, hammering at the typewriter.

John's eyes watered from too little rest. They had been open for some forty-eight hours. Now they bore witness to another morning, without the kindness of a restful night. The clock on the kitchen wall read 9.08am. The shops would be open. He took his memories of rations and bought more than he needed. For Haji, he purchased four tins of dog food. For himself, he bought a sliced loaf, a chicken, potatoes, carrots, a cauliflower, lemons, celery, butter, milk, potted ham, tinned garden peas, Colman's mustard, Rich Tea biscuits, Bourbon biscuits, tea, instant coffee, sugar, gravy granules, eight packs of Benson & Hedges, and a two-pint bottle of gin. The girl double-bagged his items and he paid with a cheque. He dragged the whole lot back, stopping regularly, catching his breath sitting on garden walls.

Back home, he turned the tin opener over the lid of the dog food and shook the can until the glistening meat slid upright into the bowl, a perfect cylinder. He put the oven on high and pulled the giblets out of the chicken. He peeled the butter wrapper and scooped up a good amount in his hand, which he inserted between the skin and the flesh of the bird. Clumsily, he rubbed grease into the meat, leaving big gobs of butter in places. He sliced half a lemon and inserted these into the bird's skin. Potatoes were peeled and dropped into a pan. He did the same with the carrots and poured in tinned peas. Timer set, he put the chicken in the oven and made himself a large gin and tonic. He lit a cigarette and opened the back door. Haji, licking his chops, went out to defecate on the grass.

John fell back into his seat and spooled yet another fresh page. He stared at the pure white, the void. Nothing more terrifying than an empty sheet of white. They had not parted, of course, he and Lynne. He reminded himself of that now. Sonia had faded from their lives. Other women had come and gone, women who represented an escape from the life he and

Lynne had concocted for themselves. There were chances. By God, there had been some fine opportunities for separation

While Winston Smith can write back to the past to define his own present, Burgess recognises that there is another kind of temporal interaction, that of historians and biographers, which intends to bend the past to the will of the present. This conception can be seen in *Nothing Like the Sun* and *A Dead Man in Deptford*, but is exemplified in a piece of short fiction entitled 'The Muse: A Sort of SF Story'. 'The Muse' first appeared in 1968, in the *Hudson Review* and was then recontextualised as the final chapter of *Enderby's Dark Lady*, in 1984. Paley is a literary historian sent to Elizabethan London to find out, once and for all, in the way of all good historians and biographers, whether Shakespeare actually wrote the plays attributed to him. Paley is not sent back in time, however, but transported to a parallel universe, 'System B303', by a Swenson, his pilot.

In this parallel universe exists a planet that is 'enjoying the doubtful benefits of proto-Elizabethan rule' (2012b, p. 647). After he arrives in what appears to be Shakespeare's London, Paley finds his way to the playwright's house. However, rather than being met by the man Shakespeare, Paley 'spun around to see, dancing in the air, a reproduction of the Droeshout portrait of Shakespeare, square in a frame, the lips moving but the eyes unanimated' (2012b, p. 660). The historian realises that his presence, his prejudices, are affecting his surroundings. He cannot enter the real past because he brings with him the future, and a conception of the past from that future. Paley's experience throws into question the testimonies of all those historians and biographers that had come before him: 'Other time-travellers had ventured forth and come back… laden with sensible records. Wait, though: had they? How did one know?' (2012b, p. 657).

In his essay on the short story, Cullinan makes that point that scholars gift the plays to Shakespeare who is then 'reduced to the status of copyist' (1972, p. 217). Indeed, Paley confirms his pre-existing belief 'that Shakespeare wrote the plays that carry his name—this I will not believe' (1968, p. 123). It is interesting to note that Burgess changes this line, when the

short story is reused in *Enderby's Dark Lady*, to 'this is a thing I must prove' (2012b, p. 660). Time has even changed Paley's perspective of Shakespeare and his works, softened his view.

Burgess questions whether any biographer can claim to have entered the world of their subject without affecting it with their own presence. With Paley's inability to see Shakespeare and Mr Burgess's impulse to link Shakespeare to Malaya, Burgess intends that the objective past is not a place we can visit, because we always see the world from our 'unique, unrepeatable existence… in a specific social and historical situation', meaning we take our present place and time with us wherever we go (Holquist, 1990, p. 28). The idea is expressed again in *1985*. Burgess states: 'The memory of the collective mind has to be contained in records, and it is in the nature of records to be altered. Take it further: the past does not exist, and so we are at liberty to create it' (1990, p. 35).

'The Muse' is a direct repudiation of Barthes's 'Death of the Author', published two years earlier, in which Barthes declares the meaning of the text resides with the reader. It is not that Burgess is necessarily against the notion of the text being with the reader, rather the opposite. Each reader is entitled to their own reading, but they must engage directly and not through the conduit of another, privileged reader's view. In his book of Joyce criticism, *Re:Joyce*, Burgess makes the point that a writer's words are often at the mercy of critics and academics. Burgess's claim is that Joycean scholars frame Joyce's works as only truly comprehensible by Joycean scholars, who redefine his works as 'mystical codices' (1965, p. 9). Burgess argues that Joyce was a man of the people, yet readers are unable to engage with his as such (ibid, p. 11). This view not only relates to the centrality of the reader but to a fear of authorities, both critical and actual, who can impose their own meanings on texts.

It was a mild May morning. Lynne had sent him out of the house, the clack, clack noise of keys slapping against the platen driving her to distraction. He carried his Olivetti downstairs into the garden of Applegarth, collecting the morning post along the way. Between bills and statements and the general clutter there was a letter forwarded from his agent. He took a good mouthful of Stepmother's Tea and sliced the envelope with the butt of a teaspoon.

Dear Mr Kell, the letter started.

> *I hope this missive finds you well. I am contacting you*—a woman's writing, it was clear—*in regard to your most recent novel, Inside Mr Enderby.*

There was, and still is, something supremely erotic about a woman referencing your work by name. He read the line again — *I am contacting you in regard to your most recent novel* — it made him want to write a hundred other novels. For the first year as a professional writer he had been driven to write due to a sense of impending death. But since then, one of the compelling factors had been the letters he received. Of course, for every letter praising the entertainment value of his works or wanting to know how close to the real Mr Burgess or Mr Kell his heroes were, there was a threat of libel from some distantly remembered someone with an axe to grind. When he had been the television critic for *The Listener* the letters had come in weekly, from both men and women. When he was made literary critic they had ceased. He had very quickly requested that he return to TV watching.

> *I must say that I found it a most engaging novel. The reason for my getting in touch is that I am writing an article for the Bompiani Literary Almanac, which will serve to offer some insight to the scope of English novels released this year.*

He was part of the scope of English literature, just as he had known all along.

> *I would be grateful if you would agree to meet me, so that I may discuss your work, and future projects, for this publication.*

There was an address, *19 Elder Street, Stepney*, and a name, *Liliana Macellari*. He rolled that one around his head and over tongue a good few times. *Liliana Macellari*. He put out his cigarette and folded the letter back inside the envelope.

John peered down at the words on the page. Young Shakespeare stood on Clopton Bridge contemplating what his future may look like to those who saw it as the past. It was schoolchildren hovering over a not-yet-dead poet's body all over again. The trick was obvious. William Shakespeare, some other Shakespeare's son, watching the rivers of time flow from the inception of Naseby to the near future of Tewkesbury to the unknown of the Severn Sea and the unfathomable of the North Atlantic Ocean. *Dear Mr Kell.* And what of John Wilson? Would his name float down the Rother and into future seas? *I hope this missive finds you well.* What of Joseph Kell and Anthony Burgess, the author skins he climbed into? Would their names ring out like that of WS? *I am contacting you in regard to your most recent novel, Inside Mr Enderby.* How many of their works would survive? And who, in that dark and deep future, would connect the two writers as the one man? Would there be conspiracy theories about the origins of Joseph Kell's works? Scholars attributing them to the

pen of Queen Elizabeth II, perhaps, or Lord Abergavenny. *I must say that I found it a most engaging novel.* No writer can write with future approbation in mind. Sweet Master Shakespeare certainly wouldn't have had in mind Peter Brooks or a refurbished Globe. Bricklayers, surely, did not anticipate their bricks to last nine hundred years. Bricklaying paid, so bricks were laid. Words paid, so words were written. *The reason for my getting in touch is that I am writing an article for the* Bompiani Literary Almanac, *which will serve to offer some insight to the scope of English novels released this year.* But to survive, to survive on through time as black marks on a white page. To continue on along the continuum, imbibed through the eyes of people from distant futures. But thoughts like these did nothing for the jobbing writer. *I would be grateful if you would agree to meet me, so that I may discuss your work, and future projects, for this publication.* What price legacy when there is food to be put on the table. Reviews of *'Til Death Do Us Part* and *Some Mothers Do Have 'Em* paid far more in spendable pound notes than literary craft. All novels paid little, so he knocked out novels. Three weeks' worth of work rendered some sixty thousand words and enough notes to pay off the gas, electric and mortgage bills. *Yours Sincerely,* only the independently wealthy, *Liliana Macellari,* had the privilege to write to further their reputation or in the name of *art*. If John had been the son of Lesley Stephens or had inherited the wealth of a merchant banker, he might have spent his time considering, rather than writing, literature. *19 Elder Street, Stepney*. But that was not the case.

He went in to the kitchen and filled the kettle. In the living room, Lynne was sitting on the couch, cuddling one of the Siamese and nursing a glass of white wine. From the shelves behind her, John found a map of London in with the dictionaries and encyclopaedia, and looked up Elder Street, very close to Liverpool Street Station.

Where are we on the house? he asked. The Chiswick house, on Glebe Street, had been purchased but there were matters for the estate agents to take care of before keys could change hands. They would squeeze another few drops from the Wilsons before their house became their own.

You've got the post, haven't you?

Nothing today. He could take the early morning train from Etchingham into Charing Cross. He put the map away, looked over the various review copies piled up on the shelves. *I'm thinking of going in.*

Going in where? She craned her neck to see him.

See if I can get things moving. From there he could get the circle line to Liverpool Street.

You?

I'll go in tomorrow. Get the early train. It would mean getting up at six, maybe even earlier. The kettle whistled. *Do you want one?* Lynne replied by raising her glass to her lips. He made his way back to the kitchen.

We could book a room, Lynne called.

John poured hot water over the teabags piled at the bottom of his vat-like mug. *We?*

Go and see a show or something. Have a night on the town.

He stirred. *Can we afford that?*

Why don't you sell some of this lot? He peered through to the living room. There were review copies not only on bookshelves but on the dining table and mantelpiece. A pile in the hallway, more lining the stairs. He could take them into London, get a few pounds spending money.

He took his tea into the living room. *I only meant to visit the agent's office and see if I could gee this all up. I've got too much work on to go drinking in the West End.*

Lynne stood, the cat falling gently onto the carpet. *Just an idea, John.* She passed him and pulled the half-drunk bottle of Riesling from the fridge.

I've not said no. All I'm saying is that I've got a lot of work. Six reviews, an article for The Listener.

Forget it.

Lynne, don't walk away. If you— He stood in the kitchen doorway. She refilled her glass and turned. *If you really want to go, we'll go. I just thought, well, I thought I'd only be gone a few hours.*

Shift. She met him, her face lifting towards his. He could feel her warm breath. *Shift, John.* John stepped aside and Lynne took her full glass, the bottle in her other hand, and went upstairs. *I'm getting in the bath.*

John held the envelope to his mouth. He thought he caught her scent, sweet and yet delicate. All that was required was a reply. A simple, *Thank you for your kind letter. I would, of course, be happy to discuss my work, present and future, at length. I am working on a novel currently, for the Shakespeare Centenary. Yours, Joseph Kell.* Yes, that was all that was needed. Nothing too strong, nothing too imposing. Was this how Joseph Kell wrote letters? He wasn't sure. Wilson would be more intrigued, *how did you find my novel, who else are you speaking to?* Burgess would be aloof; he'd pass it on to his agent. But Kell, he wasn't sure how Kell actually worked. It had merely been a name to cover the presence of Burgess, which was, of itself, a masking of Wilson. He rather enjoyed playing the role of Burgess, that's true. Kell was a paper name rather than a pen name. What were his politics, what had he read, what would he be writing next? How would Joseph Kell, only three years old, respond to Liliana

Macellari? John went back into the garden. He could hear water running, looked up to see Lynne dropping her nightgown and dropping the blind. He turned back to young Shakespeare, soon to make his trip to London, and started to type.

Liverpool Street, his stop. He tried to walk not as John Wilson, but a kind of Wilson-Kell hybrid, Wilson carrying the emergent form of Kell. He tried to walk with drama, striding with purpose. Wilson ambled, meandered. But Kell, how would Kell walk? Wilson-Kell tried a nonchalant walk, something like a schoolmaster wandering the empty corridors at night. At ease and in no hurry. At the stairs he let a group of teenage girls pass, before following. Yes, probably at ease, he was able to write as a woman and as a dirty, comic poet. Comfortable in himself, that must be how Joseph Kell is seen. He lit a cigarette – fortunately Kell smoked the same brand as Wilson, the same brand as Burgess.

Elder Street was a ten-minute walk away according to the map. Wilson-Kell had time to practise his walk, decide how Kell smoked, and order Kell's thoughts into something like a cohesive character. But what character? He was a hollow man. What would Liliana Macellari make of this entirely hollow man, made up of only two volumes, able to comment only on television culture, capitalism, and the flatulence of poetry. A tiny verbal command, compared to that of Wilson, and certainly compared to Burgess.

He turned down Brushfield Street, a long dusty road of market traders and pubs, all in the thin shadow of Christ Church. Kell moved with confidence, dodging a fruit and veg cart, turning himself sideways to allow buxom cockney women past. He hummed and turned onto Commercial Street. Wilson knew so little of London. Perhaps Kell would be more knowledgeable. He would know that Spitalfields is just ahead. And he would recognise this building as Toynbee Hall where, John Profumo currently cleaned toilets and generally made up for lusting after long-legged brunettes. Kell might have said, when asked, *yes, I'm out West, Chiswick. A quaint terrace, yes. Enough for me to live and work.* Rather than Wilson's more Londonphobic, *Lynne's bought this fucking house in the arse end of London with some inheritance she got. She can do what she wants of course, but Christ, why there.*

Fashion Street, another place that meant nothing to Burgess, might mean something to Kell. He was very conscious that Kell wouldn't wear this shirt, faded pale blue, put in the wrong cycle. He stopped dead to examine his shoes. John Wilson barely registered his shoes. They were scuffed and unpolished, not that polishing would save them now. In the window of a fabric store, he checked his hair, comically unkempt. This wasn't how Kell would present himself, not by a long chalk. Liliana Macellari had seen something in Kell. Perhaps not just in

his writing, but through his writing and into the man himself. She could mould him. He could jettison John Wilson and Anthony Burgess; an opportunity to reorder the many inconsistencies that made up his character.

The market rang out with calls of apples this much, oranges another. Hawkers, he thought, recalling the food markets of Malaya. He pushed through a crowd of capped men huddled in the entrance. All tees have been glottalled away. John listens to callers who sell *le'uce* and *carro's*. There is much monophthongisation too. *Wa'ch your bladdy maaf*. How does an Italian navigate such rich dialect, he wonders? John Florio could answer that question. Shakespeare had spoken more like a Dubliner than a cockney. It struck John that Malaya was as far in distance as Shakespeare's London was in time. The two shared certain features, mainly both being entirely alien and unknowable to today's British.

Joseph had got himself all turned around in Spitalfields. He asked a fishmonger if he could point him in the direction of Elder Street. Joe or Joseph? It was quite a difference. He walked from the bottom of the road to the top. It was only on doubling back that he saw the ridiculousness of the situation, the oddness of his behaviour. John would go and— he saw a well-dressed brunette leaving number 19 Elder Street. Her hair was luscious, everything about her was curvaceous and voluptuous. She turned left and he followed.

His heart pounded. This could be, he thought, keeping his distance, some friend of Liliana Macellari. She could be Liliana's daughter, her lodger. All these doubts did not put pay to the excitement that he felt. This throbbing sensation, he admired her legs and the cut of her dress, which was finished halfway up her tight-clad thigh, only receded when he saw an advert for a guided tour of Jack the Ripper's London. There were many pubs round these parts that claimed to have lost customers to the Ripper. Joseph lost a step, laughed off the comparison, and continued to follow her.

Liliana cut down the side of Spitalfields market and Joseph realised she was walking towards Liverpool Street. He followed her down the stairs of the station and onto the Circle Line. He hung back, twenty or so feet away, casually smoking. Liliana waited patiently. She had smooth skin, the cold did not seem to bother her. She wore a fur coat, though he could not tell whether it was real. When the train arrived he waited for her to get on, climbing aboard at the last moment. He moved up the carriage and sat a few seats away. She took a book from her bag, not his, he sadly saw. Spark, he had read it and written a review. Liliana, then, was young Jane Wright, writing letters to authors who may never write back. Or, Kell thought, lighting another bad-tasting cigarette, was writing as Charles Morgan, and writing everything he had wanted to hear. At Tottenham Court Road she put her book away. He stood and waited

by the doors. They both got off at Oxford Circus, he at first in front, then hanging back to be overtaken. He followed her along Oxford Street and into the Academy Cinema.

At the counter he paid for one ticket. He watched Liliana go into the ladies'. The place was quiet. He walked to the back row, lingering for a moment, smoking again. Liliana, or Liliana's flatmate, walked in as an advertisement for Lyons Maid Fruit Parfait played. *Cool, exciting, sophisticated, special* came the description. She was a striking figure against the red of the walls and green of the seats. Joseph followed her along the aisle, Liliana a few rows ahead. She sat in the middle. He continued a little further so that he could see her face and took his seat. She opened a bag of Butterkist carefully and placed a few pieces on her tongue. She did not chew, letting the popcorn melt in her mouth. That heart-thumping feeling was back. He wanted to go over and sit beside her, smell her smell. He wanted to touch her skin. The lights dimmed, the film began.

There seemed to have been some kind of accident. A huge pile-up of cars and buses. There were children, it appeared, suffocating. Whispering voices, he looked over to Liliana who watched intently. Now there was a man in a trilby and long black coat floating over the cars and—what had happened?—dancing in the sky like a kite before plummeting into the sea. What the bloody hell was this film?

During the process of writing this fictional account of Burgess's life, I sought a way to replicate Burgess's narrative device of a future reader visiting, or creating, a past writer. Even in his more conventional literary biographies, it is the dichotomy that Burgess is working within — he presents, in *Flame into Being*, the child Burgess who will, in the future, meet the works of deceased D.H. Lawrence. While Burgess complained that his narrative device had been overlooked, particularly in *Nothing Like the Sun*, it is easy to see how a narrative conceit that is presented at the beginning of the novel, with a few small, esoteric references in the main narrative, and a resolution at the end of the novel can be disregarded. The narrative device is most successful in *A Dead Man in Deptford*, where the character of Jack Wilson is not only present in the text but actually engages with Marlowe.

While working on this strand of the novel, I read *Beard's Roman Women* and came across the character of Gregory Gregson. This was a coincidence, as I used the last name of Gregson for the first short stories I had published and plays produced. Gregory and Gregson represented something of my own development as a writer. I often wonder if Burgess chose to write under a pseudonym for the same reasons I did, in that I did not feel confident in the quality of my early work. I used Gregson as a disguise, under which I could try and fail, in the knowledge I would revert to my real name when I became more assured in my craft.

There has been a great deal of coincidence during the process of writing this book. In the first novel I read when I began this project, *Any Old Iron*, Burgess presents a character who works on Deansgate and lives on Palatine Road, Withington. I had not long shared both of these traits. In Malaysia, on the hunt for Burgess, I went into a bookstore in Penang owned by a man called Gareth Richards. Richards, it turned out, had gone to university in Manchester and had worked as a lecturer. The last house he had lived in, before moving back to Malaysia, was one street over from where I was currently living. Richards had recently been grappling with Burgess's influence and future influence on Malaysia and how to raise the profile of his connection to the country and the *Malayan Trilogy*. There are many other coincidences, but these best explain my decision to insert a character called Gregory Gregson into the novel.

The Gregson in *Beard's Roman Women* is an old friend of Roland Beard's. He is brash and pompous, but he is also a link to Beard's past, to the past of his dead wife. My Gregson was a fictionalised version of myself. I began plotting points where Gregson could infiltrate Burgess' life. He survives as the fanatic at the book signing, wanting Burgess to sign his entire works, and also hoping to get Burgess's signature on his own novel. He was to be a passenger aboard the Willem Ruys, a guest at Cyril Connelly's party, and a guest at the Time/Life party some fifteen years later. In the latter part of the novel, Gregson was to meet Burgess in Rome, and make his final appearance in Iowa, in 1975. Here, he would ask Burgess whether the performance of his *Symphony in C* was truly was his 'great artistic moment' (1975, p.73). At each juncture, he would interrogate Burgess, about his current life or a piece of writing. The problem was that Gregson had no forward momentum of his own. He met Burgess at important points in Burgess's life but not in his own. His whole existence was predicated on furthering Burgess's narrative — finding new ways to mine information. This is the reason that Burgess chose to have his narrative characters open and close his novels. Mr Burgess can only get drunk on the telling of Shakespeare's story — his life is in stasis while WS's life unfolds. The schoolchildren who visit upon Enderby can only be present when the poet is sleeping, his life in limbo. Jack Wilson can only ever be a minor

character in Marlowe's story, unable to both narrator and partake in life. In all three of these examples, the narrative character must create the story they are telling. Jack Wilson presents Marlowe as if drawn from a box where he was waiting. Enderby's visitors instigate Enderby's story. Until they declare him a great poet, surviving in Great Time, Enderby is dormant, waiting to be awoken.

After jettisoning Gregory Gregson, I began to experiment with a critical voice, inserting analytic responses to my creative writing. By deconstructing — dismembering — this constructed history and fiction of Anthony Burgess throughout the text, the 'academic's voice' intends to draw the reader from the illusion of the narrative, to make them question *my* Anthony Burgess. This critical voice approaches Burgess's story from a Bakhtinian perspective, both revealing and imposing a theoretical reading of the novel. And while the inclusion of other writers and their works in the creative narrative reflect the metatextuality of Burgess's historiographic metafictions, my critical interruptions, with quotations from literary critics and yet more writers, intend to further interrupt and add layers to this device. Burgess's use of 'spurgeoning', in *Nothing Like the Sun,* is an allusion to Shakespeare criticism — to the critic Caroline Spurgeon — but quotes from Jim Clarke, John Stinson and Geoffrey Aggeler make visible the range of Burgess criticism.

While I was writing the book, I saw Will Self give a talk on the future of the novel. He thought the novel was doomed because readers no longer immersed themselves in books. When readers previously hit a word they didn't understand or a reference they weren't sure of, they would read on, hoping that context would reveal the word's meaning. In our technological age, readers who come across a word they don't know will, according to Self, put the book down and access the internet. This lack of immersion, for Self, means that the novel as a medium is no longer viable. But Burgess's novels have always had people reaching for their dictionaries. When I first read *Nothing Like the Sun*, I found myself constantly referring to Shakespeare's plays and poems, even reading Joyce's *Ulysses,* to confirm what Burgess only suggested in the text. Burgess intended his works to be read as hypertexts — part of a wider network of interlinked texts. In an article about the creation of *Nothing Like the Sun,* 'Genesis and Headache', Burgess relates just some of the other texts that are implicit in his novel:

> I had been reading pretty widely, ever since my student days, in books about Shakespeare, in Elizabethan documents, in close scholarly background history. I had taken a lot of notes, and, in early 1963, I took notes feverishly. (1988, p. 31)

While *Inside Mr Enderby* is internally metatextual, Burgess both writing about Enderby and Enderby writing poetry, his historiographic metafictions are hypertextual, implying the many works written by their subjects.

Of the novel *Madame Bovary*, the historian Hayden White states that 'the only information we can possibly ever have… is what Flaubert chose to tell us in his novel' (2005, p. 150). Burgess's historiographic metafictions, however, explicitly refer to information outside their pages. Just as White claims there cannot be any more information about Emma Bovary than that contained in Flaubert's novel, there can be no more works by Enderby than those presented in the novel. By contrast, the vast amount of Marlowe's work exists outside Burgess's *A Dead Man in Deptford*. The novel does not contain all information about Marlowe but acts as a hypertext, linking to the range of Marlowe's creative output and its wider critical and creative responses, including works that will follow.

Published four years after *A Dead Man in Deptford*, Ian Sinclair and Dave McKean's *Slow Chocolate Autopsy* presents another fictional Christopher Marlowe. The narrator, Norton intends to 'muzzle Anthony Burgess' by revealing the real circumstances of Marlowe's death (1997, p. 8). However, by evoking Burgess's work, the graphic novel becomes a hypertext, and adds to *A Dead Man in Deptford's* hypertextuality. Furthermore, the novel's metatextual engagement with Burgess goes beyond Marlowe. The central story of a time traveller trapped in Elizabethan London parallel's Burgess's 'The Muse', while the use of the River Thames as a means of traversing time echoes Burgess's river chronotope (see p. 192). My biographical fiction of Burgess, rather than muzzling him, consciously replicates his own hypertextuality. His works are both implicit and explicit in my own. The addition of scholarly references, and those writers who also enter dialogue with Burgess, furthers the notion of text as hypertext, by presenting specific, visible threads that make up the web of unending Bakhtinian dialogue, down to the very page number.

He came through the front door of Applegarth. *Lynne, I'm back.* In the kitchen he made two large gins. Lynne was nowhere to be found. On the coffee table was a note, *gone to Rose and Crown*. He sank into the sofa and drank bitterly. He had spent the entire journey back from

London struggling with Shakespeare and everything he did not know about Shakespeare. Why had he been described as a schoolteacher, when there was no evidence of him ever being employed in such circumstances? Where the hell did he go between 1589 and 1592? He sank his gin and went into the kitchen to sink Lynne's.

He was not in the country, thus he was not accounted for. But where could WS had gone for three years? There was a boat. He boarded at midnight, escaping whoknewwhat. The boat took him around the Bay of Biscay, where they docked in Tangier for a few nights, through the Strait of Gibraltar, resting at the Rock a day or two, and then into the Alboran Sea, the Balearic Sea, the Tyrrhenian Sea, and finally the Aegean Sea. Yes, John could see it all now. He poured another two gins, a force of habit. WS spent some time in Athens, where he was introduced to the story of Timon. From Athens he visits Ephesus in Turkey. Here he shares quarters with an Italian merchant who owes a great deal of money and wants only to escape home to his wife and sons. Down to the Red Sea, through the Gulf of Aden, and across the Arabian Sea, stopping briefly in India, and finally to Tanah Melayu. Here, WS becomes a teacher to the children of rich Portuguese and Dutch traders. He finds himself infatuated with a Malayan woman named Rahimah. No, Fahimah was better. She cannot be with him because she has followed Parameswara into Islam, but they cannot control their passion for one another. The moment they promise never to see each other again, the lovers are caught in a passionate farewell kiss, WS's life is in danger. He absconds in the dead of night, his poems and plays safely hidden upon him, in a brown leather satchel, and journeys back home. When he arrives back in London he falls ill, it appears terminal. A doctor gives him just a year to live, and WS, desperate to raise his family's status and the Shakespeare name, begins a crazed period of writing. He survives, but alas Hamnet, his boy child, does not. The legacy he has set about creating has been lost. But in these plays, WS comforts himself, the Shakespeare name will live on. Back in Tanah Melayu, a dark woman gives birth to a son she names Hajat.

The plot was sound enough, but John feared that he did not have the time to write all to a satisfactory standard. The novel must be completed by Shakespeare's quatercentenary or he would have to suffer the ignominy of having it published the year after all the Shakespeare celebrations had ended. Just getting WS to Greece would take five thousand words, the whole bloody thing was running away with him. He would have to write much in Greek and Latin and, by Christ, Cleopatra herself spoke Egyptian, Ethiopian, Hebrew, and God knew what else.

Beside Lynne's note was the day's post. An envelope that bore the sigil of the Inland Revenue, a couple of bills and a handwritten letter. He recognised the handwriting, blushed on

recognition. Finishing off one drink and starting on the other, he tore it open. A flush of anger, of shame, of— it was all too much.

> *Dear Mr Burgess*
>
> *I hope this missive finds you well. I am contacting you in regard to your most recent novel, A Clockwork Orange. I must say that I found it a most engaging novel. The reason for my getting in touch is that I am writing an article for the Bompiani Literary Almanac, which will serve to offer some insight to the scope of English novels released this year.*
>
> *I would be grateful if you would agree to meet me, so that I may discuss your work, and future projects, for this publication.*
>
> *Yours sincerely,*
>
> *Liliana Macellari*

He thought he might be sick. Joseph screwed up the letter, Anthony unravelled it.

The fucking bitch. She's writing these to every bloody bastard bugger. I bet she's written one to sodding Muriel sodding Spark, an' all.

Don't be such a fucking kiddy. She says she's writing to other bloody writers—

But you?

Yes, me. What the hell is wrong with me? I am a fine writer.

John was too drunk to stop them. They fought all night, raging about who was the better author, Burgess claiming it was he on sheer output alone, Kell sniping that productivity did not equal quality. Lynne was dropped off by a taxi just after midnight. She came in, opened a bottle of wine, and sat on the armchair. She was asleep in moments.

You sad prick, Kell.

Oh, piss off, Burgess.

John took control. He sat at his Olivetti and wrote a letter. *Dear*, he wrote, *Ms Macellari*. *Thank you*, he wrote, *for your kind letter*. He would be happy to meet to discuss his work and help in any way he could. She may be aware that he had recently had a book published on the very subject of *The Novel Today*, and that was its title. He suggested a place, time and date. *He was*, he wrote, *coming from Etchingham which*, she might not be aware, *is a town outside London*. There was the small matter of a new house, he informed her, he was purchasing in Chiswick, hence the place, mid-afternoon, hence the time and date, which brought him to London. *If this was not convenient, then something else*, he wrote, *could be arranged*.

Although, he wrote, *I so rarely find myself in London at present, what with the writing*, he wrote, *of a novel about Shakespeare set for publication in his quatercentenary year*.

In Kleftiko, John tasted the fine Greek flavours he had been writing about. She was late, the wine was oily and tart. The waiter moved between him and a young couple, amorous and eating with great appetite. He checked his watch, fifteen minutes past. She would not come, then. Wine drained, he drew out his wallet to pay for piss poor wine.

Sorry, someone said, voice ripe with Italian body, *you are not, by any chance, Anthony Burgess, are you?*

I am, he stood. It was her. She looked exactly as she had done a week earlier, dressed in exactly the same outfit.

Mr Burgess, I am Liliana Macellari. Liana. She held out her hand, firmly. John shook it weakly.

Yes, he said, mind wandering, following her down backstreets and deep red corridors. *Please*, he pulled himself back to the present, *have a seat. Let me take that.* He snatched at her jacket, and had it gently taken from him by the waiter, who pulled out a chair for Liana to sit.

Another glass, John said, shakily.

Of course, sir.

And another bottle, he added, draining what was left of the first.

She was, he realised, equally if not superiorly stunning. By the time the waiter arrived with another bottle of miserable Greek wine he had all but forgot the other Liliana's face.

You have bought it today?

Finalised today, yes. I picked up the keys moments ago. He jangled them in his hand.

How exciting. You will move from—

Etchingham.

From Etchingham?

No, I will keep the house. It has been good to me. In a writing sense, I mean. I have written several novels there. It is a quiet place. Quietness is required for the writing of novels.

But your novels are so noisy! She said it as a compliment. He took it as a compliment. *Riots and beatings and Russian parties and—*

Music.

Yes, lots of music.

You have read a number of my novels?

I have. Though not all, I am afraid.

And your favourite?

She sipped her retsina. It seemed that she had never drunk retsina before. The pine flavour obviously did not agree with her. Liliana tried to close her nostrils every time she drank. *If I had to choose one, but I do not.*

Go on. For my own curiosity.

Your first, I think. Though, I loved A Clockwork Orange.

A minor work.

With major ideas. Major statements about the world. She stopped, the waiter serving up their starters. A medley of Greek tapas. Taramasalata and pitta bread. Dolmades, like fat slugs marinated in their own juices. Keftedes Arni. Baba Ghanoush, which is not Greek but a welcome imposter.

Well, he said, *thank you for saying so. And tell me about your work at the Bompiani Literary Almanac, who else are you speaking with?*

Many, she put a dolmade in her mouth and chewed. *You will know them?*

I have my literary friends. John wondered if Shakespeare had ever eaten rice wrapped in vine leaves. He found it very easy to imagine WS sampling the foods of the world.

Muriel Spark. Have you read her most recent novel?

He coughed on his mouthful of pork. *I have.*

She is a great talent, I think. She chewed. *John Fowles. He is new.*

The Collector?

Correct. Yes. With her elegant hand she dabbed a slice of pitta bread into mushy aubergine. *Joseph Kell. He wrote a very funny book. Lots of bad behaviour.* With her Italian emphasis, bad behaviour chimed seductively in his ear. *But Kell is not very productive,* she continued, *two books in three years. Whereas you*, she made a sound and a gesture of an explosion, which put him immediately at ease.

Yes, well. A man must work to eat.

In that case, Anthony, you must eat very well. How will anyone ever keep up with you?

I'm not sure. He drank down half a glass of retsina. It really was quite awful.

What are you writing now, if you don't mind my asking?

No, I don't mind, don't mind at all. I'm writing a novel about Shakespeare, kind of a celebration of the man, joining the dots. More about the man than the myth, if you see what I mean.

He worked to eat. She bit into a meatball.

Exactly that. Yes, quite exactly. He has no sense of the Shakespeare we know now, the Shakespeare of the RSC. No, he writes plays because plays put food on the table, because plays are demanded of him.

And novels are demanded of you?

No, no. No one would mind very much if I never wrote again, I should think, but it is how I make my living. Now, at least.

Now?

Yes, I was, in another life, a schoolteacher, if you can believe it. I taught in Malaya.

Like Crabbe.

Indeed, thank you. Yes. Unlike Crabbe, I only came close to death.

Drowning? How awful. She scooped up the last of the taramasalata with the last piece of pitta. Refreshing to be faced with Italian hunger instead of British politeness.

No, not drowned. I had a kind of episode. I collapsed in Malaya, while teaching. They told me I had a tumour in my head, he pointed, *and just a year to live. So, I thought I had better start writing. I was under the impression that a writer would earn much more than a teacher in a year, although that proved not to be the case.*

I would think there are very few teachers who have a house in the country and a house in the city.

I have no doubt about that, dear Algy. John laughed. Liliana did not, it seemed, get the reference. *I'm going to go ahead and order some more wine. This,* he held up his empty glass, *is not going down well.*

Don't order on my account. I cannot drink too much, I have work to do later.

He called the waiter over, *can I see the wine list again, please. But this is a celebration, it is not every day I get to have lunch with a beautiful lady.* It was too much, he knew it was too much. The waiter returned with the list. John busied himself with it. *The Sancerre, I think.* It was by far the most expensive wine on the list, besides the Champagne he toyed with ordering.

A very good wine.

Good wine, he quoted, *is a good familiar creature, if it be well used.* He lit a cigarette. *Apologies if I embarrassed you then, it's just being with you, an intelligent, sweet lady,* he was doing it again*, I'm just very pleased to have met you.*

That is very kind.

He had brought her back here, to Glebe Street. Entirely bare and entirely empty. He found, in the upstairs airing cupboard, some pillows and cushions. They opened another bottle of wine, bought from Kleftiko along with two large wine glasses.

So, Anthony, what is your Shakespeare novel about? I mean, which part of his life?

Centrally it is about his relationship with the Dark Lady. He thought of it now, have the Dark Lady come to WS, have Liana come to him. *While his wife is at home, in the country, Will falls for an exotic woman in London.*

I see. It is a romance? Liliana looked very comfortable, lounging on cushions. John sat against the wall flicking ash onto the threadbare carpet.

Of sorts. It is about sex, so there is romance attached.

But not love? I get the impression that you are suspicious of love. She accepted another glass of wine. *Those who do love are so often separated by death, in your writing, do you see? Crabbe loves his first wife, dead; Beatrice-Joanna loves her son, dead; Alex, I think, loves no one, but loves the him that is now dead, the him that was free.*

He felt a hard lump in his throat, and sinew between his teeth. *I don't— There is very little a novel can say about love. Love comes at the end, if at all, as some kind of reward for the characters—*

And the readers.

Yes. Yes, I see that.

Will your William find love in the end?

He crouched down, now, against that wall and smoked, drawing the ashtray down from his desk. There had been, from John especially, too much honesty. He had described, in great detail, the loveless marriage he persevered with. Liliana had recently divorced a writer by the name of Ben Jonson. John hated him with all of his drunken rage. An Italian Catholic divorce was no small matter, she told John, but sometimes you must do what is best. And, she said, she hated God. But this was after they had shared three bottles of Sancerre, when all nuance and specificity had gone out of the window. He told her that he could not bring himself to divorce. Lynne would have to, he remembered saying it, he said it out loud with only Haji to listen, *die for me to be free of her.* Liliana looked on him with pity. Carefully, she put her wine glass down and crawled over to him. She kissed him and, he remembered vividly, it was like being kissed for the first time. He felt faintly ridiculous, like one of these greasy-haired teens he saw necking outside confectioners. It wasn't long, though, before he had forgotten all about that, about the world outside. He delighted in kissing her. As she continued to talk about

the indelible harm lovelessness could do to a person, John tried to put his mouth against hers, she pulled away but only to finish her point, which she had, by that time, forgotten.

They made love. Liliana set the cushions out, drunkenly, trying to create something approximating a bed. She laughed, bent over, on her knees, trying to get the damn things to go where she wanted. John attempted to help, just there, it had happened just there in front of where he sat now, but found he was of no use. He sat and watched the scene play out before him. Liliana pulling him towards her. This beautiful young woman pulling this ageing man on top of her, and inching down her underwear. There had been something thrilling about it. No, not something, everything about her was thrilling. Even in memory, it was all thrilling. She had made him feel, how to explain? It was like Jesus making the crippled walk again. Synapses fired that had lain extinguished. He had had, on a trip to Marrakesh earlier that year, his first taste of opium, with William Burroughs, an American writer famed for opium-tasting. This was better. This was freedom.

John watched himself roll over, a cushion causing his back to arch painfully. He freed it and threw it across the room. *I have a confession to make*, John said then, John repeats, sitting now, stubbing a cigarette out.

What kind of confession? How had she made herself look so elegant, here on this derelict floor?

I, he lit a cigarette, then and now, *I write under a pen name, occasionally.* He took a drag and passed it to Liliana, remembered passing it. *I'm also,* he fastened his trousers, *Joseph Kell.*

Liliana laughed soft plumes of smoke. She coughed a little, took a sip of wine, and handed him his cigarette.

Lynne will have to die for me to be free of her. Had he said that? Yes, he had said it a great many times, mostly in his head. He had wished her dead a hundred times. A hundred times on the train back to Etchingham, Liliana's perfume still evident on his clothes, he had wished Lynne dead. A hundred times, sitting on the bus to their house. A hundred times more, his key sitting in the lock.

He was played in by pipes and drums blaring from the television. *You could have rung.* Pipes still piping, he put his keys on the hallway table and went through to the kitchen. *I said, you could have rung me, John*. The tune, he thought, sounded something like Johnny Todd with a military bent. He filled the kettle. *Am I talking to myself? I have been, John. All bloody night, I've sat here talking to myself, wondering when John is, is John dead, is John coming home.* From the bread bin he took the heel of bread and sliced it, putting two slices under the grill. *Or have you had an accident and gone deaf, is that it?* The music ceased, replaced by

sirens. What the hell was she watching? He sniffed his shirt. It smelt, he thought, more like pork than sex, but he couldn't be sure. *Are you taking the piss or something?* He went upstairs and put on a fresh shirt. The bed remained unmade, John could still hear her but not what she was saying. Halfway down the stairs he heard, *and leave me to fend for my fucking self, was that the idea? You can't keep me away from my own bloody house.* The door into the living room was wide open, he could see a bloodied body, the scene of a crime, police officers, it was a repeat of the one they'd watched on Tuesday night. *John? John?* The kettle whistled. He put a handful of teabags into the pot and filled it with boiling water. *Am I going mad or something?* He turned the toast. *I am? Because I could swear that I'm talking to you.* He poured milk into a milk jug and took two mugs from the tree. *You spiteful bastard, John Wilson. You spiteful bloody bastard.* He buttered the toast, put this along with the tea on a tray and took it through to the living room.

I tried to ring you last night—

Liar.

Lynne, please.

What happened?

I went for drinks.

Who with?

Graham.

Graham who?

Greene. I'm thinking of changing agents. This whole thing about selling rights. Do you know how much he got for Brighton Rock? Our Man in Havana? For The Third Man? A hell of a lot more than I'll ever get, even if Hitchcock himself directed every last bloody book I've written. He says he'll speak to his people. Then I might start making some real money. I stayed in a hotel, bed and breakfast, more like. Missed the last train. I thought it would be too late to call and let you know.

Lynne stroked Sandy, their ageing cat. John listened resentfully to his purring. *You're a terrible liar.*

What's that?

You talk too much, it gives you away, John. Where were you really?

Look, I'm not going to—

Pissed in some two-bit members club, trying to put your hand up the waitresses' skirt? Bloody sad, you are. Fell asleep in your chair, did you?

I've told you, now, haven't I told you. Would it do you so much harm to bloody listen once in a blue bastard moon? He slammed down his mug and stood. *I'm a grown man. I'm—* Sandy continued to purr, John resented his deafness.

You can't just leave me here, to forget about, you know.

I've had enough of this. He left the room, slamming the door.

I won't just be forgotten, John, she yelled after him.

John stormed into his office and crashed into his chair. Paper forced into position, he typed loudly and vigorously, *I WISH MY WIFE WAS DEAD.* He typed it out again and again. When he ceased his clacking, the house was silent. After a while, he went to the door, opened it a crack, and listened. Nothing, not a sound. The television had been turned off. He crept down a few stairs and peered over the bannister. A low hum, emitting from the fridge, the faint sound of a passing car. Sandy meandered along the hallway and bounded up to him.

Where is she, ay? He stroked his soft, pale fur. John went back into his study and gently closed the door. He reread what he had written and discarded it. On a fresh piece, he wrote,

> *Dear Liliana,*
>
> *It was delightful to spend time in your company this weekend. I do hope that this will not be our only meeting. There is still much to talk about, I am sure you will agree. Should you accept, I would like to see you again and spend more time discussing our potential collaboration. I am of the opinion that we would make an excellent alliance. Perhaps, next time we meet, we could spend a little more time together. A night away, without distraction,*

He drew the page out from the machine. It was all too, too what? Too effusive, perhaps. He would write something better later, more fitting to the recipient. His head ached somewhat, partly wine, partly wife. He made his way downstairs for a fresh cup of tea. Lynne, he saw, had left. There was a note on the table, she enjoyed leaving notes, though they were so often sitting mere feet apart. It read, *two can play at this game.* She had gone to Hurst Green, then. That was fine. He had had the whole day off yesterday, he could not afford to take another off today.

John reread the unfinished letter to Liana, it was not quite right. He would try again.

> *Cara Liliana*
>
> *It was a great pleasure to finally meet you. I look forward, very much, to our meeting again. It is so rare to talk intelligently with someone, nowadays. Our meeting was to the ends of business, I know, but I cannot help feel somewhat stronger towards you. I have not felt like this about a woman in many years. My wife is ill, as I said. I cannot*

leave her, but I cannot be alone any more. I feel a great need for companionship and compassion.

Letters were not like novels. These few lines had taken more than half an hour to commit to paper. It was nearly four o'clock, John had not written a word of WS. A drink would help.

She stood over him. There was something in her hand, held close to his face. It was morning, the room illuminated by sun. He must have fallen asleep at his desk. John pushed her hand away, but she moved it back again. What was that thing she was clutching?

What time is it?

Late.

He rubbed his eyes, *what that?*

I was going to ask you the same thing. She picked something up from his desk, a piece of paper. Two pieces of paper in her hands.

Lynne? She left the room. He got up, quickly. Dressed quickly. How much had he written last night? He checked his Olivetti and found out. There was a simple explanation, he told himself, before telling her. It was part of the novel he was writing, a letter from Will to his Dark lady. He said,

Have you been messing about with my work? I'm missing a bit of my work. The words ran hollow. He said, *did you take something from my room? I've got a deadline, Lynne.* Full of subterfuge. His head was heavy. He buttoned up his shirt and went down to the living room.

I would have worked it out, you know. Even if you hadn't have left these lying round the house.

They weren't lying around, he said.

No, but you were.

Lynne, he couldn't help it, *a poor pun, even by—*

Don't you dare! She set upon him, pinning him to the wall. *Don't you dare start that linguistic bollocks with me now. This is deadly serious, John. How long has it been going on?*

It's part of my novel. My Shakespeare novel.

Bullshit. You don't bullshit me.

This was the first—

How long? She seemed like she might tear her hair out. Hers or his.

I am telling you that this was the first time.

A one-night stand? Lynne sought an answer in his silence. *No, of course not.* She read, *I have dreamt for the longest time of leaving her. Are you going to leave me?*

Isn't that what you've been waiting for? Isn't that what you've been bloody well hoping for, for Christ's sake? You've wanted to be free of me for years, Lynne. Years.

Free? John, look at me. Look at what I am. Are you really planning on leaving me now? Like this? Alone? Alone in fucking Etchingham, while you fuck her in the house I bought. I bought, with my dad's money. Have you gone mad, John?

I am not the only one who has been unfaithful.

That was years ago—

—Now who's the bloody liar?

What the hell are you talking about?

Marrakesh. Don't roll your eyes at me. Marrakesh, I came back from a night alone, after you'd told me you were too sodding tired, and I come back to find you getting into bed with a bloody black bastard.

Getting into bed? Are you fucking mad? You are!

Just a kid, he was. A bloody, he felt embarrassed saying it, *gigolo.*

She laughed. She laughed and coughed; coughed heavily and had to sit down. *He was a member,* she cleared her throat, *of staff. A barman or something. I went down to get a glass of water—*

A bloody gin, more like.

— And I, she tried to clear her throat once more, her eyes welled. *I collapsed, John. I'd been vomiting blood and you went off to get pissed up. I needed help*. She cried, her face still full of rage, her eyes pitiful with sorrow.

That's not, he tried to play the scene out again. Strapping Berber lad, in striped waistcoat, climbing into bed. Why the hell would he get into bed with his waistcoat on? Where had Lynne found him? It made no sense. *There've been other times, too many to mention.* He wished he could stop. Lynne sobbed weakly, she looked all but broken, yet he couldn't keep his anger in check. He could not, when asked, show her compassion.

You are a bastard. If you think you're going to leave me and shack up with her in my house. My house!

Lynne—

—you've another thing coming, Jack. You really bloody have. He winced, he couldn't help it, the name cut through him. *You think you're some kind of big shot, Jack? Been on the telly a few times and now you're summut special. Is that what you think, Jack, aye? Some kind of fucking celebrity! And you need a pretty new thing on your arm? Sad bastard, Jackie, you're a sad bastard.*

Lynne—

She calls you Anthony? His face reddened further. She carried on, *Anthony's place in London, where we make love.*

Lynne, please—

Anthony takes me to parties, to restaurants. Anthony is a great lover. She was drawing closer to him.

Lynne.

Anthony, and closer, *tells me that he will take me to Rome, to America,* into his ear, *to Malaya.*

I said, I am sorry.

No you never. Say it now.

Do you think this is easy for me?

She whispered, *do you think I give a shit?*

We haven't, but he found he couldn't say it.

Go on. She grabbed him, pressed her thumb and forefinger into his cheeks, and moved his face to face hers. *We don't fuck any more, is that it? Haven't fucked in you can't remember how long. Easy enough to blame me. How could you fuck me when I'm like this? Changing bloody bastard bloody pads every hour. It was you who stopped, not me.*

It was you, he said, his mouth held tight by her grip.

She drank heavily that day, the television up loud as punishment. John trapped in his room. He would leave her, the wheels were in motion. Liliana had been the catalyst, the instigation he needed. He began to plan it. Lynne couldn't keep both houses, and she couldn't exactly move to Chiswick. It would be best for her if he let her remain in Etchingham, he would take the London house. They would continue in some ways as they had for years. John working and Lynne being cared for in Etchingham. But not by him, not any more. That would have to change. They would still be husband and wife. He would still want to see her. Was that true? He couldn't imagine his life without Lynne. But there was a better life without her in it. He had been holed up for hours. From the hallway, he could hear the glug, glug, glug of wine pouring. Indignation rose in him.

He stamped downstairs and made a noisy gin and tonic, crashing around clangourously. Through the crack in the living room door he could see she was watching some drama, an older man discussing melons with a pretty young woman. John went in and sat down. Lynne paid no attention, exhaling smoke, inhaling Hock. He cleared his throat, slapped his hand

down on the armrest, farted loudly. She continued to ignore him, with utter conviction. Glass drained, he got up with excessive grunts and barrelled back to the kitchen. He poured and drank another gin and slim. Humph, he dropped down into his chair. Lynne tutted. He tried to catch her eye, watching for a change in her face, but all she had done was tutted. Stroking one of her horrible bloody cats. He would take Sandy to Chiswick with him. And Haji. Haji would need walks. Lynne could barely drag herself upstairs to bed. He wanted to tell her then and there. I'm leaving you, Lynne. I'm going and there's nothing you can do about it, nothing at all. There'll be no divorce, and you can stay here as long as you want. I'm taking the dog and Sandy. Don't try to argue, I've made my decision. I may move Liliana Macellari in with me. We will make love, while you are here alone. While you— What will you do when I'm not here Lynne? Drink, of course. No one to make you mutton stews or change your bedclothes, buy new bedclothes. You could move someone in, couldn't you? You've always been good at finding men to take care of you.

She had put on a lot of weight. Her hands were balloon-like, tight and fat. Her skin sagged in places, was taut in others. She was an old woman. A sick woman, it occurred to him. If he saw her on the street or in a pub he would wonder what she had, what sickness had taken her. That yellowy skin, red set eyes, sallow skin, translucent yellow, lips permanently t-t-t-trembling, her whole body in a kind of constant frisson. He drained his glass, she poured herself more wine, holding the bottle high by the base, patiently waiting for the very last drop to fall. John got up, quieter this time. He lit a panatella and went into the garden.

It was cold December. Horrible weather. Haji followed him out and pissed on the dormant rose bush. Just in his shirt, sleeves rolled, John shivered and chattered. Etchingham in December, not a place to be alone. She could cope. She would have to cope, there was nothing else for her to do but bloody cope. He threw his fag end across the garden. *Come*. Haji followed him in. John made another drink for himself and opened a fresh bottle of wine. He took it into the living room and placed it gently on the table. Lynne did not look, she fixed her eyes on the television screen and Harry H. Corbett. He looked at her again, searching for that woman who had betrayed him, that beautiful young woman who had made him a cuckold time and time again. Her eyes were wet, wavering, weak. He made his way upstairs. He sat at his typewriter. The work would not wait. WS would find no solace with his Dark Lady. Sickness had already gripped him. Sickness would define his last days, not love or companionship. Sickness.

He ran his tongue around his mouth, the bitterness of gin, the sharp sweet of cheap tonic, the dank of hours past. Downstairs, yawning, scratching at stubble and rubbing sore eyes, John went through his usual ritual of making tea and toast. He carried the tray upstairs into Lynne's room. He placed it down and took in the image. Lynne, fully dressed still, lying on her side, clutching at her belly, knees lifting up towards her bowed head. Blood-stained and blood-soaked, vomit-covered. Her face a mask of red and beige. Thickly caked, so that you might be able to peel it back and have an exact replica of her visage. Blood-stained and blood-soaked sheets, behind her, before her, encrusted from the waist down. He touched her arm, which was wet with sick, and gently rocked her, she immediately began to cry, a child's cry, and baby's tears. John left her and went downstairs. He phoned Doctor Stinson, who did not answer at first. John lit a panatella, found both hands were shaking. Three matches spent before he managed to get the thing lit.

There had been a second, in that rocking, before that crying, when he thought she was dead and that he had killed her. What had he felt in that moment? Sadness, sadness for Llewela Jones that girl he had met back in 1940, when she was just eighteen, who was now dead. Anger at his wife for letting this happen, for doing this to herself. Pain at the idea of having to sort through her things and throw things away and keep things because they had come to have meaning and value even though they were not his. Grief that Lynne was no more and that that was their last conversation, that *Hothouse* was the last television programme she had ever watched, that Hock was the last wine she had ever drunk, that she had eight cigarettes left in the packet when she went, that she was dead. Grief that she wasn't dead, that she was merely dying still. Pain that it was not over and that he would have to suffer at least one more morning such as this. Pain, real pain, that she had not made it easier on both of them and simply let it all draw to a close. Anger that she would not just fucking die. Sadness that he felt this way, that he had revealed these deeply held feelings when all he should have felt was sorrow, compassion and remorse.

The receptionist answered the phone on the third ring. John marvelled at the calm in his voice. It was calm enforced by his father, who had treated any show of emotion in an emotional situation as though it were a kind of hysteria. *Hello, yes, I've found my wife in rather something of a state, could I be put through to Doctor Stinson.* He tapped ash off his panatella. *Yes, well, there's been a lot of bleeding.* Pause. *Yes, I'll wait, thank you.* The doctor told him that an ambulance should be called for. John duly hung up and dialled 999. He tried to clean her up a little. He used a flannel to wipe away the sick and blood from her mouth, cleaned between her legs. Under the bed he found the empty medicine bottle. Another empty

medicine bottle. He hid them in the bathroom cabinet, told them nothing when the ambulance arrived.

All those plans, all that thinking, it had been fantasy, a dizzy expedition across the mountains of possibility. Lynne lay silent but awake on the gurney. At intervals she sobbed and the paramedic would try to calm her. Not that she wasn't calm, but these people have only a certain vocabulary, and one of their stock phrases is *please try to remain calm*, or if someone is not already calm, *please try to be calm.* He hated the way the paramedic spoke to her, like she were some kind of invalid. Even when she was asking questions, he spoke to her as though she were catatonic. John wanted to punch him in the bloody face. *She can hear you quite well,* he said. *Why not answer her question rather than talk yourself in circles.*

Please try to remain calm.

I'm not bloody calm. John folded his arms, impotently. He scowled at the back of the paramedic's receding hairline.

When they arrived at the Hawkhurst Community Hospital, doctors gathered and doctors murmured and doctors shook their heads. It was a much played-out performance, one that John and Lynne had seen time and again. This was certainly not their first visit of this kind, not even their first visit to this hospital; less of a hospital and more of a convalescence home. She was wheeled into a little room, more like a bed and breakfast than a ward, and lifted onto a bed. The doctors followed, shaking their heads, muttering this and that about her general state.

And you say, one of them said, *you found her this way?*

This morning, yes. John watched a nurse insert an IV drip into Lynne's arm.

Just fluids, she reassured. Lynne began to sob again.

This isn't the first time?

No, but it is worse. Another nurse pulled the curtain around them. She took a pair of scissors and began to cut Lynne's clothes off. John thought he might be sick.

What medication is your wife taking?

I'm sorry, I didn't quite—

Who is your GP?

Could you— is there a chair?

What time this morning?

I'm just a bit—

Did you ring the ambulance straight—Please, I can't—Is this a regular occurr—Do you have in-house—I'm not feeling—Does your wife have an—Could I have a glass of—impolitic relationship with alcohol, Mr Wilson? Mr Wilson?

Blackout.

John woke up in a bed next to Lynne. She looked white as a sheet. But, no, she did not even look white. She was a kind of grey, a sort of dirty beige. They had found, in the garden of King's Pavilion, snakeskin discarded from shedding. She looked that colour, that cellular appearance, as if her skin were being held up to the light, all blood and muscle removed. He felt queasy again. He pulled himself up and found that he too had an intravenous drip in his arm. It was taped down well. Lynne was fast asleep. She would live, he felt it in his bones. Her behaviour, her actions would not change, she would continue to kill herself slowly, or not so very slowly, but she would live some time yet. The curtain had been lifted. For so many years, John had somehow convinced himself that her drinking was more of a personality flaw than an addiction, more of an inconvenience than a death sentence. Lynne's bad behaviour was legend, yet he had denied himself the obvious truth, she was sick. She was desperately unwell. The blood, the constant stream. How many doctors had told him that she must never drink again.

If she drinks again, she will die. He pictured them all, white gowned, lined up with clipboards, repeating the phrase in unison. He knew it was true, yet he also believed it to be hyperbole. His doctor in Brunei had said it. Lynne wasn't even his patient. That time she had fainted while visiting John. Another embarrassing episode.

A doctor came in, saw Lynne sleeping, and approached John. *How are you feeling?*

Somewhat humiliated, but otherwise fine. He hid the arm that held the cannula under his sleeve.

Very good. Your wife, on the other hand. He turned his gaze to Lynne and shook his head. *There's no other way of putting this, Mr Wilson. If your wife drinks again, she will die.* John felt like a schoolboy, reprimanded for his part in stupidity. *I cannot say this to you in strong enough terms.*

Yes, I see.

I hope you do. If you have any affection towards your wife, you will help her. I would recommend getting the house empty of all alcohol. If you want to help her, don't drink in front of her, don't keep anything in the house.

That seems a little excessive. I work from home.

As I say, if you value your wife's well-being, you will do this.

I was going to— John caught himself and said no more.

You were going to?

It's unimportant.

Please. The doctor sat on the end of John's bed. Both of them checked Lynne was still asleep.

I was going to leave her. Today. Yesterday. I'm not sure which one. We've bought a house in London, Chiswick. I was— There's someone else, might be someone else. The doctor said nothing. John waited for some kind of reply, the silence growing pregnant. *She tried to kill herself,* he finally said. *She's done it before.*

How?

Pills. Painkillers.

Most likely, she vomited them up.

She did it to get at me.

Mr Wilson, the doctor sighed, took off his glasses, rubbed his eyes, *whatever your wife did last night was merely a punctuation, a sudden plummet on what is already a downward fall. Your wife did not try to kill herself last night. Try to understand, she is killing herself now. She had been for some time. But I think you already know that.* He put his glasses back on. *I'll ask one of the nurses to discharge you.* He said no more. On his way out, he checked Lynne's chart, made a note, and left.

That had been four years ago. How many rooms like that had he sat in from that day to this, too many. Taxi rides to and from hospitals all across London. All across Europe. Nights such as this, spent alone, spent writing to block out the inescapable. A suicide so long it would take a note the size of his opus, two thousand words a day for fourteen years, to do it justice. He looked down at the typewriter now and wrote *I WISH MY WIFE WAS DEAD*.

In all his life he had never felt as tired as this. It had been days since he had slept. He had feared sleep and what his subconscious might bring. But he could fight it no more. There were no more memories to keep him awake, no more Bardic songs to distract him. He lay down on the floor, pulling a cushion down from the armchair. He curled up in the very spot he had made love to Liliana Macellari four years earlier. The second best bed, he found himself thinking.

Bakhtin was sent into internal exile by Stalinist forces in 1929, soon after publication of his 'major work' *Dostoyevsky's Poetics*. He was to remain in Kazakhstan for six years, away from his life in Leningrad and the circle of intellectuals who had so nourished his thinking. Although this time is referenced in several texts, Emerson's *The First Hundred Years of Mikhail Bakhtin* for instance, its importance, if it had any importance to Bakhtin as a man and as a thinker, is little discussed. Emerson claims that 'although his life was indeed darkened by politics, we cannot blame political suppression for the lacunae in his biography' (1997, p. 3). But it is not only through banning books that a totalitarian state silences its citizens. The six years he was exiled in Kazakhstan were a reduction to the original sentence of ten years in a Soviet death camp (Morson & Emerson, 1990, p. xiv). The spectre of such a sentence must loom large even when it has been commuted. Many suffered worse fates that Bakhtin at the hands of the Stalinists, including his colleague Medvedev. However, this does not mean that the events of his life did not have a great impact, or that his response to their treatment would not lead to him keeping his counsel for fear of further punishment. The fact the most of Bakhtin's works did not see the light of day until the latter half of the twentieth century would suggest that there was a personal aspect to Bakhtin's theories of dialogism and declarations that all voices would be, in the fullness of time, heard. A man who sets out a theory of the inexorable flow of human discourse, great time — the 'infinite and unfinalized dialogue' — is writing as much to put his own mind at ease as he is to contemplate the innate nature of language (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 169).

Bakhtin's notion of great time is the 'complex unity of all humanity, all human cultures... a complex unity of human literature' (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 167). It is the context in which we read a text as a 'cultural artefact' or representative of the 'whole culture' (Haynes, 2013, p. 73). Bakhtin offers another term small time, which Haynes, in her text *Bakhtin Reframed* — a repositioning of Bakhtin's theories as a way to critique visual art — describes as the place inhabited by 'artworks created by contemporary artists in their studios' (ibid). The schoolchildren who appear around the poet Enderby's bed, in *Inside Mr Enderby*, have crossed great time, time travelling back to understand the poet Enderby in his small time circumstances (1973, p. 12). *Nothing Like the Sun* also traverses great time, from two points of small time, Mr Burgess writing back to Shakespeare, and Shakespeare's own contemporaneous context. Indeed, Burgess chose the title of his novel as he felt that *Nothing Like the Sun* 'meant primarily that the human reality of the artist bore no resemblance to the shining golden image that time had made' (1988, p. 29). Burgess, in his search for human reality and rejection of posterity, echoes Haynes's notion that historians and biographers who

tell ‘the stories of history as dramatic narratives of great men… overlook ordinary elements of daily life’ (2013, p. 72).

Burgess’ decision to use the signifier WS for Shakespeare, rather than Will or William, was intended to remove the ‘connotations [that] cluster around the full name; it need[ed] to be purged of all the harmonics of greatness in a novel which had no concern with that greatness’ (1988, p. 35). Bakhtin also notes that ‘neither Shakespeare himself not his contemporaries knew that “great Shakespeare” whom we know now’ (1986, p. 4).

Burgess intends his novel to be a dialogue between great and small time. While he accepts that any text written about Shakespeare traverses great time, the present reaching back to the distant, unknowable past, Burgess’s intention is to write about Shakespeare the artist, a man who writes because of the small time pressures of supporting a family. Unlike conventional biographers who move between their subject’s historic position and present-day status — which Shakespeare biography does not herald him as the greatest writer in history? — Burgess reveals the disruption that occupying two positions in great time causes. Mr Burgess, in present-day Malaya, begins to speak in the vernacular of Elizabethan England: ‘Preached, ladies and gentlemen — softe let me drinke before I go anie further’ (1985, p. 160). The implication is that Mr Burgess has been infected by the past. Yet this small moment also raises a larger point, if we are intended to read the text as a transcript of the lecture, then Mr Burgess has been speaking in the Elizabethan vernacular the entire time. It is only when he speaks to his students that the anachronism is exposed. Mr Burgess also conflates the students sitting in front of him with a ‘mob, advancing on the capitol’, explaining, ‘You are all there with your bills and cudgels – Prindable, Lillington, Liddell, Alabaster, Anguish, Edgecumbe...’ (1985, p. 228). Geoffrey Aggeler suggests that rather than putting on a performance, Mr Burgess has actually transported his class back to Shakespeare’s time, just as the children from the future have arrived at Enderby’s bed (Aggeler, 1979, p. 69). Burgess recreates this image once more in *The End of the World News*, when children travelling through space in a post-apocalyptic future are transported, through dialogue, to the distant past, back on Earth.

Lynne woke and felt at once better. She wanted tea and hot cross buns. Could you get hot cross buns in February, or was it too far from Easter? John would see to it. If not hot cross buns, then teacakes. *John*. She didn't want to get up. Today, she would have tea and breakfast in bed. *John*, she called again. This room, so bare. She had meant to get the place decorated. It had never truly felt like a home, just John's workplace with rooms attached. She shouldn't have bought it. For four months, she would not even acknowledge there was a Chiswick house, not after what he had done. John reacted badly, of course. Reacted worse when she told him that she wanted the house to be exorcised. It wasn't a joke. He thought it was a joke, but it wasn't. Lynne was dead serious.

John, are you in? She couldn't hear the typewriter, she'd be able to hear the typewriter if he was at it. Damned thing. They might buy some new curtains, get Terry to recommend a decorator and get the wallpaper done. She could get a catalogue from Laura Ashley. John wasn't interested in that sort of thing. *John, can you not bloody hear me*. She was losing her appetite for tea and toast, for hot cross buns. A headache was coming on, and that taste. *Fuck*, she spat. Meat extract, dirty fucking Bovril drink. *John, please, John*. She tried to spit the taste from her mouth. There was water beside her, she drank and the taste deepened. It was only a matter of time before she was sick. Nothing in her stomach but wine and a few chips, she could feel the acid lifting through her. *Jesus*. There was someone coming. *John.* He was at the door. *John, I need you.* She felt sure he was at the door.

She had bought herself a wig, which he thought preposterous. She didn't need a wig. But then she put it on and he was hit with the shock of it, the years rolled back. There was a tree in the garden in Etchingham that Lynne had planted and it was only when he'd got back from Hollywood that he noticed how much it had grown, how much time had passed. He saw time's effect on Lynne only now when she suddenly looked like his Lynne once more.

You don't like it, she watched him in the mirror, his eyes wet, misty.

You look, he took a breath, *you look lovely, Lynne.* He kissed her on the cheek, her skin sallow and dry. *You look lovely*.

She smiled, she saw that it was true. But he could not unsee what he had seen. The girl in the shop had shown her how to apply foundation. Not too much, you quickly lose sight of how much you've applied. Blend into the neck, she'd told Lynne, who looked at her sagging neckline. He watched intently, as if she were some magician and he had been permitted to see the trick behind the curtain. These moments of silence were as close as they came. No smashing of keys or glasses or smashing of words against the other's words. It felt good to have some peace between them.

She stood and lifted her arms. Silence. John had helped her on with her dress. Lynne had chosen the caftan because it looked like it had been sown together from Van Gogh's Sunflowers. The canvas clung to her fat, it was tight and yet baggy. She didn't care. It looked radiant. She watched herself turning in the mirror, feeling a warm sense of pride move up and flush her cheeks.

Well, she said.

Very good. Yes. Very nice. And then, *I'll check the car is here.* He left.

She took two more pills and a good slug of gin to help them down. She made her way downstairs as he was putting his jacket on.

What do you think? He asked.

You look bloody awful, she told him, no hint of irony. *Who bought you that tie?* She lifted it to her face and flicked it away.

I like it.

At least get the knot right. She pulled the thing off, John choking under the strain.

We have to go, he gagged.

Bend down. She threaded the tie and straightened it out, her eyes twitching and blinking as she fiddled around his neck. Impatient, she pulled hard, the knot tight to his throat. *Done*, she pronounced. It was all wrong, but there was no time. John looked in the mirror, a bulk of a man with a schoolboy's tie.

They arrived to a great mob of flashing lights and yelling. Lynne peered out of the taxi window to see who they were shouting at. A couple posed, she seemed more accustomed than him. He was, from what Lynne could see, through the flashes of camera bulbs, a short, big-nosed man. The woman on his arm was blonde and angular. Long legs, a big bit of fur over her shoulders. She was not pretty, she was too provocative for that. Terry had come round and opened the door. He helped Lynne to her feet and into the lightning storm. She wanted to see this woman up close. Her hair straight, the roots showing, but not in a sluttish way. As Lynne got nearer, the girl draped her elongated arms over the short man's shoulders. His hair was scruffy, long sideburns, in the way men were wearing it. Quite effeminate, it seemed to her, but Lynne had seen some right brutes with similar styles. The girl turned and their eyes met. She gave Lynne a big, white-toothy smile. A glamorous smile. Lynne ran her tongue over her own teeth, tonguing the false tooth, and gave the girl a closed-mouth though fulsome smile in return. John pulled at her arm.

Come on, they're not interested in us.

She followed John towards the entrance. *Who is that, John?*

Polanski. He's a director.

And her?

An actress. She was in one of his films, I think.

Isn't she bonny.

They climbed the stairs, Lynne holding onto John, John holding on to the handrail. A slow ascent.

Inside there were a great many more photographers taking a great many more photographs of vigorous beauty. John sat Lynne down, lit her a cigarette and was called over to another table, all waving and gesticulating.

Champagne, madam?

Go on then. Another stunner, in a black waistcoat and blouse, placed a tall foaming flute on the table.

Enjoy your evening, the girl said.

Might as well leave a couple, save you coming back again, Lynne told her.

The girl put another flute next to the first and said, *enjoy your evening*. Off she went, ignored by the guests who lifted glasses from her tray, who placed empty glasses down. She was all smiles though, to be fair, probably in awe of all these celebrities, all this finery.

John was talking to two old couples, all nodding in unison, laughing politely as one. He was pointing in Lynne's direction, no doubt inviting them over to join them. She didn't want to speak to old people. She had no interest in old people, she never had. Using the back of her chair and the table, she eased herself from her seat. Lynne polished off her first glass of champagne and took the second with her, shuffling towards a table off bright young things.

Who are you lot, then? She sat in an empty seat.

They looked at each other, laughing slightly at this woman and her hairpiece. One of the women scowled at the man next to her and said, *I'm Mary, I'm a singer.*

You're Welsh.

That's right.

Are you very famous? The table laughed again.

I'm not sure, Mary said, thoughtfully. *Am I?* She asked the young man beside her.

I should say you probably are.

What about you? Lynne asked him.

No, I'm not famous at all, the table roared, even the pretty Welsh one.

Why do I feel like you're taking the piss? The table went quiet.

Another woman said, *And what about you? What do you do?*

Me? Nothing. I'm the wife of someone who does something. She looked at the other women sitting at the table. *He writes books. Not very good books, but he's written a lot of them. He's over there,* she nodded behind her.

That's Anthony Burgess, isn't it? One of the men asked.

John, he's called. Or Jack.

They're making a film of his. The Stones are going to be in it.

Are they? How fab, the Welsh girl said to Lynne.

John came over and said, *good evening, everyone. Lynne,* he placed a drink next to her drink.

Your wife says you're a writer, Mary said.

Well, I consider myself a composer who also writes books.

Lynne groaned. *Here we bloody go*, she said. The table laughed, John's face reddened.

He said, *Lynne, come and say hello to Angus. We're on this table here, look. Places reserved.*

It was nice to meet you, Mary said, as John helped Lynne from her seat.

You too. You're lucky, you know. Getting old is shit. She followed John over to their table, where writers were talking about writerly things. The waitress, unbidden, placed another two glasses in front of Lynne.

Angus was saying to the other old people at the table, *we really must get Tony to tell us about this big Hollywood thing he's working on.*

Tony, Lynne sneered.

John laughed him off, *no, no, no. I'm trying to present myself as a reputable writer, Angus.*

How much are they paying, eh? Who's in it? Tell us everything, Angus insisted.

Well, if he's doing that, Lynne finished another spuming glass, *I'm going to have to get extremely pissed.*

She left John boring on about his Shakespeare musical. Who, anyway, would want to watch a musical about plays that had no music in them? It made no sense to her and sounded like it would be a bloody disaster. Why John had to get himself into these things she didn't know. He had more than enough on his plate, what with writing for all the different papers and working on his books and reading books for reviews. A barman, shining up a brandy glass with a cloth, nodded towards her.

Free? she asked.

What would you like?

Gin. Have you got any Jenever?

Bombay Sapphire or Gordon's.

Double Gordon's and slim.

He went off to unenthusiastically make her drink. If she'd been the actress, whatever her name was, Lynne was sure his service would have come with a song and a bloody dance.

Lynne? Lynne Jones? Lynne recognised the voice; she turned and recognised the face.

Sonia Brownell.

Orwell, she corrected flatly, but smiled and said, *I recognised you straight away. Lynne Jones. Look at you.* Sonia meant it as a compliment, but Lynne couldn't help becoming horribly self-conscious. *How are you?*

Are you having a drink?

I'll have what you're having.

Excuse me, Lynne called over the bar. *Two of those.* He would never give that look to a young, beautiful woman, jumped up little shit.

How long has it been?

I'd prefer not to remember.

Twenty years.

We don't look that old, do we? Christ, we do. Well, there's nothing for it, then. She lifted their hi-balls and handed one to Sonia. They clinked glasses. Lynne watched Sonia take a drink. She'd aged well, considering everything Lynne had heard. Big drinker was the rumour. Bit of a state. There had been many occasions that Lynne had meant to make contact with Sonia. They had been so close for a while. She knew the reason. Even now the past was closing in on them.

Is John here? Or do I call him Anthony now?

Our Jack? Lynne did her best Manc accent. *He's over there with them. I'm sure he'll be over soon. Always had a thing for you, didn't he?*

Don't be silly.

Did you two ever?

No! God, I wouldn't have done that.

What did they talk about now? Dead George? How's the kid, Sonia? What've you been doing these twenty years? Lynne knew most of it, the failed marriage to the homosexual, the affairs with whoever she could get her hands on.

So, tell me about yourself, Lynne. Where are you now?

Chiswick. Chiswick and Etchingham, Sussex.

Very nice. All that writing has done well for you then.

It's mainly mine. Parents dead. I was told to invest in property. What about you?

Oh, not far from here. I've a little place in France too.

Très bien. Très agréable. She drained her glass and placed it beside Sonia's. *I'll get us another.* She walked the few steps back to the bar, the surly bartender still polishing his glass. *Two more,* she told him. *This time, pour like you're not paying for the sodding gin yourself.* She watched him pick up a small metal spirit measure. *Not with that,* she shouted over. He scowled but did what she said. *Keep going.* He poured. *That's fine.*

Sonia laughed. *Lynne Jones.*

Wilson, Lynne sharply corrected, caught Sonia's stung look and gave a howl of laughter.

You do look well, Sonia said, just to say something.

Lynne looked her old friend dead in the eye. She saw, underneath the mascara and make-up, bloodshot eyes and a familiar weariness. *I'm dying, Sonia.*

You're…

It's okay, you don't have to say anything. I don't know why I'm telling you. I've been dying for a long time now.

But you look—

That's kind of you. You were always kind. You weren't always nice, but you were always kind. She put her hand on Sonia's. Both shaking, their shaking cancelling out the other's. *And you?*

I'm tired. I've been putting together this collection of Eric's work. There's so many enemies out there, Lynne. They'd prefer me dead. I'm all that's between them and Eric.

You need to take better care.

And you? Should you be drinking that?

We're celebrating, she squeezed Sonia's hand. *Old friends.* They touched glasses, Sonia on the verge, Lynne offering her a napkin from the table. *We're okay. We're fine.*

Had she ever been friends with Sonia? Who was to say now? Women like us, Lynne thought of the pair of them in their early twenties, vivacious, self-sufficient, and saw that women like them never truly had friends. No matter how many people orbited around them, a deep sadness, a deeper mistrust coursed through Lynne's and Sonia's blood. They had good reason to be friends. Both of them had been aliens in London, which made them both exotic to the rarefied world they had inhabited. Caitlin Macnamara had introduced them, she thought they may be the only English women who had toured war-shadowed Europe. Sonia had travelled to Romania and Poland, where the war was already escalating, while Lynne had

travelled with John a year later to Belgium, France, Holland, and Luxembourg. They talked about the threat that seemed to envelop the continent. Lynne told Sonia of the fear that pervaded France, Sonia recalled salivating Polish men who could not wait to conquer the world. Well, France had been right to fear and the Poles had merely caught a whiff of the violent fever that would strike out at them first.

They had been sitting at a corner table. There were never arrangements made between them. Lynne had spent the first half hour alone, Sonia caught up in conversation with T. D. Kendrick about an article or other for *Horizon*. She returned with a flat half pint and apologies.

How is John?

Don't talk to me about John. Lynne saw Sonia's eyes narrow. *He's fine. What's he got to be troubled with, ay? Gibraltar is hardly Gdańsk. Hardly Geneva, is it? He teaches squaddies how to tell a noun from a verb. Not likely to bring down the Fuhrer with linguistics are we?*

Does he write often?

As often as I write to him.

They were interrupted, always interrupted.

What did he say? the man asked.

Nothing, yet.

He studied Sonia's face to see if this was true. *Come on, Son, you tease.*

He was reading it when I left. They'll be over shortly.

Will you come and find me? He took her hand and gave it a quick peck.

If there's anything to tell. She smirked and he went on his way. *What were we saying,* she said, looking over at a group of soldiers making their way to the bar.

Nothing important. Are we having the same again? Lynne's glass empty, Sonia's barely touched, Lynne went to the bar to buy herself another.

Evening, mam. Lynne turned towards one of the soldiers, an American GI. He leant into the bar so that their heads were the same height. *How are you this fine evening?*

Very well.

Who's next, the bartender interrupted. When a short, bespectacled man behind began to place his order the GI straightened up and swung round.

Hey, hey. Don't you Brits let ladies go first? He stared down the man. His friends, three other American soldiers, crowded round the little man, who could only cower and say,

I didn't realise there was—

Didn't realise. He turned back to Lynne. *What'll you have miss?*

Half a pint, Lynne told the barman.

She'll have a pint, the GI said. *Sorry about that. Some guys, eh?*

It's fine. Thank you. The barman placed her drink in front of her and she held out money.

Can't have a lady paying for her drinks, can we boys? He looked agreement and found three nodding heads. *Your friend don't want one?* He looked over to Sonia who was now talking to two older men.

Not this round. Lynne went back to their table.

Maybe we'll come and join you ladies, the GI called behind her.

Lynne sat, the two men said their goodbyes to Sonia and left. *Who's that*, Sonia asked Lynne.

Some Yank trying it on. Says they're coming over. Going to take us out, I reckon.

I'd like to see them try.

The pub was filling up. The great and the good of Fitzrovia. Writers, artists, curators from the British Museum, Lynne recognised nearly all of them, Sonia knew all of them. Sonia was about to face the now busy bar when one of the barmen set down two glasses of sherry. *From the lads*, he nodded over to the group of American GIs.

What do you think they want? Sonia asked.

They're probably asking the same of us.

The GIs, their names something like Hank and Butch and Johnny and Scotty, raised their glasses from the bar at the two women, who in turn raised their glasses back. They continued to be stood drinks by them. Two gins, then two ports, two glasses of white wine, two halves of bitter. The glasses were lining up around their table, the women not particularly keen on half of what had been offered. After two watered-down Scotches arrived, Lynne wandered over, glass in hand.

No, don't Lynne.

Thanks for this, she put the glass down in front of the group, *but I take mine neat.* They laughed. The broadest of them, hair slicked with pomade, turned and put his hand on the bar, creating a barrier between Lynne and the other three.

You want another?

Go on then. She turned to Sonia, winking. Sonia had pulled some book or other out of her bag.

Barkeep, the GI called, *another one of these things*, he held the short glass in his hand and rotated it, the spirit rolling around inside, *neat this time. Neat?*

Neat, she replied. Lynne took a cigarette from a soft pack on the bar and waited for a light.

Neat, barkeep. Make it five of 'em. He lit her and stared searchingly into her eyes.

So, where are you lot from then?

Oh, all over. He laughed, his friends laughed with him.

Five glasses were placed in front of him. He slid one over to Lynne, *for you darlin',* and drained another. The rest of the crew followed suit, downing their drinks, one of them coughing and spluttering, the other two grabbing at him, pushing and pulling him about as he tried to get his breath.

Cheers, then, Lynne smiled, necking her drink and sliding the glass towards him.

How about another? Invite your friend over too. He smiled his broad, American smile, revealing teeth he was clearly proud of.

You're not my type, Lynne replied, holding her ring finger before him. *And whiskey's not my drink.* She returned to her table to a barrage of hoots and whistles.

Goddamn, these Brits are something else.

Sonia put her book back in her bag. *Do you have to?*

Just a bit of fun.

With them? I can't imagine any of them being much fun. Anyway, Sonia changed the subject, *Cyril and Stephen will be here in a minute.*

Don't you want to have one night talking about something other than bloody books and sodding poems? She looked back over at the GI, but he was no longer looking her way. The Americans were growing rowdy, jeering, pinning down the smaller one and forcing a pint down him. He spluttered and gagged, but when they pulled him up he laughed along with the rest. *Your round,* she said, heading to the bathroom.

When Lynne returned there were two glasses of sweet Vermouth on the table. Sonia hadn't touched hers.

From the barbarians, Sonia said. *I told them I didn't want them, but he wouldn't let up.*

It was about 7.30pm. Uniforms and civilians, groups of people trying to have a quiet drink, while the Yanks bawled and catcalled.

A drink's a drink, Lynne took a draught of Vermouth. Not to her liking, she set it down. The GI watched her.

So, that's how it goes here, hey? What's wrong with these? He picked the Vermouth glasses up, spilling liqueur over his thick, hairy hands.

Piss off, now, Lynne said.

Just ignore him, Lynne.

Ignore me? Is that what you said? You drink at my expense and now you want to ignore me. No fucking way, lady.

Hey, Andros, one of the other GIs placed his hand on his arm, *come and have a drink.*

I'm having a drink, he drained one of the glasses and let it fall.

Lynne stood and walked round the table to meet him. She was only a couple of inches shorter than him. *You go back over there with your friends. Go on.* She could see in his eyes he was drunker than she'd realised. He stared, almost through her.

Come on, Andy, man. Leave the girls alone.

Do what your friend tells you, Lynne advised.

Blinking, he seemed to come out of a trance. He looked at her closely, shifting his face towards hers. *Cunt,* he whispered, the word hit her like a smack. He turned his head as if to go and spat at her. Shock turned to rage turned to shame.

How dare you, Sonia was up, red-faced, as livid with Lynne as she was with the soldier.

Andros, he was pulled away and back to the bar. There was a dense silence, as though the stylus had been dragged from the record that played background chatter. One of the Americans was trying to get the others to leave, he was pushed away and fell into two men. He tried to right himself, but his hand slipped from the table, spilling two pints. Another man in uniform, his accent English, his sleeve sown with several stripes, made his way over to the other three and asked them to leave. They crowded around.

What the fuck d'you say?

Fucking limey.

Where do you get off?

You wanna piece?

The barman stepped in, *that's enough now, thank you, lads*. But was turned on quickly,

I'm not your fucking lad, you fat piece of shit.

Now, there's no need for that kind of language. There's ladies here.

Fuck your snotty English bitches. Get your goddamned hands off me, you prick.

Others had stepped in. The GIs threw their glasses at the back wall, shattering bottles of Angostura Bitters and Stone's Ginger Wine. A few punches thrown, a few landed, they were ejected. The landlord locked the door, which was kicked and punched.

You motherfuckers. We're coming back to burn this shithole down to the fucking ground.

After a few minutes the door was opened, the GIs nowhere to be seen.

They treat London like it's a bloody holiday camp, Sonia said, setting down two pints of bitter, pushing away the sweet Vermouth. Lynne tried to hand back the handkerchief, which Sonia pushed away.

They're just drunk. They'll be under a lot of pressure. Who knows where they're being sent tomorrow.

Sonia took a drink and studied Lynne. *Bollocks.*

Lynne glowered. The doors opened and in walked Cyril. Sonia stood and waved and budged Lynne up so everyone could be seated.

You remember Lynne, she said.

Of course, Cyril beamed his chubby smile. *Sorry for being late*, he kissed Sonia on the cheek, *Peter wanted to go through some things. Financial headaches he thought best shared. Busy, busy,* he said, winking at Lynne.

Book reviewing for Queen and country.

Lynne, Sonia scolded.

You'd be surprised. (*I wouldn't,* Sonia held his arm.) *What can I get you girls to drink?*

A half for me, said Lynne, finishing her drink.

Gin and Tonic, Sonia smiled.

The door went again, Cyril turned around, *Stephen*, and waved him over.

Sonia, good evening. Nice to see you, Lynne.

Right, drinks. Give me a hand Stephen? The two men went to the bar.

You're sleeping with him.

Shut up, Lynne, and then, *what are you talking about?*

That lispy one. 'Niths to sthee you, Thlynne.' And what about the other one? Fat Cyril? You having it away with him too?

You are coarse. She lit a cigarette. *Not that it's any of your business, Cyril and I are colleagues.*

Colleagues! He's your boss.

It's not like that. We enjoy each other's company.

Which means you are fucking fat Cyril. That Stephen's more your type, though. I can imagine you two at it.

Stop saying that, Sonia hissed. *Do you know his work? A great poet.*

He's queer, you know.

Oh, Christ, Lynne—

Look at him. Stephen had his arm around Cyril's back, nudging him as they spoke.

Well, Sonia watched on, *you should know.*

Meaning?

Meaning just that. Don't you worry about him on that rock with all those strong, handsome men?

Bitch.

Here we are, then. Cyril set down their drinks.

Cheers all, said Stephen, raising a wine glass. All raised their glasses.

Stephen was, Cyril said, lighting a cheroot, *just telling me about a new poem.*

No, no, no, Stephen demurred.

Something new? We'd like to hear it, wouldn't we Lynne.

If you fancy, Lynne replied, signalling to Cyril, who unpeeled a cigarette from his pack and offered it to her. *Why not?*

Well, I don't know if it's quite ready for public performance.

Come on, don't be modest.

Well, alright. Stephen took a drink, his lips dyed red and then pink again. *It goes like this,*

'You dream,' he said, 'because of the child
Asleep in the nest of your entrails, whose dreams
Flutter through your blood in streams.'

'Baby,' her lips dreamt, and he smiled.

He laid his head, weighed with a thought
On the sleep of her lips. Thus locked
Within the lens of their embrace
They watched the life their lives had wrought,

The folded future active street
With walls of flesh and crowding face,
Within her flesh complete,
Between their clinging bodies rocked.

He took another deep drink of red wine and set his glass down.

Marvellous, Sonia said. She reached over a grasped his hand in hers. *Really, marvellous.* Cyril patted Stephen on the back and shook his head in something like awe. Lynne blew smoke and studied her nails.

Sonia, a smile fixed, her eyes cloud-covered, turned breezily to Lynne. *Pourquoi ne partez-vous pas si vous allez être si impoli?*

Moi? Lynne leant forward, responding with a toothy smile of her own and said, *vous êtes celui qui fait un idiote de vous-même.* She looked Sonia up and down. *Vache stupide.*

Salope.

Lynne stubbed out her cigarette. *Connasse.*

If the two men spoke French they did not let on. Sonia, for her part, kept up the pretence of a jovial conversation in the language of love. Lynne stood. She walked around the table and bent to give Sonia a kiss on one cheek, *bonne nuit, salope,* and the other*, j'espère qu'il éjaculera en appréciant ta jolie jupe. Gentlemen,* she nodded, as they half stood at her leaving. She made her way through the pub and out into the pitch black of the London night. Taking a full pack of cigarettes from her bag, she lit and held a match to her mouth. The small flame captured the street in dull, flickering light. She started up Charlotte Street, cursing Sonia, herself, Cyril Connelly, and anyone else she could think of.

Hello again. The broad GI sidles up to her, placing his arm around her shoulder. *Should you be out here, in the dark, on your lonesome?* The three others walk behind at a distance, their laughter long silenced. *We could escort you.* He removes the cigarette from her mouth, takes a deep drag, and clumsily returns it. Lynne snatches it from her lips and tosses it behind her. *Hey, hey,* he draws his arm tighter around her neck*, what the hell's the matter with you?*

Lynne stops in her tracks, by Colville Place, nearly tripping the GI, and pulls herself free from his arm. *Right, that's enough. You can all fuck off now.*

Is that right? The other three catch up but keep their distance. *And why would we do that?* He moves towards her, grabbing the back of her head. *Thought it was pretty funny getting us kicked out of that place?*

Get your hands off. That had nothing to do with me.

You fucking English. You want us to come and save you and you can't even say thank you. Go on, he grips tighter on her hair, *say thank you.*

Andros, let's just get out of here. There's a place around the corner—

We ain't going round the corner. We're going to her place. Isn't that right, what do you say your name was?

Get your hand off, he tightens again. *You're some tough specimen aren't you? Waiting in the dark for a woman, waiting to get her on her own. Real man, aren't you.*

Shut your fucking mouth. He pulls her into the side street, his friends looking wildly around to see if they've been seen.

Do you think I'm afraid of the kind of man who preys upon women at night? How could I—

I said, shut your fucking mouth.

—be afraid of such a coward as a man who would— He hits her across the face and she can speak no more. More shock than pain, more surprise than fear.

I told you, he strikes her again, *to keep your goddamned mouth shut.* He drags her head sideways and hits her hard on the cheekbone. She feels her eye pulse and a surge of nauseous pain. There is something hard and small on her tongue, she presses it tightly against the roof of her mouth. Lynne tries to turn to the other three, if only so they have to register what is happening, but he grasps at her hair again and draws her to the floor. She can hear, in the distance, his voice yelling about sluts and bitches and how he will teach them a lesson. Absolutely frozen and absolutely detached, she knows that she should be angry, knows that she should fight back, but the fight is going on somewhere out there, as she shrinks deeper inside. She rolls the tooth across the ridges of her hard palate. He hits her harder on the side of her head. Her temple throbs. How will she explain this to Mr Jacobson and the women at work? It will take more than a bit of blush to cover up. What will Eddie say if he finds out? Or Herbert? They'll think she deserved it; women like her get what's coming eventually. *You treat men like you want them to hit you,* Eddie had once said. *I treat men*, she'd told him, *like a man would*. She feels his boot against her ribs. She'll have to take a few days off. Maybe she can get some friends to bring some supplies, she can see the bare cupboards in her mind's eye. Molly will have to take care of her. After a few days, she can go back to work and tell them she'd fallen, something like that. She hears his heavy breathing some way off and turns away from it, bringing her knees up to her chest. There will be no more drink or visits to London pubs, not after this. He yells something and there are other voices too, American voices with their dropped *G*s and pronounced *O*s. She tries very hard to listen to what he is saying, to listen closely. *Not my type, eh,* he says, and she can feel his fingers envelop hers, grasping to pry her hand open, gripping at her wedding ring. John. She will have to tell John. But what can he do all the way from Gibraltar? That isn't the point, she thinks, sensing the weight of the GI as he continues to pull and tear at her hand, John is her husband and he has a right to know what has happened. He wouldn't like them to have a secret like this between

them. Her ring finger trapped in his fist, the other hand pulls at her wedding ring. She can feel the skin around her knuckle growing hot. She'd tried to take it off herself only a couple of nights ago but found she couldn't. Water retention, Molly had said with an air of knowledge. There's points in the day, Molly had continued, when your body expands and points when it contracts, like. It was nothing to worry about, she assured Lynne. But she did worry and she'd stopped having lunches, but still the ring wouldn't budge. As it won't budge now. He, the fucking idiot, pins her finger down and punches it, punching the pavement at the same time. He stands up, or is pulled up by the rest of them, and gives her a few more kicks to the stomach. Everything goes very quiet. The world has got a lot more evil, she supposes. Death and death at the hands of another is all too common. Germans killing Brits, Brits killing Italians, Italians killing French, it is only a matter of time before any death is a justified death. They are all strangers in this new world, that seems like it has such a short lifespan, that seems like it might be the death of them all. She tries to keep her breathing shallow. The tooth must have been swallowed. Or spat out. Something inside, something like a voice but not a voice of sound, tells her that she will pass out soon, but she tries desperately to remain conscious. He might come back. When this new world is finally done with there will have to be another world to replace it. It might be, she clings on to her knees and on to consciousness, that the old world will return, even older, even more broken and banausic. No, there will have to be a real shift, a place come about by design, that has come about because it is a place where people want to live. She is slipping. Pain flushes through her, colouring her whole body at first red and then a red so bright it turns blinding white.

The shuddering grows, the sound of coughing swept towards her like a train through a brick tunnel. She woke with the feeling of water trickling onto her lips and down her chin. Sonia held the glass but looked away. Lynne swallowed and coughed more. The parts of her that were not numb ached. She tongued the gap in her teeth that lit up the side of her face. A needle of pain ran up from her abdomen, the thread coursing through her stomach. Her eyes welled, the right one unable to fully open.

You're in the hospital, Sonia told her.

How did, a voice replied, croaky, old and weak.

I found you. We found you, me and Stephen.

Lynne could feel the cold tears rolling down her face, could do nothing to stop them. Sonia had not looked at her, but Lynne could see that she cried too.

John? Lynne asked.

You're awake, came a voice, soft as cherry blossom.

Lynne felt the tears continue to fall. *This is it, isn't it?*

She waited for John now, like she had waited for him all those years ago, like she had been, it dawned on her now, too late, waiting for him all their lives together. He had never really arrived, was always looking for a way out, searching for a way out, yet never leaving. She had found, she thought, a discreet way of making her escape. He had hidden her pills, but had opened countless bottles, offered countless mid-morning gin and tonics. The pills would have stripped them both of their pain a lot sooner, but both of them had grown accustomed to pain.

A nurse cracked the window and a cool breeze caressed sleeping Lynne's white-hot face. She woke to find the nurse standing over her, smiling with Eurasian features. Where was she? Arrived in Singapore once more to make another go of it. I'll get it right this time, she tried to tell the nurse, but her lips were too dry, her head too heavy. The nurse placed the back of her hand on Lynne's forehead.

Singapore, Lynne managed.

What did she say? a male voice spoke behind the nurse. For a moment Lynne thought it was John.

Sounded like Singapore. The nurse leant towards Lynne. *Did you say Singapore?*

Lynne tried to speak. The nurse held the glass to her lips. She saw the man move towards the window and reach to pull it closed. *No, please,* she barely sounded.

She says she would like the window open.

John? Lynne asked.

Your husband is not here. But not to worry, he will come soon.

Yes, the male voice confirmed, *we're expecting Mr Burgess to return for visiting hours.* He toned Welsh notes, within an English overture. *You've given us a fair old fright, I have to say.*

Lynne felt the sickening lurch of the Earth's turn. She knew that voice knew, she saw his physician's whites, the doctor who approached her now.

What is carefree and confident in our youth becomes stupid and vulgar later on, the doctor chided her. *I seem to recall telling your husband back in Singapore that one more drink might kill you. It seems,* she could not see his face but felt him eye her up and down, *that you sought to put my prophesy to the test.*

Lynne began to cry. The nurse, dragging the bedsheet out from beneath her; the doctor, continuing his monologue about Lynne's impending demise. She tried to crane her neck, but the nurse pushed her back against the rough pillows.

Right, Mrs Wilson, or is it Mrs Burgess now?

I want him out, she told the nurse, who strained to listen. *Get him out.*

More water? The nurse asked, holding the glass close.

Ching, Lynne whispered. *Yeshung*. She gritted her teeth, he continued to prattle in the background. *Wo busheyao.* And tilted her head. *Yeshung.*

What's she saying?

The nurse took the glass away. *She says, does not need doctor.*

I would, he scoffed, *beg to differ.*

Chu chee, Lynne breathed, again trying to sit up. *Chu chee.* She sounded the words like two quick exhalations. *Chu chee.*

What's that now? he asked the nurse.

Chu chee, Lynne continued to repeat, *chu chee,* a mantra growing louder and louder.

It means, go out.

Chu chee.

Ridiculous, I'm about to examine her.

Chu, Lynne railed, *chee.*

The nurse pushed her back down, but Lynne fought this time, grabbing the girl's wrists. *Ni beschu bowshu lungting*, the nurse cried, trying to hold Lynne down.

Lynne clenched her eyes tight and mustered up all she had left. *Wo busheyao yeshung. Rung tavi hijugafun ting.*

Lynne? Llewela? Lynne?

Chu chee, she yelled once more.

Can't you give her something? A sedative, anything at all? The voice had morphed. She felt her body soften, felt the heat of an all-encompassing pain split into so many pockets of aching.

John?

Yes, Lynne, it's me. You're in the hospital. In Central Middlesex. He emanated gin as he spoke.

I thought I was, she licked her cracked lips, *in Singapore.*

Wet your tongue, John said, placing a paper cup to her mouth. *That's what the nurse says.*

That doctor—

What doctor?

The one from Singapore, the one— she couldn't put the events in order. Singapore was so many years ago, another life.

Doctor Scott said he'll be with us shortly.

He and John spoke as if in another room, talking about a cadaver that had been dredged from the Thames. From the Mersey, from the Penang. She was no longer a patient but a death that John must prepare for. The tests were in and the tests pronounced that no more tests were needed. John listened attentively to the doctor and nodded. He did not interrupt or correct or question. After the doctor had finished, John sat next to her and took her hand.

I'm done for?

Not yet.

When then?

They say it could be any time. They'll keep you comfortable, that's the main thing now.

I'm not.

I should, he was preoccupied, *is there anyone you want me to contact? Hazel? Anyone?*

Lynne shook her head. She took in the water he offered, it stung at the ulcers and sores. *The book.* She pointed at John. *Bring the book with you.*

She could have asked for anything and he would have brought it. He half expected her to tell him to bring gin, or white wine. He would have brought them to her. Doctors had been telling her that the next drink would be her last for years now. It seemed apt that she would drink herself directly into the grave. What she had asked, he knew, was for him to bring a copy of *Time for a Tiger*, his first novel. She had asked him to read to her from it before, in Etchingham, when they had woke in adjacent beds and she thought that it might be the end.

Anything else?

Her eyelids grew heavy. He watched her sleep for a moment and then, on unsteady feet, left the hospital.

When she awoke, John was sitting across from her, flicking through a paperback book. It looked brand new. Lynne tried to remember the parts she wished to hear and John tried to remember the page numbers. But it was not good. The new, collected edition had put all page references out of order and Lynne was too weak to describe what she wanted. John flicked through the book until he came to the first mention of Crabbe's wife, Fenella. Though she was not exactly Lynne, she was certainly more Lynne than any other woman. He read:

Fenella, his living wife, would sleep on, long, killing the hot morning in sleep. She wanted to go home, but she would not go home without him. She wanted the two of them to be

together. She believed her love was reciprocated. Lynne laughed a little at the word reciprocated, only John believed that love could be dealt with in such terms. He carried on. She found herself ebbing and flowing with his voice. Some sentences she caught only the odd word, others returned her to King's Pavilion or to the kedai by the wet market.

One must love the living, she heard and crooked her neck to see her waiting parents. *She deserves whole wells of pity, tasting and looking like love.* The Malayan sun cut through London pea-soup and bathed her in a soothing light. She turned and saw that John had stopped reading. He had gotten old too, had she aged them both? He opened his eyes and smiled a half-asleep smile. Yes, Lynne thought, I'm still hanging on. He lifted her head and let water drip coolly in. He split a grape between his thumbnails and placed it on her tongue. She drained it of its pulp and juices, then weakly spat the seeds and skin onto her chin. John took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped her.

John sat back down and found his place. *Victor Crabbe put on clean starched white slacks—*

Lynne coughed to get his attention. *What happened to her?* She murmured.

To Fenella? They're forced to leave Kuala Hantu. She and Crabbe are sent to somewhere else. Dahaga. He lifted the book once more, but she coughed again.

After that.

Well, I— They separated. Crabbe can't save her from drowning.

She died?

It's a test, to see if he truly loves her. She swam out and cried for help. Crabbe feared the water more than feared her death. Fenella went home, Crabbe stayed in Malaya. He dies out there, drowning amongst the reeds.

She left him?

Rather good, I thought. Set it all up in one book, pay off in another.

And after?

For Fenella? Lynne nodded. *She went home,* John said.

Wales?

Fenella wasn't from Wales.

She went home.

Yes. Do you want me to keep reading? Lynne did not reply so he went on.

She closed her eyes and saw John pulling on sweat-stained linen pants. Trying to keep quiet, he blundered around their small bedroom and kept her out of sleep's warm embrace. She tried to stay focused on his voice. Lynne waited for the hit of nostalgia she was so

desperate for. But as he kept reading she realised there was no sentimentality in John's words. This, she supposed, was no bad thing for a writer of serious novels. But even his beloved Joyce had sentiment. She listened hard. *He had never met her, but he had seen her often, sweating in the heat as she walked to the Club or to the shops.* It was difficult to follow, her mind wandered to other points in time, *her golden hair darkened at the forehead by sweat, her delicate white face dripping with sweat, the back of her frock stained and defiled by sweat.* She remembered the heat, she need not remember the dry lips and dull headaches that came of dehydration. Was there a way that John could sneak something in, a bottle of gin, perhaps. Even a double would suffice. Just a drop to cool her down, to take this blasted migraine back a few notches, to give her some strength. He had most certainly put a few away before this visit. Maybe he could go out now and pick a bottle up, a quick taxi ride and he'd be back before visiting was over. *But he must meet her, at least see her closely, to examine her blue eyes and appraise her slim form*, that was what he thought Ibrahim was interested in, her slim form. That was John's problem, he saw only the surface of people's actions, believed only words had depth. *Get me something to drink*, she told him. *Tall glass with ice and lemon. Ice and lime. Something refreshing.* He held a glass to her mouth and she tasted the bitter bite of gin diluted in the dull fizz of tonic. *Blue-eyed women he believed there were in Kashmir. That's,* she gasped in the liquid, *that's it.* Her mouth filled with perfume and sour lemon notes. She bathed her tongue, *he had to meet her*, and swilled the ulcers in crackling water. She let it pour into her, taking huge mouthfuls down, clutching the glass to stop him from moving it away. Her thirst raged. *Just before she went to sleep Fenella said*, where were they now? She'd lost the thread. *You know, that Khan man, the driver, is rather nice really.* She would not have said that. Not to John. Whatever Ibrahim had been, it was not really rather nice. He was there now, in the room. Ibrahim, tall and handsome, his full beard and piercing eyes, tinged with lime leaf green. *I only wish I could understand what he's saying*. She wanted to tell John to shut up, but feared any movement might expel Ibrahim's ghost. *Hantu hantu*, she thought and Ibrahim smiled back, having exactly the same thought. The torrent of diluted spirit flowed through her; her hand, the ring finger, tapping the glass. *Like one of those cheap novels about Cairo and what-not. She giggled a little,* and Lynne remembered being that way, remembered how much fun she had been, how much fun she had meant to be. Her senses were overcome. Gin on her tastebuds, John's words in her ears, and beautiful Ibrahim stood before her. She should ask John to get him a Tiger. She looked at his full, deep-brown lips. *He spoke some words of English. Beautiful, he said.* She raised her hand from the glass and out to him. *Bloody beautiful.*

She was dead and he shouted

MOTHER

She was not, he told himself, weeping and with a running nose, his mother but his dead wife. It was something of a thrill, in fact, to think of her dead, but he cried anyway and cried at the thought of being glad about her death. Two of them, slumped on a bed while he gurgled in his cot. His dead mother's face offering nothing in return as he made open-mouthed faces and cooed and bawled his little baby eyes out. The little girl beside her was dead too, God forgive him for laughing, sniffing up snot that dangled from his wet face. Even that bitch Maggie Dwyer was dead. All of them lined up on the bed slumped against each other, the Belle Burgess, the bitch wife and the vile stepmother, then the sister, then him, crawling around looking for a tit to suck. Disgusting. He had been loathed by them all. Their disgusted faces held in rigor, sneering and mocking and nothing peaceful about any one of them, God rest all their heathen souls. He sniffed hard. He blew his nose on his shirtsleeve, revolting child that he was.

Please, mother, the little boy begged, showing her pictures and writing her pretty poems about a boy's love. Another body slumped down beside, the body of aunt Ann, whom he had called mother and who had taken it with a sour expression. Look at this I have written, listen to this I have played. They'd wheeled him in a piano and he sat, back turned to the cadavers, and played something from Brahms, then waited, waited, waited for applause. *Don't self fucking analyse*, a voice, his, cried. *One trip to America and suddenly you're in need of psychoanalysis.* He bit down hard on his bottom lip, drawing blood. The script must be written and written tonight. He got on the phone to Conrad.

Hello? Bill! Bill, it's John, eh, Burgess, John Burgess———Fine, yes, fine thank you. And you? ———Very good. Very goo—now listen, Bill, there's been. Well, I don't know quite how to—I suppose I should just come out and. My wife, you see, I told you that she hadn't been feeling, all the blood loss, I don't know that I mentioned the blood loss, but, well, anyway, look sorry, what time is it with you? ———I didn't wake you?———Good, that's good. She's dead, Bill.

It felt strange to say it out loud, as if it weren't true. He said it again, *she's dead, Bill. William, she's passed away.*

The phone line was as dead as his dead wife. John said, *are you there?*

Yes, I'm here, John.

How did you, it was not Bill Conrad's voice, *how have you?*

What are you playing at going around telling people I'm dead?

I'm not going around telling anyone anything. I told Bill, that's all.

Who the bloody hell is Bill? What business is it of his, you tell me that.

We're working together on— I don't have to. He hung up. As the receiver hit the hook it rang back into life, like his dead wife.

Look, he said before the thing was close to his mouth, *you've got no fucking right.*

John? John, it's Bill. We got cut off. Awful news, truly—

They were far too liberal with their emotions, these Hollywood Americans, hence all of the bloody therapy. *No, that's fine. No, thank you for saying so.*

You must come out to LA. You don't wanna stay cooped up in London. Is it raining there?

He checked. *Yes. Just a light drizzle.*

You don't need rain in your situation. Come over here. Come and get some sun on you. He actually said *sun on ya.* John pictured him giving it the old golly-gosh clenched-hand gee-whiz arm gesture. Shucks, we'd be just delighted to have you come visit. *John? You there, John? I'll call back.*

No, I'm here. Here, I'm here.

What do you say? (*Waddaya say?*)

I've got to deal with a few things here. Deal with her, body.

Sure, sure. But when that's all been taken care of. John felt a sickening amount of empathy exuding from the speaker. *We'll take good care of you.*

That would— you're very kind, Bill.

Nonsense. Call me and I'll get my girl to make the arrangements.

Okay. You're very kind.

Nonsense. You take care, John.

You too. I've— he stopped himself.

You've? John?

I think I've solved the problem of the Shakespeare script. It came to me tonight. No, came to me four years past. Shakespeare on the high seas.

John, I don't think now is—

A poetaster Phileas Fogg. There will be much opportunity for musical numbers, an Egyptian song with lots of Arabic scales and plucking lyres. Then on to Turkey, more sombre,

sultry, men playing great big reed pipes, like didgeridoos, thick-browed women dancing, waving their arms in smoke rising from hookahs. He journeys to her, do you see? To his Dark Lady.

You get some rest, John. We'll talk all this through when you get here.

He held the phone against his ear, a click and then silence and then breathing and then, overwhelmed, he waited for her to speak again.

Part Three

24 Glebe Street
Chiswick
London, W.4.
May 15 (Wet Monday)

Cara Liana,

Of course I know and remember well the sweet Italian lady whom I tried to re-contact but could not find, not knowing quite where she was. So you are in Cambridge and I know where you are. Alas, I cannot come to your Guest Night on Friday, just being about to migrate to Etchingham, Sussex, to finish a novel and start a brief dictionary of slang, but it is very kind of you to ask me. The point is, when will you be coming back to London? Do let me know and, whether I am in Etchingham or not, I will come up to town and ask you, if you will be so good, to have lunch with me again, but in a better place next time. I do want to see you again; there are so few intelligent people about. Write, then, and look after yourself and know myself to be,

as always,
with all possible affection and
admiration,

Antonio

The ceremony had been simple. He was a widower, after all, and a Catholic one at that. The eyes of Archbishop Dwyer were, John felt, watching. Liana was an aggressively lapsed Catholic and a divorcee to boot. No, nothing too elaborate at all. A quickie in the Hounslow registry office, and then a decent meal somewhere nearby. The registrar, a man of John's height, John's age, had presided over matters with little interest. Liana winced when asked if she would take John Burgess Wilson as her lawfully married husband. Liana did not want to marry a John Wilson she had barely met, she wanted to be Mrs Anthony Burgess. It was, Anthony assured her, just a detail. They were, as she wished, Mr and Mrs Burgess from here in.

Anthony sat in bed and watched Liana take off her clothes. He felt a kind of sickness, not unlike hunger, not unlike being caught in a lie. They had been living in Glebe Street together for a couple of months by this point. Bringing his new wife into the house raised the spectre of his dead wife. Lovers had been fair game. Lynne had, he was sure, had several men in their marital bed, but she had not been so indecorous as to marry one of them. Liana watched him through the mirror of Lynne's vanity table and smiled, her torso glistening, her breasts heavy and full. He started to salivate and worried he might vomit.

Antonio? Liana looked on with a wife's concern.

I'm fine. I just need something. He did not say what; he did not know what. Anthony put on his dressing gown, newly bought by Liana, and went downstairs. After pouring himself a large glass of Frascati, he lit a cheroot and went out with Haji into the garden. Life in sin; prenuptial sex was like the dress rehearsal, married life and marital intercourse was the performance itself. He thought about this metaphor and blew smoke. It did not stand up to interrogation, there was no audience present. There had been, though, an audience that morning, and marriage vows hinted towards what wedding guests were implicitly bearing

witness to, when the couple had and held one another, loved and cherished until— He threw his smouldering fag end into the long grass and lit another.

As he locked the door the phone rang. It was late, past midnight. Bill Conrad, no doubt, ringing to give his congratulations. Anthony picked up the telephone.

Burgess, he answered. The line crackled, went dead, crackled again. *Bill? Bill, is that you?*

Who is she?

No. He would vomit. *No, I'll not have this.*

Who's that little slut, John? That little bitch you've brought into my house. I told you, I wouldn't stand for it. Using my house, my house bought with my dad's money, for your depravity. And the child, who is the child?

He's mine.

Are you fucking him too?

Enough! Enough of this. You are dead. You are no longer my wife. You are dead!

Get them out. Pack their things and—

Goodbye. He put the phone down. Beads of sweat ran from his top lip to the lip of his poised glass. He saw off the Frascati and poured more. Perhaps it was Hazel, getting some sort of revenge on him for moving on. The niece, Ceridwen, had pulled faces, refused to attend Lynne's funeral, would not look him in the eye. Youth could be cruel. The voice had sounded youthful, Lynne from twenty years previous. He lit another cheroot and went upstairs. The little boy was on the landing. Anthony said, *go to bed now*, and the child did. His heart still thumping, he opened the bedroom door and found another woman lying naked on top of the bedsheets. He half expected to blink and find Lynne there, blink again and find her cadaver, blanched of colour and life, drained of blood, hollow cheeked and dead-eyed. He pressed down hard on his eyelids with his thumb and forefinger. His mouth was dry, brow wet, heart throbbing.

Antonio, she sighed, tired and a little drunk. *Come*, she tapped the space beside her. He stubbed out his cheroot and took off his housecoat. He took off his pyjamas. His heart picked up with every button he unfastened. Be-beat, b-beat, b-ba-b—ba. He was hard. He felt young and on borrowed time, all at once. He climbed, not next to her, but on top of her. This was his wife now. This was new life, a new life that had been bestowed on him. He kisses her lips. She tastes of garlic and wine. She kisses him back, sleepily. Holding himself above her he takes in her body, the curve of her breasts and hips, the slenderness of her waist, her elegant arms. He kisses her breasts and, placing his head between them, hopes his heart rate will fall.

Be quick, she whispers She wants him. She is his wife and she wants him. He feels like an adolescent. Fifty years old, gripping his penis and trying to guide it into his new wife, this beautiful woman. She takes him in her hand, he shudders, and guides him inside. She takes breath, her breasts rising and falling. Her hands on his hips, she gently pulls him towards her. He feels like a child watching the hired help touch herself. He remembers Rahimah, her beautiful tanned skin, her childlike murmuring, biting her lip as he was on top of her. Liana says, *yes, like that. Make love to me, Antonio.* She moans, her eyes closed this entire time. He feels himself within her, feels how she controls his movements, feels the sensation of it all through his body, all over his skin. This is too much. Lynne would— Lynne is dead— Lynne could not— she would not stand for— she is dead and gone— she will have revenge— there is no revenge, she is dead and buried— she was— she is— she was— she's gone— this is life— this is my life now—this—this—this.

He fell beside his wife. She licked her lips, touched his leg with her hand, and rolled over, immediately asleep. His body continued to pulse, shots of electricity racing through his capillaries, through his pulmonary system. His left arm tingled. Downstairs, the telephone began to ring. He closed his eyes, naked and shuddering. They could not stay here. The ringing continued. If they stayed, they would never be free of her. He would never be free of her. Anthony pulled the sheets over him and thought of Will travelling to Malaya. The vastness of the world, so many routes of escape.

Anthony had suggested they eat somewhere better than the oily Greek restaurant of four years earlier. Liana booked a table at one of the few Italian restaurants in London that bore some approximation to the food of her homeland. Liana ate as much as she thought acceptable. Calamari dipped in mayonnaise to start, alongside garlic bread, overly buttered but still delicious. For her pasta dish, she had seafood linguine, the calamari being so good the first time she wanted more. She broke soft pink prawns from their hard clear casings and pierced clams from their shells. For the main course Liana had sea bass with green beans, potatoes, and a thickly reduced ragu. Anthony ordered spaghetti Bolognese and sat spinning his fork for much of the time. They had coffee and Liana ordered two scoops of vanilla ice cream. Like all British, Anthony though ice cream a thing for children, and perhaps the gap in their ages widened with each mouthful. As the waiter passed, Liana ordered a brandy. When it arrived she poured half of it on her ice cream. Delicious, truly delicious. She had not eaten this well in some time. Her fullness pleased her and she would have liked to have gone back to Martha's apartment and slept awhile. But she had received and now she must give.

We should take a walk, she told Anthony, *along the river*. He was unsure but agreed and called for the bill. When it arrived, he studied it intently. She could tell that he was *that* kind of writer. There was always someone else to get the bill, an agent, a publisher, a Hollywood film producer. What was he looking for in the list of numbers? Finally, after Liana had smoked one cigarette and lit another, Anthony paid.

Molte Grazie, she placed her hand on his. *It was a lovely meal.*

They walked and she told him about life in Cambridge. She did not mention Paolo Andrea, at least, not as much as she normally would have, and she did not mention Stephen. Other things she failed to mention included the huge amount of debt Stephen had got them into, the fact that she had had to take on three lodgers to cover the mortgage and bills. Liana, instead, told Anthony all about the great work she was doing at the university and the beauty of Cambridge compared to London. She told him about the papers she wanted to write and the possibility of writing her PhD thesis. Hearing all this, removed from the daily grind of mothering a son and a man she had long lost patience with, Liana believed herself to be rather impressive. Impressive enough, at least, to feel no intimidation in the presence of the great Anthony Burgess.

They came to a pub and he insisted they go in. The British cannot walk for walking's sake, unless they are halfway up a hill surrounded by nothing. Why a city, which was built by men for men to walk through, cannot simply be a place to stroll, she could not understand. She felt too full to drink any more. They had had two bottles of Soave with their meal. But there was still some brandy warmth lingering on her tongue, so she ordered another. John drank his gin and tonic with great thirst. The brandy in the restaurant had been smooth and glistened with alcoholic heat, this one was all raw booze that made her mouth tighten.

Another, he asked, already standing.

No. No, thank you. I think I had better go. Liana stood but Anthony did not move, blocking her path.

But I thought we could, he indicated towards the bar.

I have to catch a train very early. My son, she said, with no further explanation. *Thank you for a lovely evening.* She kissed him on the cheek, gently but firmly moving him aside.

I suppose I could walk with you. He eyed the bottom of his glass.

No, no. You stay. It was good to see you again. Liana left, happy to be leaving. She was happy to be walking in the city alone. She knew it well and wanted to savour this new-found enjoyment of London. She had left damning the place and its people. It is always this way

when love turns foul and the city does not provide comfort. That was all forgotten. She was full and slightly drunk and thinking warm thoughts of Paolo Andrea.

Liana! Cara Liana! He was not running, but the intention was there. She stopped, lit a cigarette and enjoyed this tall, cumbersome, but somehow charismatic man half bound towards her.

Mr Burgess, she laughed. In her mind, Mr Burgess was a sitting man. Sitting on television panels talking about this and the other, sitting at his typewriter writing all those articles she had been reading and, she could not get the image out of her head, sitting in a little toilet, distracting himself with poetic thoughts. She thought he was going to kiss her, he stopped so close that she could smell tobacco and tomato on his breath. He did not, but he took her hand and they walked together.

Bad manners, he said in way of explanation. *It's being married all these years, you forget how to behave around women. It's easy to think of the correct way to behave when you're sitting at a typewriter. All writers have it in them to treat women well. But in the moment, I,* he drifted off, *it has been so long since I've taken a beautiful woman out to dinner.*

Liana could not help but be complimented. *Truth be told, Antonio, it has been a long time for me to.* They stopped and he lit a cheroot. *With,* she added, *a handsome man.*

He convinced her to have another drink. They walked for a time, passed the great landmarks of Parliament and Big Ben, which Anthony told her was actually not the name of the tower at all, but the largest bell within, which sounded E natural. They took a taxi to Fitzrovia, he told her he knew a place that did a good bottle of Italian white.

By the time he brought glasses over, she was quite ready for a nightcap. She asked him if he was working on a new novel and he fell into character, explaining that a new novel was something like a pregnancy and gestation did not guarantee birth. She enjoyed the way he spoke. He started most sentences with an elongated *well*, his bottom lip jutting so she could see the brown base of his front four teeth. He then said a few words, *one has to understand* or *when you treat writing as a career rather than an art*, then he would take a long, thoughtful pull on his cheroot, before making his pronouncement. It was not conversation as she knew it. She found herself making her own promulgations, talking over him, and placing his gesticulating hands down on the table in order to make her point more clearly.

He talked learnedly about Italian literature, about the language of Belli, and when she corrected him on some generalisation or invention, he would wave his arm and somehow brush away what in his mind seemed a matter of perspective or semantics. On the first few occasions Liana was irritated by his dismissal of what she saw as inaccuracies, but she

enjoyed his company, his way of talking as if there were no doubts left in the world — *well, of course, a man and a woman are designed to be entwined* — it was much like Paolo Andrea talked about the world he lived in. Whatever was unknown to Paolo Andrea was filled in by imagination, so that everything fitted into a harmonious, sensical whole. When she took him to visit her mother in Italy, Paolo Andrea finally made sense of his mother's accent, it was because of pasta. Potatoes made English people speak one way, pasta made Italians speak another. Paolo Andrea had eaten pasta and exuberantly pontificated like his grandmother and mother.

They arrived on Glebe Street. Antonio helped her from the taxi. Liana had been talking about Paolo for half an hour. She could get like this, particularly when he was not close by. She could not wait, she repeated whenever she lost her train of thought, for the two of them to meet. She felt that there would be an immediate sense of kindred spirit. Paolo, she told Antonio, laying her head on his shoulder, wrapping her fingers around his, had always been a musical child. Any record she would play, Vivaldi, the Beatles, Joe Sentieri, little Paolo Andrea would shift backwards and forwards in time with the beat. Liana, heaven knew, had no musical abilities. Paolo could hear a song once and sing the melody back perfectly. Of course the words were not quite correct, he was only four years old, for pity's sake, but the melody was perfect. Days later, weeks later even, he would be able to remember the tune as if he were singing along to the record itself. *You should hear him*, she urged Antonio. *You should hear my little boy sing.*

When she woke up she was back in the Chiswick house. She dressed in her white cotton dress from the night before. High-necked, white with an embroidered rose covering the length of one side. Thorns removed, of course. She made her way downstairs and caught the odour of bloody meat frying. Uneasy, her head heavy, she pushed open the door to the living room. It was exactly as she remembered it. There were a few more pieces of furniture, a standard lamp, an uncomfortable-looking sofa, an upright piano, but nothing that would suggest this was a place where life went on. It was as though four years had passed in the rest of the world, but time had been unable to penetrate this building. She had to remind herself that between her first and second visit, a woman had lived and died in these rooms. In the kitchen area, Anthony stood over a spitting pan, thick with coagulated fat, drinking noisily from a tea-stained mug. He whistled and waved his wooden spoon like a conductor's baton. What the hell was she doing here? He had, before passing out next to her, proposed marriage. *I'll take*

you to Etchingham, he declared. *I will*, his eyes barely open, *take care of you, you'll see*. Then they had both slept.

Good morning, Antonio.

For a second it was as though he'd forgotten she was there. He wore a creased and stained shirt with baggy green trousers, carpet slippers. He put his mug down and wiped his hands on his trousers.

Buongiorno tesoro, he sang, happy, so happy to see her she could not help but laugh. *I've bought pork kidneys. Sit down, sit down.*

She sat at the Formica table, barely room for two, and watched him carry the pan to the table. Fat sloshed the kidneys around like rotting dolphin corpses rolling on the tide. Anthony clumsily dropped a kidney on her plate. Oil splashed onto her dress. He didn't notice and went back to get plum tomatoes, which were bubbling and spitting. He poured tea that ran like treacle. It was all she could do to breathe through the stench of overcooked meat, burnt fat and stewed tea. John could hardly contain himself, slicing into and chewing down on the sinuous, rubbery meat, bloody grease smearing his plate.

Do you have coffee?

Just, he chewed, *tea.*

Liana lifted a piece of toast from a plate in the middle of the table and took a small bite.

Not hungry?

I'm feeling a little, she held her breath as a wave of nausea washed over, *delicate.*

I can make you a G and T? It would be no trouble.

She laughed, then saw that he was serious. *No. No, I don't want anything like that. Just coffee. You don't have any? Not even instant?*

I don't drink it. I could go out? He put his knife and fork down, wiped his mouth with a napkin.

No, no. Just some water, then.

Anthony stood up and went to the tap. *I leave for America tomorrow.*

Yes, you said. He handed her a hi-ball of warmish water. *What will you do when you are out there?*

They want to go over ideas for the Shakespeare script. Bill, that's William Conrad, he thinks we should see a green light soon enough.

You like being a scriptwriter?

I suppose so. He chewed his kidney thoughtfully.

But you are a novelist.

Novels don't pay the bills, I'm afraid. Not like movie scripts. I've already made more for this non-existent film than I did for the novel it was based on.

Yes, but, surely, the water was doing the trick. *Surely, you want artistic fulfilment, artistic joy?*

Fulfilment, I get from composing.

Music?

I can play you something, if you like. He chewed rhythmically. *I thought we could go into town after this.*

I haven't any clothes. She looked down at the spreading stains, brown ink bloats, on her pretty new dress.

There's clothes upstairs. You can pick out what you like.

She began to cough. Her throat tightened. She could feel something like sand in her windpipe. He tried to feed her water, but she could not stop coughing long enough to drink. He slapped her on the back, too forcefully, tears streamed down her face. What the hell was she doing here? She wiped her mind of everything, of this poor man's dead wife, or her son left with that resentful bastard back in Cambridge. She drank water and sealed her eyes tight.

I must go. I've got to get home for Paolo Andrea. He will wonder where I've got to. It's been lovely, thank you for a lovely evening, she kissed him on the cheek, she saw that he did not know what he had done wrong. She said, *get rid of your wife's things, Antonio. If you want to move on, if you want your life to continue. My mother, when my father died, she kept everything. She is alone still.* She kissed him again on the cheek and left.

Are you my dada now? Andrea studied Anthony. His long, slender child's face did not move, his almond eyes did not blink. He thought of Anthony as some kind of a magician.

That depends on you, I suppose. Would you like me to be?

Not really.

No? I don't blame you. Anthony drew out a page from the typewriter and hand it to Andrea. This page was full of rhyming words— *bum hum tum numb thumb sum gum dumb thrum drum.* Andrea did not recognise them but saw that they were connected. Anthony went back to typing and Andrea went back to staring. *I had a wicked step-parent too, when I was about your age.*

What was he like?

She, this was my stepmother. She was not terribly kind to me. She had no time for children, especially not little boys who were naughty and not her own. She did not want me.

Is that what I am?

You're something different, Anthony said.

Do you not want me?

No, no. I'm happy you're here, Andrea. I love your mother and she loves you.

The boy looked quizzical. He took his page of rhyming words and sat on the sofa, running his finger over the print. *She's my mama,* he said, finally.

It was September, late evening sun stretched out the days, and they were something of a family together. Paolo Andrea had made many friends, Glebe Street being full of young families. The house itself was austere, but Chiswick was vibrant and energising for Liana. The house could change, she told herself. She would take her time but would begin to breathe life back into the place. When Stephen showed up with a van and dumped most of their belongings on the street, it gave her an excuse to claim the place for them, for her and her son. Anthony seemed to shudder when he saw pictures had been hung, ornaments displayed, and photo frames placed on the empty mantelpiece. His eyes darted between these objects, not daring to focus on any one thing. But he did not move them, nor mention them to her.

Paolo Andrea brought his own sort of joy into the house, which made it feel even colder, as if it sought to reject the boy. Anthony complained bitterly about the interruption of his work. Paolo Andrea would lead in a steady stream of other children who asked if they could press the keys, as if he himself were pressing keys at random. *Bugger off,* Anthony told them. Paolo Andrea would not bugger off. He found Anthony endlessly fascinating. All that hair and those huge hands which turned like windmills as he spoke. When Anthony stood, Andrea would try to climb him. Taking big handfuls of corduroy, he pushed his heels off Anthony's shins and began the long ascent. *There's no reasoning with him*, Anthony complained, prising Andrea from his trousers and placing him back on the ground.

There's no reasoning with any four-year-old, Liana told him. *Be kind to him.* Anthony promised he would be in future.

Liana was woken by the tapping of keys. He stopped as soon as she walked through the door.

The Inland Revenue plan to take all of my money away, he said.

What are you talking about?

Lynne had some money. They want all of that. Death duties, death tax. Then there's this money from Bill Conrad, they want that as well.

What does your accountant say?

He says, get out of the country. That's what he says, Liana. He tells me that I should do what everyone else is doing and tell this blasted Socialist, Communist government to go directly to hell.

She approached him. He looked as though he had not slept. His shirt was crumpled, all buttoned up wrong. Beside him was a thick black cup of tea and the remnants of a gin and tonic.

I'm being hunted.

Who are you talking about? she asked.

Who do you want? The tax man, the government, publishers, production companies, agents, readers, the sodding guild, the BBC, I could go on. Reader's Digest, The Telegraph, The Spectator. I could go on, I really could. Time *magazine, the Booker-McConnell Prize. The Hawthornden Prize and their damnable age restrictions. Do you want me to go on?* He stared accusingly at the telephone.

Liana saw the look, she turned to the phone and then back to him. *What are you saying?* She placed her hand on his head, as she did with Paolo Andrea. He was hot to the touch.

I'm saying we have to go. Get out of this bloody ungrateful country that punishes people for dying and punishes those that dare to carry on living. Malta. He said it as though it had just come to him, the solution to all of their problems, Malta.

Liana went to the kitchen and made up the moka pot, lit the stove, and placed the pot on top. She lit a cigarette and opened up the back door. Paolo Andrea was outside, naked, chasing Haji. She checked for faeces on the lawn and came back in. The pot began to splutter and spit. She turned the stove off. From the cupboard she took an espresso cup and poured frothing coffee into it. She took a sip. *You want to move to Malta?*

It's in the sterling zone.

Liana didn't know what that was. She didn't much care. *But when? You seem to be talking as though this must happen now.* He took a mouthful of tea. *Antonio?*

He swallowed and said, *We must do something soon or they'll ruin me.* He stood up, cradling his stomach. *I hate the smell of that stuff.* He went upstairs, closing the toilet door with a clatter. She could hear him, from the living room door, making groaning noises and cursing Godknewwhat. He would be some time, she assumed. Malta.

She woke having dreamt of the Mediterranean Sea. Antonio had taken her to the symphony, Giovanni Sgambati's *Symphony No 2 in E flat minor*. The music had reminded her of home and now, having dreamt of waves and Sgambati's undulating strings, she longed to leave

London. After the concert, he had taken her for a meal, an Eastern European restaurant that seemed no closer to closing when they left as when they arrived. Antonio had discussed, animatedly, a new novel he had in mind, his first for two years. The novel was to follow an aging writer who travels the world, present at some of the defining moments of the century. Liana felt drunk again. She left Antonio sleeping and went to make herself coffee.

Paulo Andrea was staying with friends. Liana opened the kitchen door for Haji and lit a cigarette. She had felt, in the restaurant, in the symphony hall, the full force of Anthony Burgess. The sheer freedom of travel, of creation. They would have to take their son out of school, but a voyage such as this was an education of its own. Liana began to make plans. They would fly from Heathrow to Paris, or perhaps journey by train to Dover and take the ferry. From Paris they would fly south, Provence, she would have to check the airports — perhaps, Monaco. Anthony stirred in the bedroom above. She put the kettle on once more and filled a tannin stained mug with several teabags.

I would like to take you to meet my mother, she said, handing him his mug.

Anthony wiped sleep from his eyes and supped at the thick brown tea. *Your mother?*

In San Severino. We can fly into Perugia. But Bologna first.

What are you talking about, Liana?

She made a plosive with her lips and went to her bag to find another cigarette. Anthony followed her and lit them each one. He said, *I am glad to see you are happy.* And then, *you are happy, aren't you?*

I want us to travel, Antonio. The three of us. If it's to be Malta then, so be it. But why not take our time.

Anthony furrowed and itched at his brow.

You can write, while I take Paulo Andrea to see the sights, day trips to the beach, afternoons at museums and galleries. You can begin your new novel. Our travels to inspire your new work. She had spoken quickly, her eyes widening, volume raising.

Anthony put bread on the grill. *It sounds like a perfectly good idea,* he said.

Liana turned him from the oven and wrapped her arms around his neck. *This is a new beginning, Antonio. You were right, it is time to leave London.* She kissed him, his lips wet with thick, bitter tea. *I will go and make enquires today.*

So soon?

Wasn't it you that said we must do something soon? Tax bills and whatnot.

Yes, but, he tried to turn to check on his toast, *I don't want you to think*— he could smell the toast beginning to catch.

Think what?

Think that we're, he tried to move her arms from him, but she took this as an act of defensiveness and clung tighter. *I will take care of you, and Andrea.*

She held his gaze for a moment to check that that was all he meant, then she kissed him once more. She said, *I'm going to get ready*, and left him scraping burnt toast into the sink.

Liana returned with brochures and leaflets Antonio refused to read. He had become wrapped up in his Shakespeare screenplay once more, unwilling to discuss the novel Liana had felt such excitement over, she continued to feel excitement over.

That Sunday, Paulo Andrea in the garden kicking a half flat football against the side of the house with friends, Liana waited for Anthony to finish his work.

I can help you, she said, watching him put a red line through an error on the page.

Help me?

Thwack came the football, slamming against the wall behind.

I have travelled, lived in America, I have helped other writers with their work.

Your ex-husband, you mean, he said, not looking up from the typewriter.

And others.

Thwack.

I need to get the script done. Bill Conrad says they're almost ready to green light. He began clacking away on the keyboard once more. The ball punctuating a bassline beneath the snare of Anthony's typing.

Liana stared at the back of his head. His hair wild and unwashed, she would make him get it cut. *I want us to go through my schedule, for the trip. I need some money too, to book our first flights. A hotel in Paris and—*

Anthony had stopped typing. *About that,* he said. *I was talking to someone who recommended a motorhome. I've got*—thwack. He rummaged through papers on his desk—*this, here.* He handed her a brochure for the Bedford Dormobile. Thwack.

Liana stared at it. Thud, against the back door. *Andrea, that's enough now. What is this, Antonio?*

Bedford, he nodded. *Dormobile.*

Crack, off the kitchen window. *Andrea,* Liana stood, checking the window, *go somewhere else to do that. I don't understand,* she returned to Anthony. *You don't drive.*

No, he said, and turned back to his desk.

She waited for more, but he began hitting keys once more. *Sure*, she said, grabbing her bag and purse. *Andrea,* she called, *I'm taking us for gelato.* She walked to the front door, followed by raucous children, raucously filing passed Anthony, and threw the Dormobile leaflet in the bin.

When they returned, Andrea exhausted and ready for bed, the leaflet was back on the coffee table.

I am not driving to Malta. Christ, Antonio, do you know what you are asking? If you want the damned thing, you can learn to drive.

I'm too old to learn. Liana—

No. It's final.

Please, just let me say—

I don't want to hear any—

It will give us time together just the three of us, as a family. This is the beginning of our lives together. It would give me time, real quality time, with Andrea.

You are doing it again, using my son.

Our son, he said. *At least,* he kissed her on the lips, *at least think about it.*

Three days later there was a knock at the door. Anthony leapt up from his typewriter and rushed to answer it. He called Liana to follow. Parked outside their house was a red and white Bedford Dormobile, something like a transit van crossed with a caravan. Anthony moved around it with a boy's enthusiasm, goggling as though it were a Maserati.

What is this ugly thing? Liana asked. It reminded her of the police vans that would tear down the streets of Bologna, sirens blazing, carrying hoodlums and violent criminals. It was sad-looking, to driving what bumblebees are to flight.

It's not ugly, not ugly at all. He opened the back doors and Paolo Andrea, entirely naked, clambered straight in. *Out of there, Paolo. Esci, esci.*

Why you speak Italian to the boy? Do you drive?

I will write and look after Andrea. Antonio tried to hold Paolo around the ribs, unsure how to touch the naked body of a child. The boy wriggled free and climbed over the back seat. Liana could see there was a kitchen inside, a sink and everything.

And I drive from Chiswick to the middle of Malta?

I will be the resident chef, he retorted, scrabbling into the van to retrieve Paolo Andrea, who was yelling gibberish to the tune of 'Hurdy Gurdy Man'. *You will be well fed,* he called

from within. *No, leave that,* he told the boy, who was grasping at knobs and honking the horn. *Leave that, I said. Lascia stare, per favore.*

Liana went back in the house and poured a glass of wine. There was always wine, or gin or whatever you might want to drink in the house. They would share the workload, indeed. Liana knew her son was her responsibility, and the driving now too. And who knew what else she would be responsible for. Antonio, his hair wild, out of breath, followed her in.

Liana, we made an agreement. Please. He tried to speak like a man but sounded like a baby. Please, mama, let me have it my own way. Outside the car's horn blared. She could hear the voices of other children, drawn in by its call.

An agreement before I saw that thing. That monster out there. Liana took a plate from the cupboard and threw it on the floor. It broke in two.

It will be a great trip. A holiday from everything else, from everyone else. The honk, honking became a sustained note. *Can you please go and stop him? It's giving me a fucking headache.*

You can't, you can't. What about me? What about my son? You say you want to make me happy and give me a better life? Ha. I drive for three bloody weeks, is that your idea of a better life for me, Antonio? She went over to the window and opened it. *Andrea! Andrea! Shut that thing off!*

Outside, boys were clambering on the front of the Dormobile, bouncing up and down. Antonio gripped the centre of his brow between this thumb and forefinger. *We can visit Rome, go and see your mother, you wanted to see your friends in Bologna. I want the three of us—*

It's no point saying these things now, Antonio. You've bought that whatever you call it out there, you've made the decision. I just want, she put her glass down and went to him, *I just want us to make the decisions together. Not you. Us.* She kissed him, *wait,* and went into the street to prise Paolo Andrea from the van he would spend the next several weeks living in.

Anthony was suddenly struck with a melody, a kind of theme that rumbled just as the engines rumbled below him. The sea had its own music, its shifting tempo, waves of undulating bass and the treble spume, like shimmering bells. He attempted, watching the coast of England gently slump below the horizon, to match the music in his head to the libretto he had been writing. Nothing fitted. This was not the music of a Hollywood showtune, this was something far more onerous, more profound. The sea wind picked up, the waves following suit. He leant over the barrier and down into the wash below. There, he heard strings murmur, pulling this way and that, the sea drawing him in, *join us.* It was the music of dread. All that he had tried

to bury was making its way up in sonata form. There was no money. The house in Malta had been paid for by the sale of Applegarth but there was nothing left. There was not enough to pay for plane tickets. The Dormobile was bought on the tick, as had Liana's expensive new camera. The edge of the boat looked very appealing again, his head swam with music, besieged with strings and brass and woodwind and percussion. He went back to the van to write all this down, pulling out drawers and opening cupboards to find his music manuscript. But music was mere distraction. They needed money. He winced at the thought of having to tell Liana that the man she had married was, in fact, a poor writer, that her bag contained not just the deeds to the new house but every penny he owned. He put away the music and instead wrote a quick letter to Professor Louis Rubin at UNC Chapel Hill to see if there was any teaching available. English writers could command a decent salary in American universities and none of it would have to go to Deborah Rogers. Agent's fees would be the end of him.

In Paris he posted his letter, his palms had grown quite sweaty with the deceit. Liana, armed with the newly purchased Zeiss Ikon Contessa, stopped at the windows of Parisian art galleries, pointing out and photographing particularly interesting pieces. One look at their price tags would send him into partial paralysis. He would then denigrate the piece as being badly composed, a crude imitation, or simply not to his tastes. They left Paris distanced, one a liar the other doubting her critical eye.

From Paris they headed South East, vaguely in the direction of Troyes. Liana drove and navigated. Paolo Andrea swung between the front seats and the back seats, depending on what piece of scenery caught his attention. Anthony sat in the back and wrote. He wrote and continued to write *Will!* Picturing himself following in the Bard's footprints, albeit chugging along in a beige and burgundy caravan, Anthony focused on the journey ahead, the open roads of Europe. Will had become a kind of Quixote, Anthony a kind of Sancho Panza. The rain pelted down, ricocheting off the metal roof, snare raps interrupting that damned piccolo theme he just could not get out of his head. He still felt the swaying of the English Channel that was no longer beneath him. He wrote a large set-piece scene, Will leaving Gibraltar and his Gibraltarian lover, a black-haired mystic who had had a vision of his wife and his brother, Richard, in a lovers' tryst. Will stands at the front of the ship and asks God to put a curse on Anne Shakespeare. A storm breaks out, like nothing any of the mariners has seen before. The sailors sing:

MASTER
Boatswain! Boatswain! The sea is upon us,
Speak to the mariners: Fall to't, rarely.

BOATSWAIN
Heigh, my hearts! My hearts, oh cheerly, cheerly!
Yare, take in the topsail, yare tend the whistle!
Blow, til thou burst thy wind, our seabound missal.

WILL
Pry, I'm to assist, tis my fault the sea rages.

BOATSWAIN
You? A poetaster, can thou write pages,
To quell the mighty sea beast beneath us?
WILL
I can hand a rope, the mast I can untruss.

BOATSWAIN
Make yourself ready in your cabin, Will,
For the mischance of the hour, if it so hap, if tis God's will!

There were certain rhymes that were not too pleasing on the ear, but once they had been Hollywoodified, with American twanging Elizabethans, it would do more than well. The crew and poet would seem to have been drowned to a man, but the following scene revealed their ship washed up on the shores of Algiers. He made a note in the directions that an albatross

should fly over, just as Will woke, still gripping the ship's wheel. He had saved them all from certain wreck and when the men came too, they celebrated Shakespeare's name, singing:

MARINERS
We were shook, our lives we feared
Thank the seas for Shakespeare!

The rain was coming thick and fast now. The tarmac beneath, the road ahead, set a rhythm and pace which demanded to be matched. The rain continued to fall, crack crack crack, peppering the Dormobile. Anthony pounded at the keys, clack clack clack, more words than he had written in a year. The storm passed, but the storm of metal kept apace inside their mobile home. It took several minutes for Liana to realise that the exhaust pipe had fallen off, the clattering of keys sounding much like the clattering of car parts on the autoroute. She ran out into the rain-soaked night to retrieve it, still hot to the touch, from the roadside.

He sang Berlioz from Lyon to Montelimar, and now they were reaching the Southern coast, he had started on Satie. Paolo Andrea stared with open-mouthed wonder as Anthony began to parrumph Milhaud's *Provence*. *Ba da pa da dar dah!* He would strike the keys in time, accompanying himself with great vigour.

What is he doing, mama? Paolo Andrea asked.

He is making music.

It was not long before the boy joined in. He learnt the bassoon part of *L'apprenti Sorcier*, parp parping away with such confidence that Anthony was able to provide accompaniment, filling in string and brass sections. Paolo Andrea had never heard the music before and had no notion that it was in fact written for a hundred musicians with instruments rather than *dah da dahs* and *bla bla blas.* The boy had an ear, Anthony thought, and he set about trying to teach him the whole cello part for Saint-Saëns' *The Swan.* Paolo Andrea quickly grew bored by Anthony's insistence that he listen carefully and copy exactly. Liana enjoyed hearing them play together. Even living in such close quarters, they had kept each other at arm's length, yet in all of this blaring and warbling the two seemed to have found a connection that was not her.

When they arrived in Avignon Anthony collected up all the books he had finished reviewing and the three of them set off to find a book shop. Anthony posted the copy he had produced, some twenty reviews, as well as a further letter to Professor Rubin, suggesting that he could come for the spring semester, listing a range of courses he could teach: the works of

Shakespeare (of course), Seventeenth-Century Literature, British Literature, Post-1910 Poetry, Contemporary American Culture, and James Joyce. Anthony explained that he expected to be in Malta by December and gave his new address, 168 Main Street, Lija, Malta.

In the book shop, the owner, a hunched myopic man, questioned the value of books written in English he had never heard of. She explained, in a cocktail of Italian, French and English, that she was a famous, international literary agent, that the bank had closed and that they would not sell these books, which represented the best of contemporary British literature, were it not for the dire straits they found themselves in. She got a good price, tucked their francs in her passport and put it in her bag alongside the wad of sterling notes, all the money they had.

They spent the afternoon on the banks of the Rhone, drinking Châteauneuf du Pape, sampling Racket and Pieds et Paquets. Liana photographing Anthony as he reclined glass in hand. She took pictures of Paolo Andrea as he undressed and clambered to the riverbank. They watched as he pissed in a vaulting arch into the Rhone. The locals stopped and gasped. Anthony saw the boy's slash hit the river's flow and felt a terrible foreboding.

He turned to a couple of elderly women stood on the bridge. *Il est fou*, he told them, nodding towards the child.

Il est four, Liana corrected.

I wrote this last scene with a discussion on the literary chronotope in mind. It is, for me, Bakhtin's most challenging concept but also the one that I have spent the longest amount of time contemplating.

Derived from the Latin for time/space, Bakhtin conceives the chronotope as a narrative device, as 'the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied' (1981, p. 250). It suggests the impact of time-space on the characters through the narrative. For Bakhtin, 'every entry into the sphere of meanings is accomplished only through the gates of the chronotope' (1981, p. 258). The chronotope is how the time-space of the narrative effects its characters and, to some extent, vice versa. It is also how time and space relate to each other.

One of the central chronotopes present in *Nothing Like the Sun* is the river chronotope. The novel begins with WS walking along the River Avon. The river, its flow revealing the passing of time, causes Shakespeare to 'smart' at being 'treated as a child still' (1985, p. 3). However, it is not just the personal timeline that is held in the river chronotope, the river also holds within it the history of Stratford, and its future. Across the river stands the Clopton bridge, named after the man who built it, Sir Hugh Clopton. Clopton's Bridge evokes the other edifices he commissioned represent a particular time/space moment for locals — he is the 'New Place hero' by whom all Stratfordians judge themselves; New Place being the house that he built as a monument to his success in the centre of the town. Shakespeare wonders if he will leave as indelible mark on the world as Clopton, whether he, quote, 'will die as great a Stratford's son'.

The most important use of the river chronotope in the novel occurs as WS makes his way back to Gloucester from Bristol, having lost the copies of Plautus' *Menaechmi* he was sent to buy. The scene presents the river chronotope as a representation of great time. Burgess writes:

> WS mounted and turned his shamed back on Bristol, leaving Severn's mouth and returning to its source without, he soon saw in renewed shame and so fear, the books that had been the sole end of his coming hither. (1985, p. 60)

The estuary is where the great works exist and the source is where Shakespeare will write his own, new literature. The flow of the river is not only representative of the flow of time in WS's own life, but the flow of literature from its creation towards a future far beyond. *Nothing Like the Sun* contains a dramatisation of the theory of *Hamlet*'s genesis as proposed by Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Dedalus posits that the ghost that haunts Hamlet is Shakespeare himself, and the play reveals that Shakespeare's son, Hamnet, was actually the result of an affair between Anne Hathaway and Shakespeare's brother, Richard (Joyce, 1992, p. 223). In the second half of *Nothing Like the Sun*, this theory is played out, and in the first production of the play, WS himself plays the Ghost (1964, p. 191). Joyce responds to Shakespeare and Burgess places the two in a new context, a new dialogue.

The chronotope is a place where time becomes corporal; Bakhtin explains:

> In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. The intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope. (1981, p. 84)

It is at the intersection of narratives where the chronotope becomes significant for our reading, when Bakhtin's metaphor of knots in string becomes the tying of two narrative strings together. In Burgess' works of historiographic metafiction, he ties narrative strings from two time/space positions to call into question their relationship. This tying of narrative strings together – of writing about one time/space from another, asks the reader to consider the space between. Geoffrey Aggeler views *Nothing Like the Sun* as a drawing together of different spacio-temporal positions. Burgess is able to 'transport himself and his class of school children back into sixteenth-century England. In a sense, however, he will also bring Shakespeare forward into the twentieth century through identification with himself' (1979, p. 68). As Burgess and Shakespeare are drawn together, 'the identification becomes stronger and stronger until finally, in the epilogue, we are able to hear the voice of a Shakespeare/Burgess composite hero' (ibid). While Aggeler claims that this identification is between the writer Shakespeare and the writer Burgess, it is, in fact, between the character WS and the narrator Mr Burgess: one teacher telling the story about another teacher whose name is synonymous with storytelling.

The chronotope of *Nothing Like the Sun* reaches from present-day Malaya, with Mr Burgess' inscription to his '*special* students' back to Shakespeare's time (1985, p. i). Elizabethan England is not, in this context, the place of the narrative, but the place where the narrative stretches towards. Elizabethan England and present-day Malaya are the two boundary points of the narrative, neither being the centre. Fatima, WS's Malayan lover, becomes the conduit between the two times and spaces, she is a both a modern, independent Malayan woman and an Elizabethan courtesan (1985, p. 152). Fatima is from the East but has been taught the ways of the West, while her son will be brought up in the West, before returning to the East. Furthermore, this use of the chronotope problematise the position and identification of the reader.

Describing the position of the reader in conventional literature, including conventional literary biography, Catherine Belsey explains that:

> The reader is invited to perceive and judge the 'truth' of the text, the coherent, non-contradictory interpretation of the world as it is perceived by an author whose autonomy is the source and evidence of the truth of the interpretation. (1980, p. 68)

In direct contrast to the interpolating Belsey describes, *Nothing Like the Sun* presents the reader with an incoherent, contradictory interpretation of the world, invalidating the authoritative centralising of the narrator and exposing the author's subjectivity. In short, Burgess does not want the reader to trust the text too much. As a man who lived in words, Burgess felt that, as readers, 'we are bemused by the printed word, giving it an authority it does not really possess' (1992, p. ix).

While the editors of *Bakhtin's Theory of the Literary Chronotope* recognise the chronotope as a means to understand how fictional worlds imitate the real one, and as a means of understanding human actions, I have also found that the chronotope can be used to replicate or, at least, allude to the disordered nature of human memory (2010, p. iv). Burgess sets out his confessions in chronological order, presenting his life as a comprehensible journey. Yet memory is not accessible in this manner. It is much closer to Burgess' description of language, which 'tend[s] to ambiguity and vagueness… Language has, in fact, many of the qualities possessed by human beings themselves: it tends to be emotional when pure reason is required, it is sometimes unsure of what it means…' (1992, p. 15). Memories shift with emotion. Burgess is taken back to wartime London when he recalls Lynne's death, because this is the time when her decline began. Writing a life using chronotopic shifts – a river's flow leads us to the flow of another, long-distant river; sex with one person can take us back to another bed, with another lover. Or an empty bed can invoke the memory of one shared. This is not the cliché of someone, on hearing a songbird's call, being wistfully transported back to a happy time. The shifts of memory, recreated in literature, become shifts of time-space, connections made in the actions of others, or in geographical and temporal parallels. It is part of the pleasure of memory and of art that both can transport us from our current, unbearable position to not just one other place but may others, all traversable in the blink of an eye or in the turning of a page.

As night drew in they walked back to their temporary home. When it came into view, Liana cursed its very wheels, gears and gearbox. Andrea, tired of a day's swimming and singing, tripped and scraped his legs. Anthony cursed him, Liana cursed back, and a young man who had been following, unseen, snatched Liana's bag and ran into the shadows. Her blood

already hot, Liana flung weeping Andrea into Anthony's arms and gave chase. She would beat his head with a rock should she catch him. She yelled, *stronzo!* and *A fanabla!*, bearing down on the thief's heels. She would crack his skull in two. She would pierce his throat with her fingernails. He turned down an alleyway, she turned down after him, but too late. She had lost him. *Vaffanculo!* She cried, *vaffanculo!*, she raged. He had taken everything. All of their money, their passports, and all of the documents pertaining to the house. *Vaffanculo, pezzo di merda!*

She took her time returning to the van. Anthony was sitting on the step with Andrea asleep in his arms. Once he had been put to bed, Liana begged her husband to put an end to this nonsense. They could fly from Marseille-Marignane to Malta. They could sell the van and use the money for a hotel, for plane tickets. They would need to travel to Nice for new passports and Anthony would have to contact his bank to have money sent. If he was so serious about their new home, what was the delay? They could fly from Nice Côte d'Azur to Malta. If he was determined to see Italy, Liana was willing to drive to Turin, after which they would fly from di Torino-Caselle. But he would hear none of it.

Anthony's temporary passport proclaimed, unlike the boy's birth certificate, that Paolo Andrea was indeed the son of Anthony Burgess. Not that Anthony's passport carried that name; John Wilson was still, to some degree, alive in the world. Without her passport, Liana would be crossing from France into Italy illegally. With his passport, Anthony was able to withdraw money from the bank, and buy bottles of Côteaux du Tricastin, Rasteau, and Lirac.

There is wine enough in Italy, Liana cursed. And so there was.

Piedmont, Lombardy, Emilia Romagna, Anthony wrote a bawdy ballad, with Will necking soothing carafes of wine, wrapped in wicker wood. Brunello, Carmignano, Chianti, Bolgheri, Will read poems to the beautiful women of Florence, who stole from him all these sonnets only to encounter Will once again in an Arezzo taverna.

She fell into a kind of delirium, getting into the driver's seat each morning and simply pointing the van in whichever direction took her fancy, reacting to the road in the same way a person lost at sea reacts to salt water. That she no longer felt ashamed when she kicked out her husband and son, so she may use the vehicle's chemical toilet was itself a matter of great shame. She had long ago stopped putting on make-up. She would go days without changing her clothes. None of this mattered, in and of itself, but Liana had not agreed to travel the length of Europe to piss into a plastic bucket. It was like some kind of magician's trick, where Anthony seemed to be living in luxury, drinking fine wines and smoking expensive cigars,

while she and Paolo Andrea made sandwiches from stale bread and hardened cheese. Anthony ate these with delight, exclaiming that this was true European food. From Venice she drove West once more to Padua. It was only when he realised they were travelling back into Verona that Anthony tried to draw his wife from her trance.

This thing will destroy me, she told him. Paolo Andrea lashed out with his feet at the glovebox, an act of solidarity.

The quicker you get us there, the quicker you can get out of the bloody thing, Anthony snapped, counting stolen and spent pennies in his head. Liana snarled back, but she knew he was right. They turned on to the A22 and started, once more, Southward.

In Bologna Anthony used a public phone to call Deborah Rogers.

I'm glad that you've finally made it to Malta.

We're not in Malta. We're in Bologna. He could hear a hand muffle the mouthpiece on her end and cotton-wool expletives.

Anthony, she said calmly, *you're expected in LA in two weeks' time.*

I will be in Malta.

They've green-lit the Enderby project, you're expected to deliver a completed script.

But I'm working on the Shakespeare script.

Which you're also to deliver in two weeks. She was breathing heavily, he had the sense that the receiver was shaking in her hand.

Well, how the bloody hell am I supposed to write two bloody scripts at once? What the hell is going on there? It took her a long time to reply. He was worried his money might run out. *Hello? Deborah? Can you hear me?*

I can hear you, yes. Anthony, the fee had been agreed and wired to you. I would suggest you make the best of this situation. Could you stay in Rome and write? You can always come back to London and work here. She made it sound so simple. They had been travelling for weeks and yet he could have been back in Chiswick in a few short hours.

No, no, we're not coming back. I'm working well on the road. Leave it with me. And you're sure the money has been transferred?

Very sure. How is Liana?

We're all fine. Better. We're all extremely happy. He hung up and went back to the van to open another bottle of wine.

Anthony set about working on two scripts. *Will!* was nearing completion, the Bard having arrived in Malaya only to, almost immediately, begin his return journey. The second script,

based on Kell's book *Enderby*, would be mainly written inside the chemical toilet cupboard, Anthony thinking this approach close to method writing; it may also aid excretion. He rang Deborah again, from a bar in Faenza, and arrangements were made for him to fly back from Malta to London and from London to Hollywood in ten days' time. This he kept from Liana.

Anthony had not been told what to expect, but whatever he had expected was not this. He presumed these were the maid's quarters, that they were here to pick up a key or drop something off. Liana's mother was a Contessa, these were the rooms of a pauper. Her mother, the Contessa, was old but still striking. Her greying hair was wrapped in an elaborate Italian braid, entwined like rope, pinned tight to her head. Her clothes were much like Liana's, modelled on Chinese Communist attire, though the Contessa's outfit was dappled with paint of many different colours. Liana said, *madre, per favore, incontra Antonio, mio marito. Antonio, questa è mia madre, Maria Lucrezia Macellari, Contessa Pasi della Pergola.* The Contessa mouthed along with her daughter, nodding with satisfaction when her full title had been announced.

Molto piacere di conoscerti, Anthony recited, holding her frail hand, scaly with dried paint, and smiling absently.

Quindi tu sei lo scrittore, quello la cui moglie ha uno dei miei quadri. Dimmi, come sta tua moglie? He did not catch it all but recognised the horror on Liana's face. *Moglie*, wife, he knew; something about his wife.

Per favore, mamma, non ora.

Ora lei è la sua defunta moglie e tu sei la sua moglie vivente.

This he understood. *Defunta moglie*, dead wife. *Moglie vivente*, alive wife.

E questa, mamma, è tua nipote, Paolo Andrea. Liana shifted slightly to reveal the small boy that clung to her wide denim culottes. He pulled at them like a curtain, covering his face. Liana, gently as she could, peeled Paolo Andrea's hands from her and moved him out before his grandmother.

The old woman held her venous hands to her thin, wrinkled lips. She said, under her breath, *Non sai quanto mi manchi.* Tears wetted her arid skin.

Saluta tua nonna, Andrea, Liana sang, though Anthony heard the anxious tone she sought to hide.

The boy's eyes began to well too. They all stood there for an uncomfortable moment, Andrea's lip quivering.

Una foto! Liana called, moving her husband, mother and son together in a huddle. S*orridi!* They did not, for their own particular reasons, smile.

Vieni attraverso, vieni attraverso, the Contessa clucked, and led them into the living room, a little place with a farrago of furniture and mouthfuls of dust for all.

The walls were filled from floor to ceiling, it seemed, with paintings presented in elaborate gold-leaf and artless plain wood frames. Anthony moved away from the conversation and towards the largest of these paintings. Lynne had hung a painting much like this in the Chiswick house. A gift — the lies they had told themselves, had told everyone, unravelled before him. Liana had gifted one of her mother's painting to Lynne. The shame of it.

His wife and her mother spoke in rapid, dizzying Italian. He made out the repetition of Paolo Andrea's name but little else. Each picture was different but contained the same young woman at the centre. He had seen her before, in a photograph that had recently adorned his mantelpiece and was now in the hands of some Avignon thug. Grazia, Liana's sister. She shared the same striking brown-black curly hair as Liana, but there was an innocence in her eyes that Liana either never had or had lost. This was the blessing of youthful death. Liana's sister had died in a skiing accident some years before, her mother had not overcome her grief.

Objectively, the paintings were terrible. The composition was all wrong, buildings simply disappearing into the background, surrounding figures seemingly made of driftwood and wire. Yet as he studied the largest of the paintings closer, Anthony couldn't help but be drawn to the beauty of this young girl, almost always in the same pose, always with saltwater eyes. He moved from painting to painting. Grazia in a ballgown, horse-riding, reclining by the pool, hugging Liana, kissing her mother's cheek, standing by a gleaming new car, sitting at a restaurant table, surrounded by other people all looking at her, in a bridesmaid's dress, at the beach, with her hair in a dramatic beehive, laughing in a rowing boat, one oar floating away, smiling intimately into the camera, standing outside a gleaming white building, sitting outside a bar, bottles of beer filling the table, standing next to a tall off-duty police officer, sitting in the window of an airport terminal, waiting to fly to Borneo, posing in her gown and gavel, sitting by a water fountain in Rome with friends she had met there, holding hands with a uniformed soldier, after their wedding day, posing with the Bedwellty School Ladies' Hockey Team, meeting the prime minister of Kelantan province.

Antonio, why don't you come into the garden?

In her skiing outfit, goggles on her forehead. *Yes, darling. In a second.* As a child, sitting with Liana outside the church they had passed on the way. As a baby, swaddled in her

mother's arms. He found himself turning on the spot, his breathing shallow and quick. Drinking a glass of wine, a half-pint of beer, swigging straight from a bottle of Tiger. He saw what this place was: a shrine. Endlessly smoking cigarettes, in each and every painting, grey brushstrokes blended with the bright background. The Contessa, Havisham-like, lived in her daughter's tomb. He felt drunk, drowning. Strings started to swell, the swell of a cyclone. Horns stabbed, her eyes were everywhere, her lips, her— snapping snare hits, snap, snap, over and over —he tried to get his breath— ba dah, ba dah, da dah —falling into a dusty armchair. The room span about him. He had heard of this sort of thing, the body continuing to feel the motion of travel long after the journey had ended. He lit a cigarette. Motion for him always carried with it music, and this was violent music. Anthony held his eyes tight for a long time, placed his hands over his ears. He waited until he could no longer make out her face in the blackness, until the sound had quelled to a dull background hum.

I am opening prosecco, Liana said, passing her clenched husband and going into the kitchen. The idea of bubbles horrified him.

Anything still? He called after her. *My stomach,* he said, blinking back into the room, his eyes averted from Lynne's visage. From the kitchen came a cork pop. Liana walked in with a tray of glasses and an opened bottle.

You look sick, she said to him.

A brandy, anything?

I have poured you a glass of Galliano. Come out. She continued out into the garden. He cursed her under his breath and drew himself from the chair.

The garden was a few potted bushes and plants on a thin balcony. Contessa Maria was making a fuss of Paolo Andrea, tears in her eyes chanting *Paolo mio Paolo, Paolo mio Paolo.* He smiled, the boy, but even Anthony could tell that he was unsure of this woman and this place. The boy did not want to explore, the rooms were cold in every way imaginable, but he did not want to stay here, with this woman who seemed either mad or a child trapped in an old woman's body.

Paolo mio Paolo, the Contessa kept repeating, holding the boy's face vice like in her hands. His bottom lip started to go again.

Anthony drained his liqueur, just what was needed, and said *Andrea, why don't you go and see if the Bedmobile is okay? Bring back a bottle of wine. Red.*

Liana tutted at this, *he is just a little*— but she saw her husband's intention. *Yes, you go and check for us, darling.* Andrea pulled away from his grandmother's hands, that grasped after him as he went inside and to the front door.

Lui è bello, Maria said, tears in her broken eyes. *Proprio come tuo padre.*

Mama, Liana warned, but the sobbing had begun. And then the accusations. Why had her only daughter, her only living daughter, left her alone for so long? How had she kept her grandson, her only grandson, from her for so long? Who was this man that she had married, married in England, that she now brought to meet her poor, sick mother? They returned to speaking in alacritous Italian.

I'm going to, scusami, he tried to interrupt. *Scusami*, *I'm just going to*, but it was no use. He walked back into the living room, dead eyes ever watching, and into the hallway, where even more paintings waited. Outside, Andrea was kicking a stone about the cobbles. Anthony approached, his hands in his pockets.

That's my nonna, he told Anthony, though there was something of a question in it.

Yes. Yes, that's right.

She has cold hands. Her breath is funny.

You shouldn't say a thing like that, not about your grandmother.

She smells old.

Now that's rude. You know not to be rude. Anthony sat on the windowsill; Andrea continued to kick his stone about.

Are we leaving soon?

We're going to stay for a few days. Your mother hasn't seen your grandmother in a long time. As long as you have been alive. This stopped Andrea in his tracks. He looked around at this place he found himself in, at the vehicle that had got them here, and the man who had come with them.

But I've been alive for ever.

Anthony lit a cheroot. *Were you alive when I was born?*

The boy thought about it. *That was a long, long time ago.*

Then how could you have been alive for ever?

I don't ever remember not being here. I've always been here.

But at some point you weren't. Anthony thought of the Big Bang, of God creating heaven and earth. *What do you think came before you?*

Andrea seemed to have lost interest. He went over to a creeper, climbing the worn stone face of the building. After pulling many of the leaves from the plant, he said, *I can't remember. I can almost remember but then something stops me. Maybe nothing. Maybe just nothing.*

But I remember. I remember twenty years ago, forty years ago. I remember being a baby myself, in my cot.

The boy held the leaves he had collected and smelt them, he scrunched them up in his palm and smelt again. *You can't remember all that. I can't remember being a baby. Maybe you had all these things put in your head and really you're only four too.*

Anthony laughed. *Come. Let's have a walk.*

He picked a direction, right, and they set off, the boy running ahead and climbing on the brittle-looking walls, Anthony smoking, following behind.

Andrea said, *why does she have so many pictures of my mother in her house?*

They are not of your mother, they are of your mother's sister. Your aunty.

Where is she?

She died. Before you were born.

Andrea eyed him suspiciously. *Did you know her?*

No, I didn't know her. Did your mother never talk to you about her? Her name was Grazia.

He thought for a moment. *I don't know. Why did she die?*

It was an accident.

Did she really look like that?

Like the paintings? No, she was very pretty. Like your mother.

Is your mama dead?

Yes, he said. *She died a very long time ago, when I was younger than you are.*

Was it an accident?

No, no it wasn't an accident. My mother died of Spanish Influenza. The boy pulled a face, mulling the words over. *She was very poorly, lots of people were. My sister died as well, she would have been your aunt too.*

How old was she?

Very young. She was just a girl.

Were you sad?

No, I was too young to be sad, I was a baby.

What about now?

Now? He pointed the boy down a wide street off to their right. *Sometimes, I think about them. My mother mainly.*

What about my mama?

You shouldn't worry about that. Your mother is very much alive and well.

Where is your papa? Did he die too?

He did, but much later. He was an old man when he died.

The boy had another question to ask, he stood still, his foot kicking at the cobbled street, trying to form the thoughts in his head into words.

You want to know what he died from?

No, the boy replied.

They found themselves in a square with a bar at the far corner. He ordered a gin and tonic and a Coca Cola for Andrea. Choosing a table, he spotted, in the back room, an upright piano. *Through here,* he told Andrea.

Placing his glass on top of the piano, he opened the lid.

Are we allowed? the boy asked.

I will ask. He called out, *scusami. Suonare il piano?*

The owner, a man not much older than Anthony, taut and tanned, called back, *non è un problema.*

What did he say?

He said, that it is okay. Anthony slammed his readied fingers on the keys, making Andrea jump and laugh at the same time. He played big, bawdy chords, letting the strings reverberate. Then he played 'A Smile, and Perhaps a Tear', humming along out of time and tune. Andrea laughed and excitably struck two or three notes himself.

Do you know this song? Anthony asked.

I have heard something like it. Can I play? Andrea said, Anthony still in full-swing.

Have you played before?

Andrea struck another few notes at random. *Can I play it?*

Would you like me to show you?

No, the boy said. *I want to do it.*

Anthony stopped and stood, giving Andrea the whole seat. The boy shuffled on and Anthony shuffled him up to the keyboard. *What will you play, Andrea?* he asked.

The boy thought and said, *I'm not sure. I think I'll play the same thing you played.*

Okay, well, let's hear it.

Andrea slammed his outspread palms on the keys, slapping them down wherever they fell. He played with great concentration, stopping at one point because he had got it wrong and then continuing in the same raucous fashion. The bar owner stood behind and watched, amused by the boy's enthusiasm. After forty seconds he stopped, out of breath and ideas.

Very good, Anthony told him.

È naturale, the bar owner said, returning to the main room.

Would you like me to show you a few things? he asked, moving the boy along and sitting next to him.

Andrea thought for a second. *No.* He hopped down from the stool and drank his cola through the straw.

This, Anthony said, undeterred, *is Middle C.* He struck the note, poignantly. *If you know where Middle C is, the whole piano is laid out for you.*

I'm hungry, Andrea said, milling between the empty tables.

Are you paying attention, Andrea? I am teaching you something.

But I'm hungry.

But nothing. Come here. My father never showed me any of this. You should be grateful.

I want to go to Mama, the boy said.

No, you can come back here and learn something. This, he struck the note again*, is Middle C. Now, you show me.*

I don't want to.

Come here and show me.

The boy returned to Anthony's side and struck out at a key. *No, that's E. Middle C, I asked for.* Andrea tried again. *No, B. Try again.* Frustrated, the boy hit out with both hands on the keyboard. *Do it properly, Andrea. Here, watch me.* He hit the note again.

I don't want to. I want to go back.

You're being very disobedient. Here, he hit the note a fourth time. *All I want you to do is repeat after me.*

No.

You will. Show me.

No. I want mama.

I will take you back after you've—do you not see this is meant to be interesting. Fun.

Andrea hit the note and ran from the bar. Anthony yelling behind him.

Show me again. I didn't see. He chased after his father, who had gone through to the kitchen and was lifting the cap off a bottle of stout. *Please, dad, I want to know.*

I've bloody well shown you once, haven't I.

Please.

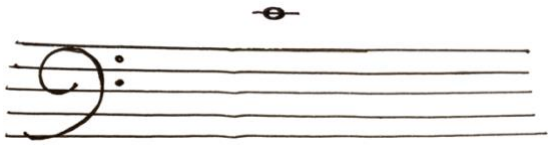
In the square he could not see the boy and started to shout his name loudly. There were four strada leading off the square, he could have gone down any of them. *Andrea!* he yelled. *Andrea, come on. Come back.*

Stop mithering, for Christ's sake, Jackie. You're givin me a flaming headache.

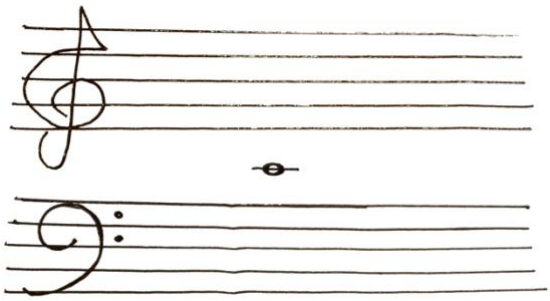
He returned to the piano and stared at the black and white puzzle before him. His teacher had told him that Middle C was the door that led to the world of music. There had been no piano in the classroom and he had struggled to contain his excitement on the journey home, jumping from the bus and running down the narrow streets. He went in quietly and saw that Liana and Maria were alone, still talking on the balcony. Fraught, he ran back to the square, shouting the boy's full name. What the hell would he do? He shuddered at the idea of explaining to Liana what had happened to her son. He should have never been left in charge of the boy, he told himself. This was not his role, not what they had agreed. He waited for the moment of inspiration. He hit a key, one he thought central, one that might, just might be Middle C, but how could the boy know when there was no clue, when all white keys looked the same and all black keys identical? He circled the square, considering going down one of the roads, but instead sat on one of the benches around the fountain. And if there was Middle C, was there also Middle A and Middle B? Where were they? Why were they any less important than C? He looked up and saw that it would most likely rain soon, and that it was getting late. The boy had disappeared and there was nothing he could do. She would never forgive him, even though it was the boy's fault. Even though he had only tried to teach the boy something. Standing at the left-hand edge of the keyboard, he struck the last white key, boom, and the next, boom, boom, boom, boom changing into bah, into bee as he moved up the keys, change to dah to dee and at the very end *ting*. There was nothing for it but to return to the bar and wait. He would buy another drink, sit outside and wait. In all these paintings, a Middle C, in all these bottles of wine, a Middle C, in the women that he had met and the places he could possibly be, each one a potential Middle C. But again he had no point of reference, no clue that would eliminate any of the options before him. Which of these passions, his creative outlets was Middle C? He still had no idea. The boy distracting him while he tried to write his screenplay, while he thought about a new novel, while music battled within him for attention, while reviews had to be written, think-pieces thought, biographies set down and critical texts researched. The boy, the son, the child did nothing but distract, did nothing but question and question. *Why why why why why why why.* And his father said, *for money. Not for pleasure? No, not for pleasure. Not for invention or for ego or for the challenge? Lad, have you been listening at all to anything I've been trying to tell you? It's money, in't it. It's for money. I learned where Middle C was, aye, and where the bloody hell did that get me, ay? Din't want me in the cinemas no more, kicked out, the Joanna thrown right after me, din't want me in the pubs n'more, rolling in their fancy fucking Yankee*

jukeboxes and kicking my bleeding arse out the door. We're selling the flamin thing, so there ain't much point in learning where anything bloody well is. But here, if you must know, here, ding ding ding, is Middle C. Like the thumb of your right-hand fist, your forefinger and ring finger the black'ens. Do you see? Here is it, on the page

Here it is again



The same, but not the same, do you see that, lad? Keeps itself from the stave, from those lines there that the other notes live on or between.



Centre of everything, committed to nothing. Now you know the answer that will unlock all other answers, or so your stuck-up teachers'd ave you believe, well, believe me, pianerplaying ain't nothing to do with Middle C, not in my book, any road. Not in my book, lad. Music I play, did play, won't nothing to be written down and read but was played in like reaction and in responding to the pictures on the screen or the people yelling out for Boiled Beef and Carrots or Two Lovely Black Eyes, only by the time I'm playing one, someone's yelling out for summut else or the picture's changed and I'm avin to make the Joanna do plenty of work and at last orders or when the reel reels off, then it's all gone, all that music disappeared in the night, never to be done the same ever again.

Ephemeral, he replies.

Don't give me none of that big word bollocks, our Jackie. Big word bollocks and a big load of notes on a load of pages, that's you all bloody over. Here, ding ding ding, on the key again*, I'm off out.*

And Anthony sits on the piano stool, looking down at the keys, Middle C in the centre of his vision, and he thinks to himself, now what?

Have you seen, he begins to say, seeing Andrea on a barstool drinking a fresh bottle of coke, the owner talking to him in broken English.

Ecco tuo padre, the man exclaimed. *Your son,* he said to Anthony, *he came back.*

I can see. Andrea, he said, holding himself together, *come to me.* The boy climbed down from the stool, eyes downcast. *You must,* he felt that he might strike him across the face, *never, never, run off like that again. Do you hear me?* And to the owner, *how much do I owe you? For the coke? Quanto?*

Nessun addebito, he replied, waving Anthony away. *Little boys are little boys,* he said.

Grazie. Andrea, say thank you. The boy stood rigid, terrified. Anthony snapped and yelled, *say thank you for Christ's sake! Say thank you. Say it!* The boy said nothing. *Say thank you, say it,* he bawled.

Thank you, the boy's voice cracked.

Now, let's go.

They walked back in silence, Anthony red with rage, Andrea sobbing, though he tried to hide it. At the door Anthony said, *your mother does not need to know about this. I will not tell her what you did. Okay?* The boy nodded. *Now,* Anthony said, *wipe your face.*

He opened the door and made sure the boy went in first. Liana came to meet them, exclaiming, *tell her, Antonio. Tell her we want to take her out to eat. She refuses to let us pay, lei è così testarda,* she yelled in the direction of the balcony, *she says she will cook.*

In the galley kitchen, no bigger than the ones they had left in Chiswick or Bedford, Liana assessed the ingredients she had to work with. They were limited. She made a list and, taking a wicker bag from a hook, went to the market nearby. Andrea went with her, clinging to her arm, while Anthony took his glass of wine back to the Dormobile and continued to work. The final push to completing *Will!*

Liana arrived back, weighed down with heavy bags of pasta and vegetables, her face fixed in a scowl. He opened the Dormobile door and gave her a cheery *buon pomeriggio*.

Liana gritted her teeth and said, *where is my mother? What,* she put the bags down, *for Christ's sake, Antonio.* Before he could respond, she had gone in.

He followed her, labouring with so much shopping, saying, *I need to work. I've got so much to finish.*

Liana tutted, grabbed one of the bags and pulled out a smaller bag containing porcini mushrooms. She let them roll onto a wooden chopping board and began slicing them.

You should wash them first.

Liana swung round, the point directed towards Anthony. *Would you like to do it?*

He put on an apron and Liana poured herself a glass of wine. *She is fine*, she told him, *she is taking a rest. But*, she shot before he could interject, *you should not have left my mother's house like that. You are a guest, you are her son-in-law.* How ridiculous that sounded to both of them.

I need to work, Liana. He poured a great glug glug of olive oil into the pan and threw in the sliced mushrooms.

Jesus, she cursed, and took the spatula from him, *give it to me.* Anthony took her wine and Liana retrieved the mushrooms from their greasy bath. *You can take a day off to meet and get to know my mother.*

There is no time. The truth was bubbling within him. He watched his wife put a pan of water on the boil and add a loaded tablespoon of chicken stock, which she swirled in the water. *There's no time.*

You have all the time in the world. You do nothing else but write, Antonio. The water began to boil. Liana took a packet and sprinkled what looked like sand into the pan.

Well, I have to bloody write to live, don't I?

Don't speak to me this way. You choose to work so much. She whisked the water that grew thick with yellow grains, which she continued to pour.

You think it's a choice?

Why not a choice?

I write to make money, Liana. Don't you— he stopped himself. *Those reviews I've been writing are paying for the food we eat.*

Hand-to-mouth writing, Antonio. She continued to whisk, the water boiling and spitting yellow lava. *You get distracted by this small stuff, writing for magazines, for movies. Novels are how you make money.*

He drained the wine in Liana's glass. *Is that what you think?* He knew it was exactly what she thought. *There's no money in sodding novels, let me tell you.*

Shush, you will wake her. Liana reduced the heat of the hob and put the lid on.

I wrote, he continued at the same volume, *five novels in a sodding year and didn't earn a fucking penny. If you want money, Liana, if you want things, I have to write for magazines, I have to write for the bloody movies.*

She poured another glass of wine and studied him. *What are you trying to say, Antonio? We have no money?*

He reddened. *Of course that's not what I'm saying. I'm just trying to say—*

I think you underestimate your worth as a novel writer. You make bad deals. When we were apart I would often see your books published and think why is this not better advertised, why is Antonio not on the television?

I'm always on the bloody television.

No, you are on the television talking about everything else except what should be the most important. She lifted the lid and stirred what was now a thick paste.

Anthony peered in. *What the hell is that?*

Polenta. I am no cook, Antonio, but polenta I make very well. She kissed him, the argument seemingly over. He had neither unburdened himself nor kept his secret a secret. He itched with frustration.

Questo sembra delizioso, Marie said, taking her seat and spooning herself something that looked, to Anthony, like semolina pudding. Thin, watery semolina pudding. It turned his stomach just to sit in front of it. What the hell was he doing here, he poured more wine, in Italy, having to eat whatever the hell this was. He saw his expression reflected in Andrea's face. A little boy sticking his tongue out at the abomination his mother had presented as food.

Eat up, Liana told Andrea sternly. Anthony felt sternly told. He put a forkful to his mouth, it felt grainy and sloppy against his lips. He took a glug of wine for courage and forced the fork mouthwards. It tasted of nothing but the texture was repulsive. It was all he could do to stop himself from spitting the slop out. What fresh hell was this? Liana had made other things, pasta with mushrooms, drizzled in oil, grilled fish, heads still intact. All of this was not right. Surrounded by paintings of— Jesus, no, don't think about her —he was no longer in Chiswick, no longer in Etchingham. Etchingham sold, Chiswick given to Terry, his homes were gone. He drank and, distractedly, lit a cheroot. How far away was the nearest lamb chop or rabbit stew? Christ, Christ, oh Christ, how grief came like a falling lift. And then, once you thought you'd hit the ground, how far it fell once more. She was dead and buried, wasn't that meant to be the end.

I've escaped, he wanted to scream. I've fucking escaped, haven't I? Aren't I meant to be bloody free now?

Antonio, put that out. Try this, she stubbed his cheroot out and dropped an eyeballing fish on his plate.

I can't— he thought he might be sick. He stared down at the staring visage of Pisces. My birth sign, he thought, but knew too little of astrology to draw a significant link. *I think I need*

to get some air. He got up unsteadily and went into the street. If he could, he would have driven the Dormobile away. He had no means of escape from his escape, however. He was trapped in his liberation. And, no, he would not eat that Italian filth. He was an Englishman and he would eat pies and black pudding and mincemeat and gravy and peas and she is still with me and I cannot be free and the more I try the more she will find me and drive me mad and curse me. Music struck again, vivid, arching chords, then the melancholy of oboes and bassoons. He climbed into the Dormobile and searched for staved paper. He tried to write the notes down but found they would not sit on the bars. What he needed was a piano, a piano and more wine.

They left abruptly the next day for Rome. Liana apologised, explaining to her mother that they had to get to the capital as soon as possible so she could get a new passport. Liana drove like a getaway driver, Anthony sat in the back, in silence, no crack of typewriter keys, nor humming and drumming one of his one-man orchestra. Instead, with black ink on music manuscript, he carefully plotted a course, charted a journey. They joined the Tiber by night, Anthony saw it running red, the delicious, juicy red of Sangiovese.

You are awfully quiet, Liana called back. But she could not have been further from the truth, he was brimming with noise and bustle. *What do you think is going on, Andrea?* she asked in a comically conspiring tone. The boy looked behind at the old man hunched in concentration. *Why don't you go and see?* But the boy did not want to go and see, instead he fixed his eyes on the road ahead and said *Rome: r, ohm, e,* watching for the corresponding marks on the signs that hurtled past.

They stopped in Caldare, Anthony carefully putting away his music and taking his typewriter from the cupboard. Liana and Andrea walked by the river. Anthony watched its mighty flow from the Dormobile and knew its significance. With the river spurgeoning in his ears, Anthony completed his script for *Will!* The finale had him give up the woman he loved in Malaya, and the revelation that a son was soon to come into the world. Will, waving sadly from his departing ship, would never know of the heir he left behind. By the time his wife started the engine again he had relocated to the toilet cupboard to press on with the *Enderby* script. Pulling off the dirt track onto the autostrada, Anthony hoped that all the roads that led to Rome were smoother than those in the opposite direction. His head reeled in andantino with dialogue and the reanimation of dead characters. Enderby himself had to be made younger, the cinema being no place for the infirm. Give him a young, glamorous wife, Anthony told himself, that will knock years off him.

Liana held Andrea's hand tight. Rome thronged with people, all seemingly experiencing a life-defining emotion as they passed by.

Keep beside me, she told him.

Yes, mama.

They arrived at the *questura*, where a long queue stood before them. Liana cursed but knew there was nothing for it.

What happened to all of these people? Andrea asked, looking around at faces filled with regret, with rage, a woman in tears, a man holding a bloody napkin to his face.

Different things, she told him. *Don't look at them.*

Andrea looked. He had a sense that this was where he belonged, not in the police station, but in Rome, surrounded by all these lively faces and, *Vai avanti! Vaffanculo!*, loud voices. He struggled to see the man shouting, his mother reining him into her.

The queue had not move for some time. Andrea said, *mama.*

Liana replied, *yes?*

Mama, how long is Antoniole going to be staying with us?

What do you mean? they shuffled forward.

How long?

For always, Andrea. We live together now. He is your father.

But when will it just be you and me again?

Sbrigati, per l'amor di Dio, she muttered, and then, *it is you and me now.*

No. Not like this. I mean, when will it just be you and me, only you and me, no one else, no Antoniole?

She grew impatient, *why are you asking this, Andrea? You know the answer, I have already told you.*

He watched an elderly couple, arm in arm, sharing disappointed looks and consolatory words. The queue inched forward, he said, *can I sit over there?*

No, you can stay here with me, his mother replied, tightening her grip.

He said, *do you remember when we used to live with Stephen?*

She did not reply.

And he used to take me to the park or to get sweets or sometimes to the toy shop.

Quiet now, Andrea.

And you took me on the boat and let me do the rowing. And you took me to eat lasagne and the woman let me have a glass of wine.

It was not a glass of wine, Andrea. It was only a mouthful. And I told you to drink it very slowly.

And do you remember when I would come and help you do your work and I would put the pages in order and you let me draw on the coloured paper. And you cut out the people—

Signora, come posso aiutarti? came a gruff, disinterested voice.

Sì. Il mio passaporto è stato rubato, Liana replied, looking for something in her bag.

Mama, Andrea pulled on her blouse.

Not now. Ma ho il mio certificato di nascita qui, she handed a piece of paper to the man.

Quando è stato rubato il tuo passaporto?

Due settimane fa, she replied.

Mama, do you remember when I used to sleep in your—

—Andrea, no. Be quiet now. I don't want to hear another word.

Due settimane fa? Perché ti ci è voluto così tanto tempo per segnalarlo?

Perché stavamo viaggiando. Ho guidato qui da Avignone.

Cosa c'entra Avignone con qualcosa?

Andrea tried to bite back tears. He did not want to give her the satisfaction of seeing him cry. He tried to unpick her fingers with his free hand, but she would not let go, refusing to look at him.

The man was saying, *hai attraversato il confine senza passaporto o documenti ufficiali? Questo è un crimine.* His tone was hostile, the words meant nothing to Andrea. He was bewildered, censored, demoralised, unsettled, repressed, discombobulated, rattled, overwhelmed, silenced, muted, trapped, watching his mother as she said words that he was sure she was making up, words that frightened him with their loudness and peculiarity. The man shouting back, his mother slamming her free hand on the desk and saying,

Preferiresti che restassi ad Avignone senza soldi, senza passaporto, senza via d'uscita?

Preferisco che tu non infranga la legge, he said, matching her volume.

His mother rested her head on her hand and said, *questo non ci sta portando da nessuna parte. Cosa devo fare per ottenere un nuovo passaporto?*

The man stood up and left. The people behind cried out, afraid he would never come back and they would always be waiting for him to return. She did not look at Andrea and the boy refused to look at her. He stood still, trying to pay attention as time passed. The man behind wore a watch, which Andrea could see only when he turned around and only when the man's sleeve was not covering the face. This happened every few minutes, and Andrea made it into a game, where he would try, without counting, to guess how long had passed. He would turn

and the face would be hidden, so he would have to wait until the man scratched his arm or twitched his fingers, which he did regularly.

Above him, the man said, *è necessario compilare questo e chiamare questo numero. Questo è il dipartimento che si prenderà cura di te. Ti consideri fortunato a non fermarti perché hai attraversato illegalmente i confini internazionali.*

One minute and twenty-eight seconds, Andrea thought. He turned his head, correct.

Il telefono più vicino? his mother asked, in a tone he had only ever heard her use with him, when he had been acting up. *Grazie*, she said, pulling his hand, leading him along the crowd and out into the street.

Come on, she said, *we need to go this way.*

He was made to stand in a small phone box while his mother talked to someone. It wasn't Anthony, he knew, because Anthony didn't know Italian. Perhaps she was on the phone to his nonna. But mama had her serious voice, the one she would use in her office or with Stephen late at night. Finally, she put the phone down and said, *do you want gelati?*

It's too cold for gelati.

Come on, she tried to pull him close, but he kept his distance. *Okay, we'll have spaghetti.*

Liana ordered for Andrea, who pulled his face at the food put in front of him. *What? You don't like it?*

It smells.

It smells, she mocked. *Eat up.* She took the napkin from the table and tucked it into his t-shirt. His mother laughed to herself and then took a picture of him.

He tried to resist, but Andrea was too hungry not to eat and the food was delicious. He couldn't help but return the smile his mama gave him. After he had eaten as much spaghetti as he thought he could, his mama ordered more food. The waiter put a plate in front of him, with what looked like ice cream mixed with jelly.

What is it?

Who knows? Try it. She put her fork into her brown and yellow cake, it smelt of rich coffee.

He took a small spoonful from his plate, so small he could not tell whether it was good or bad on his tongue. The next spoonful was much bigger. It was creamy and sweet and made him feel like laughing. He said, *what is it called?*

Panna cotta, she told him.

What does it mean?

It is cotta, which is cream, and then, how to explain, like my white blouse, like the shape is the same, yes, it is wider at the bottom than at the top, yes?

That is panna?

It is something like this. Here, she poured glossy red sauce on top, which tasted of jam. He ate everything on the plate.

Should we take something back for Antonio? she asked, lighting a cigarette.

No, Andrea replied, putting his spoon noisily down on the plate.

He could hear the mechanical tapping before he saw their home. Turning the corner, the sound grew louder. Antoniole, the boy thought, and shook his head. His mother carried a bag with food for him, against Andrea's advice.

How are you getting on? she asked, taking the plate out of the bag.

Very well. The van stank of cigarettes, Andrea hung by the door, taking gasps of air from outside.

Close the door, darling, his mama said. *I have to go back tomorrow.*

Back?

These police and bureaucrats. They accused me of being a criminal. An illegal immigrant!

Antonio bunched his fists up and said, *how dare they. How bloody dare they! I will go down there tomorrow and give them a piece of my mind.*

Eat, Antonio. Don't worry about that. I will go, you need to work. There is nothing you can do. Antonio ate, tomato sauce spattering his blue shirt. There was much work to do.

The next day was much the same for Liana and Andrea. They waited in the queue, then waited in another queue, only this time they were allowed to take a seat. They ate lunch in the cafe and took food back for Anthony. In the afternoon they visited a big church, walked through the open plazas, and Liana showed her son around a huge art gallery. His mother took photographs of everything. He stood beside portraits of old men and beautiful women, recreating their poses. His mama took photograph after photograph of him. Andrea and Liana alone again, just the way he liked it.

Don't you, he asked, *wish it could be like this all the time?*

Like what, darling?

Me and you. Just me and you.

She did not reply. They met Anthony outside a different cafe, one that did not look so nice. No one else was eating, those who sat smoked over black coffees or small glasses of red wine. The food was bad, Andrea watched Anthony as he ate it just the same as he had eaten

yesterday. When Andrea refused to eat, his mama did not even argue, instead she ordered some gelati.

How was today?

Good, Anthony replied, mouth full with runny sauce and tough pasta. *I may well have it done by the time we get to Lija.*

Get what done? the boy asked. He stabbed the ice cream with the spoon. It was too cold.

Work, his mother told him. *I spoke to an old colleague from Cambridge today.* It was true, she and Andrea had visited a man, not that Andrea would have told Anthony this. The man had been kind, his wife spoke with an accent he had only heard on television programmes. She took Andrea down to the park across the road from their apartment and played on the climbing frame with him. *He offered me some work, translating.* The woman had asked Andrea how he enjoyed his holiday. He was surprised to hear this word, he had not thought of this as a holiday.

It has been, he told her, *hard work.* She laughed and he laughed along, though he didn't know why.

Who's offered you work? When was this? Anthony was getting riled at the table. Andrea looked to see if his hands had gone into fists yet.

What has been hard about it? the woman had asked him. She rolled the word *harrrrd* about her mouth in a way that made Andrea feel happy.

Antoniole, he said, matter-of-factly.

Bruno offered me good work, good pay. He is teaching here now. He has a book that he wants translating. The publisher is dragging their heels.

What's wrong with Antoniole?

He's a nuisance, Andrea said, which made the woman laugh again.

Of all the bloody nerve, Anthony yelled. The other men, for there were only other men in the cafe, turned to look at him. Loud-mouth Englishman, they seemed to think in unison, going back to their private thoughts.

That is no way to think of it, Antonio. Who knows how long we will be stuck in Rome waiting for my goddamned passport.

A nuisance?

He's always yelling, or saying nothing, or banging around, or telling me to stop making noise, even though he is the noisiest person in the Door Mobile.

What is that?

It's our house on wheels. It has five big doors and can go very far.

And Anthony makes noise?

And other things. He yells at me.

What about?

About everything. About everything I do.

I'm sure it's not all that bad, Andrea. He smiled at the sound of his name from her lips.

I'm telling you, lady, it's terrible.

Anthony scooped up his cigarettes and matches. He said, *I need a drink. A proper drink.*

Wait and we will come with you. But he was already gone. His mama went to the door and called, *what about the baby?* She meant Andrea, even though he wasn't a baby any more.

The next morning, the van smelt sweet and sour. Andrea woke first, Anthony's snoring had woken him. The old man lay next to Andrea's mama, her hair in rollers and a net. She seemed very small beside him, like a child, with her hair hidden she looked like a little boy too. Andrea watched them, trying to remember when it was just he and she, but it was hard with Anthony there to remember anything but the three of them. He tried his best to remember Cambridge, his house with all of his things in it, but Anthony had somehow got into the memory, it seemed like his life hadn't been anything until Anthony arrived.

After cornflakes they went back to the *questura*, where Andrea was now allowed to move freely about. They were taken into a private room, where his mama spoke to two men in grey suits for a long time. She was calm and they were calm. After a little time, the two men left but Andrea and Liana were made to wait. Then a woman came and they followed her, his mama not talking the whole time. At the front door, the woman said, *addio,* and Liana repeated this word, so Andrea said it too.

Addio, he said. The woman, who had not looked at him this whole time looked down. Liana said the word again, and they left.

They went to a place called Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna. It was an enormous building, with pairs of thick white pillars. Andrea wanted to climb them to the very top. Inside, there were lots of statues and paintings that his mama liked very much. She took a great deal of photographs and was told off by a security guard. Andrea played a game of being very quiet but moving his mouth as if he were talking very loudly. The men and women they passed seemed to think this was funny, so he made even more elaborate head and mouth movements, like a marionette.

Do you remember, Andrea said, eating sugary donuts from a paper bag, *when you took me to the circus?*

I do.

Who else was there?

You mean, like the clowns and the lions?

No, with us. Who else?

No one, she said, suspiciously.

Okay, he replied, licking his fingers, *okay.*

They ate with Anthony. He had a big piece of meat and lots of vegetables. All the time, he kept saying, *this is more like it. This is much more like it.*

Like what? Andrea asked.

I spoke to Deborah.

Oh yes? What did she have to say?

Anthony put a hunk of meat in his mouth and chewed and said, *everything has arrived in Lija. She has organised for them to have access to the house. Everything's been arranged.*

That's good news.

The car has arrived too.

Andrea could tell that Anthony wanted to say something else. His mama said, *anything else?*

Yes, he cleared his throat. *They, eh, they want me to go to LA. Film people. She's going to organise a flight.*

Soon?

I'm not sure.

What's LA? Andrea asked.

She didn't say when?

They're working out the details. How long do you think this passport business will take?

They say a few more days. But you're not going to leave us here, are you?

I'm not leaving you anywhere.

Antonio, you said—

I know what I said.

What's LA, Mama?

Quiet for a second, darling. When, Antonio?

Can we talk about this later?

You brought it up, now. When did she say?

In five days' time. There's a flight from Malta to London. I'm to meet a man there to discuss the Enderby film. Then a flight to LA. Bill Conrad wants me out there.

For how long?

A week. Maybe two.

You tell me this now? How long have you known?

Not long. I didn't want to— he pushed away his plate, tired of too much meat. *I didn't want to upset you or make you worry about being alone.*

Because now I am alone.

Andrea said, *you're not alone, mama.*

This is not fair, Antonio. This is— how dare you! You make me leave my home, then you make me leave my mother, you make me drive that fucking pezzo di merda all the way here. And you expect me to drive you to Malta, a place where I don't know anybody, where I don't know anything, where I am alone and— how do you think I will survive? Have you even thought about what I will do while you are gone? Cazzata. You are, she gritted her teeth and let out a violent shriek*, you are a selfish man, I knew this. I thought you would show me kindness—*

—Liana—

—Mama—

—No, I will continue. You think you can act this way? No. No.

We need the money, he blurted. *There is no money. There is nothing. I need to go to London to earn money. I need to go to America so I can earn more money. I have nothing. All of Lynne's money is tied up, the bastard British government have taken half of my earnings. I have nothing.*

We have nothing. She suddenly seemed very calm. *You lied to me.*

I did not lie to you.

You let me believe that you were wealthy. You made me believe that I would be cared for, that I would need no job.

And all of that is true, but I need to work. I need to go to work.

How much money do we have?

That's not for you to worry about.

How much, Antonio? Tell me how much.

Anthony was silent, Andrea had never seen him so quiet. He looked like a little boy too. His mother looked at Anthony very sadly, like she was very sorry for him. Finally, he said, *not much. Maybe enough to last a few weeks.*

Stupido uomo. His mother put her head in her hands, but quickly sat up straight. She said, *okay, here's what will happen now. I will go and speak to Bruno and take this work with him. There is other work with the publisher, I will look into this. I will ask for an advance.*

Liana, please—

—I will ask them. Then, I will tell them I can do the work once we arrive in Malta.

I'm not happy about this, none of this.

Andrea thought Anthony might start yelling but he went very quiet again.

That night, when he was meant to be asleep, Andrea listened to them and watched them in the side mirror, while they sat outside, drinking wine. His mother said, *why the hell are we here, Antonio?*

Anthony looked like he would not reply, but then said, *I had to escape. They,* he fumbled, *they would have taken even more money in tax.*

Why are we here?

I need somewhere to write.

Why, Antonio, why?

Then, stumbling over his own words, Anthony said, *I needed to escape her. She wouldn't let me live. She wants me dead. We needed to get out of Chiswick, of England. She haunts me, Liana. I wanted her dead and now she is dead and she won't let me forget my part in it. We had to leave so we could start our lives together. You see that? Do you see that?*

She looked on, a great deal of sympathy in her eyes. *You were not a good husband to her, I can tell now, but you will be a good husband to me.*

I will.

You must listen now, Antonio. You will go to London in five days, yes?

He nodded.

And I will be with our son in a strange place. Okay, none of this can be helped. But when you return, you will not do this to me ever again. Where you go, I go.

Cara, Liana.

Wait, I want to say more. From now on, I must know everything about the money. I cannot help solve a problem I don't know exists. Yes?

Look, I—

—No, Antonio, this is not for arguing. I will not live in darkness, worrying whether my son will have food on his plate or a roof over his head, that is not the life I want for him and it is not the life you promised. From now on, you tell me.

I'm sorry, he sounded weak.

I am sorry too, but this is where we find ourselves and we must make the best of it.

Andrea couldn't count how many days they had come to the same building and waited, but he knew it was many. This day was different, this day Anthony came with them. They

were taken into a room when one of the grey-suited men talked to his mother, with Anthony interrupting saying, *what was that? I didn't quite catch that*, and *parla più lentamente.* After a wait the other man arrived with pieces of coloured paper that he showed to his mama. There were tears in her eyes, but Andrea could not see what was written or if there were any pictures. The men shook her hand and shook Anthony's hand, saying, *buon viaggio.*

Outside, Anthony called the men fascists, a word Andrea had heard Anthony use a lot. When they got home, Anthony and Liana packed everything away. Andrea said, *where are we going?*

We are going home, his mama replied.

Back to my house?

To your house, yes. Andrea was very excited to hear this. He started to pack his things, the toys and papers he had out.

Soon they were back on the road, driving home. Andrea became so excited, he said to Liana, *mama, remember when we was little boys together and Antoniole was not with us?*

Anthony, who was sitting in the back, not typing or singing, or doing anything really, looked angrily at Andrea, but the boy didn't care. They were going back home, back to just the two of them.

While Burgess's depiction of Lynne, in his *Confessions*, is not without issue, his rendering of Andrea is even more problematic. Andrea goes missing for pages and pages, they have left for America without him, left for Barcelona and do not know where he is. That Andrea and Liana are absent for large sections of his memoirs implies that he was largely absent in their lives. Burgess described himself as 'fad[ing] out of the life of my loved ones to work, even while in their presence, and to them I do not seem to have been working at all' (1990, p. 178). But what a man has missed of life he cannot know. He wrote, 'looking back, I am not able to understand how I managed to complete two lengthy shooting scripts in that period of turbulence and change' (ibid). Reading his description of this period, and all the writing he undertakes, it is difficult to understand how his days were so filled with life.

In a paper given at the Anthony Burgess' Centre's International Symposium, in 2004, Philippe Lejeune gave his assessment of Burgess' confessions:

> What struck me about Burgess' autobiographical aesthetic is that it seems to be founded on an absence or a fear of emptiness that is compensated for by saturation, by an obsession for 'filling in', so that no shadow is to be found, there are no blanks, no doubts or hypotheses and no amnesia. (2006, p. 50)

Bakhtin claims that 'when a man is in art, he is not in life, and vice versa' (as cited in Holquist, 1990, p. 109), and Burgess appears to be conflating his life as a writer with his life in the real world. Indeed, Burgess himself admits that writers 'do not, with the best will in the world, make good fathers. The fathering of works of art distracts them' (1990, p. 345) To use Burgess's own words, while what a writer writes may be true it is 'must be demonstrably true only of himself' (1992, p. 292). Burgess regularly said he wrote two thousand words a day, almost every day of his life. Malcolm Bradbury claimed he 'wrote and wrote, as if in a race to bring out words against the clock of a human life' (1993, p. 3).

It was late when she pulled up beside 168 Main Street. None of them moved. Andrea kept repeating, *what is this place? Why have we stopped here?* Liana and Anthony looked over at each other, neither wanting to make the first move. Anthony watched as she studied herself in the rear view. She was thinner, a little tanned, and greasy-haired. He waited for her to jump out, to yell in joy at leaving behind this ugly machine that she hated so much. But he realised, watching her grip the steering wheel, that it had become something else, in all the madness that had ensued these past few months, it had been steadfast and dependable. And now she must leave it for a future she could barely comprehend. He wasn't quite sure what to do. He knew after they had spent their first night in this new house, he would have to ask Liana to drive him to the airport and he would be gone.

Andrea said, *are we staying here? Are you getting the bed ready?*

Liana opened the driver's door, saying, *we are staying in there,* she pointed at the green door. *Shall we go and see?*

They all climbed out, Andrea still muttering to himself, still unsure what they were doing here. Liana found the key under the pot, as had been agreed and, with a short sharp breath, opened the front door. She couldn't find the light switch and then, when she did, it did not work. Anthony went back to the Dormobile and returned with three torches.

Here, let me turn it on for you, he said, showing Andrea where the switch was, pointing the bulb down so not to blind him. Anthony led, pointing his torch down the hallway and following the bannister up the stairs.

We need to find the fuse box, Liana said, apparently to Andrea.

Anthony turned his torch right and came to a door, which he opened. There, gloomily lit by torchlight, was Lynne's chair, her sidetable, where it had always been. He lost his grip, juggling the torch between his hands, before recovering it, the light pointed down.

What is it?

He dared not say. He slowly lifted the torch again. The standard lamp at the side of the door, the bookcases, arranged as Lynne had arranged them, only now completely bare, her chair, her table, the television on the television cabinet, where she had liked it. Their Chiswick living room. He closed the door. He gripped his chest, he could taste thick dust on his tongue, the faint odour of Haji, old books, stale fags, Lynne's stale fags, the smell of stewed tea. Her perfume, her scent, her sweat, her hairspray, her lipstick, he could smell it all.

Antonio, what is going on? Liana's voice came from far away.

She's here, he cried. *She's in there.*

Who is? Her voice further still.

Christ, he yelled, holding his torch at the door, not daring to move it, least he find that this was Glebe Street, a deadzone where Glebe Street stood in perpetual darkness, with Lynne lay in wait.

Help me, he called out. From the corner of his eye he could see candlelight, he could hear her breathing, could smell the sweetness of warm white wine on her cold breath.

John, a voice said.

No, please, he whimpered. His chest stung, he gripped at his shirt, pulling it tight.

John.

I didn't mean to. I never meant to— he struggled to talk, his mouth filling with saliva, his teeth rattling. He dropped to his knees, the torch falling to the floor. In darkness, in this bleakness, he cried. She was dead. She had found him. There was no escape. There was no end. They were bound by more than marriage, they were bound by fate, a shared end that was ongoing, unabated. His chest pounded, his breath ceased, he felt like his throat had been cut. It

was death, now. These last few months had just been the interlude between her death and his. The piece of string that connected them had not been severed but stretched to its very limit and now it was drawing him back to her.

Antonio, a light shone brightly turning absolute black into blinding white. This was it, then. Dead. *Antonio, breathe, take a breath, my darling. Andrea, Andrea, stop doing that, get down. Antonio, can you hear me?*

The light shifted, white with black, Liana's face peering down at him. He wanted to say sorry, sorry for all of this, but she kept repeating, *breathe, please breathe, Antonio.*

From out of the darkness, she had breathed new life into him and then she drove him to the airport. Anthony slept on the plane in something like a fever dream, shivering and twitching. All that way by road, a quarter of a year gone by, and now he was returning to London in a few short hours. It didn't quite make sense. He told himself that he was not returning to Chiswick, but he dreamt of Chiswick and of Lija, two sides of the same coin. He dreamt of Liana as a kind of sister to Lynne and as, he gasped in his sleep, a kind of daughter. When he woke he asked for gin, drank much, and fell heavily asleep once more.

In the Hilton he was met by John Bryan, who had a copy of the script Anthony had sent from Rome. There was a great deal of red ink on his shooting script.

John said, *don't worry, Tony, can I call you Tony? Just a few changes, for the studio, you know what it's like.*

He did. He went up to his hotel room, drew his typewriter from his suitcase, and started typing. The next morning, he was met for breakfast by John. Anthony ate a full English, his first taste of real food for three months, while John read.

You work fast, he said.

I've got to fly to LA today.

I'll have my guy look over this. It looks good.

Good. He coughed, wiped his mouth with a brown-sauce-stained napkin.

Are you feeling okay? You don't look all that well.

Planes. You can't get on a plane without getting ill.

Well, I'll get back to you, Tony. Where are you staying?

I'm not sure. Warner Brothers are putting me up.

He had climbed back into bed, dead tired. Deborah rang and said, *Litvinoff wants to meet you. They've got a director on board for A Clockwork Orange, they want you to write the script.*

Meet me? Meet me when?

Now. They're downstairs.

And where are you?

Crickhowell, Powys.

Wales? What are you doing in Wales?

I'm with my family. They only want to discuss the project with you. Anthony, are you okay? He put the phone down.

In the bar, he met Si Litvinoff, a skeletal man with sunken eyes. Anthony hated this man, who was a reminder of foolish decisions made in the pursuit of killing off his dead wife.

Good to see you again, Anthony, Litvinoff said.

Si. A pleasure. A pleasure. So, you have a director?

Yes, but, he looked about to see they were speaking privately, *you must keep it to yourself.*

I have no one to tell, Anthony placated.

Ken Russell. You know him?

I know the name.

He's just done Women in Love. Very sensual, very well received.

As in Lawrence, Women in Love?

A bit fairy for my tastes, but he knows what he's doing.

We want you to write the script, of course. It is, after all, your vision. But, Litvinoff stopped himself.

But you want things changed? Anthony was still reeling from the news that someone had put Lawrence on the screen. Why had no one asked him to write the screenplay? He was filled with a bitter jealousy. *Who wrote the script for Women in Love? Do you know?*

Some American kid, I hear. Litvinoff drank his black coffee and eyed Anthony. *We've had a few thoughts that I'd like to run past you.*

I'm sure you have. Go ahead.

We want to make it as a musical. Alex and the Droogs will be the name of their band, and they'll play rock'n roll.

Rock and roll?

The kids go wild for them, especially Alex, with his bright hair and his catsuit.

Catsuit?

I've had a designer draw up some images. He pulled from his briefcase a file of gaudy sketches of young, lanky men in brightly coloured outfits, red hair in a kind of beehive. The pictures made Anthony's head spin.

He said, *I'd be happy to work on the script. Are you sure a musical is right?*

Sure, sure. Alex loves music, right? So, the authorities take music away from him, make him hate music, make him turn against rock 'n roll. That *'n* sound made Anthony's fillings prickle. *They're lining up to do it. The Rolling Stones, the Beatles, you name them.*

I'm afraid I can't. But I will write it.

Excellent. I'm delighted.

I am working on a couple of scripts for Warner Brothers at the moment, however. My fee has been set, accordingly.

Of course. Of course. We were thinking $10,000. Litvinoff smiled, openly. $10,000 was two hundred times what the bastard had paid for the rights in the first place. That smile, like he was doing Anthony some kind of favour.

I would say $25,000 should cover it, Si.

The smile vanished. He bundled his pictures of young boys, hairless chests revealed, back into his briefcase. *If that's what they're paying in Hollywood, Anthony. I look forward to seeing what that kind of money gets us.*

As do I, Si. He stood, suddenly feeling light-headed, and shook Si's clammy hand. He went back to his room and resisted the urge to climb back into bed. There were still more planes to catch.

He arrived in Heathrow early and spent several hours drinking, but unable to get rid of the image from two nights previous. It was a kind of curse, *hantu hantu*. But, he thought, the curse had been lifted, broken by his wife, his new wife. His new wife, in their new home, without electricity or a phone line, without gas, without anyone to assist her. There would be a new curse put on him, he was sure. Self-hate is a powerful drug. When he boarded the plane they called him Mr Wilson, but he resisted falling into that reverie again. Little Wilson was dead.

He was met at LAX by a car, put on by Warner Brothers. Bill Conrad, waiting at Warner studios, Burbank, said, *lots of work to do, Tony.*

And don't I know it.

You don't look so good. You sick?

I'll live.

Can't have you sick, Tony. Gotta get this ship on the ocean. Here, he pulled a copy of the script Anthony had sent from Rome. He could already see the red marks of Bill's script fixer.

At least let's get a drink.

Sure, sure. How's the new wife? he asked, the two of them walking into the studio bar, Bill waving over a passing waitress. *What'll you have?*

Something potent.

Two Old Fashions, darling. Then, *so?*

Oh, the wife. Yes. I've left her in Malta. No power, no phone. A bit of a debacle.

No power? Christ!

I need to get some money over to them.

That a question?

It's a statement, but I need to talk about my fee.

Fee's been paid, Tony. The fee has been well and truly paid. Thanks, doll, he lifted his drink off the tray and said, *how much we talking?*

Just enough to get them fixed up. A few hundred.

Dollars? Okay, I'll get Joanie to get that together. Cheers, Tony. You sure you're feeling okay?

Bill was a vision of confidence. He went through the script with Anthony, all that needed to change, all that was required for the whole project to be green-lit was for Shakespeare to stay in *merry old England.*

But half of the bloody script is him out of, tartly, *merry old England.*

And that's what'll have to change. We got faith in you, Tony. He was driven to his hotel and led up to his room, where he was expected to work morning and night until the script was fixed. He wanted to climb into bed and sleep. His nose ran, his body ached. Twenty-four hours passed, the script torn apart and pinned back together. Will and his Dark Lady merrily prancing across merry England. They parted at the port of Southampton. Hiding the swell of her belly, Fahima sailed to a future without him.

Bill read and said, *we're gonna need to get Marty in on this.*

The fixer?

He'll just give it the once over.

Christ, I have to be back in London by the end of the week. I have to get home to my wife.

Don't worry, Tone, he finished his drink, *we'll get there.*

He went back to his room and tried to sleep. Heat and chill seared through his body. His throat was raw, his heart taut and irregular. America would be the death of him, films would be the death of him. There was no sleep here. He rang room service and ordered a bottle of Scotch. Scotch would chase the sickness away. Half a bottle in, he felt worse. He found himself in a bar, drinking Wild Turkey, watching the Los Angeles Rams, listening to a man

tell him that this season should have been the Giants', only they managed to screw the whole thing up. Anthony dropped a ten dollar bill on the bar and finished his drink. The bar was light, marble-floored, he'd never seen anything like this in America before, it was reminiscent of somewhere from his past. The bartender said, *excuse me sir, is everything okay? Can I help?* Very un-American. Anthony followed the sunlight and hailed one of the many cabs that seemed to drift around the streets just waiting to be mobilised into the pursuit of something or somebody.

Shrill. Shrill. Shrill. A bell struck in rapid succession. He woke back in the hotel room, safely back in the hotel room. He answered, *Burgess.*

This is Burgess too. Her Italian tones unmistakable, but how had she got this number?

Liana.

Antonio.

Where are you calling from?

From home.

He thought for a second, wondering how she had managed to get them, her and the boy, back to Chiswick. *Home? How?*

I got them to put the phone line in. Girgor has been helping me.

She was calling from Malta. They were still there. *Who is Girgor?*

Our neighbour. The electricity is working, gas too. I have a man here fixing some things. Andrea would like to say hello.

No, no, hang on. What things? What's going on there?

Just things. The house is in need of much attention.

He didn't like the sound of that. Houses that required attention also required a good deal of money. Money was not something he had in abundance.

How did you get this number, Liana?

Deborah. I rang her first, so she would have our number and I would have yours. Have you spoken to her?

Today? How did you pay for the work to be done?

I spoke to her this afternoon. She has had an offer from those men who bought the rights to Clockwork Orange. They want you to write a script for a film.

Yes. He knew all this. *I know all this. Everything's agreed.*

Deborah and me, we think you agreed wrong. Deborah is going to ask them for more. I said $50,000.

He seethed, gritted his teeth. *She will bloody not.*

She has. I told her to go ahead.

You can't do this kind of thing, Liana, for Christ's sake. I'll call them now and apologise.

Silence.

Liana?

I'm here. Wait to hear from Deborah. They practically stole from you, you are owed, Antonio. Andrea would like to speak to you.

When did all this happen? This afternoon? What time is it there?

Do you want to speak to him?

Fuck, he thought, that money was our lifeline. He would ring and apologise, he would fire Deborah, best not to mention Liana in all this. Why had she not called him herself? He should fire her now, regardless.

Hello? A pitched voice called out as if lost. Anthony looked around his hotel room for cigarettes. There seemed to be none where there should be many. *Hello?* Came the voice again.

Liana? He found one cheroot in a crumpled packet. He lit it.

Where is he?

Where's who?

You. Mama says you're in America, but I can hear you.

Put your mother back on.

She's talking to Girgor.

Who the hell is this bloody Girgor?

Are you really in America?

Yes. Now, can you ask your mama to come back to the phone?

What can you see?

See? I see nothing. I'm in a hotel room.

On your own?

Of course. Look, Andrea—

I am in the hallway. I can see the front room. We have two sofas now and a big chair that I'm allowed to sit in. The old one is gone. And the kitchen. Rita is making food for us all to eat. Girgor and the master are taking a big cupboard up the stairs. It's very heavy.

And where is your mother? This is totally ridiculous. I have to be at a meeting in fifteen minutes.

I'm going to help them. Andrea dropped the phone, Anthony could hear his little voice asking to help and the replies of a jovial man, most likely the famous Girgor. Liana chimed in, telling Andrea to be careful and not to get in the way when the men were carrying such heavy things. The jovial man responded, he was happy for the boy to help, he was a great help, in fact.

He could hear Liana's voice getting closer and closer. *Make sure you stay beside Girgor and do not,* her voice was close now, *go underneath the wardrobe. Andr—* her voice was cut out by the clatter clatter of the receiver being picked up from the floor. *Did Antonio go?* She lifted the phone to her lips, *Antonio? Are you still there?* He said nothing, listened to her breath and the sound of men turning a heavy piece of furniture round a tight corner. *Antonio? Andrea, did you say goodbye to your fa—* She put the phone down. She was about to say, father. It had been the first time he'd hear her refer to him like that in front of Andrea. There had been no talk of paternity in front of the boy.

He stood for a little while with the receiver at his ear and a crooked cheroot in his mouth. She had bought more furniture and got them to turn the power on. She had hired a cook and who knew who else. This hotel room. That house. There seemed, he held the receiver out to look at, no possible way that anything could link the two. He hung up and puffed the last of the cheroot. If he could save the situation, get Litvinoff to see that this was a rogue agent acting alone, then that $25,000 would do them for some time. It would mean no more trips away, not for a long time. There were novels to write, as Liana kept on telling him. He suddenly felt like the punchline to a very sad joke, sitting on that double bed, tying his shoelaces, about to breakfast with Hollywood producers. Foolish old man. They had been married only a few months; Liana in her thirties, in Malta, in the house he had bought for her, Antonio in his fifties, in Hollywood, in a hack's hotel room waiting for the next hack job. He rolled onto the bed, crawled up and wrapped himself in the duvet.

He arrived at the meeting late. Bill said, *Tony, you know Joe.*

Joe held out his hand saying, *good to see you again, Tony.*

Likewise, Anthony said, knowing he had spent too much time in America.

Sorry to hear you've been unwell.

Unwell?

Yesterday, Joe said, as explanation. Bill interrupted,

Let's get some coffee and get started. Sit, sit. Anthony sat, glad to be off his feet. Joe returned to his seat, a defaced copy of *Will!* before him. *Coffee, Joe?*

Sure, why not.

Coffee, Tone?

Tea.

Not sure I can do tea.

Bourbon, then.

Bill laughed, saw it was no joke, and went to get his girl to make the order. *Right*, he came back in, still laughing, *Joe's got some ideas.*

Sorry, Anthony said, feeling nauseous, *who is Joe?*

The room fell silent. *You don't remember?* Bill asked, then, *jeez, I knew you were sick, Tony, but God, man.*

I feel I'm missing something.

We met, Joe said, *last night. We went for a meal, at the La Media Mangia.*

Remember, Tony? You had an argument with the waiter about how to cook pork.

I'm sorry, my— where had he been? How long had he been in Hollywood?

We've all had nights like that, Joe said. *To recap, I love the project, love the story, but I don't think this film will work as a musical.*

As a— Anthony felt he might pass out.

You agreed with me last night. He agreed with him now, but all of those songs, all of those lyrics, hours on the road, hours after the death of his wife trying to make Shakespeare sing and dance. *I think, maybe, we should rearrange, Bill.*

No, no, I have to go home. I have to get back to my wife.

You're okay? Bill asked.

Yes, yes. He hid his quavering hands. *Carry on.*

Right you are, Joe said. *So the other issue is the length of the thing.* He ran his finger up the side of the script, page after page falling on top of each other.

Too long? he guessed.

Exactly.

Joanie came in with drinks, putting a glass of iced water in front of Anthony. *Hey, Joanie, how long did we clock that last read?*

Last one? She thought for a second, *six hours. Six and a half, say.*

Thank you, Joan.

We're looking for something around the two-hour mark, Bill said, pouring cream into his coffee.

Of course, Anthony said.

So, you'll go away and rewrite it, Tone?

As a straight script, Joe added.

Back in London Anthony was met by Deborah Rogers, drinking red wine in the Hilton. *It's all been agreed,* she said, trying to hide her delight. *You're getting $50,000 for the initial script and any further rewritings they may require.*

From?

From Litvinoff.

You shouldn't have done that. He pouted and called the waiter over, *gin and tonic, double.*

I shouldn't have done what? Negotiate? Anthony, that's exactly what I should do. And you should be pleased.

Yes, well, you'll take your ten percent, I'm sure. She did not reply, so he said, *I'd like to get some of that before I leave. Liana has been busy while I've been away. I think she's spending more than we have.*

I'll make sure to get a transfer arranged tomorrow. There's one other thing, I spoke to Bill Conrad.

Yes, they've finally listened to reason. They want another draft of the Shakespeare thing, but without the showtunes this time.

They had a meeting this morning, the project has been cancelled.

Cancelled? But I only met them yesterday.

Studio decision. I'm sorry. Bill will try again, maybe next year. This could be the best outcome, Deborah said, with no hint of sarcasm.

I beg your pardon?

Better to be paid for a good film that never got made than to see one of your novels forever turned into a terrible one. How many Hollywood adaptations could be truly deemed a success?

She stayed to finish her wine, asked Anthony to pass on her regards to Liana and left, thinking what an ungrateful bastard he was. She stopped in the doorway and looked back at hunched and weary Anthony. She had gone with him to clear out Lynne's clothes from their house in Etchingham, and he was still not above implying she wasn't worth her ten percent. She should have made it fifteen, just for putting up with him.

Another taxi ride, another plane ride, another taxi ride. Was this the house he had left? How long had he been away? By the looks of things, it had been months, if not years. The window

shutters had been replaced and painted royal blue. There were planters and plant pots on the balcony. Anthony had to be let in, as he had no key. He was eyed suspiciously by an elderly Maltese woman. *I am*, he pronounced, *the owner of this house*. She let him in with a great show of reluctance and misgiving. The hallway smelt of fresh paint and varnish. There was new furniture, alongside the things they had transported with them. The woman, who he was subsequently told was their maid, Rita, trundled back to the kitchen without so much as a backward glance. The walls were a kind of off-white that suited the age of the house. The stairs had been cleaned, the metal bannister painted black, the handrail sanded and varnished. There were new lampshades, elegant and well placed, and new paintings hung on the walls. In an alternative universe, this is what their house looked like. And yet, here it was, in this universe, visible and corporal. Uneasy, he looked in at the living room. It was alien to him, not a trace of his own life visible. There were children's toys and a new television. There was a pale blue sofa, no bookshelves, no armchair.

He walked back into the hallway and past Rita, who tutted under her breath. Upstairs he saw a new bed in the master bedroom, with new bedsheets. In a full-length mirror, he saw the tired old man he had become. He needed a good strong drink. He went downstairs into the kitchen, which was now filled with all the equipment and utensils a kitchen might require.

Do you know where Liana is? My wife?

Rita begrudgingly turned her back on the contents of a pan she was stirring and wiped her hands on her apron. *Family go swim. Be back soon.*

Family, how that word hit him with its force. He hadn't thought of them being a family before. He really did need that drink. From a table he did not recognise in the hallway, he took a key out of a ceramic bowl. He closed the heavy door, still sticky with fresh paint, turned left and soon came to a crossing. In front of him was a pharmacy and a place called the Three Villages Bar. He went in and ordered a Cisk. He made a joke to the barman, a moustachioed Maltese man with bear-like hands and bear-like chest hair, about the removal of a cyst. It garnered no response. He stayed by the bar and smoked, which the barman appreciated, also lighting a thick cigar. The family home had rattled him. He cursed himself for this continuing inability to see Liana fully. Even now, he knew he underestimated her. She had made a home that they could live in, live in as a, he choked down Cisk, family.

After the third or fourth beer, Anthony felt a gentle hand on his shoulder. *As soon as I saw your bag.* He turned and Liana smiled. She kissed him and, stood up and taking a good look at her, he kissed her.

I'll just finish—

No, no. Fonzu, I would like a white wine. She sat beside him and took his hand. *How does it feel to be home?*

He could not answer. This isn't, he wanted to say, my home. It has no trace of whatever home is, whatever home is meant to evoke. But, he realised, watching the smile slowly shift on Liana's face, she does. Being in her presence once more felt rejuvenating. *I feel relief. Relief,* he quickly added, *and joy and joy to be here with you and*— he kissed her, holding his lips to hers for a few seconds, aware that Fonzu was watching, aware that other people were entering the bar, but not caring about any of that.

We are glad to have you home too, she said, the emphasis somehow landing on *we*. She took her freshly arrived glass and raised it to him.

Yes. It is good to be home. I, he told himself, *doubt I will want to leave for some time.*

All is well, Liana said.

Anthony fell into the house and immediately fell ill. He could barely move, let alone write, let alone fulfil the several commissions he had undertaken. He had cheated death, switched himself for his wife, and now death was back to claim its prize. Andrea had given him chickenpox. The child pox, the boy had plotted to make his evil stepfather sick, sick to the point of death. The son, Hamlet-like, would kill the man who had stolen into his mother's bed.

The house was to Anthony a mausoleum. Lynne's ghost had been purged to make way for his own. She had had the child do her bidding, a twist on the tale. The two, childless wife and fatherless son, were Lilith and Hephaestus. They watched over his terminal billet. He would die in this house. Afterwards, Liana would leave his decaying body in their bed and shut the house, never to be opened up again. Whatever he had contracted would die with him. She fed him chicken soup and spoke to him in gentle, loving Italian. He composed, in his head, a death march to be played at his funeral. A funeral march for his death. Delirious, he tried to dictate the notes to Liana, who had neither music manuscript nor the ability to write or read music notation.

Dum, dee-dee, dum, dum-dee-dee, dum dum, he murmured, as she cooled his brow with a damp cloth. *Da-dee-dum, da-dee-dum, da-da-dur, dur, dur, dur.*

Doctors came and went. They spoke to Liana in Maltese or Italian. In his stupor he heard them discuss the merits of the life he had led, the quality of his work, his abilities as a husband. *I barely know him,* Liana said, *but I know that he is the finest living English writer.*

Living for how long? one of the doctors mused, his colleagues nodding in sombre recognition. He might be the finest living writer but in the ranks of dead he was a mere bottom-feeder. There had been no new novels for years. The novel he had recently published had been written some five years previous. This man, who on his yearlong death bed had written five novels, had been idly living, writing quickly for quick cash.

I admit, he told those gathered, *I have not done enough. If I should live*, the doctors again shook their morose heads, *I will do better. I will focus myself on the writing of great literature.* His temperature was taken, the thermometer barely capable of registering the fever within him.

It is, Liana said, *indolent talent that is killing him, I know it. I begged him to write more. He would not listen.*

Now that he was fully contaminated, Andrea no longer came to visit. He heard the boy laughing and shrieking beyond the door, for he knew that it was only a matter of time before he had his mother once again to himself. The doctors spoke again, saying, *to shift so quickly from feast to famine is an extremely dangerous act. More people died after the potato famine from over-indulgence than during from starvation. Unspent words are killing him.*

Give me pen and paper, he moaned, rocking his body from side to side. *Take dictation, one of you, write this down.* But as he began to orate, Anthony fell into a deep, wordless sleep.

There is no hope for him now.

There is an unfinished novel, a village poisoned by polluted water, Liana wept.

The unwritten rest is poison in his veins, his blood polluted. Someone must write all the words that he did not or else the sickness will become epidemic. The child is too young, the wife too overwrought. We must retrieve all those latent works from within him. He felt fingers on his temples, running around the circumference of his skull. *Get me my bag, get me my scalpel.*

He felt he could peel the cold sweat that covered him like a snake sheds its skin. His mausoleum was decorated with fresh flowers, the smell overwhelming. Very painfully, very slowly, he inched himself into a sitting position. He was terrified that he would look down to see his body lying flat, while he, ghostlike, sat as a translucent outline within himself. The wooden shutters had been opened. The sun shone, though he felt brittlely cold. The door opened, the sound of unoiled hinges scraped against his inner ear.

You are awake?

He could not speak, his mouth entirely fixed, entirely hollow.

Let me help you. Liana leant him forward, his ribs ached against his skin, and rested him back against plumped-up cushions. *How do you feel?* He said nothing, but she saw it all. She gently placed her fingers between his, barely touching. *I will get you some pain relief. I will be back in a moment.* She went to leave but he grasped her hand, his eyes welled with tears. He had been alone for so long, for years now. They had surrounded him, people, doctors, experts, but it had done nothing to remove him from his absolute isolation. Since he had found her, he had done everything he could to get away from Liana. He did not know why. The black and white still image of his dead mother and sister flickered before him like the slippage between cinema reels. *I will stay,* Liana said, tears in her eyes. She yelled for Rita, who came slowly, crossing herself when she saw Anthony sitting up. *Please get my husband something to eat.*

Soppa tat-tiġieġ?

No, Anthony wheezed, *no chicken fucking soup.* His head lolled back.

Qualcosa di diverso dalla zuppa di pollo, he heard Liana say.

By that evening he was ready to take a small glass of red wine and a couple of drags on a cigar. The doctor visited, he spoke no English, simply taking Anthony's pulse and nodding half-heartedly.

What does he say? He asked Liana after the doctor had gone.

That you are better, but you are not out of danger.

I dreamt the beginning of a new novel. I want to make a start. I see that I have wasted so much time.

Rest, Antonio. There is time enough.

Bring me my typewriter.

Rest, she kissed his forehead. But later that day, she brought him his Olivetti and a wooden tray with retractable legs to sit it on.

When Liana visited him the next morning he was puffing on a cheroot and typing wildly. *Antonio, you will make yourself unwell again.*

Wait, just wait. He tap tap tapped and drew the paper from the machine. *I'm feeling quite well. Quite rested.*

I am happy to hear that.

Could you get them to bring some tea up, show her how I like it. And some bacon, if there is any. I need to get the taste of soup from my mouth.

Should I open the blinds?

No, no, leave them, he said distractedly, feeding paper and lining it up.

At least let me open a window.

I must get on, Liana. Tea, if you could get me some tea. Thank you.

She left him to it, the sound of clattering keys filling their Maltese home for the first time. The noise continued for three days straight, until Anthony was ready to leave his sick bed. He descended the stairs, Rita, Liana and Andrea watching from the hallway.

Hawn jidħol missierek, Rita said to Andrea.

Mhux missieri, Andrea snapped and ran into the kitchen.

Now, Anthony said, *what have I missed?*

What he had missed was the opening of several envelopes addressed to him. Liana, in a panic, had sat with a bottle of wine and a letter-opener. She led him now into the living room and the coffee table where the letters were displayed.

What are they? he asked.

Bills. Tax bills, medical bills, a bill for your wife's death.

He felt immediately sick, immediately delirious. *Let me sit,* she helped him into the armchair. He picked up the letter closest, from Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. He had failed to register himself as a Maltese resident and, as such, owed a great deal of money to the very taxman he was trying to escape. The sum was enormous, a sum so enormous it could only be part of some mass hallucination.

We're fucked, he said finally, wishing he had died of chickenpox.

Part Four

Dear Anthony,

I shall start off by saying I don't really know how to write this letter, and that it is a task which is as awful for me to perform as it may be for you to read.

You are far too brilliant and successful a writer, and I am far too much of an admirer of yours to patronize you with a listing of what is so obviously excellent about 'Napoleon Symphony'. At the same time, I earnestly hope that our all too brief friendship will survive me telling you that the MS is not a work that can help me make a film about the life of Napoleon. Despite its considerable accomplishments, it does not, in my view, help solve either of the two major problems: that of considerably editing the events (and possibly restructuring the time sequence) so as to make a good story, without trivializing history or character, nor does it provide much realistic dialogue, unburdened with easily noticeable exposition or historical fact.

I'm very sorry that the subject of the letter could not be of more pleasure and benefit to both of us, and after saying all this, I can only thank you for trying this and hope that you will continue to accept my admiration and respect for you as an artist, and my great feeling of warmth and friendship for you personally.

Sincerely,

Stanley

In writing this novel, this biography, this fictive account of what was once real, I intended to set out the defining moments in Burgess' life as an artist, as the man that I have only met through words. These moments are his time in Malaya, where Burgess, to use his own words, 'became a writer'; the death of Lynne and subsequent marriage to Liana, which self-evidently had an impact on his artistic output; and, finally, the writing of his third symphony and its first public performance in Iowa, USA (1981). I include his meeting with George Orwell because this seems to have had a latent effect on him and his work. I include Stanley Kubrick not because of *A Clockwork Orange* but because it is the project Kubrick initiated, *Napoleon Symphony*, that leads the music director of the University Symphony Orchestra of the University of Iowa to invite Burgess to write his third and final symphony. Here is a dialogue between two great minds, two visionaries and writers, that did not reach its intended conclusion. Kubrick's film of Napoleon, a project he planned for many years, was never made. Out of their failed collaboration comes Burgess' novel, which reveals he was more focused on music than cinema.

This is not to say that Burgess is an unwilling collaborator. Michael Holroyd claims that any work of literary biography is an 'opportunity' for the subjects to write 'a posthumous work in collaboration' with the biographer (1974). He co-authors books with William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe and John Keats and George Orwell, amongst others. He co-authors my own text, I believe. I am certainly not the first writer to have responded to Burgess's dialogic provocations.

Paul Theroux's short story 'A Burgess: Slightly Foxed' presents Burgess in a similar light to Burgess's depiction of James Joyce in *Earthly Powers*, or Marlowe in *A Dead Man in Deptford*. That is to say, drunk and caught up in the creative process. In his article 'Burgess as a Fictional Character in Theroux and Byatt', published in the Anthony Burgess Newsletter,

John Stinson suggests that a 'heated discussion… is almost certain to ensure' if other writers 'follow Theroux in the deliberate knocking down of the boundaries between biography and fiction' (2000). However, it is clear that Theroux himself has consciously followed Burgess in this enterprise.

A.S. Byatt has also fictionalised Burgess, in her novel *Babel Tower*. In Burgess's 1980 novel, *Earthly Powers*, Burgess took the obscenity trial against *Lady Chatterley's Lover* as the blueprint for the obscenity trial of 'The Love Songs of J. Christ', a fictional work of poetry. The text on trial not only brings to mind the T.S. Eliot poem, 'The Love Song J. Alfred Pruflock', but also Lawrence's short novel *The Man Who Died or The Escaped Cock* (1929). Toomey, Burgess' protagonist, draws the comparison, as both texts centre around the sexualised life of Jesus and his response to resurrection (1980, p. 254). Byatt first fictionalises a review by Burgess of *Babbletower*, the novel on trial in her novel, and he is subsequently called as a witness. The testimony that this fictive Burgess gives appears to be responding to both Toomey's testimony in *Earthly Powers* and a 1967 article Burgess wrote for *The Spectator* titled 'What is Pornography?'. In the article Burgess claimed that 'a pornographic work and a didactic work… have this in common: they simulate and expect the discharge of the simulation to be effected in real-life acts' (1967, p. 11). Byatt has her fictive Burgess make similar statements, telling the court, 'true pornography… is kinetic, it moves to action, it titillates, it irritates and excites flesh and spirit to seek relief' (1996, p. 420). Byatt replies to Burgess, replying to Lawrence, with Burgess in the centre stimulating the conversation.

There have been further fictional Burgess's brought into the world, including in works by Philip Sollers, Erica Jong, and Kingsley Amis. As Levings indentified, in his paper 'Biographical Perspectives on Anthony Burgess':

> Byatt… placed him in a witness box. Aggeler has placed him in a Comic box, and Lewis has placed him in a cantankerous, querulous and myopic box. We are starting to see that because of the breadth of the author's work and characters there are many boxes into which he can be placed (2006, p. 59-60)

This dialogue is what Bakhtin had in mind when he said, 'every utterance generates a response in the other who receives it' (cited in Morris, 1997, p. 5). Burgess provokes these responses to his life and works because his own metatextuality exists beyond the pages of his novels. *Nothing Like the Sun* contains not only *Hamlet* and *A Comedy of Errors*, but their antecedence in the *UrHamlet* and *Menaechmi*. Experiencing the texts in this way creates a visible web of the invisible, unending dialogue Bakhtin describes. The text becomes a hypertext and other writers can add new texts, new responses, to this ongoing dialogue.

Burgess offered a model of the novel in '2000 AD', which could also be read as a model for a work of Bakhtinian literature:

> I have a dream impression of a 21st-century novel as looking, on some of its pages, very much like a film script... then the film-script format gives place to a page or so of prose as elaborately and painfully composed as a piece of 12-part counterpoint for strings. Or there is pastiche, parody, even a passage of verse. And all the time the resources of language are being exploited to the utmost. There are strange new coinages, passages in foreign tongues, puns and riddles. The novel is, in fact, mirroring the shape of English itself—structural simplicity (dialogue with no trimmings); semantic richness (a récit of delicious complexity)... the complexities of a 21st-century novelist's prose are directly related to the human complexities he is trying to represent. (1970, p.223)

He smashes, bang, the letter down and, bang, his drink down. He clutches at the letter and in a kind of daze, turns on his heels and reads it once more. *I shall start off by saying I don't really know how to write this letter, and that it is a task which is as awful for me to perform as it may be for you to read.* Anthony felt lightheaded, as though hallucinating. The ire rose in him once more. *You are far too brilliant and successful a writer*— he choked the words down — *and I am far too much of an admirer of yours to patronize you with a listing of what is so obviously excellent about 'Napoleon Symphony'.* He swooned at all the wasted time. All those words written one way, a single sheet of A4 sent in return. *At the same time, I earnestly hope that our all too brief friendship will survive*— a fraud communicating in a fraud's language. Anthony recalled those last few days of writing, the ease at which the words flowed, the joy of writing them, the beauty of the sunrise, the satisfaction of the sunset. All tainted, tainted by *me telling you that the MS is not a work that can help me make a film about the life of Napoleon.* He felt himself spiralling.

Anthony stormed along the hallway into the drawing room. The sound of his shoes hitting the tiles echoed one atop the other atop the next in booming resonance. He lifted the bottle of brandy in something like exultation and poured a thick, murky glass and stared into it with

desire and loathing. All that time. How much time had the writing of the goddamned novel cost? Days spent watching Andrea from his study window, the child growing before his very eyes. A year passed. More than a year. He turned and went back into his office, into his place of work, his haven, which Kubrick's letter had infiltrated. *Despite its considerable accomplishments, it does not, in my view, help solve either of the two major problems*— how dare he damn me with such faint praise as this.

I never wanted to write a damned novel, anyway, he yelled, draining his brandy glass and marching back into the drinks room for more.

He returned with the bottle. He intended on rolling the letter up and forcing it down the neck of the bottle and using it like a Molotov cocktail, setting fire to this typewriter and desk and study and house that had been so hexed by Kubrick. Anthony grasped the letter once more— *that of considerably editing the events (and possibly restructuring the time sequence) so as to make a good story, without trivializing history or character* —and poured himself more brandy. It would have made much more sense to write it directly in script form, the *Eroica* being only about forty-seven minutes long and a Kubrick movie being around two hours. But no, Stanley had requested a novel to work from, so he could claim authorship of another screenplay, no blasted doubt. That night in the Algonquin, merrily drinking with Malcolm McDowell, surrounded by beauties who were only too pleased to be in their company. Malcolm the youthful star, Anthony the enigmatic writer. A glorious night of excess and gratification. Richly deserved after another television interview where they were coerced into hailing Kubrick's invisible divinity, the bloody bastard. Anthony had, a few glasses in, confided in Malcolm that he had been tacitly barred from set. Kubrick would not return his phone calls, would not discuss the film or the content. It was only when the press had called Kubrick a degenerate sadist had Burgess' phone begun to ring. Only then had he met the man himself. The master would not explain himself to the world's media, so Burgess had been given a nice little sum of money to explain in his stead. Malcolm had told Anthony, both well-oiled by this point, that cast and crew had all been given copies of Burgess' novel, which dialogue was taken from verbatim. There was no bastard script written by sodding Kubrick, just the novel by Anthony blasted Burgess. Now he knew why he had been exiled. *Nor does it provide much realistic dialogue*— actual meaning: nor does it provide dialogue I can lift and claim as my own. Deborah had tried to get a fee for the writing of the Napoleon novel and Anthony had put a stop to it. Kubrick made all talk about fees and money seem uncouth, even though he had seen his big bloody house and had heard about the big sodding fees Kubrick demanded. All that time and nothing to show for it. He had been forced, through

trickery, back into novel writing. The fucking, he screwed up the letter and shoved it into his mouth, grinding it between his teeth, bastard. He ground his teeth against the paper, supping down brandy too.

He fell into his armchair, still chewing. They would never let him in, he saw that now. All those interviews with the movie press, talking to him as if he were Kubrick's spokesperson. He had only recently come back from venerating his holy Kubrick at Cannes. None of them had read the book, none of them would, they were convinced that cinema was the only medium, Hollywood the only place that mattered. He had nearly convinced himself too. He remembered Liana's words. Bitter pills every single one. He remembered meeting Alex North in a bar in Hollywood. Drunk and getting drunker, North had told Burgess to watch his back with Stanley. *A Year of my life he took from me*, meaning the writing of a discarded film soundtrack. To be discarded for Beethoven, for Mozart, for Brahms, was nothing to be ashamed of, Anthony had said at the time. Those words sat sulphurous on his tongue now. How he wished he had listened harder. North's music had great qualities, a modern composer, a man of great integrity. I don't even have, Anthony chew chewed down the now soggy page, a script to sell. Novels had offered little in the way of money, which was the only barometer of success. The only novel he had made any money from was the one that Kubrick had stolen and called his own. The publishers had fallen over themselves to get those bastard rights.

Liana had said something at the time. She had had much to say after they saw Kubrick's film.

Claiming this is Kubrick's A Clockwork Orange is like Warhol claiming he invented soup tins.

He didn't quite get the reference, but he had seen soup tins in newspapers since and thought he understood.

The film will age badly, she told him. *Where you*, she ran her fingers through his hair, naked in bed together, *sought to make the book timeless with language, Kubrick's vision dates every day. The fashion has already moved on, his future already looks like the past.*

She was right. She had to be right. He put his own fingers through his hair, pulling and yanking. He would have to find a publisher for the Napoleon novel, meaning he would have to finish the bloody thing. He would be a novelist once more. Deborah would have to earn her ten percent.

Anthony cried. He had already started working on the score to the film. A great partnership: Kubrick director and producer, Burgess screenwriter and composer. The film would contain

the whole of Beethoven's *Third*, but there must be more and he had begun to put down what felt like notes that were both Beethoven and Burgess, the past and the present. He cried like a child. The sheer disappointment was too much to bear. Napoleon's failure, Burgess' failure. The difficulty in putting music into words, setting themes and melodies and instrumentation and composition into sentences and paragraphs and dialogue and—he swallowed—chapters. Not that Kubrick gave two shits or a fuck. The act of writing had become the act of composing, the dissection of writing and composing and the building of something entirely new. He had not written this novel, he had composed it. The words had been placed on a stave. How could an act of such creation not help him make a film? The man was a fraud. On his desk sat the music manuscript he had been working on that morning, just a few ideas to show Stanley when they met. Fool, he chided himself. There was half a sonata and half a novel and exactly nothing to show for it. The score charted Napoleon's sailing from Corsica to Marseille. The notes rolled like the Ligurian Sea. It was a theme that had been with him, tucked somewhere at the back of his mind, for some years. A seafaring theme, written aboard a boat to Malaya or Russia, a subtle hint of adventure in it, but also of reluctance and trepidation. He thought about swallowing this down too.

He walked out of the apartment and into the Rome rain. They were still playing *Arancia Meccanica* in the Catholic capital. The young lapped it up as something of their creation. Which it was not. It was created by an old English man and a bastard middle-aged American.

He sat at a table in Da Meo Patacca and ordered a gin and tonic. Where was Liana, that's what he wanted to know. Off somewhere with Andrea. Not that Anthony wanted her to hear the news. She would give it the old I told you so. And she would be right. He breathed smoke into his glass and sucked down his weak cocktail.

Più gin, he called to the bartender. *Meno ghiaccio.*

The young Italian brought over the bottle of London Dry and poured a healthy amount into Anthony's glass. *Prego*, he smiled toothily.

Grazie, Burgess muttered, biting on his cheroot. Writing the rest of the Napoleon novel was a vast undertaking. It was already some two hundred pages and would most likely be double that when finished. There was still much research to do, much thinking and processing. The bastard. He would need space and time to write, no more trips to America and elsewhere. The fucking bastard. Kubrick had not only destroyed any future of the endeavour but had ripped the joy from writing it. And what joy it had brought. He had, once more, felt like a man of music, a man of literature too. But, no, it was the music that had been the catalyst and the engine that drove him on. The music of Beethoven, yes, and his own music

too, the music of Anthony Burgess. Why not? Why not the music of Anthony Burgess? He had met these two-bit Tin Pan Alley songsters who knocked out rip-offs of the old classics. There was no artistry in film composition, in the same way there was no artistry in banging out a he said/she said script to the specifics of ten contradictory studio executives. Kubrick had all but agreed that his music would be used. *Who would know better than you, Anthony?* Fuck. He had already heard his words spoken on screen. But to hear his music— he tried to stem the tears that were welling up, great tears of shame and tiredness. He drank down his gin, ice and all, and left quickly. In the bitter Roman rain, he wept. He wept for the time he had wasted and the flights of fancy he had allowed himself. And all of the rotten deals he had made these past few years. Giving away the rights to books, losing advances, working his fingers to the bone for free. His agents did nothing except take ten percent of what eventually came in. They were to bloody blame, all right. He would fire everyone. He would leave all of his publishers and tell them all to go to hell. And those arrogant movie-making bastards, he was once and for all done with them and their dirty promises and casual betrayal.

Back in the apartment, Liana was still nowhere to be seen. He lit a cheroot and thought about burning the entire manuscript, a half-written novel never to be fulfilled. He grasped the top pages with violence in mind. The unwritten poison remained in his veins. He knew what must be done.

The Directory had been removed, he had proclaimed himself King, and now the war was almost at an end. With it finished, he delivered his manuscript to Jonathan Cape to muted response. They would have preferred something more sellable. One of the account managers suggested that he write a *Clockwork Orange* sequel, which had Anthony balling his fists. Liana had already decided that his next novel would be published elsewhere, there was good money to be had from Hutchinson and McGraw-Hill over the pond. The decision was congruous, his next novel would deal with the replacement of one wife with another. It would be set in Rome, in the very apartment they were living in. It would be about a haunted writer, haunted by his dead Welsh wife. Haunted by his old life, desperate to renew himself so he and his new life might coalesce. It would lay her to rest, he thought.

But as he wrote, he received a letter. The University of Iowa wanted him as a visiting lecturer, to teach their American students how to write international literature. There was already a lecture tour arranged for the end of the year. He was uneasy about American campuses, he could not control himself. The new world was like a drug that over-stimulated, youthful Americans only added to his intoxication. There was an extra note, from the

conductor of the University Symphony Orchestra, James Dixon. He had read *Napoleon Symphony* and recognised the hand of a composer.

> *If my assumption is correct, I would be delighted to present some of your musical works here in Iowa, should you visit.*

Should he visit. He went with Liana for lunch in her favoured spot, for once happy to slurp down tomato sauce and seafood. The letter was a kind of binary, written to the duplicity of Anthony the author and Anthony the composer. He felt Kell twitch in him. They wanted him to be both Burgesses at the same time, the man of letters, the man of music. How could both exist in unison now, they had never coexisted previously. Liana said,

Is that what you are now, is it, Jack?

He put down his fork and spoon and said, *what was that?*

I said, she said, *I wonder how it is with Zeffirelli?*

I see. When they're done with the crucifixion, I'm sure they will let us know.

I'm going to order an espresso. You want some gelati?

A small bowl, he said.

Liana called over the waiter, who used the familiar *tu*, and gave their order. She said, *twatting around, he thinks he's Elgar.*

I think I'm—

You should bloody hear the noise. Keeps on asking if we can get a piano for the house. No chance, I keep on telling him! I'd go deaf before I let him bring an instrument of torture into my home.

He ate his gelati in moody silence. Liana sipped her espresso, people watching. It was part of the problem with being surrounded by a foreign language, your ear played tricks, convincing you you had understood, or finding analogous English words and stitching a meaning together.

Paper primed, he prepared to begin the novel, her novel. A panatella in his hand, a glass of wine beside him, he prepared. He could see, warped into a curve by the foot of his glass, the words *of your musical works*. He wrote,

> Dear James Dixon
>
> I was both surprised and intrigued by your letter. You have deduced correctly and have exposed me as both author and composer. The contemporary world tells us that a man must do one thing and is certainly incapable of doing more than one thing well.

> This is an attitude I cannot subscribe to, having spent many years in pursuit of some proficiency in two art forms. Your proposal sparked my interest. I have no works in stock that might engage a whole orchestra. That being said, there has been, at the back of my mind for some time, an extended work. Dare I say, there is a symphony that waits to be set down.
>
> It would be my pleasure to commit this work to the page and present it to your orchestra for performance.
>
> Yours,
>
> A. Burgess

He posted his reply that afternoon, afterwards visiting a music store where he bought a hundredweight of scoring paper. His desk cleared of all tools of literature, he opened an inkwell and wetted the nib of his fountain pen. There would be no mistakes, he was giddy, as giddy as the first time his father took him to the Free Trade Hall to hear Wagner. That sense of expectation, the staves entirely blank, only the gentle hum of the lines themselves, waiting for notes that will cling to and sit upon them. The pen hovered but did not strike, he returned it to the well.

A week or more passed. Sleepless nights were followed by fruitless days. The typewriter sat, dormant, the inkwell lid secured. He sat and looked out at Romans going about their business. He could hear, yelling in his newly acquired Roman dialect, Andrea with some friends. There would be no work done today. He took Liana to a show at the Teatro dell'Opera di Roma, then for a late night meal by the Tiber. They arrived home tired and drunk. Anthony fell asleep at his desk.

Liana called in from the living room the next morning, saying, *Antonio, there's a letter from someone called Jim Dixon. About a symphony?* Anthony put on his nightgown and went to her.

What does it say?

He says, he would be delighted to perform your music. Your music?

He wrote to me, he is a conductor.

In Iowa, yes. He asks that you get in touch with the English department to arrange dates and travel.

They want me to write a symphony for the university orchestra.

I have read the letter, Antonio. He also says that his budget will not stretch to copying out scores for an entire orchestra, so, she shrugged, holding the letter out to him.

He read the letter over, *delighted, arrange dates and travel, don't have the budget.* His inertia was ended.

You are happy?

Anthony put down the letter. Liana sat at her desk, a pile of letters to go through, a list to be dealt with. *I am happy,* he said, earnestly.

Congratulations, Antonio. I cannot wait to hear it. You should tell Andrea. He always loves your music.

That night the phone rang. He climbed out of bed and went to the phone downstairs. Her voice said,

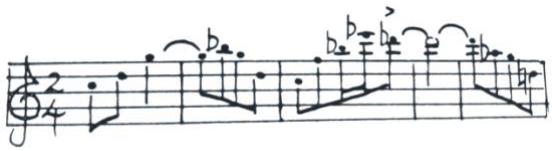
> *Brunei night, unholy night—*
> *Dogs howl, mosquitoes bite.*
> *Brown men busy with axes and knives,*
> *White men sleeping with other men's wives.*
> *The curry's making me cough.*
> *There's nothing to do but eff off.*

Whatever he had had in mind. Whatever music that had haunted him, had tried to seduce him, had filled him, it was all gone now. Unscrewing the lid of his inkwell, the squeak squeak was all the notes he had in his head. A *G* squeaking in 3/4 time. The pen hovered once more, the size of his task already revealed in that hundredweight of paper. When he wrote novels the pages piled up, only when he had finished did he know what size and shape the thing would take. Music worked opposite. A symphony is a certain length of time, it has a temporal existence and this temporal value must be held in a physical space on pieces of well-presented paper. He rationalised that the first part of the symphony would be around nine minutes long, which meant it would be around sixty sides of score. There he had it, the beginning and the end of his first movement, but nothing but those humming lines between. The piazza outside played its own chaotic score, reducing his internal music to static notes, suspended in mid-air. The more he tried to blot out the honking and shouting and bell rings and all else, the louder it grew. It grew to deafening.

He left the apartment and went to see the bones of Cecilia, who had replaced Francis de Sales as his patron saint. Inside the basilica, the stave hummed, each footstep reverberated.

Odd that the patron of musicians should rest in such a quiet tomb. He walked to the back of the church where the organ sat silent. There were very few visitors. As he looked around he could see only two young women who were checking their watches and looking to the door. He sat. From the corner of his eye he watched them leave and then he struck the keys. Pent up for days, for weeks, he pressed hard on keys and pedals, filling the space with a sound thick and full. He expected to be stopped immediately but no one came. He thought about his Catholic family, if they could see him now, blaring out discordant phrases in this sacred place. But they came neither. They would not have cared for it, not only the modernity of his playing but the instrument itself. His family had endured the organ rather than embraced it as God's accompaniment. Give the Dwyers and the Wilsons a penny whistle and a bodhrán any day. They were somehow Pagan Catholics when it came to their choice in holy music. The fiddle could commune very well with our Lord.

He wrote the theme down, carefully in ink. A row of notes that were at once both Celtic and austere. He played it over in his head



and found that it spoke to the other parts of him that had gone so still. He threw everything at it. He wanted to leave nothing out, every note would be played, every moment of his life commemorated. One hundred instruments representing sixty years of life, sixty years of repressed expression. He charged at the task. The brass clambered over each other to be heard. The strings would not relent. He filled in every gap. Anthony was desperate to fill in. By Christmas he had made himself sick with it, blacking out again, waking on Boxing Day and returning straight to the job in hand.

He threw in *Merdeka!* and notated the sea swells of journeys past, waves crashing overboard, drowning notes, notes floating above the waters, riding the skies to the new world. In motels rooms, up the Eastern Seaboard, Anthony replicated Manchester terraces in the key of *C.* Lectures were missed. The literary of Wisconsin were left waiting as Anthony began the *scherzo*, a wild jaunt, notes from the Old World, notes from the New, ricocheting between the two. *Andantino*, he wrote, and *Allegro. Molto vivace* must be written and written twice as much. By the time he got to New York he had almost finished it all, yet not heard a single note played.

Lynne rang him late one night, in a Sacramento motel room. He said, *I am to be a composer, Lynne. What do you think of that?* She said nothing. He said, *I will give up writing books and write only music from now on. What do you think of that?* She said nothing.

He did not give up on books. He wrote Liana in Rome, just as she had been when they first met, when they first made love; their Roman apartment carefully recreated. Liana said to him, *I want to become a photographer, a real photographer*, and so that is what she became. He a successful screenwriter, Liana a successful photographer, he gave them both success in his novel. But the phone rang there too. Lynne would have her moment. She would appear in the opening of his second movement, a stab of strings and brass. He had reined her in too.

Mr Burgess? I'm James Dixon, Jim. He held out his big, meaty American hand. His grip was subtler than Anthony expected. Dixon was smaller than Anthony in stature, yet his presence made him a titan. Anthony felt his hand subsumed by Jim's. *It's a pleasure to finally meet the maestro. Did you find us okay?*

The pleasure is all mine. It felt all his, he clung to this pleasure dearly. *Maestro*, he had been called. It was a pleasure he never wanted to end.

How do you like Iowa?

I feel America is my second home these days. America grew out of extension of my own country, grew out of a rejection of British hypocrisy and British oppression.

Is that so? Well, let's get you a cup of coffee.

Anthony followed Jim's cowboy gait as he strode towards the music department. Many students were sitting out on the grass, flicking idly through textbooks and music manuscripts. Anthony desperately wanted to see if any of them were his, but his eyes were too poor and the students too far away.

Where'd you fly from?

New York. I've had work up there too.

You're a busy man. Won't you follow?

Jim led him through the building and into the cafeteria. On the way, fresh faces smiled and said hello, Mr Dixon. Some Jim replied to, others he only nodded. Anthony recognised the great delight of the students who had been addressed directly. In another life, Anthony had also experienced the pedagogical admiration of students.

I trust the scores are legible and complete.

All fine, fine. What'll you have? Cup of coffee?

No, tea.

No tea. One of my staff suggested getting some English tea for you, as a welcome gift, but I thought that was sort of an English cliché. But you guys really like your tea, huh. Can I get you anything else?

Coffee is fine. Three sugars, plenty of milk.

Okay. Hi Dolores, gimme one cup black and one with cream and sugar. The manuscripts arrived no problem. I'll go through the changes I've made when we get in my office. You want me to find you some tea from somewhere?

That's fine. I have tea in the hotel.

Brought your own, huh? Not many, mind you, just a few technical points, probably from the duplication. Jim did not pay. *Thanks, Dolores.* He handed Anthony his large mug of coffee, slightly lightened by some kind of dairy product. *We're this way*, he pointed, and Anthony followed.

Well, I'm sure whatever you've amended—

Morning, Mr Dixon.

—will be with good reason.

Hello, sir.

I wrote it without the—

Good morning, Mr Dixon.

Morning, Julie.

—hearing a note out loud. I find that—

Hey, Mr Dixon.

—I work better that way, but it will tend to lead to the odd error of judgement.

Here we are.

They reached an office door Anthony expected to be labelled GOOD MORNING, MR DIXON. But instead it read: JAMES DIXON and under that SYMPHONY CONDUCTOR. Jim rustled keys in the lock and invited Anthony in.

So, say that again, you mean you haven't heard anything that you've written?

Not, Anthony put his scalding mug down, *out loud, but in my head.*

Plenty of deaf composers, I suppose. That's impressive, if you don't mind me saying. Anthony didn't. *Come on in.*

They sat opposite each other, Jim's desk between them, a copy of the score unopened sat in wait. *Well,* Jim said.

It is strange to think all this exists because of a piece of literature.

Sure, but anyone who knows anything could see that what that book was really about was music. I'm just glad we got to you first.

How are rehearsals going?

You know. He did not. *The kids take a while to warm to anything new. This is the problem with kids, they think they're the great innovators, the custodians of new, but really they just want the familiar, the undemanding. Do you want to see the hall? I can ask one of the students to take you over.*

I've got to visit the English department, I'm going to be doing some teaching while I am here.

So I'm told. Busy man. Well, I won't pick your brains too much then, but I've got some questions for you later.

I only hope I can answer.

Your wife here? You want to bring her along?

She is not. She is in New York, but she will join me before the performance. My son too, if he chooses.

Welcomed by the deputy head of the English department, Anthony was informed that he was to give a seminar on the short story at 2pm. He had nothing to say about the short story, so instead talked about the use of myth in modern literature. This, he was advised by a student, must be somehow turned into a creative writing exercise. And thus, Anthony was informed that he was now a creative writing teacher.

Write, then, a myth reset in the present day.

Like what? A student asked.

Like whatever you like. The Minotaur might be a mob boss, the labyrinth his vast empire. Theseus would be a policeman or vigilante, out to rid the city of crime.

Wouldn't that work better if Theseus was a sheriff and the Minotaur was a kind of, I don't know—

—An outlaw who preyed on prospectors, a slab of a boy interrupted.

But the Minotaur had his victims gifted to him. He wouldn't be in charge, a girl with tightly swept-back hair added.

You're not here to solve the problem of resetting the Minotaur, I have asked you to come up with your own idea. He sat at the desk and looked at the class. They were all first years, they all had no idea who he was. He was glad. He did not want to be known for books here. Anthony wished to be a composer. Anonymity was a joy. He was a composer here on campus. After Wednesday they would all know him as a man of music.

So, is this meant to be like a short story or something? someone asked.

I suppose so. Or an outline, or the opening of a novel, of a play, whatever you feel best reflects your idea.

Don't you, a girl at the back spoke up, *want to talk about how you wrote myths into your work?*

My work?

Sure, like MF and Napoleon Symphony, right? They're basically the myths of Oedipus and Prometheus, aren't they?

And, another girl chimed in, *The Worm and the Ring is The Ring Cycle.*

Yes, he said, standing. *You know my work?*

Sure, the first girl said, *you're Anthony Burgess.* Americans had a tendency to over pronounce the *en* and *aitch* in his name, giving them equal voicing to the rest of the letters. It usually didn't bother him, but this girl gave them such emphasis she turned his name into *An Phoney.*

They made us read a bunch of your books last semester.

Hey, I got this idea about a girl who can't take her eyes off of her compact mirror.

I had that same exact idea.

That's all too simple. It doesn't go anywhere, Anthony said, already exasperated. *Why not,* he stood, *how about Bellerophon and Pegasus?* The students looked between them, confounded. *Bellerophon is tasked to capture Pegasus. On the journey, he sleeps in Athena's temple and dreams that she has come to him. When he awakes, he has in his hands a bridle for a horse and knows exactly where to find Pegasus. He captures the horse and flies back to the King who offers his daughter as prize. This is just a small part of the story, but how could we transform this into the narrative of a modern novel?*

They sat there stumped, stupefied. One said, *Pegasus is the unicorn, right?*

The flying horse, someone corrected.

I will leave you to contemplate. Anthony collected his things and left.

Liana and Andrea arrived the morning before the performance. She had, from New York, organised a party before his symphony was performed.

A party will take your mind off things, she told him.

Andrea looked older than his eleven years. He met them at the airport, Andrea getting into the front passenger seat.

How was the flight, Andrea?

Andrew, he corrected.

How was the flight, Andrew?

Long, he replied, in his jumbled accent.

Tell him about school, Liana said, squeezing her son's shoulder.

What's to tell?

He started to learn the recorder, Antonio. His teacher says he has a natural gift. Like his father. She squeezed the boy's shoulder once more. Anthony caught the boy's embarrassment in the rear view mirror.

Andrew sniffily investigated their motel room. Anthony paid the driver, then said, *so, what would you like to do?*

I have some work to finish, Liana said. *But you boys go ahead.*

What's it going to be then, eh? Anything you want. Within reason. We could see a film.

If you want.

No, Andrea—I mean, Andrew— if you want. We could go for hamburgers and fries. Whatever you want. Whatever you want, he repeated, internalised.

The boy fidgeted, shy and embarrassed. *Yes.*

Yes?

Yes, please. Do they have Jaws on here?

Well, I'm sure we'll find out.

In 1982, Burgess published *The End of the World News*. This novel offers several intersections, not least between the fictive writers, such as Enderby and Toomey, Burgess created and the real-life writers, Marlowe and Keats, whom he fictionalised. *The End of the World News* is presented as a posthumous novel, the first to be published after fictional Burgess's death, in 1983. His executor is John B. Wilson, BA. In his foreword, Wilson describes Burgess's home as littered with unfinished manuscripts and half read books: 'a literary beguilement, consisting of a volume of Henry James's letters; a book of poems by one Geoffrey Grigson… a work of musicology by a certain Hans Keller' (p. viii). Wilson found, 'in a shopping bag', a manuscript that appears to be three separate projects 'shuffled casually

together' (ibid). These three narratives, while being shuffled together in Wilson's present are also revealed to be interlinked in an unknown distant future, on a space ship that was launched after the destruction of the Earth. Each narrative presents the end of the life of a writer — a man whose legacy is his words. The first to be introduced is Sigmund Freud, who is in the midsts of escaping Nazi occupied Vienna, in 1938. As the Freuds travel to Britain, the next narrative is introduced, which takes place in contemporary America, though the narrator begins by explaining that 'all this happened a long time ago' (p. 20). The narrative follows Val Brodie, a fictionalised science fiction writer, in the weeks leading up to an asteroid, Lynx, hitting and destroying Earth. The narrator is relating this story from a space craft, populated by the descendants of a group of scientists chosen to escape the end of the world. The third narrative, set in 1917, presents Trotsky's time in New York, as he has been exiled from pre-soviet Russia.

None of these narratives intersect, although Freud and Trotsky died within a year of one another. Each is presented in its own particular style. Trotsky's narrative is presented as a script to a Broadway musical — and with Trotsky living in exile in New York, it is specifically a Broadway musical. Freud's story is presented in prose, although Burgess's own introduction suggests that it should be read as 'the raw material of a television series' (p. viii). The apocalyptic narrative is written in the genre of science fiction, it could, in fact, be one of Brodie's stories (p. 29). While each part of the novel takes place at a different moment in time, Burgess does not present these elements as being part of a chronology. The two stories that take place in the closest proximity are, in fact, the most disparate, with the Freud narrative conceived in the tropes and language of modern television programmes, and the Trotsky narrative parodying early twentieth century musicals. Furthermore, when the world comes to an end in Val Brodie's time it also comes to an end for Trotsky and Freud. What Burgess presents in this novel is not a history but a genealogy.

Genealogy, as conceptualised by Foucault, rejects the linear conception of history, that time move towards a 'monotonous finality' (1977, p. 139). While history is 'the concrete body of a development, with its moments of intensity, its lapses, its extended periods of feverish agitation, its fainting spells' Foucault's conception of genealogy is as a 'numberless beginnings', which history insists on sowing together as a continuum (p. 146). Dialogue, in Bakhtinian terms, is a rejection of history, history that builds towards our current point in history. As all utterances will, ultimately, have their 'homecoming festival', dialogic interaction does not move in a linear direction, each utterance succeeded by the next (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 170). If this were the case, Shakespeare would not continue to have such

'overwhelming presence… throughout almost every aspect of the world's culture' (Holland, 2007, p. 139). And as Burgess's interactions with the past and with writers and thinkers of the past are dialogic then they are also genealogic. Burgess's historiographic metafictions remove their subjects from this continuum, presenting a Shakespeare whose 'main aim was… to make money, not to bequeath deathless plays to posterity (Burgess, 1973, p. 159).

The End of the World News presents three concurrent narratives whose relationship is defined by the ever shifting space between. Bakhtin's theories are also defined by such spaces. Dialogism is the space between speakers, chronotopes the spatio-temporal distance between two or more points, transgredience is the space between I and other, while polyphony implies the space between languages. In the novel each narrative is separate but unified. Towards the end of the novel Olga, a woman who Trotsky has a relationship with, sings:

> The new world coming tomorrow —
> I hailed it again and again,
> And if folk ask me when
> I have to say:
> The day after
> The day after
> The day after
> The day after (p. 381)

The narrative shifts to the future where 'Val switched it off. "Oh my God," he groaned. "So this is what we take into space…"' (p. 382). The Trotsky story is revealed to be a video of a musical performance and Olga's utterance finds its response in Val. The impending end of the world, the end of literature and culture, has the effect of reducing the distance between points in time, between people and their ancestors. With the asteroid descending, Val speaks to 'two ploiarchs… two tough young Scots whose ancestors had fired crankshafts over bitter seas' (p. 373). A ploiarch is a Greek solider, and the two men exist between shifting civilisations, telling Val '"Ye'd best see her yersel"', as they revert back to the language of their forefathers (p. 374). When the world ends, all points in time end, the moon — which has become the asteroid's satellite — is described as 'the moon of Shakespeare and Shelley' (p. 385). The world truly dies, for Burgess, when humans no longer create. Val Brodie renounces science fiction for the science of space travel. Without access to culture, to the utterances that have gone before, all dialogue ceases. Val tells the crew of the ship, '"Literature, metaphysics, music — must be accounted mere nostalgia, nothing more. What have we to do with poems about love under the sycamores under the moon?"' (p. 385).

The epilogue of the novel reveals the narrator as a teacher called Valentine O'Grady, who has been telling this story to his young students. O'Grady tells his story in much the same way that Mr Burgess recounts Shakespeare's life in *Nothing Like the Sun*, with the enthusiasm of the time-travelling teacher who visits Enderby: 'He had told it at length, dramatically, drawing on his fancy' (p. 387). But the death of the author at the beginning of the novel, Burgess's pseudo death, brings with it what Burgess most fears, the end of dialogue. The last line reveals that this story will likely die with O'Grady as, when the students leave, 'they had forgotten the story already' (p. 389). Valentine O'Grady is the ultimate future reader; he exists beyond reading and symbolises the last true dialogic impulse.

Liana walked around the room with her camera hanging from her neck, taking pictures of the buffet, the campus outside, Andrew talking to two young Iowan students. It does not take his mind off anything, it focuses his mind on the impending performance. All these people, all these people and more will soon listen to what represents a life's work. He made sure to tell everyone he spoke to that this was, in fact, his third symphony. But Anthony knows the truth, this is his first symphony. His first two novels did not count until someone had read them. This is the same.

Anthony, I'd like you to meet, says everyone he knows, introducing him to everyone he does not.

Anthony Burgess, I'd like you to meet Gianfranco de Bosio, said Burt Lancaster.

A pleasure, he said, shaking the director's hand, wary of directors.

We're very keen to talk to you about a new film, we're putting the money together, Burt said, grinning with brilliant teeth.

I am a great fan of your work, Gianfranco told him. *You are a wonderful writer*. He had heard these words before, from another director. He was about to reply when Liana placed her hand under his and said,

Antonio, this is not an evening for talk of movies. You are a composer tonight. Will you excuse us for two minutes, gentlemen? The men bowed, charmed by his charming wife.

Jim was smoking a cigar and talking to a well-groomed young man. He said to Anthony, *how you holding up there?*

I have been better. But I have the utmost faith.

Jim's wasted here, the young man said.

No one's wasted anywhere. Everyone deserves great art, every place deserves to hear great music. Don't you agree, Anthony?

Indeed. He moved on, in something of a daze, the young man keeping his elegant eyes on him as he went. He found himself in the centre of the room, alone, looking around. It felt like a wake, a wake for the author Anthony Burgess. He was offered and accepted a drink.

Someone said, *I wanted to come over and introduce myself. I am a huge fan of yours.*

Oh yes? Anthony said, disinterested.

I've read a great deal of your work. I'm trying to get through them all, but you keep writing more.

I will have to put a stop to that.

And now a composer too!

I have, Anthony said, *always been a composer. Only now are people listening. Are you on the faculty?*

I am a researcher, though not in Iowa. I have come especially to hear your symphony.

Then I am honoured. Where have you travelled from?

A country you will not have heard of, Mr Burgess. A country whose history has been obliterated. I have brought my wife and my son to hear your work. There they are, in the corner. You see? Beautiful, aren't they?

Charming.

I cannot wait to hear your creation.

Neither can I, Anthony said, shaking the man's hand.

You said once, he said, *that MF is the only work you're proud of.*

Did I?

It's not true?

It's time, Liana said, and took Anthony by the arm, leading him through the crowd.

How do I look? he asked Andrew.

Better, his son replied. *Look, they're going in.*

Anthony reaches out his hand to his son. His dad takes his hand and says, *stay close, Jackie.* His son pulls his hand away, *dad, what are you doing?* He is eleven, but older somehow, somehow ancient, as he was as a boy, that boy who was pulled, hand in hand with

his father into the Free Trade Hall. The ceilings, he'd never noticed ceilings before. After the Free Trade Hall, he always made sure to look up. His dad queued at the bar, mumbling to himself about the people 'ere, Jackie heard *gin and tonic* and *G and T*. His dad ordered a pint of bitter, quickly draining the top quarter.

Where do we sit? he asks.

This way, Mr Burgess. A girl leads them down the steps. Her teeth are a touch splayed, she has a heavy metal brace, the kind only Americans wear. Anthony turns as the door closes behind them, his father showing their tickets, the usher tearing them at the centre and handing them back.

What'd 'e do that for?

Stops people sneakin other people in. The hall is huge. Jack gasps at the size of it. He says, *Dad*, too loud, his voice reverberated round.

Joe says, *you're not to piss about 'ere, mind. Nahthen.* He looks at their stubs and at the row numbers. *This way, gobby.* He follows his father, is followed by his son, is sitting and ready to listen, was sitting with his heart beating in his chest, listening to the fizzing hum of expectant voices, beating with anticipation that swelled in the silence. All around them the audience whispers, the energised drone of a bee hive. The background noise, those five unwavering bars, come into focus. It is, he listens closely, a human equivalent to an orchestra tuning up. The low murmur of the boys behind them, the higher register of the girls down the front, the mid rustle of those waiting on the platform, all converging to A 440 hertz.

Jim Dixon makes his way to the centre of the stage. Anthony's hands are shaking. He's trying to open the bag of sweets his dad gave him, but he can't get the bag to break. *Can thee 'ave a go?*

Giz them to me, his father replies, giving the bag a good yank and handing it back, taking one for good measure.

Ay, them are mine.

Cost of admission, Joe says.

When he chews, he can hear his heart beating in his ears. *What will they play?* he asks.

Wagner, his dad tells him.

Wagger?

Wagner, he emphasises the *n.*

Thur starting, he shouts, watching the musicians lift their instruments. He could hear the difference, the air in the room had become charged. Particles held in position waiting for the striking moment.

Tap, tap, tap.

His heart is full, he squeezes his son's hand his father's hand, his eyes are were already wet. Then, with a flick of a wrist, the whoosh of a million, billion atoms and particles shifting in one fluid motion, but only for a millisecond as they turned towards and against one another. In the slipstream he sees the faces of the crowd, filled with the living and the dead. It's like he can barely make out the music itself, the feeling of it, the sense of it, is too much to take in. The sound of that many instruments, of that many human bodies moving and breathing and beating as one is just too bloody much. He's never heard real music before, only in his head, only what he'd heard on the radio, which was tinny and was the sound of just one man as far as he could make out, buzzing out of a tiny speaker by his ear by his bed. There's nothing to prepare you for that force with which music, people playing music, can attack you. The don't need guns in wars, John thinks, thee need flamin trumpets and tubas and timpani and all of them like a wall playing all at once. He wants to ask his dad, *dad, has anyone's head ever blown off because of music?* But his dad is entranced, teary-eyed and transfixed. He squeezes his leathery hand, he can't remember ever holding hands with Anthony. There must have been a time, but he's not sure when. He can't focus on the music because he's too absorbed by the man beside him, the man he has known his whole life, yet who he does not know at all. They had taken him to see *Cyrano,* when they were living in New Jersey. Andrea had fallen in love with music then, but had been told by Anthony that it was derivative claptrap and not really music at all. Andrea had seen it again and loved it even more, Anthony raged against it two-fold. But while he sat stony-faced, sneering almost, during those performances, here he was wiping his face with a handkerchief, eyes straining to stay wide open and then, wavering, blinking away tears that streamed down the crags of his face. He had not seen his dad like this before. Music was a job, something to pay the bills. The piano is a bitch, he'd heard his dad say, *Joanna, the old bitch*. To see such pleasure on his dad's face disturbed him, it was not his dad, was not what his dad was, couldn't ever be like, he felt himself fill up, he listened hard, like his dad was listening and he could hear, through the power of it, the absolute force of it, he could hear the delicacy, the way certain players played opposite and against each other, not in a battle but in a kind of dance, swaying between one another like trees by the river, all branches and that sort of intertwining but pulling apart as the wind blew. He wanted it to stop, it was too much. He wanted to be overrun by it, for it to fill his every sense, for it to push out all other thoughts from his mind until all there was was this and the moment of every strike of every note, of every string bowed, every breath breathed. If there is a god, a higher power, a good that is pure and concentrated, then it is this. People believe in magic, in the reading of

words in a certain order, an incantation that will make the rains fall or a man drop dead or the future expose itself. He had spent his whole life toiling with words, in a constant war, and the only incantation he knew of was the playing of notes on a page. They lay there, unmoving, static, incomprehensible, abstract, artless, these black notes and yet a person with an instrument, a hundred people with a hundred instruments, could bring these inert marks to life and they moved and they sang and caused the human mind and body to react in a way totally unexpected, totally beyond what the marks themselves could have even hinted at. Music could bring life and end life and, yes, it could reveal the future, it certainly immured the past. Not the past of a previous performance, for all incantations were entirely unique. No, this was the past in which the notes were set down, the past the composer wanted to petrify on the page. Played, these pages contained childhoods and love affairs and deaths and the fall of countries, of entire empires, the end of everything, the start of everything. And that past was fortified by the present, was only possible because of the present, meaning the past was alive in the people who played it, meaning that the past was not dead, was not irretrievable, quarantined, inaccessible. The past lives.

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