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**We Are Seven**

Fortune-Wood, Rowan

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## **We Are Seven**

**Rowan B. Fortune-Wood**

**2016**

In fulfilment for the requirements for the degree of Doctor of  
Philosopher in Bangor University

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Rowan B. Fortune

We are Seven

In which in an unknown city of known  
England, brave women & men assemble to  
fight iniquity and poverty.

“But they are dead; those two are dead!  
Their spirits are in heaven!”  
‘Twas throwing words away; for still  
The little Maid would have her will,  
And said, “Nay, we are seven!”

—William Wordsworth

# Prefude

A speck of rain licked the black reflective surface and trickled down its convex to fall from the helmet's brim. It was joined by a further smattering that throbbed on the faceless masks and translucent shields; anyone close to the police wall would see, mirrored on an opacity where human expression belonged, only the image of the building and the reflected huddle of Shedders moving around the forecourt before the corrugated green door. An expanse of rutted concrete separated the police from The Shed, which had once been a lorry park for cumbersome vehicles to pick and drop sheets of packed plywood.

Alice put down her phone. 'Nearly here,' she shouted to the assembled, trying to lift her voice over the weather.

'When? If they don't come soon, *we're* not gonna be here.'

'Then we won't be here. What cannot be changed must be abided,' said Triple-A.

Mary tapped furiously on her touch phone and pressed the devise to her face. 'Caleb... remember you said you owed me for how I was fired before, and you wanted to get some footage of police action for *The Watcher*...' She held out the phone to the police wall, then drew it back. 'I've sent the location on Google maps. An image is on its way. Think this will look good on the website... Be a good boy and get here with a camera... Sure, bye.'

'I'm terrified Alice,' said a young woman.

'We all are, but we'll be alright.'

'You don't know that though, do you?'

'No, I believe it. And I've been here before. Triple-A is right.'

‘Did I experience an auditory hallucination, am I to lose my only true possession, my faculties, or did I rightly hear our glorious leader proclaim me “right”?’

‘Probably the first thing,’ said David with a well-meaning scoff.

‘I...’ but the Shedder who was about to speak halted as, in eerie unison, the police began to bang batons against their shields.

‘Fucking bastards,’ said David, glaring like his namesake faced by Goliath.

The young woman stifled a sob. ‘Shall we just go? They’ll let us leave.’

Ella stepped forward. ‘They didn’t before, Cindy.’ She took the woman’s hand. ‘We have to trust, okay?’

‘Should we have everyone go indoors or bring all of them out?’ David asked Alice.

‘Unless they come it won’t matter, look, they’ve circled the exit to the car park. As things are, we can agree to get arrested, wait to be arrested or have them rampage through our Shed to arrest us. And even if we play nice, they’ll probably still have a rampage.’

Cindy started to cry.

David slurred, ‘Hey-hey-hey-hey,’ holding up his hands, ‘coolly does it. We won’t do any good bawling.’

‘But that won’t happen,’ assured Alice, worried at the impact of her assessment, ‘They’ll be here in time. I believe.’



# +Principal Dramatis Personæ+

~

You.....	The Reader
Rowan B. Fortune.....	The Author
Philip 'Phil' Grange.....	The Uncle
Sarah Grange.....	The Mother
Ells Grange.....	The Daughter
Joshua 'Quixote' Urquhart.....	The Hero
Ollie 'Sancho' Brown.....	The friend
Andy 'Mike Wilmot' Perkins, BA.....	The Traitor
Toby Dee, BA.....	The follower
Graham Finningham, BA, LLB.....	The Lawyer
Beth Porter, BSc.....	The faithful
Mary Pritchard, BA, MA.....	The Journalist
Sebastian Lyme, BA, MA.....	The Artist
Clare Dee/Grange, BA, MA.....	The Lost
Peter Grange.....	The Son
Maurice Rathbone, BA, MA, PhD.....	The Herald
Alice Workman, BA.....	The Leader
David Somerville.....	The Loyal

Peter Jr. Grange.....The Grandson  
Bret 'Azariah' Colman.....The Prophet  
Vera Tatchell, BA, PGCE.....The Pedagogue  
Ainsley 'Triple A' Arwood, BSc, MSc.....The 'Mad'  
Et al.

&

The Block, The City and The Shed, besides other locations.

## Part One: Utopia

*In which helots occupy the block  
and our cast gathers to build a  
new life in the midst of the old.*

The rift between dreams and reality causes no harm if only the person dreaming believes seriously in his dream, if he attentively observes life, compares his observations with his castles in the air, and if, generally speaking, he works conscientiously for the achievement of his fantasies. If there is some connection between dreams and life then all is well.

—Dmitry Pisarev

He tongues his protruding lower lip. Takes another bite of his baguette, chews strips of mayonnaised bacon. Ruddy in beige three-piece, skinny black tie, he eats with determination, lumped uncannily on a café stool. And fumbling change onto the table, he waddles out, takes a fag to his mouth, deploys a liberty statue novelty lighter—sucking as he eases through crowds. Only thwarted by a woman in white handing out bold font ‘Jesus Saves’ leaflets to passers-by.

He laughs and throws his in a trashcan.

The corpulent body moves gracefully. A woman catches the place’s transparent door. He’s seen her before on his routine into the towering fifteen-storey apartment block; it is one of a swarm of identical fellows in a city with a population of over a million. This castle destined for siege is a monolith in grey decorated by satellite dishes—like Christmas baubles affixed to pine. Inside is a monotony of dingy apartments—akin to all of the apartments in all of the tower blocks on the city’s outskirts, which form a donut ring of brutalist high-rises like a new take on Neolithic standing stones.

None of the assembled joins the man in a cramped lift that creaks ascension, rattling at destination. At floor seven he makes his way through corridors with a Minotaur’s familiarity. And at the door with peeled lime paint knocks once, resolute. And waits for her to play a fretful spyhole ritual, collecting semblance and unbolting. She’s smiling, oversized tortoiseshell glasses magnifying her eyes. She presses into his folds. He reciprocates with a firm pat.

In the living room he takes a place on the sofa while she stands awhile before occupying the only other seat, a moth-eaten chair with faded floral pattern. As gauche in her bony fragility as he is natural in his bulk, they are joined by an adolescent—so much her skinny genderless mother, nothing of her uncle.

‘How’s things?’

‘A’right.’

‘Ella keeps well?’ He indicates with a head movement to his niece.

‘She’s a’right, aren’t you darling?’

The girl smiles.

‘How’s money?’

‘Same old, same old.’

‘Planning on seeing Peter?’

‘Phil, lay off? Do him a good turn, your business.’

He opens his mouth, but is cut short.

‘I’m not interested.’

He nods, pausing, and then, ‘Charming weather.’

‘Bloody flats are baking.’ The woman scratches her arm.

‘You ought to get out and enjoy it, Sis. Take Ella.’

‘Where?’ She’s abrasive now Peter’s been mentioned.

‘Somewhere.’

‘Who has time?’

‘I could take her... now?’

‘She’s fine; y’know she ain’t for wanderin.’

‘It’d be good. For her... good for you too.’

His niece stands behind her mother, she jerks her head. The man watches her fretfully track their conversation. It goes on: silences and nattering. He stares at *Maneki-neko*, the good luck Japanese mantel cat, the tiny TV screen with a crack in the black plastic frame, grey stained carpet; a keyboard and chairs where his sister teaches piano. Ella’s hands are making regular movements—tics.

He extracts himself from the seat, goes through the landing to the toilet. Pulling down trousers he sits, bare legged, reads ‘Home is where the Heart is’—a baroquely framed sign on the door, over the top of ‘Keep Calm and Carry On’—stoicism for the constipated. He lights up, it helps.

Slamming the Terry's Chocolate Orange on the Kitchen surface he breaks it into slices. Ella jerks.

'Got t'keep healthy love—one of my five a day.'

Her smile again. He regards her. *My niece the puzzle*—her reticence, selfward retreat, obdurate smiles signifying gut responses to the world's intrusions. He wishes his sister would challenge her daughter.

'We could go to the flicks? Sure y'mum wouldn't mind.'

Ella nods so slightly it could be missed, staring at his black goatee and moustache.

He pops a chocolate in his mouth, grinds. 'Good. Y'need to get out, eh? It'd be good fer'ya? And for her in there.' And less loudly, 'as I keep telling Sarah.'

He takes another piece. Slowly consumes sliver-by-sliver, offering Ella, anticipating refusal. He licks residual stains.

Gently, he hurries her from the apartment with podgy hands. She dons a frumpy brown cotton charity shop coat with meticulous care. He considers how alike his niece and sister are, with their inconsequential regard for details; how his sister would clean, even for her siblings. His part of the room would be tidied last, while he watched with relief-tinged ambivalence.

Down the hall, two children make a theatre of blocking them. The older wearing a headband with an abstract swirl on a metal plaque, blue shirt, white shorts, white and black bands decoratively wrapping arms, holding out a pointed finger.

The kid exclaims with bold enunciation, in thick patois, 'By order of de Hidden Village of Tower, I ahn I *Genin* will arrest yah S class criminal and won't her be urt,' he indicates Ella with his still trained finger, moving with choreographed drama. 'Try any'ting ah use taijutsu.'

Phil smiles and lights another fag. 'Little Kee'hotey and faithful Sancho. Good to see you two.'

'Won't escape tis time.' Quixote adopts a pose with one fist raised.

Behind, 'Sancho' looks reflectively at the floor. 'Hi.' He's freckly, with red curls. A chubby child for whom the fat man feels affinity—he likes these mites, their cartoon games inspiring elaborate fancies. He recognises outcasts and their creative response to abandonment.

'Don talk to im tat way. He evil ninja attack de village. By order of ah *Kage* to be caught ahn killed.' The boy returns to face his adversary, 'Choose.'

'Hmm... tough,' avuncular, he goes along in good cheer, 'but I'm afraid, knight-errant...'

'Ninja.'

'I'm afraid, young ninja, I've prior engagements.' Phil puffs smoke, strokes his chin's wisp like a wise hermit he saw on an eastern martial arts film. 'You'll have to lemme pass or I won't be able to take an important missive about a worse villain to the supreme ruler of the ninja.'

'There ah no supreme rulah,' the kid avows, relishing superior knowledge.

'Beg to differ.'

'Who?'

Their game persists until Ella tugs at Phil.

Before the lift reaches the ground it halts, the door slides and two guys squeeze into the constricted space. Phil studies them. The older wears a plain, black suit—sepulchral supermarket attire. He has inflated biceps and a sculpted face with sharp cheekbones and pronounced forehead. The younger is taller, but chubbier, on the cusp of fat. A blue-black linen shirt hangs loose over navy jeans. They are both brown haired and tallish. Phil places himself as a barrier between them and Ella.

'Next Thursday?' asks the younger.

'Yeah, Toby.'

'You read the newsletter?'

'Course.'

'Will they split?'

‘Na.’

‘Sure?’

‘Not of anything.’

Toby emits a breathy snigger. ‘Yeah? Socratic.’

Silence. Phil decides he does not like them. Although in minutes he forgets. When the lift stops they all clamber out, leave the building, each pair in the opposite direction.

The two men walk silently through a suburban landscape. Past tower blocks, terraced houses, newsagents, a board promoting British Beef Burgers, off-licences, derelict shells and a lone tattoo parlour displaying skulls, roses, hearts, Oriental characters seared on pink sore flesh and flashing neon lights on puddles with electric greens, blues, reds. In the distance is a column-guided gasometer, its envelope engorged into a circular gas bell colossus. They pass a homeless man with a sunken face and upturned cap. The sky is a mild unfailing grey, backlit by a weak autumnal sun that radiantly tips from blue cracks. Toby reflects that the heavens match the pebbledash and concrete. He thinks of ‘squalor’ and likes the sound, despite its ugly import. *Like squeal. Like squall.*

At a bus stop they wait. Standing still Toby wants to talk, resents his friend for neither starting nor maintaining conversation. He pauses in faint hope.

‘What do you think will happen?’ Toby asks.

‘When.’

‘Next Thursday wolly.’ *Wolly?*

‘Nothing.’

‘Why should we go?’

‘Something better to do?’

‘Suppose.’

More silence.



‘What does this accomplish? What’s it for?’

‘Don’t worry overmuch. Nuisances pass, then we get to work.’

‘Hope so.’

The older man is silent. Toby tries again.

‘Hear about the anarchists?’

‘No.’

‘Only got themselves arrested. Another anti-Islam protest, made out the Third Reich was on our doorsteps. It was all for the sake of a half dozen lumpens who’d probably been rounded up anyways.’

‘You don’t say.’

More silence.

‘You read about that Bret Borger? The interview?’ Toby asks.

‘The guy who killed the minister? Fucking idiot. Why’d I wanna read that?’

‘I’m glad the shit is dead.’

‘Irrelevant, doesn’t help. Gives the government ammunition, sympathy. It’s selfish to act alone.’

‘Think the guy was too desperate to be selfish.’

‘Possibly. Anyway, my ride.’ He says this with enthusiasm, maybe too much. The older one gets on the first bus, a double decker with a skeletal driver who looks shrivelled by his booth.

‘Seeing y’then, Toby,’ he says as he climbs the stairs, hand in pocket in search of loose change.

‘See’ya Mike.’

Toby has to wait for another two buses. He slots in the white earphones and listens to his iPod shuffle. Indie: Muse’s wall of sound dramatics and Placebo’s androgynous vocals. He keeps listening on the ride home, watching the same views from a window seat.

His attention shifts to billboard adverts as the bus moves through commercial districts; when he first learnt to read he took narcissistic satisfaction in these and still habitually focuses on

them, an unconscious reaching back to lost pleasures. One was for a 'Revolutionary' flat screen, 'be the future.' Coke Zero; Fairtrade Coffee; Bestseller Atkins Diet Book—promises of guiltless decadence, an unachievable paean to consumption.

Even the two political adverts—the Pragmatist's humane brand of *status quo* and the Realist's smiling photoshopped faces of generic politicians with Joe Public—offer lowest common denominator promises no one opposes, everyone reads differently: family values, employment, safer neighbourhoods, freedom.

Heavy rain breaks, obscures his view; he watches water runnel down glass.

The bus stops and a middle-aged man in a green-waxed raincoat climbs on; he pulls down the soggy hood, showing a groomed head, neatly trimmed greying auburn. As he pays the driver he drops a two pence and it rolls the isle, past aluminium seats, under the legs of a hobbling elderly woman, narrowly misses chewed pink gum, towards a chubby kidult in headphones, who stops it with a slam of his right trainer.

The man awkward-smiles his clumsiness and takes a seat in front. *Have to make a show of myself?* He looks at his watch as the bus starts; its silver, mechanical hands offer a transitory respite from anxiety. Twelve minutes and he looks again, four minutes, seven, fifteen, three, as though checking were a means to control time. He pushes the red button even though the vehicle is slowing. He pulls his hood up again as he alights.

A man in white shoves a leaflet at him he instinctively takes, 'Jesus Saves.' He scrunches it into his coat, accepting whatever he's handed, and sidles into the mahogany ambience of a Bella Italia. A babbling crowd and muzak meet him as he pulls down his raincoat hood and looks at his watch.

'A reservation for Finningham?'

A waitress with a large Roman nose and ear length hair smiles, her nametag reads 'Beth'. She informs him his wife is waiting, directs him to a two-seater table at the back. He hangs his coat on his chair, revealing a well-fitted cream suit with carmine and black slant-lined tie.

'How long were you waiting?' *Does it matter?*

She smiles. 'I don't know, Graham. Five, ten minutes.'

'I turned out early to be punctual. Always on time, you know?'

She shrugs. 'I just had nothing to do and left the house too soon.'

'Yeah, thought so. I didn't want to be late, thought I'd beat you by ten or so minutes, right?'

He looks at her. She has on the thin sun-backed dress with the fluted hem; exposed décolletage and arms; a silver chain lily necklace, greenstone in the middle of the flower; big, black triangle earrings. She stares back; he interprets her gaze as acrimonious. Has he made too much fuss about the time? He almost checks, but stops as his arm raises and rubs the back of his neck instead, feeling a nodule of his spine. He wonders if he is getting bony—and has a gastric craving.

'Ordered?'

'Course not... well, a bottle of white.'

He picks up the menu. 'Anything good?'

'I don't know. I'm getting the *Zuppa del Giorno* and *Salmone e Fagioli*.'

'Yeah? Sounds nice.'

He's quiet as he scans options. 'I think I'll have a *Bruschetta* and a... and a....' He reads various pizza toppings. 'And a *Pollo Piccante*.' When he looks up, he sees she's staring off behind him.

They each order for themselves when the waitress comes with the wine and asks 'How has your day been so far?' with a forced rictus. The waitress offers his wife a first taste, he wonders if it is a comment on him or a reflection of who arrived first. His wife accepts the bottle.

They eat the first course in silence. He feels bile build.

He'll let her pay—she's the one who is enjoying this evening.

Beth senses a beaut of a blister and a pain in her calf recalls her grandmother's varicose veins; will the job deform her too? Make her ugly in dotage. She forces a smile for the couple, senses how they are tied more by wrath than love, like her parents. Right age, right clothes. Better than her other customers: the family whose orders are inaudible over their raucous children. For a moment she wants to hurt these kids, and then herself. The two women in business skirts, one listening dourly to the chatter: promotion, a new YBA art exhibit, how it compares to animals preserved in formaldehyde, her botched dental appointment, the state of Yemen. The group of teenagers huddled around a lanky boy celebrating his birthday; the jibes make him flinch and laugh as if pleading for pity.

That ache; it hadn't progressed, was not a creeping soreness. Beth began work with the throb in her leg's sinews and for the whole extent had to resist relinquishing to its injunction: sit, sit, sit, sit, sit, sit... And her back and her arms too. Not giving in is what's awful. She feels for the cross at her neck, gently rubs her thumb on the silver.

Each group lingers after dessert. Beth wills them to leave. After they go she still has to scrub. She forgets to smile at table seventeen when serving two *Pezzi di Dolci* mini-deserts—*Torta Cioccolato* and *Torta Limone*. Perhaps that's why the two women don't tip.

She takes her grey coat on the way out, does not pause to button, but does it up as she walks briskly, dodging through crowds to huddle with strangers at the bus stop. She can't fit into the stop to guard herself from the vertical rain, which plays staccato on the shelter—wishes she had her umbrella.

On the bus Beth shares a seat with another woman; happy when this lady quickly departs, leaving her alone, huddled against a steamed-up window.

The woman in the red cardigan watches the woman with the grey coat and roman nose. Her stare is glassy. She imagines home's heat, television and a reserved bar of Galaxy. It's dusk, wet outside and she worries about the small walk from bus stop to the end of the street. Will she be soaked? The woman she's watching answers a mobile.

'Hey... Said to call me Beth... Just been working. God, I feel ... With Henry... Yeah, in an hour... Sure... Thanks. Sounds heavenly.'

She fantasises—imagines undressing this woman, unbuttoning, being undressed; top over head, the fabric momentarily covering the face and holding arms fixed: shared nakedness, the feel of bodies stretched across one another; faint sweat, slightly flabby skin, just detectable bones. Familiar abdominal pains rise to her chest, but she continues. She conceives humiliating, hurting and degrading. Making the other woman weak, weep and pitiful. *Idiot, not like that. Here.* And in reverse, comforting—by turn, tender, cruel.

She's disappointed when the subject of this imaginary flirtation leaves. And alighting too, the woman in the red cardigan is soaked; despite an undignified sprint, sabotaged by high heels, her black leather case held ineffectually over her head to protect tangled hair.

She remembers fairies in the doorway; unsure where she heard the myth, but it captures the sense of crossing worlds. Somewhere to elsewhere, nowhere. *No place, utopia.* It's not just a step from outdoors to in, but slipping realities, different points of view, parallax. That shift in sound as a rippling on glass substitutes for the splash on pavement; in odour, as the scent of lemon greets; in time as her tenses change; here her reality is in past tense, out there it's present.

She slipped off her shoes using only her feet and left them by the door. Picking up the mail, she spied her name on each envelope, 'Ms Mary Pritchard', and climbed stairs to her solitary bedroom. Where she sorted the junk: Co-op membership vouchers; a Barclays letter; her dad's handwriting was on a white envelope she had left on a desk. She garbaged two takeout adverts and a 'Jesus Saves' leaflet.

As always Nadežda had cleaned impeccably—it was a source of pleasure for Mary. Each evening there was the same sensation of liberation and sadness, whereas time was micromanaged at work. Mary wanted to escape to autonomous acts, infinities of freedom she could only acquire when most constrained by procrastination's protests: blogging on office time, snatched reading, mental masturbation on the bus. Lying in bed, she did not feel the embarrassment of sexual imagination, only the emptiness of fatigue and the anticipation of the next day's work. And the next...

She threw her clothes on the floor and put on white silk pyjamas. She went to the kitchen for the Galaxy bar that tasted less and less appealing—it gave her diminishing returns. In the living room she watched television, human sounds, while she ate—and fell asleep to dreams awash with canned laughter and then the reassuring narration of a wildlife show.

Later Mary woke for a bath and bed, but she could not make it so far. Instead, she fastidiously checked emails. Forty-four spam. The obscene: Viagra; Penis Extension; XXX; multiple penetrations. Quixotic: Saudi Arabian Princess needs bank account to secrete money from wicked uncle. Banal: U.S. Government issuing a tax rebate; a free online degree. Someone had tagged her on a Facebook photo, but when she looked it was not a photo of her but a romance movie poster; someone with whom she has had only the briefest contact had added Mary Pritchard along with twenty-six others she did not know. She moved from Facebook to a hyperlinked Watcher article by Caleb Everts about an increase in violence directed at the disabled, perceived benefit scroungers. She remembered meeting Bret Borger and felt culpable. She hated that she could feel remorseful about doing a hack job interview of a murderer. And she hated the part human-interest sob story, part critique of austerity—its clichés and opinions as canned as the television laughter. She knew the writer, Caleb, from the office.

Her mind's ear heard Borger's voice, 'Token of our shared humanity.'

Mary's mind wandered after two paragraphs. She clicked a link on her bookmark toolbar to another news site, Solar, and scanned the opening page. She went to the business section and

looked at stock the market arrows, red and slanted in downward trajectories. Clicking the back button Mary followed her instincts to the politics page; most of the articles were still about that minister's sex life or the other minister's murder. She could not land on the satisfactory page, gratification was always a hyperlink away.

Returning to Facebook, Mary's newsfeed, there were only prosaic status updates about people coping and not coping and managing virtual farms. She streamed through this infoglut and shut off. Five pages down Mary spied an unusual thread from a friend of a friend, and skipping through comments, she read: 'You'd populate this world with scarecrows. Society has to be made from Hamlet's quintessence of dust.'

And the next comment: 'Come again?'

'The loving, hating, moving, eating, sleeping, shitting, farting, dying, fighting, laughing, talking, sulking stuff of your future world—human beings. Can you plan for all that mess?'

She would recall it next morning and again years later, unable to attach it to anything, wondering in what book she read this half-remembered list, incorporating it into an article.

~

Fire balloons from Joshua's mouth and engulfs Ollie. The charred body knocks against a sand-house, thumping an instant web of cracks onto the frail structure. Despite the blow, Ollie rebounds—his faster-than-sight thin-elastic frame emerges behind Joshua to launch an upper-kick for which he has saved on his chakra-bar. The target vanishes in a puff, as he is about to take the knock, only to reappear behind Ollie and deliver the *coup de grâce*.

Ollie's avatar pixilates as it bounces.

'Kay Oh' reads a hyper-masculine Japanese voice as the letters flash a red 'K.O.' on the monitor, 'Perfect Match.'

Ollie sits cramp-tight next to Joshua, blinkered and neck-craned in the dim, televisual light. A blocked-off hallway bedroom-convert, where an IKEA single takes the floor and a faux-wood laminate shelf couches silver, black and grey entertainment boxes above.

Each grips a white console-control, leads wiring them to machines; they reselect fighting avatars from a roster of anime characters. Joshua has won the last twelve, but Ollie does not care about victory; he cares about how time fast-forwards when he sits with his friend and button-mashes. He loves to watch Joshua worry at the game; that familiar body jerks with the screen's events, the intimacy of bumping knobbly shoulders; the eccentric way he moves the controller—steering action that only responds to less kinetic signals. And he loves the enclosed smell, a faint body odour under strawberry shampoo.

Stifled echoes of a door slam and traipsed movements to the kitchen; Joshua's granny's Jamaican accent just distinct; the social services woman's brittle wrangling about 'absenteeism'; the vain fortnightly attendance visit.

Ollie squirms, wanting to be erased, or step into the game world, enveloped beyond discovery by Joshua's fantasy universe, elsewhere. He envies Joshua's faculty for escapist insouciance, but their circumstances are different. Granny says 'learnin ain't fi everyun' and thinks Joshua needs special care after 'all ah fuckups in him life a'ready.' But Ollie's dad is uncaring. And the socials will be rattling the lion's cage, oozing good intention.

'Can I stay?' Ollie asks.

Joshua shrugs, 'Yah, sure man.'

Joshua does not assure Ollie, but while he often tolerates that as an unalterable fact, now he needs hope, fears pent parental rage after its long lull.

'Really sure, right?'

'Pick one a'ready? *Genin.*'

'Sorry, yeah...'



Granny pokes her head out as Ollie manages one of his few wins, breaking Joshua's proud streak; Ollie knows Joshua will blame Granny.

'I nuh mind if yuh play, but growin pickney haffe eat and mi see two here,' she holds out knobbly fingers, 'not eatin all day long. Mi a go fi bingo wi Sarah. Go find cereal pon di kitchen counter... Joshua?' She pauses, elevates her voice, 'Josh?'

'Ya-yeh, old woman. Cereal.'

'Yuh'll get some fi yuh fren?' Another pause. 'Mi say get eem some too.'

'Whar yuh goin at me for? Him not feeble, sha.'

'Watch yuh'self.'

Josh smiles disarmingly. 'How? Mi av no mirror.'

'Don be smart. If di social right and we get eviction what happen to yuh loud mouth den?'

'Wah yuh yammerin, Granny?'

'Som'ting she say, social woman mouthin worse'n yuh.'

'Can I stay?' Ollie put in.

She softened to a purr. 'Course darlin, any time. Gud ave ah proper behave man bout. Dun know where him got it from.' She looks at them with sentimental detachment. 'Both a'right den?'

'Course woman. Get goin a'ready.'

Ollie never adapts to the irreverence; he cannot grasp the mock tones of pseudo-bickering or how domestic quarrels can be humorous. And he struggles to focus on their patois, which Joshua can lessen and intensify on whim.

'Ah likkle devil-child Josh; like yuh mudda.'

'And yuh ah devil-woman, Gran; and mudda marry ah devil-man—ah right devil family den.'

Ollie catches snippets of the radio Joshua's granny leaves permanently on at low volume, the familiar murmur, the stern Queen's English of news bites, 'Borger was sentenced to thirty years

without parole... In other news new mayor George Hendrickson restated opposition to extremist proselytisation, arguing the methods of the group 'Jesus Saves', which has included mass letter campaigning and non-licensed city-centre leafleting, ferments interfaith and denominational tensions while upsetting the business community. The Realist party accused him of caving to anti-Christian pressure groups. His press secretary had this to say... "If you look at what the ecumenical and interfaith organisations are saying..."

'Ay Josh?' asks Ollie, speaking through a mouthful of chocolate and milk, 'Who is the *Hokage* of the Hidden Tower Village?' He piles in another spoon, shovelling as he leans into the foldout table from the stool, balanced on two pieces of plastic furniture.

Joshua eats with poise, filling each spoon of his *Special K*. 'There ah no *Hokage*, that's only fi Konohagakure...' he notes Ollie's disengagement, 'Hidden Leaf Village, man? There's di *Kage*. Each village has *Kage*, not *Hokage*.' Joshua pauses, pleased at any opportunity to teach Ollie the mythos of the anime *Naruto*. 'And we bettah den Konohagakure—though dem be second and our ally fi fightin evil...' He pauses again to masticate. Gulping the contents before continuing, 'yuh read di *Naruto* book ah *lean*? Too many months fi pass.'

Ollie remembers his dad ripping it in two. It was a rare instance in which he'd preferred those blows. 'No... not yet.'

He is committed to buying another, but he had yet to pilfer from his dad's coat while the man was safely alcohol-prone, or to find where he might purchase one. And he lacks Joshua's talent for executing plans.

'Nevah mine that.'

'Kay,' Ollie mutters. Forcing down more food before refilling. Ollie could often get through three bowls to Joshua's one.

'We onto more serious tings. Wah yah want fi fight di evil today?'

Ollie admits he does not know and proceeds to eat.

Only as they finish, Ollie remembers he has not got a reply to his earlier question, ‘so, then, who is the *Hokage*...’

‘*Kage*.’

‘Sorry, who is the *Kage* of the Hidden Village of the Tower?’

A short silence before Joshua shrugs. ‘Dun know.’ Then his eyes widen as his mouth grins, ‘Then that’s wah we av to do. How come Hidden Village of di Tower, di best hidden village, ain’t av no leadah?’

Ollie stares at Joshua.

‘Must be ah *Kage* and we ain’t bothered to report to eem.’

‘Or her,’ interjects Ollie.

‘Eh?’

‘If the Hidden Village of the Leaf has a woman *Hokage*. Maybe the Hidden Village of the Tower...’

Joshua piles the bowls and takes them to the sink. He stops, putting on a show of considering Ollie’s idea. ‘How an idiot *Genin* like yuh’self be right pon di spot?’

‘Really?’

‘Yeh. The *Kage* of di Hidden Village of di Tower must be ah woman. And yuh know som’tin?’

‘What?’

‘Mi av one idea who.’

Joshua elbows Ollie to the door. ‘Ah wan yuh to knock.’

Ollie looks down. ‘Why, you’re the *Jōnin*?’

Joshua looks at Ollie in silence, a mock glare. ‘*Jōnin* give *Genin* orders. Knockin yuh mission.’

Ollie returns silence. He looks wanly to the door. He hears a vacuum on the other side. He knows Joshua does not mind the task; he is showing off his power and Ollie’s dependence. His resentment is stifled by another light shove.

‘Alright, alright,’ beseechs Ollie, more desperate than he wants to appear. And, not taking time to consider, forms a fist and knuckles the wood in three percussions, louder than he intends. He blushes and perspiration shivers his back as they wait. The hoover stops. The door opens and Sarah takes a moment to look a head lower at the children.

‘Ello Mis Grange,’ Joshua greets.

‘What’s this?’ She asks, ‘Bothering me on a weekday; just been telling your ma you ought to be in school. What y’want, kids?’

‘Can we speak to Ella?’

‘What you wanna speak wiv er for? Hope you’re not planning silly goose games; she’s too old to be playin. Keeps herself with er courses, as she should. Not everyun is happy to waste their noggins,’ she pokes at Joshua’s head to emphasise her meaning. ‘And you’re no better young Brown; why’d’ya stop comin for lessons? Music’s serious, but you need to stick.’

‘No’tin ah go fi waste ere,’ Joshua complains as he raps his head, ignoring her comments to Ollie, ‘Mis Grange; I use mi mind fi fight di evil.’

‘I’d bet. I’ll see if she’ll see y’then. But I won’t count on it; you two know Ella’s not a social type.’

‘Yeh, we know what type ah gyal she be,’ Joshua puts in.

Sarah frowns. ‘Oh yeah? What type izzat, if you don’t mind *my* asking?’

‘She’s a *Hokage*.’

‘She’s a what now?’

‘Leadah ah di ninja.’

‘News to me.’ Sarah visibly relaxes. She leaves the door and they hear her in a distant room before she comes back.

‘You two come in and wait for her. She’ll be about ten minutes and she ain’t going out. Understood?’

‘Yeh Miss Grange.’

Ollie nods. He has not spoken a syllable.

A wide red smile and impassive black iris fix on Ollie's still frame—a cat figurine, one ceramic paw raised, the other clutching a coin with inscribed Japanese characters. Joshua kicks at the sofa in a steady der-dum as they wait in the kitsch-clutter of Sarah's living room. Ollie eyes a keyboard with suppressed shame.

'When do you think she's coming?'

'Ninja muss learn patience.'

Ollie thinks Joshua is the less patient, he cannot sit tranquilly.

'Mind not beating the stuffing from my furniture,' Sarah says as she walks in with glasses of coke bubbling on a small Pac Man découpage tray.

'I beg forgiveness, Miss Grange,' Joshua says as he halts his feet, picking up the frenetic beat with fingers on the armrest.

'You're all cheek.' She unloads her tray on the coffee table and walks away shaking her head.

'Thanks, Miss Grange.'

Ollie zones out: *cheek, chin; chin, cheek; chin*. Ollie is practised at ennui. He sips his soda while they wait. Joshua pays no attention to the refreshment.

'Why yuh slurp? It not polite fi ah *Genin*; yuh goin ah be long time makin *Jōnin*.'

'I don't wanna be a *Jōnin*.'

'Wah point fi bein ninja if yuh not soon be *Jōnin*? And wah mi ah train yuh for then?'

Ollie shrugs and is relieved of further interrogation by Ella's appearance. She walks timidly, Joshua takes more time to detect her presence. When he does he prostrates before her feet, muttering for Ollie to do the same. Embarrassed, Ollie joins the game with less zest. Ella stands in front of the two, medusa-petrified until Joshua raises his face and sits *seiza*, knelt with legs tucked beneath thighs, bum poised on V'd heels. Ollie works out the new posture, which Joshua schooled him in months earlier.

‘*Hokage* of di Hidden Village of Tower, mi master, mi request approval fi mi’self and mi *Genin*; we ah be yuh *Jōnin* fi obey yuh every command.’

Ella stays still for a flicker. She has not had a visitor besides Phil for more than a year and does not know how to receive the intrusion.

‘I... I’m sorry. What do you want?’

‘No’tin, we ah offer yuh services as ninja.’

‘I don’t need a “ninja”.’

‘Yuh might think, but people dem always needin ah ninja. Ya just av fi aks and we...’

‘No, I don’t...’

‘Think pon it. We a do any’ting fi yuh. Mi *Genin* cleans and cooks; dirt and hunger evils too.’

Their conversation rests. ‘Could you come back another day when I’ll’ve thought. Alright?’

‘Wuh evah yuh wish is ours ti bring bout... yeh acceptin us then?’

‘Yes... I mean okay. Right now I’m busy though.’

‘Sorry. We leave at once. Thank yuh wise *Hokage* fi yuh instructions.’

And he rises and leaves the room and apartment with Ollie in tow.

Joshua walks speedily with Ollie keeping pace. They shift round a young woman.

‘Wah yuh think, *Genin*? We av ah *Hokage*.’

‘Yeah!’ Ollie assents to Joshua’s enthusiasm, is enthused by his friend.

*Ah!* Ollie starts when a thwack stings his ear; his dad stands over him as Ollie senses the heady bloodrush, the left side of his face burning.

‘What the fook you playin with? You got me in trouble with that social cunt. Why isn’t he at school? Why this? Why fookin that!’

‘Sorry... sorry,’ Ollie whimpers, about to make excuses, placate, as Joshua screams, charges at his friend’s dad and launches a fast kick to the nearest leg; the man withdraws, but Joshua retains momentum, launching at his solar plexus, more kicks, grabbing his arm in a rage.

‘Get the fook off me; get the fook of off me nigger!’

What happens is implausible, but in moments his dad has made a withdrawal and Joshua picks Ollie from the floor, gently standing him up.

The woman they passed asks if they’re okay.

‘Fine, Miss,’ says Joshua, ‘wah ninja and serve Ella, *Hokage* of di Hidden Village of di Tower.’ Joshua is visibly jittery, eyes wide. ‘Fight evil all ah time, don’t we Ollie?’

~

Toby Dee > Utopia Appreciation Society

Toby Dee Why do I feel like Julian West after his nightmare; when he wakes from utopia to find hell? If you think my posts are hyperbolic I suggest research. Start with HSBC’s survey of their expatriate workers asking where they’d raise a family; they rated Britain last after Australia, Singapore, Hong Kong, United Arab Emirates and the United States. We’re bottom of Unicef’s league table of developed countries for childhood wellbeing. We’ve financial, judicial, executive, police and media scandals in succession; amongst the highest income inequality outside places sporting mud-hut impoverishment, residents of which are not irregularly targets for our bombs when they’re not repressed by armies of allied tyrants armed by British manufacturing.

And who gets the blame in this shithole? Immigrants and asylum seekers, unemployed and underemployed kids, the disabled, an imagined legion of feckless scroungers—put all our sins on their backs and merrily whip them into the desert. No wonder we’re half way to prescribing a hundred mill with antidepressants. There are no words for our depravity. And it’s no nightmare, utopia is the dream.

Edited · Like · Comment · Share · 7 · 3 hours ago

Jennifer Lamb Great post, can't stand this government and what they're doing. Need alternative.

3 hours ago · Unlike · 2

Jennifer Lamb Still, this country has to be for the people born here, can't fit everyone. Nothing wrong with immigration, but it needs to be controlled and too much has made a mess of things.

Just saying, still agree :) Down with the Government.

3 hours ago · Unlike · 1

Toby Dee It's not just the government though, they've scanty power anyway. Civil society and the market are sick too. So sick we still need a state to buffer all the madness.

3 hours ago · Like · 1

Ralph Hythloday back in the seventies, when i was just barely a teenager, i lived on a commune for a few months up at the scottish borders with radicals. not really hippy, they called themselves maoists and they definitely had an alternative. and i think things were better. great thing about it is they got all the things cons like those cretins in the pragmatist and realists want. stable community, self-discipline, hard work, no crime. and they did it by kicking out the free-market at the gate, so to speak. went there at a tough time and it really sorted me. gave me a purpose. wish i'd gone back. all gone to pot now.

3 hours ago · Unlike · 4

Ralph Hythloday we shared rooms. no doors, but there were two compounds so people of different sexes slept and washed separately. woke early and everyone of all ages ate together in a hall. that was important, older members would say it was about 'building up shared identity' and stuff. in the mornings there were regular exercises. supposed to train us for the revolution; they



really believed that stuff, about 'the vanguard that could take advantage of troubles in the capitalist order.' i think they were maoist. then everyone would do their work. they had crops and were trying to be self sufficient. they also mended things, wouldn't accept any of that planned obsolescence. if a machine broke you repaired it. simple as. the women and the men did the same jobs. none of that gender role stuff: often men would teach, clean, cook and all that kind of stuff. and just the same women would work.

[3 hours ago](#) · [Unlike](#) · [2](#)

[Ralph Hythloday](#) it got a lot of bad press, but eventually even the local towns could see sense in what this bunch of commies were doing. how good it was to have a group that'd sell them fresh vegetables at real cheap prices and do repairs too. this one local family sent their kids to be taught by us, said the local state schools were woeful. and they were. and everyone was accepted real quick; like i said, it gave me a home when i had nothing. was some trouble though, vandalism. but we had ways of dealing. all we had to do was withdraw our services from the locals and they'd stop all of it as fast they could. like 'wah this' and 'wah that' and then please will you come back and help us you dirty pinkos. it was like the outside was relying on us!

[2 hours ago](#) · [Unlike](#) · [2](#)

[Stuart Lems](#) [Martin Burnsmith](#), think you'll find this interesting.

[2 hours ago](#) · [Like](#) · [1](#)

[Toby Dee](#) We need more projects like that. We need to give people a sense that there are other ways of organising society.

[2 hours ago](#) · [Like](#)

[Sebastian Lyme](#) Great brouhaha. So how'd you organise things?

[2 hours ago](#) · [Like](#)

[Toby Dee](#) Like Gonzalo in *The Tempest*; Plato's Republic; the Christian ideal; communal property, fellowship. The sort of thing Ralph saw first hand.

[2 hours ago](#) · [Like](#)

[Sebastian Lyme](#) You have an ideal about distribution, but you need to sort out the practical and do it better. Do you have concrete suggestions? Growth? Environment? Crime?

[2 hours ago](#) · [Like](#)

[Toby Dee](#) For a better world we'll need to change people.

[2 hours ago](#) · [Like](#)

[Sebastian Lyme](#) So you'd start with education. Re-education?

[2 hours ago](#) · [Like](#)

[Toby Dee](#) Exactly

[2 hours ago](#) · [Like](#)

[Sebastian Lyme](#) And what kind of people would you want?

[2 hours ago](#) · [Like](#)

[Sexy-girl3000](#) Go to my profile's homepage to find many sexy girls of all colors who get up to naughtiness, but accidentally leave their bedroom webcams switched on. See girl on girl action, barely legal, interracial and have fun with largest XXX gallery on web fo...[See More](#)

[2 hours ago](#) · [Like](#)

Sebastian Lyme And what kind of people would you want?

2 hours ago · Like

Sebastian Lyme Sorry, double post. Fucking spambot.

2 hours ago · Like

Sebastian Lyme Assuming people can be changed.

2 hours ago · Like

Sebastian Lyme Which they can't, if you want my preeminent opinion.

2 hours ago · Like

Toby Dee People have done a turnabout before; capitalism changed people with its revolution. Swept away feudalism, leaving only nominal patches. Altered family, work, religion and the distribution of wealth.

2 hours ago · Like

Toby Dee I would want unselfish people.

2 hours ago · Like

Sebastian Lyme That's aptly vague.

2 hours ago · Like

Toby Dee Okay, I would want people who see themselves first as a constituent of society rather than atomistic units; like Donne said, no man an island. People who look outside themselves for

meaning. Whose work is a expression and joy in the vein of Ruskin and Morris, who revile the confines of egotism as per the ideas of Hazlitt. People who eschew petty resentments that fuel xenophobia. A world with people whose concern is first for humanity and second themselves, rather than, at best, the inverse.

[2 hours ago](#) · [Edited](#) · [Like](#)

[Sebastian Lyme](#) My, did you do a humanities course or what! You'd populate this world with scarecrows. Society has to be made from... Hamlet's quintessence of dust.

[2 hours ago](#) · [Like](#)

[Toby Dee](#) Come again?

[2 hours ago](#) · [Like](#)

[Sebastian Lyme](#) The loving, hating, moving, eating, sleeping, shitting, farting, dying, fighting, laughing, talking, sulking stuff of your future world—human beings. Can you plan for all that mess?’

[2 hours ago](#) · [Unlike](#) · [2](#)

[Sebastian Lyme](#) Your world also sounds sentimental. Looking up online, but Ruskin's architectural project, run according to his principles, was disastrous. And egotism can be good; some self-serving, calculated utilitarianism might be exactly what we need to get out of current problems. It is hardly in any person's self-interest to invite environmental destruction, humanitarian catastrophe, global financial ruin. Perhaps the issue is not that people care about themselves more than every one else, but that people care about preserving that status quo more than even themselves?

[2 hours ago](#) · [Like](#)

Sebastian Lyme Do you find that you talk even more like an ass online. Or is that just me?

Probably just me.

2 hours ago · Like

Sebastian Lyme Not that you talk like an ass...

2 hours ago · Like

Toby Dee Perhaps there's an element of truth to that.

1 hours ago · Like

Toby Dee I mean the stuff about egotism.

1 hours ago · Like · 1

Sebastian Lyme In Marxist lingo you'll appreciate, didn't the kinds of superstructure of capitalism arise out of the material conditions of society? You're like the pre-Marxists who wanted to build a new world on clouds out of imaginary people.

1 hours ago · Unlike · 1

Toby Dee gtg, bye.

1 hours ago · Like

~

it's enjambment of a sort, 2 keep writing between 2 diaries in this way. I crave the continuity, the opposite of the death 2 which my bloodless thoughts sink with Parmenidesian disregard 4

commonsense. So will this addition 2 my journals prove swansong or instalment in the saga of Clare Dee, which I have unalterably ruptured by saying ‘yes’?

*The Wed after next*

Encouraged by the diarists I love I press on with scribbled messages 2 an imagined voyeur or future self—Sontag, Barbellion, Woolf urge my vanity. Imagined future archaeologists elevating pitiful writings to the stature of Aurelius’ *Meditations*. And who could be interested in flights from the box I share with T?

He’s been living here 4 a month & it is ≠ how I imagined. I cannot blame my brother 4 the hell we share. Rather than a catalyst 2 rejoin the lifeworld he’s a sometimes irritation and constant focus of obsessive curiosity, but that’s my doing. Or the making of my psychoses. Instead of reaching back 4 our childhood friendship, coconspirators in our alliance against Mum & her slavish pet, Dad, I find myself asking, what drives this sad sample of humanity I invited in from the cold? Who is this strange stranger? & so I study rather than live with. & he has 4gotten me as he never could when I was moulded in2 our parent’s favourite and precocious sister, dance-partner to his meagre role as perpetual infant failure.

What do I now know: you can live confined with another human being, claustrophobic, but hardly *see* your fellow inmate. I wake & fetch a bowl of Nestlé Shreddies from the kitchen; while I breakfast to my morn’s web-streamed distract I hear the sizzle and smell the thick odours of protein as T fries his regular plate of animal-fat & pan-grease. I make a start copyediting; he’s off 2 work with shuffled, wall-muted noises. Then home with a door bang while I’m finishing dinner in my room, web browsing again. During evening I’ll wait 4 the flush, a few moments after, *then* go 2 the toilet. Not to pass him even. On weekends T takes to the living room with his console or he’ll be out @ 1 of his political meetings, but either way I hunker down.

This is ≠ spiteful or even thought through. I guard seclusion like a shy animal. Or something as close as life awakened to the fullness of consciousness can mimic.

*Sat*

Yesterday I studied S's face as he studied mine. We were in the 'conservatory' again, '4 the sun.' He's thin, chapped lips & his skin greys round his watery blue eyes. He hasn't a strand of hair on his head, *alopecia totalis*. Drawn on eyebrows. That makes him distinct, characterful & sexless, an odd bringing together of young & old, wise & innocent. He also has that haggard artist on the cusp of TB look. How Romantic, S qua Byronic hero. Only he doesn't look the part, does he? ≠ Heathcliff or even Rochester.

Sometimes he chews his lip as if in acute concentration, I do not know whether it is genuine or showy. I never know what is done for whose benefit with S; e.g. all the adjustments to my poise, the angle of my head, expression, how I hold myself when I sit. Modelling for him has changed my consciousness of myself from a floating mind tied to a lump of flesh to an alive material permeated by thought.

After he runs his hands over his paint-clothes & his bare head. & then he plods worldless to the shower while I fix kettle & toast with some of his always stocked pâtés. He only ever has coffee. I despise the muck.

Only then I get what *I* came 4. In his living room, he slurps cup after caffeinated cup & I take tentative sips of lemonade. & we talk, talk, talk. I love the opportunity 2B garrulous. I get out a weeks talking. S is like a therapist. *He* knows what he's doing. So slippery, that is, the sort who'd always employ an indefinite article if caught using the word 'truth'.

But I am happy.

≠ expectation of sex; our meetings are pornographies without erotics.

& like a kid I don't want to leave; I want to live with S, not T.

If I did would it last?

*Sat afternoon*

I heard T mention me on the phone as I ~~walked past~~ stopped @ his door. Or I think I did. & I think he was talking 2 Dad. Is he here to spy 4 them? Or am I the eavesdropping spy?

*Mon*

News from T—irony 4 us 2 talk right after I wrote how little we encounter. By dint of insufficient tenancy, there's plans 2 pack up the building—move everyone out. Spent the ~~whole~~ rest of the day staring at PC, vainly willing work.

~~*Later Mon*~~

~~—Today is a perfect nothing.~~

*Wed*

While I was getting breakfast 2day T decided to stage an American style intervention. He walked in2 the kitch all cagey as when he was still just a brat of 6 & made some mess he hoped I'd help hide from Mum's omniscience, all gaze down & stupid solemn.

Asked if I was having a good day, I shrugged him off. Asked if everything was alright with me, 'is everything okay in your life, sis'. I mean, 'sis' for f. sake, like we ever talked 2 each other in pet names be4.

He went on about how I don't eat enough or the right kinds of enough or something. He accused me of being a recluse. I mentioned S—I hate mentioning S to my family, their intrusion sullies—and he said that hardly counts. Paused. Started asking what sort of a 'relationship' I had anyway.

So I gave him some sarcasm in retort, 'I'm fine, bro' & he bloody exploded in therapeutic giddiness. 'That's good, cos we're all worried about you.' & then he went on & on & on some more. Can't remember ½ of it, but it was a proverbial deluge of saccharine, only ended by my perfunctory 'Will you shut up' and a silly exit that had all the forced melodrama of a picaresque, right down to the slammed door.



I cannot renounce solitude without giving up dignity.

*Later Wed*

Could hear him through our room's wall talking 2 some<sup>1</sup> on the phone. Bet it was Dad and I bet it is not any ideas of reference on my part 2 wager their topic was *moi*. & more than that I bet after T communicates his progress with me 2 Dad, Dad communicates it up the chain of command 2 Mum. It's sad what's happened 2 my sibling, sucked in<sup>2</sup> our parent's world of faked misgivings.

*Fri*

E. M. 4ster says we ought 2 only connect. E. M. Cioran that we should preserve our solitude. Today, impatient 4 my visit 2 S later, I'm on the side of the 4mer E. M. Yesterday, feeling wretched at the possibility of being moved out & T's prying, I was on the side of the latter.

Surely every<sup>1</sup> needs a Settembrini & a Naphta, a 4ster & Cioran?

*Sat vis-à-vis Fri*

Was that disappointing or was I in a mood 2B disappointed? I wanted so much from him after my last days with T, but S dominated the conversation 2 an unusual extent, barely drank his coffee and said I was wrong 5X. & so I came back without hope 2 an apartment in which I am now being monitored like a mental patient.

I wasn't happy living alone, I am not happy living with T. Perhaps happiness is the wrong aim?

Irrespective, I ambivalently dread next week; without S's escape I shall despair & off myself in some spectacular way—if I am going to commit suicide I may as well do it as protest, self-immolation outside of parliament? Anyway, with so much resting on next week it is even surer to

be like this 1. Had it not been 4 an encounter with a violent display in the flats I should be wretched, but it livened me be4 I ruined it by thinking too much.

*Late Sat*

About 'the encounter'; those kids were playing, all pantoed in costume. & the redhead's father came out of nowhere & wacked him one round the ear; knocked the mite on the floor. I was appalled, but my usual cowardly self. I wanted 2 scream & hurt him, but it's all sentiment. If I could make a difference I'd be helping just because I happened 2B there; if you can't help generally, helping at all is a pissant indulgence.

Guess who wasn't a coward though? Guess who didn't rationalise? The kid went on a beautiful berserker rage: kicking, screaming, punching. & I saw terror in this grown man's pasty, podgy face with his bent nose. He was shouting 'Get the f. off me, get the f. of off me!' as he beat his retreat. It was sort of glorious to witness the rebellion against the iniquity of size.

Nevertheless now that the aesthetics of it fade I wonder @ consequences.

Don't parents understand when they scream and hurt their children they debase themselves 1st? What's uglier than the large intimidating the small?

*Sun morning, from bed*

Fatigue & com4t hold the body down; there's nihilism in recumbence.

Reading a book on botany. More specifically it was about carnivorous plants. The *cephalotus* = stuff of nightmares.

*Still from bed*

I'm a fraud; I want to build a better world, to be a part of liberating humanity. Secretly I am a malcontent who uses ideals as an excuse. & I never *do* anything. Even climb out of this f. bed.

That child has the moxie to attack a grown man; how do I compare? And I don't even feel as though I have something to lose + protect—perhaps you need something real 2 risk 2 want to take risks.

*Thu night*

Got that *Bugsy Malone* song stuck, the 1 about tomorrows. Still, am I happier now, still waiting 4 the possibility of happiness, or then, when I am supposed to have it 1st hand? Is happiness always a 2ndhand phenomenon?

*Fri night*

S cancelled & I know 4 sure that the flat is to be demolished & every1 moved. Can't take this level of insecurity. Life's compensations aren't enough.

*Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'intrate*

Wounds can be as instructive as words.

*Wed*

Dad came round. He looked awful; he's put on a paunch and it hangs like a toad's potbelly, he's unshaven, his eyes are bloodshot and to hear him breathe is something pitiful. He couldn't even dress clean; his t-shirt had a yellow stain only half tucked in that old grey jacket. Dad hasn't visited in maybe 6 months now and to see the change was a horror.

Said he wants 2 talk. All serious, in Mum's normal manner—vices rub off. T was hovering & had his eagerness about him. I evaded for ½ an hr & then he left with a condemned man's bearing. But ≠ b4 saying that I needed 2 look on the bright side. Real *Monty Python*, but with no irony. Their commonplaces, urgh; it's a perfect coming together of the aesthetically and morally hideous. I remember when Mum dragged us all to Church and the way all the injunctions there

rubbed hypocritical against our home life. And here I am, my family still full of self-righteous bunk.

I have done every exercise recommended by the ~~fucking~~ platitudinals anyway, dispensaries of pleasant wisdom. Gratitude list? Check. Not the point; it's not an enjoyed experience's deficiency, but a capacity to enjoy that's the prob. & cataloguing my failures was no cure. How about helping someone? Check. & I succeeded, but no elation & I felt guilt 4 my selfish motives.

Sometimes life's just shit 4 no reason & with no solution *a la* Job, but the insoluble is anathema in an age that has made the tragic taboo or at least covered it in the maudlin.

F. them, their lives aren't good, they're just better @ faking. Their lack of scope makes it easier for them to wrap their lives in 2ndhand illusions. I'm not in Sunday school anymore. And I don't have to listen.

*Fri*

1 thing I like about T staying, nothing wakes me like the smell of a fry up. If I ate the stuff day after day I'd feel putrefying & I'd probably reek 2, but all those sizzling fats is better than any alarm.

*Procrastinating Fri morning*

In his *The Marriage of Heaven & Hell* Blake writes, 'the notion that man has a body distinct from his soul is to be expunged', which he works out, '4 that call'd Body is a portion of Soul discern'd by the 5 Senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age.' Perhaps he lays ground 4 Merleau-Ponty's dialectical embodiment—although I'm sure there's no direct link between proto-Romantic and phenomenologist.

Still, I want to say philosophers don't become poets, they rediscover poetry. 4 us Romantics, outside of poetry, Wittgenstein & Heidegger understood best. Boethius weds the 2 at scholasticism's dawn & Parmenides makes no distinction when he 4ms philosophy from

unbound thought. Plato's ambivalence is poetic & Socrates & the Cynics make quietist art of praxis—the latter in a sacrificial event that acts out an idea, the 4mer in a more embodied way.

Philosophy always strives to show, to make up 4 its insubstantiality.

Thoughts are 4 another time. Seeing S shortly. Eager as always, but ruining it already worrying whether it will match expectations.

Don't want 2 work until it's time 2 go, but if I did it'd augur better for 2night.

*Fri night*

Always come back manic with ideas; there's *my* erotics (maybe S's too). Feel like I have died & gone to Plato's pale heaven, home from home.

*Sat*

Saved. S was brilliant, less *de haut en bas* than normal. Listened like a champion of Late Stoa as I whined about my horrid week with T & set me on more diverting thoughts. His painting was perfect 2. I look downcast & thoughtful, like a Dürer.

He kept prodding, 'How'd you like it?'

'It's superb. Fantastic.'

'No, spare me your empty adjectives & tell me what *you* think,' he demanded, in his usual conceited pushiness.

'Do I look so solemn?'

'You think my painting is solemn then? Severe?'

'Yes, that's not what you want? I like the severity; it makes me more important.'

He shook his head. 'I don't know what I want, but it's not really v. important. As long as I can shift the work then that's fine & all.' As if S needed to sell paintings.

We both looked a while longer and laughed. S is the only one I have shared time with whom I can also laugh with spontaneously & not need 2 explain afterwards.

He reflected, 'You do look solemn. Yes, both you & the painting. I have caught your... mood.'

While he talked he looked at the painting, as though addressing it rather than I. & although I loved it after all these weeks & always looked 4ward to the start of the next—eager 4 each completion as though a strand in 4 some greater, metaphysical *finis*—I felt relief when we changed rooms & he no longer addressed me through his painting or talked work, which is to say talked ego.

When I think back, he is also always jubilant after completing a project. & his vitality is as infectious as his sometimes moroseness. I'm so at the whim of how he feels it scares me; this has always been the way though. I sponge the emotions of my surroundings, which is why home became a hell 4 me in those last years. How different is T & S & my mum & dad & everyone else able to live a life separate from context. 2B happy amidst despair & despairing amidst happiness. I would love that simple joy of shared solipsism.

Unable to find it, I have retreated 2 a more extreme loneliness—not the loneliness of not connecting, but further than that, of not being available.

*Sat evening*

~~Infinity is not God's proof *a la* Descartes, but the ungraspable trace in the creative nothing of a nothing ever-be4 that anticipates a nothing ever-after.~~

Sometimes I write like a pseudo-Cioran.

*Mon*

Already starting to stray from this... what is it even? Not an account of life; what life is there to account 4? So what? Confession? *Consolatio*? Philosophy? Vanity! Like the Bible says.

*Later*

Is there any point continuing? I just read what I have written so far & only just convinced myself not to rip out the pages. I would like to burn, watch it crisp and smoulder in a gesture. Don't have a fireplace though and I worry about setting a fire in the kitchen—anyway that option doesn't seem quite so Romantic.

Perhaps I should love this writing not despite its failings, but because of its messiness. I could love it as an unselfconscious brat loves a silly scrapbook & not as S loves his painting. I can't produce perfection, so why am I 1 of those dissatisfied with anything but? Why can't I be 1 of the chaotics who thrive under the Schumpeterian conditions of capitalist creative destruction?

God, I've never even read Schumpeter.

*Tue*

T says he's going to fight the block eviction with his friends. He's working hard. Too much braggadocio, but I admire him. Is it naïveté that sustains him or the reverse? Do I hate out of ignorance?

If I were a political ruler, I'd be a monster. When I think of people like Robespierre & Savonarola, I'm filled with an envious mix of fanatical admiration & disgust. These two were driven by a need to purge the world of all they anathema, but in that insane drive too active, too healthy, too involved. They betray their austere personas.

*Tue afternoon*

Spent the day talking with T over hot chocolate and biscuits. It was grossly nostalgic and I know it won't last, but right now I love him and it bodes better for *moi* too; like group talk therapy or something. And talking about talking, T's not always such an idiot. I *do* sort of admire him, like I said yesterday. And we even fleshed out abstract thought.

When someone asserts the chestnut that evil is necessary 4 good, Aquinas' shadow, the kernel of truth in this claim is 2B accepted. Nevertheless the conclusion is not that evil B permitted, but

good demands its nullification *qua* redundancy. There is no ‘good’ in utopia, no ‘utopia’ in utopia, the only state in which ‘utopia’ is neither conceivable nor prescribes its own conception against repression. That is why ‘utopia’ is always an ideal in dystopia and why the worst dystopia is one in which ‘utopia’ is actively unthought.

*Mon*

Now I’m spending more time out of my room, albeit still not out of the house. T keeps adjusting this picture on my living room wall. A gift from Mum—why did I hang it @ all? Stupid, cheap image of a horse in a field, like something you might see in a hotel.

Every time he comes back here he slams the door & the picture slants. & then every morning of the next day he adjusts it straight. Yesterday I made a change & now, instead of 1 hook with a string it has 2 catches that lock on 2 2 nails; took a while, but I got it so that it would not misalign. & I watched him as he went 2 adjust in his normal way. He looked confused & then he put an arm 2 either side & leaned in 2 it and was silent. & I just watched like an idiot. I don’t even know if I’d meant to upset him.

& when I said ‘are you okay?’ I realised he was quietly sobbing.

‘Are you alright?’ I pushed.

& he told me he’d been fired 4 nothing, that he had ≠ job anymore & wouldn’t be likely 2 get another.

~

## The Minister’s Assassin

Exclusive with murderer Bret Borger by Mary Pritchard



Two months ago a crime shocked our nation. Bret Borger was arrested at his garage. He kidnapped Gregory Simmons, Minister for Work and Pensions, then beat and tortured the man—inducing death from trauma to the head. Less known than these macabre details are Borger’s motives.

Madness, politics or grudge? So far it has all been speculation. Now, for the first time, the public is given access.

As I walk into the interrogation-room, I see a greying man in grey overalls. Late thirties, slim build, slouched. He doesn’t look up. And I have to tease him from a no-yes-no rigmarole by which he evades answering.

Nothing makes him ease into the process, so I jettison the mood-setters and proceed to what brought me, ‘Do you regret what you did?’

‘No.’

‘Why?’

He retreats with a shrug. I try another angle, reminding him he had been heard saying, ‘He got what he deserved.’ After

getting caught. A half an hour later this unravels him. He takes my gaze, green eyes fixed, and pours out a surreal monologue—separating his words into syllables like police and sit-u-a-tion:

‘He hated me,’ he bluntly begins.

I am about to probe, expecting little more, when, ‘I did nothing, didn’t know him and he... didn’t know me, right? Every time I put the telly or radio on, I was juddered. My hand trembled at his voice—nasal, sneering. And he’d go on about “people like me”.’ Borger pauses, as if for effect, “‘People. Like. Me.” How dare we exist?’ Borger lists a catalogue of everything the former Minister had accused him: that he is bone-idle, living a worthless life, greedy. That he sleeps in every morning while his neighbours go to work.

‘First I was reasonable,’ Borger pleads, ‘I argued. In my head, yes, but I sent letters too. I challenged his appraisal of the situation. It’s easy to get the wrong end of the stick, ain’t it?’ Each time Borger is about to discuss his crime he goes on a tangent. At

this point he explains at length how he misjudged a loud neighbour, nearly called the police, but thought better and befriended the man instead.

‘So, to get back to what we’re talking about, in my letters I told all about my leg, the minister that is, how it acts up if I’m not finicky. And my back. How when I last had a job I was fired after I cried to a customer.’ I allow Borger to continue his litany of excuses before steering him back, ‘I told him I wasn’t “lazy,” I didn’t have enough to be “greedy” even with what the government gave. I’d not want much, just not to be harassed. To feel I could step out my house. After I sent letters I’d wait for something back from him, that letter that’d give me what I needed. Assurances, a token of our shared humanity—that’s all I wanted. Like that, by the way? “Token of our shared humanity”? Quotable?’

For a while Borger sits with me in silence. I know to let him recover.

‘Anyway, their letter wasn’t what I hoped.’ He shrugs again and I see he is closing up.

‘How so?’

‘Worse than worst imaginings. The most horrible thing *he* could’ve sent. Didn’t mention my complaint; said I’d be prosecuted if I send threatening mail. Threatening! Never wrote a threat in my life. If I’d written that I’d hurt the man they’d prosecuted me before. And anyway, after what I did, how come they haven’t released my “threats” to police or the media? That’d be juicy, right?’

I nod. I do not want to break his flow.

‘Well, I thought long. And then I stopped feeling scared. I had a few drinks and I put on the telly. He wasn’t on of course. Very rarely was, but I put on the news and waited.’

He drifts off again. This time I think he is asleep before he violently shakes his head. ‘And then I saw him. Not just saw him in the normal way, right? I *really* saw him. It was deeper than lovers looking at each other. I’d see the heart of him. And how rotten it was...’

‘And?’ I ask.

‘And I wasn’t scared. I was enraged.  
He’d made it out I was a boil on the world,  
but it was *him*. He was, what you call it?  
Projecting. *He* was the festering wound and  
I was not worthless. They say that everyone  
needs purpose, don’t they? Way I saw it... I  
see it, when you spy a monster you run or  
face the beast; every child knows, right?  
Well, I’d been running up to then.’

His stare returns to the aluminium table.  
His shoulders rise as he slouches. The  
silence is part of his performance. I allow  
the pause to linger before asking. ‘What do  
you have to say to his family?’

He shakes twice.

‘Nothing?’

No response.

‘Do you have anything else to say?’

‘No. I’ve said everything needs saying.’

~

With his right index Phil rubs his eyes, watching phosphene patterns of nonexistent light behind his closed lids. He stretches his legs, looks out at over-road apartments. He’s too far to play *Rear Window* voyeur with details of other peoples’ interiors. He clasps his mouth and slowly slides his hand off; feels the bristly blubber of chins and smells the odour of wines, spirits and liqueurs rebound from his palm’s flesh. He knocks a fag from a packet in his pocket and lights with a match from a box atop a pile of second-hand paperbacks on a bed stand—nestled between its natural partner and his desk. He eyes the lamp with the crucifix necklace hung from it, his Grandma’s hand-me-down token of forgotten faith.

He lets the tobacco smoke calm. And as he watches dancing fumes he twists his watch so its face rests upside down on his wrist, pulling it up to his ear by clasping his neck; he can demarcate the noise the instrument makes in his head with the onomatopoeias tick-tick-tick-tick-tick-tick or tick-tock-tick-tock—the latter somehow slower.

He remains for a suspended time. ‘A time away from time,’ he says to himself, savouring that end-of-the-day segment that eschews routine measurements. ‘Family,’ he puffs out, mindful of his niece and sister, poor Sarah. Tomorrow intrudes; he sets the alarm to counteract the hangover’s stupor.

When a mechanical uproar wakes him to a dull sobering pain, it is not the frequent sharp pig squeals of a clock, but the lingering old school rings of a telephone.

‘Hello, Sis... you’re the only person who’d’a thought to phone at... never had that... they’ve gotta make do in India too... accents aren’t... cos I’ve an ache in the occipital and feel like being contrarian... no, hadn’t heard about it... I can find you another ... I just think it’ll be a waste ... yeah, course I’ll go to the meeting... no it’s nothing to do wiv Peter, I haven’t even seen him... that’s right, haven’t seen him “yet”... picking him up later... course “today”... no, I won’t mention you... no, I don’t think you’re a bad mum... listen... no, I won’t bring him to the meeting, could you imagine Peter wiv a buncha do goody activists... listen... yes, right, but listen... I’ve gotta go, Sis... sorry... yeah, I’ll get back to ya... thanks... yeah bye... have a good...’ he pauses mid-sentence, puts down the BT silver phone on its battery cradle. ‘Have a good day too.’

He shuffles from bed and strews yesterday’s clothes through his room as he approaches the shower. After an old pizza and hair of the dog breakfast of Aldi’s best blended red he delicately leaves; as he does every morning by way of apology for the previous night’s drunken slamming.

At the threshold of the Youth Rehabilitation Centre he smokes three between pestering the young receptionist in one of those humiliating orange jumpsuits, which matches the colour of her spray tan. She has luminescent green hair, pink lips and rainbow nails; *the girl is a technicolour marvel.*

‘Sorry, you can’t smoke,’ she says after telling him he will need to wait longer. ‘Fucking rules is all.’

Phil gives her his toothiest smile, ‘Guess the puritans here must be sticklers?’

‘Y’what? Oh yeah, a right laugh. Wish I’d’a bloody smoke. Getta right screaming if they saw. Getta right screaming anyway. Can’t do anythink,’ she indicates with a head gesture to CCTV trained on her station.

‘They monitor all the time?’

‘Yeah, buncha pervs if you ask. I mean, they don’t, like, really. Not “all the time.” But can’t tell, can you?’

‘A Panopticon.’

‘Oh yeah, what’s that?’

‘Big Brother,’ he says, ‘but don’t worry, Eckleburg is blind.’ He parted from her for another fag.

‘I’ll call through when they’re ready.’

‘Cheers, love.’

Relieved to be in his pub, Phil takes a slurp.

‘Saw you comin outta the five pound psychic like you were *top-o-the-world*,’ the phrase is comically exaggerated. ‘You believe in psychics? Educated man like you?’ The man speaks with a subdued Dublin accent.

Phil shrugs and addresses a different subject. ‘These places are much of a muchness now you can’t smoke.’

‘Better for non-smokers.’

He slurps again.

‘So what the ol-medium tell? Got a week? Will you win the bleedin lottery? Due a good time or down in the dumps? What’s lady luck in store?’

‘Doesn’t matter, don’t put stock in ramblings.’

‘So why’d ya go then?’

‘Kill for a fag.’

‘Why’d you go?’

Phil shrugs again. Takes another gulp of bitter.

‘C’mon, you’re too smart to be superstitious. Or you fancy yourself so. What’d she tell ya?’

Phil finishes his drink. ‘Okeydoke. I gave her a fiver and sat in her padded armchair.’ He shuffles in mime. ‘She takes my hands...’ Phil holds his friend’s hands, who snaps them back over the table, ‘...stares at my eyes and tries harder than anyone to bullshit, for a little. Tells me I’ll ripen, find fortune, y’know. That’s why anyone goes to the five-pound psychic. People aren’t so dumb as you’d think. Only nobody, but nobody, doesn’t like a fine woman’s bullshitting once in a while.’

The man digs his index into a nostril, trying to be subtle by yawning. He wipes his hand on his trousers. ‘Like prostitution.’

‘Not at all *like* prostitution. Oh, after a drink is when I want a fag the most. And I know no one gives a flying shag. Not in this dive.’ Phil’s outstretched arms further overstate his bulk.

‘Hey, watch what you say about *The Queen*. Fine establishment. And anyway, how’s it not like prostitution.’

‘It *is* prostitution. No simile. I pay for an erotic service. Don’t need illusions.’ Phil raises himself slowly. ‘Join in a smoke?’

‘Know I don’t.’

‘You’ll get some of mine second-hand wivout having t’puff or pay, so much the better for you.’

‘An the worse for my lungs...’

Phil collapses back on to the seat as the other man obstinately refuses to budge.

‘Meetcha nephew earlier? Sarah said you were planning to. Said you’re on a mission to help the lad. Good of you, but why waste your time? The Almighty couldn’t sort a mess like Pete.’

‘You saw Sarah?’

‘This morning, still owed that tenner.’

‘You went to her home to return a tenner from a fortnight?’

‘Always pay debts, why I’m “trustworthy Seán.” Social services don’t hire just anyone, you know?’

“Steal your last penny Seán” is how I’d put it, more like. Whoever thought it was a good idea to put you in charge of children was barmy.’

‘Didja see Peter? Can’t answer a bloody question.’

‘I don’t come to be interrogated about family or the five pound bloody psychic, but to get pissed out of my head with the least imaginative man in this loquacious city. You’re not holding your end, Seán.’

‘I wanna know.’ Seán smiles and wriggles more comfortably into his seat. ‘I’m feeling inquisitive, right, mate?’

‘Yeah I saw Peter. He’ll live at mine.’

‘He’ll love that.’

‘He can love it, hate it or take it to Jupiter on the back of a magic unicorn, after last time I’m all he’s left.’

‘You trust him?’

‘Trust has nuttin to do wiv it. Peter’s family, it’s how it is.’

‘Yeah, but...’

‘No, that’s how it is; what else is unconditional?’

‘If he robs you blind?’

Phil laughs. ‘He’s welcome to pawn my shit. I’m sure he could afford premium meth on the super-profits.’

Seán laughs too.

‘And why stop there?’ Phil goes on, ‘If Peter’s thinking real big, I mean in the entrepreneurial spirit of this nation of shopkeepers, and nabs from my neighbour’s too, well they’re as rich as Croesus; he might’ve enough to get drunk during happy hour if he finds a shithole cheaper than *The Queen*.’

‘Keep bad talking the love of my life we’ll’ve to take this outside.’

‘Pistols at dawn?’

‘Rapiers are my forté.’

‘You in to rape, Seán?’ says a small old man in biker leather, helmet grasped beneath arm, hair hidden by cap. He emits a single, sharp and breathy laugh at his deliberate mishearing.

‘Fuck off, Colin.’

‘Merry day to you as well,’ says Colin, ‘and how’s life treating you, my fat bastard?’ he adds as he pulls up a chair to their corner table.

‘Grand as always. All things in moderation...’

‘Especially moderation,’ they sing out together.

The landing and living room lights are off; a telly lies inert in its corner facing the two-people ripped-up brown-leather settee. The only noise is the fridge hum that has been too voluble for a month—an inarticulate *ummm* and irregular splutters. An alcohol sweet sterility weighs on the air. And Phil catches a wheezing from the bathroom.

He knuckles on the door, ‘In there, Pete?’

There’s a shambling sound of someone sitting up and then a plaintively whispered, ‘Help.’

Phil tries to open, but the handle is jarred, door locked. ‘You’ve got the catch on lad. What’s goin’ on?’

This time a louder, demanding ‘help’ and the clamour of more confused movements before the door click. Phil sees the crimson spill into a thin vermilion on the white floor, pouring from



an inexpert gash in Peter's right arm, not covered by the dirty white vest. Pete's grasping his injury with his left hand, his skinhead bent.

'Jesus fucking Christ, Pete.' Phil says as he runs off, grabs his bedding, comes back and wraps it round his nephew, tightening it on the wound, helping him hobble to the sofa while Peter repeats between stretorous gasps, 'I'm a dad. I'mma fucking daddy, Phil.'

Phil runs back and dials nine-nine-nine on the BT silver phone.

~

Minutes of the meeting of

Helots

Present: Maurice Rathbone, India Dwight, Toby Dee, Mike Wilmot, Alice Workman, Harry Jenkins, Samantha Hamilton, David Klein, Roger Middleton, Stuart Lems, Georgia Ramsbottom, Dean Parker, Reg Lumsden, Nick Wright, Donald Partridge, Catherine Smythe-Halls, Andrew Wakesfield, Jeremy Knight, Edward Croft, David Somerville, Crispin Gorman, Emily Bains.

In attendance: Antony Brown, Joshua Brown, Clare Dee, Philip Grange, Sarah Grange, Ella Grange, Peter Grange, Ollie Urquhart (child), Phoebe Urquhart, Elsie Littleton, Sadie Downs, Ted Downs, Chelsea Downs, Gwen Jones, Rose Sharpe, Lilly Caldwell, Karen Kitteridge, Ron Kitteridge, Billy Everton, Sanjit Singh, Sunita Kaur, Simon Cheung, Lucy Cheung, Paul Cheung, Ramesh Kumar, Aasif Fawaz, Dick Eliot, Sam Goldsmith.

Apologies:

The minutes of the previous meeting were noted and read. Alice Workman proposed and Harry Jenkins seconded that these were a correct record of the meeting. Carried unanimously.

Agenda:

Item 1: Occupation of tower block — against planned eviction by bourgeois police at the instigation of Mayor George Hendrickson and of the capitalist Pragmatist Party.

The Chairperson, Maurice Rathbone, indicated that this meeting was called as an extraordinary meeting in response to the planned demolition and consequent eviction of tower block —. He outlined that there would only be one item on the agenda and welcomed those attending non-members who had found time from their busy lives to participate. He informed the meeting that Helots spokeswoman, Alice Workman, had prepared a statement for non-members and tower block residents. The floor would then be open to questions before putting the measure to the vote, which would have to be carried by the majority of everyone present and the majority of members and non-members. The written statement has been included as an appendix to these minutes.

The first question was from Edward Croft about whether the movement could meet the costs involved in the operation. Helots' treasurer, Samantha Hamilton, replied that a review would be necessary, but not all costs could be anticipated. The Chairperson added that with a campaign of this scale some practicalities had to be taken as a leap of faith.

Next Mr Donald Partridge took issue with Ms. Workman's statement that the residents are impoverished. He objected that the residents are not 'chavs' and 'starving Africans'. This led to

heated discussion when other residents objected that Mr Partridge's language was derogatory and racist. After five minutes the Chairperson restored order to the proceedings.

An attending child, Joshua Urquhart, asked when they would have to move and the Chairperson responded that he hoped they would not. Master Urquhart claimed that he is a ninja and offered help protecting the building. The Chairperson thanked him and said he would make an excellent comrade.

Mr Sanjit Singh asked what risks would be involved. The Chairperson admitted he could not know, but if the bourgeois courts refused to see the justice of the residents' cause, city police would be pressed to forcibly evict. Nevertheless, they would have forewarning. In that event, Helots would find temporary accommodation. Roger Middleton objected to using emergency funds, but the Chairperson rebuked him for his lack of commitment and noted that the homelessness of these families would constitute an emergency.

There followed more questions about money. Residents worried about keeping their work and benefits during the occupation, members were uneasy about funds. The Chairperson tried to appease everyone, but many expressed anxiety. Catherine Smythe-Halls moved that the motion to occupy be put to the vote, but the Chairperson asked if there were any more questions first.

Ms Lilly Caldwell asked about the possibility that the media would be interested. The Chairperson replied that he hoped they would, as this would be the key to the success of the campaign. Mr Partridge began a long statement about the evils of communism, the rejection of democracy and the spectre of twentieth-century utopians. After allowing him the floor for four minutes, the Chairperson called the meeting to order and asked if Mr Partridge had anything constructive to contribute to the matter in hand. He replied that he was making a constructive

contribution. The Chairperson thanked him for his thoughts and replied with a summary of differences between Helots and Stalinism. Mr Partridge commenced an objection, but was asked by the Chairperson to conclude and give the floor to others wishing to speak. When Mr Partridge refused, the Chairperson asked him to desist or leave. Several other residents supported Mr Partridge with claims that this was their home and they would not take orders from Communists. Eventually the Chairperson restored order by concluding that the only option was to move to the vote. He expressed the hope that people would not be swayed by prejudicial opinions.

A vote was taken.

The motion was carried on a majority of members and residents.

Mr Partridge objected that since the vote was close Helots did not have a mandate. The Chairperson replied that he had understood Mr X to be a supporter of democracy. The argument had continued a while before the Chairperson called a halt to the meeting.

Secretary: India Dwight

Appendix to the Minutes of the meeting of Helots On — Wed. September regarding the occupation of tower block against planned eviction by bourgeois police at the instigation of Mayor George Hendrickson and of the capitalist Pragmatist Party.

Statement read by Alice Workman

Comrades and those gathered to protect their homes; we are convened by awful, if unsurprising, circumstances. I say ‘unsurprising’ not to diminish your shock, but to emphasise the ordinariness of this extraordinary callousness. We’ve few friends. Only those whose awareness stretches

beyond corporate rags and their liberal cousins; even the Realists, affecting a veneer of the left, merely pose as an opposition to capitalism. Truthfully politics begins where Parliament is quiet. And in this building we've a prime example of their culpable silence.

While their pretence of compassion fools the complacent, it does not fool you; not when purveyors of cheap lies turn you out for 'redevelopment'. And what is veiled by that euphemism? Nothing more or less than classist gentrification. That is, where you established roots and built families, they house bankers, rich students and yuppies in opulence—apartments many times the size of those into which you squeeze extended families, will be bachelor pads for single men. They call it progress. And when your poverty is less visible, removed from city centres, they will congratulate themselves on their 'regeneration.'

Yes, we do need rejuvenation. Yes, we do need progress. We need rejuvenation to ease the burden of deprivation. We need true progress, a socialist transformation of society, and not more bourgeois plundering. We need the truth of revolutionary action and not the lie of Capitalo-Parliamentarianism. Proper housing for working people and the protection of the State; not against the bogeymen invented by media (immigrants and the unemployed), but inequality, poor education, too many children sharing a room, parents skipping meals to provide for their families, pensioners abandoned.

Mr Hendrickson was elected under the promise he would address a growing disparity between rich and poor. And in a sense he has done. He has satiated middle class discomfort about inequality through a programme to cleanse the poor rather than abolish poverty. Your eviction, an eviction in contradiction with the Pragmatist's much-vaunted 'fairness', is the fulfilment of Hendrickson's promise to his own. Helots also make a promise, but one that is not duplicitous. We promise to promote your interests, the interests of the Proletariat. We promise to protect

your homes, but only with your backing; not the lame consent of political representation, but in solidarity. We are aware that you are a diverse group with individual interests and beliefs. We ask that you put aside reservations. We ask that you put aside personal interests. And in return we promise more ambitious interests: those of all of us, unified.

~

My head rests. I feel the weight on my arms, which relax on the wooden table. I stare at the empty bottle with its Merlot sticker peeling off—a yellow light flickers hypnotic on the rounded surface of the opaque green glass. Behind this relic of dinner my father sits. I look at him while keeping my sight on the wine; I make him go out of focus. His legs are spread, head tilted, a cigarette resolutely perpendicular like a proud chimney. I dim the lights before serving tagliatelle with truffle purée and wild mushrooms. A blaze of lightening provides contrast. His stubbled face is brought into relief. We are both ready for the ‘sky’s hungry rumble’—that’s what he called thunder when I was a girl sitting with him to the accompaniment of his favourite Bogart’s at two in the morning.

While upstairs Mum died by increments.

With him I can sit hours in silence. He can be like this with anyone; people find him as impenetrable as the Merlot, as empty, but I know his thoughts. He’s the only person with whom I can be silent and *not* alone.

Mr Pritchard, journalist pioneer, widower and father of the disappointment: prodigal-child cum hack-reporter. My own career an inverted mockery of his successes and, ‘not what I planned for you, darling. You really should have furthered your music. You were a gifted harpist. I wish you still played... that’s your choice. And you’re like your granddad and me; have to try what you’re no good at. Keep trying until.... And you will be. I’m sure.’ That’s what he said half a decade ago, but we have not talked shop for the last half of that period. We only sit. Anything

we might say hurts. To remind him of my mother, his Henrietta, unmentioned in more than a decade; to remind me of my failures. But we sit well. These shared Saturday's punctuate monotony.

He takes his cigarette out of his mouth, stubs it in the ashtray I bring out each week. I don't smoke, but not out of health concerns like colleagues. I don't smoke because tobacco is his—it *is* him.

'Your interview with that Bret Borger fellow.'

'Hmm. It didn't go well.'

'A good journalist never thinks so, but I think that was a good little piece. Quite a scoop for *The Watcher*. If you think about it.'

I smile. 'Thanks.'

'No really, thank you. A good little piece. It was alright, no other way to put it. I'd've been proud to write it. A scoop, *bona fide*. Getting readers interested in *his* point of view. Not easily done, no?'

I nod.

Quiet returns, but the lack of sound is pregnant. I had written a good piece, done an alright interview.

'Your mother would be terribly proud too. Of what you've done with your life. It's not easy, being a grown up. Sometimes I still feel like Peter Pan. Pan without his Wendy.'

'Are you okay, Dad?'

He smiles. 'You must miss her too, love? Henrietta I mean. Well obviously.'

I nod. I feel the food lurch in my stomach. He leans forward. Sits in his professional mode.

'Are you okay, Dad?'

He nods and we sit like this as the sky hungers some more.

'Oh, who's ever okay? It's not easy, no?'

I shake my head. 'No it's not. What's wrong?'

‘Hmm...’ he smiles. ‘It’s just... I want you to know I miss her and...’

‘Sure, Dad. Sure I know you miss her.’

‘Yes, but I hardly ever...’

‘I know it’s too much. You don’t... Some things are just, y’know, even unsaid.’

‘Yes... you have always been bright. Don’t need to hash everything. Imagine us two sages joining the fourth estate?’

‘Imagine it.’

‘Yes... I did have something... something to tell... something that’s hard...’

‘Nothing is too hard for *you* to articulate.’

‘This might be. It’s not easy.’

A rigid silence. We look at each other. I feel sweat on my backside and under my arms. I am more anxious than when the ambulance took Mum. *Why is he making me uneasy?*

A thud on the small pane of the kitchen window interrupts. It makes me laugh.

‘What was that? You have vandals? Throwing rocks?’

‘I don’t think so, Dad.’

‘I should go check it, I think. Yes.’

‘Just ignore it, Dad. What’s hard?’

‘I really think I should check. Curiosity and cats and all.’

He pushes back his chair with more than common force and goes out. Cold penetrates the air when the door to the small square garden opens. He comes back.

‘Would you believe, a poor little birdy?’ He is looking down and shaking his head with an obsessive’s regularity. ‘They get confused in storms, don’t they? Messes their bird brains, don’t you think?’

‘Maybe, Dad.’

‘Nothing I could do for it. Poor thing, stone dead. Smashed its poor brains.’ He sits back down with scrupulous ease.



‘What kind of bird?’

‘Oh I don’t know about those things. City born and bred, don’t know about bird life. And it’s dark. Black as black. You know what? You really should get one of those lights fitted. You know what I mean, those lights that come on when there’s movement. When they detect it. Movement I mean. Good security and useful. I could organise one to be set up. If you’d like. Yes? Listen to me chatter; you’d think I was my mum, your grandma, the way I’m droning.’

‘Dad, what was hard to articulate?’

‘You are a good interviewer, aren’t you? I’m no good, as an interviewee; not ever had it that way. It’s a fact, and I’d have it as a quite inarguable fact, journalists make atrocious interviewees.’

‘Please, Dad.’

‘Yes-yes?’ He leans and releases a hefty breath. ‘Like a splinter. Or, better, a front page reveal. Out in a single tug. Done and dusted. Maximum impact, minimum fuss. It makes an appreciable impact.’

‘Dad?’

‘Well... it’s my... It *is* hard. To put into words. It’s my health. A problem, pretty bad. Doctor says it’s unlikely... y’know?’

I nod.

As I sponge plates in foamy water, trying not to leave too much to Nadežda, there’s a whoosh of rain on the window in front of the kitchen sink. All the tropical spleen of the week spills. A bowl slews from my grip and chips on the basin edge; I drop it into the nearby bin. I steady a final skillet by its potholder while I rinse off suds, neatly piling it on the draining board before reclasping my wristwatch. It’s eleven forty-two. The second hand is about to lap the hour. There’s a moment of infinitesimal irrelevance that cannot be held. And in that moment there are some someones who have just died somewhere.

The phone rings.

‘Mary, that you? I got the right fucking number this time.’

‘Caleb?’

‘Yeah, right. Look, sorry to ring so late and all, but thought I’d give you a heads-up.’

‘Heads-up?’

‘Yeah, it’s chaos. Your Borger piece. You won’t fucking comprehend, but it was attacked in Parliament. Celebrating the crime, encouraging copycats. It gets worse. It’s a total fucking shit-storm and I think they mean... The bosses like. They mean to hang you. As in, like, crucify you. Out to dry. It’s a storm in a teacup if you ask, but they’re going to ambush you when you come in and if I were you, using my sense and all...’

‘Right, Caleb, got it.’

‘Sorry Mary, I wanted to do you a decent turn, wouldn’t expect it from a shit like me, would you? It was editorially approved for fuck’s sake. And you were told along which lines. If this happens to you, it could to any one of us bastards. Not sure if everyone will stand for it, my dad’ll blow a fuse, a fucking gasket, when he finds out what’s what. And you a Pritchard, but still... I don’t mean to press, but if I were you, definitely wouldn’t come in tomorrow. I mean I know it’s awful, but it’ll...’

‘Yes, Caleb. Thank you.’

I hook the phone, sit in the living room and put on the television, eat some chocolate squares from the coffee table and think about unemployment and death.

~

*Ella listened from outside to her uncle, brother and mum argue. Her Mum had forbidden her to enter, but not to press her ear to the door. She could make them out by voice:*

*Mum—How could you bring Pete?*

*Brother—I’m sorry, Mum. I should’ve...*

*Mum*—Shut...

*Brother*—I.

*Mum*—Shut up.

*Brother*—Stop being so shouty Mum, please.

*Mum*—Out of my face.

*Uncle*—Listen, can we simmer down? I'm sorry, I didn't wanna leave him alone. I'd just taken him out of the hospital. He tried to off...

*Mum*—You're being taken for a ride, y'know that?

*Brother*—Mum, please. I'm trying to change. Really.

*Mum*—Great, why don'tcha fook off and change somewhere else? Why drag Uncle Phil into your mess?

*Brother*—Don't jeer at me Mum.

*Uncle*—Now look, Sarah, Pete isn't dragging me. I offered. He even refused a few times. Take a seat, for God's sake, can't we just calm it a notch?

*Mum*—An if I don't wanna 'calm down'... No, don't touch me, Phil; I don't wanna sit. I'm happy standing. Actually why don't I just leave?

*Brother*—No, don't go, Mum, please. We haven't talked in two years. Can't you just listen to Phil a sec?

*Mum*—You don't get to make demands.

*Uncle*—Come back, Sarah, the three of us should... please come back.

*Mum*—Phil, I love you like the world, but don't contact me again until he's gone from your life.

*Brother*—Mum, I'm sorry.

*Mum*—And don't let him near Ella. She doesn't need her brother messing wiv er life.

*Brother*—I promise I'll leave Ella alone. I don't wanna hurt her. Fookin hell, I don't.

*Mum*—Your vocabulary is disgraceful as ever.

*Uncle*—If we could talk. I... and what about this stuff going on wiv the apartment? Are you going along wiv all this occupation stuff, Sarah?

*Mum*—We'll see.

*Uncle*—Well then you'll *need* help. Those people mean well. They're mean-well folk. You know whatta pandemonium those types make.

*Brother*—A what?

*Mum*—It means chaos. Don't be stupid, Pete. And I don't need you, Phil. Not while he's around. If anythink you need me. Why you need to get rid of him.

*Brother*—Please, Mum. Please. Don't.

*Mum*—Oh cry me a river. Leave it alone will ya? I'ma have a tinkle is all.

*Silence. A quieter conversation ensues:*

*Uncle*—Just us two, then. Just the two of us.

*Brother*—Why won't she listen?

*Uncle*—Because you fucked up once too often, lad. And your mum, she keeps a grudge. Never forgave our dad either, but family's family and you just have to keep trying, right? Keep knocking on that door. Christ, life's not easy, but it's also fucking wonderful. Can't grasp why you'd try and off yourself when you're about to be a daddy.

*Brother*—Please don't lecture. Enough in rehab.

*Uncle*—Too fucking right they lecture, and so will I. You need to get some sense in there. Really push it right in.

*Brother*—Yeah?

*Uncle*—Yeah. And soon if I'm gonna shape you up to be a father.

*Brother*—Y'what?

*Uncle*—Whatja think? You get to go on as you have? No. You'll learn to love this life you've been given so you can teach your kid the same. Don't wanna sound all *Godfather* on you, but you're gonna learn to appreciate family. Did you expect coming here meant nuttin?

*Brother*—Course not. I'm no 'dad' though.

*Uncle*—Well apparently you are.

*Brother*—Not properly.

*Uncle*—Doesn't get more properly.

*Mum*—Your bathroom's disgusting. Do you ever clean?

*Uncle*—Better things to be doing wiv a life, Sarah.

*Mum*—Don't change, do you?

*Uncle*—Why'd I change? I'm wonderful.

*Mum*—You're an overweight single man caring for an ex-convict, but yes, you're wonderful when you aren't trampling over everyun.

*Uncle*—You make me laugh, Sis.

*Mum*—Anyway, I'm calmer, but I'm not happy about any of this and I resent you brought him, whatever the reason. Promises are worth more than reasons.

*Uncle*—Touché.

*Mum*—Touché yourself. I'm off. Why don'tcha get him to clean your bathroom?

*Uncle*—There's a thought.

*Brother*—An awful thought.

*Mum*—You wanna amend, start small. That's your problem, like your dad. Big gestures and promises. A good man is good at little things, things that make up life.

*Uncle*—As Confucius would say, don't let your words overtake your deeds.

*Mum*—Don't confuse him Phil, he doesn't need Confucius, he needs to get himself together. I hope you're right he can.

*Uncle*—He can, the real question, Pete, is if you will?

*Ella stood away from the door as she heard her mum approach.*

~

Propped against the sofa arm, Toby watched Clare as she watched television ads. With his weekend stupor he no longer cared what they were supposed to be viewing. Nor what programme was cut up by women dancing through Paris to sell perfumes or majestic foam horses erupting from the froth of seaside waves to sell beer. The content and product as disconnected as his fatigued senses. He thought about those anarchists getting into trouble and the occupation of this tower block, his new home.

Clare was writing in one of her Moleskines: looking at the page, scribbling biro, looking up to register the set, looking down. She was always in the midst of an undertaking. Even during these late-night television sessions. She approached recreation with the seriousness of work as if time with him was a means to an end. He never understood her ends.

Toby was glad though. For months they had cohabited as prisoners in an operatic drama, they might as well have communicated through the primitive code system of drumming morse into pipes. He did not mind that she'd ended the regime of mutual isolation from pity.

'I want to join,' she said, with a dramatic decisiveness, as though her frantic writing had been progressing to the exclamation.

'Join... huh, join what? Sorry, the movement?'

'What else could I mean, Toby? Don't be slow. I want to sign up. I think this whole plan is great. Really brill.'

'Yes, well, thanks for helping to tilt the vote. It was close.'

She let go of her pen and book to pull her arms forward and up over her head in a show of exhaustion. 'Do some think it was too close?'

'Who?'

'*Per se.*'

'Well, I don't know much about our neighbours, do you?'

‘No.’ She mused. ‘I’ve seen that kid who spoke up before. Brave. Fiery. I wonder about him. Saw him stick up for a friend against his dad. The friend’s dad. A real thug. What about the movement?’

‘What about them?’

‘They don’t think it was too close... I mean generally think... the vote?’

‘I don’t know their minds. We’re not Borg, you know.’

‘Huh?’

‘Nobody’s saying it was too close, at least.’

‘What does your friend think?’

‘Who?’

‘The one you trail, the handsome one.’

‘Mike?’

She nodded and frowned in a single impatient gesture.

‘Doesn’t say much. Not much in the way of anything. Always looks like he’s thinking about... something important.’ He smiled as he caught her gaze. ‘That or he’s constipated.’ *Why did he say that?*

She laughed. It delighted Toby to make anyone laugh, especially his intractably serious sister. But he always had to try for more. ‘Mike’s always “mning” and doing that thinking statue pose, y’know, with the chin resting on the hand and all bunched up,’ he said, chuckling to himself, ‘deep thought and all that... y’know the statue I mean?’

‘Rodin’s *Le Penseur*,’ she spoke neglectfully, frowning, then added, ‘How do I join?’

The program came back on and Toby regretted that they were watching a docudrama about financial corruption.

‘How you know all that stuff? You always seem to know who wrote this and who painted that and which man said the other. Like, right away,’ he commented, pursuing the tangent to avoid slipping back into passive viewing. It irritated him that her idea of ‘time spent together’ was time

focusing on something else. He remembered the conversations and games they played as children.

‘It’s pretty iconic.’

‘I mean, like...’

‘Toby,’ she cut in, ‘how do I join?’ Her journal was resting on her knee, held up on the chair, her fingers drumbeating its hard, black surface.

‘Oh just fill some subscription forms and pay membership, nothing really. And you determine how much. I’m sure they wouldn’t mind a small fee, at least at first and what with me...’

‘I don’t mind paying more than a nominal amount. I’ve savings and I want to contribute. What would be the point if I didn’t?’

‘Yeah, but if you wanted to take it slower, all I’m saying is no one would...’

‘No. I’m tired of taking life “slow”. I’m getting like Seb. Thinking and thinking in belligerent circles and never doing anything, germinating cynicism.’ She looked at her journal, ‘all I do is write in these things.’

‘Yes well...’

‘He’s a good friend, but not someone I want to *become*, to be. I want to be a better person. To do something helpful, make the world good. Make it all weigh less on me. It weighs so much lately. I want to contribute.’

‘Like Mike.’

‘What? Yes, suppose... You’ll have to introduce us.’ And then she said, more soberly, ‘I will do this.’ She opened her journal again and wrote. She did not look up; Toby thought she was recording in a stream of prose, transcribing their words just to stay active. Her decision, their conversation; she always made a fuss. He knew from childhood when she’d involved him in her implausibly momentous choices and ferocious struggles. Like their mother, she had no proportion, which was why they’d divided.



When a man in a colourful getup introduced simply as ‘heterodox economist’ appeared on TV, Clare stood and proclaimed, ‘I’m conked. To bed. Don’t mind if you finish, but would you keep the volume down and, when it’s over...’

‘No, I don’t mind turning off.’

Clare smiled. ‘Thank you. That’s good of you. It’s just the noise and I’m a light...’

‘It’s fine. I wasn’t really into this one.’

‘Yes, and the slightest...’

‘It’s *really* fine. Not enjoying this one.’

‘Really? Thought it was your kinda thing. Political.’

‘It’s all very Michael Moore liberal pandering. That’s what some of the guys would say.’

‘You mean Helots? Perhaps a good conversation opener.’

‘Don’t worry. We’re easy. And you’ll get to know them now, even without subscribing.’

‘Yes, but I do want to,’ she said, as she perched on the sofa’s arm. ‘I want to be involved.’

‘Of course.’

‘Well, I really should be off. Don’t want to wake up late tomorrow.’

‘You never do. You always wake up at the same time.’

‘Yes, that’s because I always go to bed at the same time.’ She looked at him intently. ‘This is fun. Socialising. Things *are* going to be better for us. You’ll get a job again and there’s this Helots stuff.’

‘Yeah, I like it when we get to talk.’

‘You do?’ She was hovering, arm stretched out to the sofa as though tethered, in a transient state that could return to sitting or walking off. She opted for the latter.

He wasn’t tired, but didn’t want to watch television alone and had anyway already closed off that option. He felt he could not phone Mike either, or game on his PlayStation or listen to music in his room. He could read or sleep, but was locked in indecision, so he nursed a mounting frustration against Clare.

He spotted her journal left open. He shuffled over to snatch a guilty look and saw, ‘weltschmerz, saudade, mono no aware, acedia’ and then a neat line running clear through the words.

A jingle he could not place—he thought Beethoven, the only name he linked to music of the baroque, classical and romantic varieties—woke him from a restive sleep. Clare burst down the apartment’s small hallway towards the living room and took up her mobile from on top the DVD player.

‘Hi... Yes... Sebastian? What’s...Yes... That’s terrible... sorry... Slow down, what’s going on now?’ A long silence followed as she clutched the phone. ‘Okay, I’ll be there... No, of course I ... I’ll phone a taxi, see you asap.’ She pulled the phone away.

‘What’s...’ Toby started, but she held a raised finger up in a gesture uncannily evoking their mother.

‘Wait Toby.’ She pressed some commands on the phone’s touch screen and held it up. ‘Hi, can I have a taxi?’

Toby blinked several times to get the soreness from his eyes as she gave the address of the apartment. His mind drifted and he stopped following Clare, but refocused to hear, ‘Yes, we’ll be right there. Wait a moment actually. Toby? Toby! Can you come with me, it’s an emergency.’

‘Of course.’

‘Good... No, not you, sorry. Yes, we’ll be right there in ten.’ She slid the phone into the left pocket of her purple pyjamas. ‘Quick Toby, get ready. My friend’s had an accident, a nasty fire.’ He felt something comic in the way she said ‘a nasty fire’ as you might say to a child ‘what a nasty graze’.

‘I need to help him. I think he needs a place.’

‘Yes, of course.’

He observed her shivering as they stood on the pavement. His breath trailed, orange-lit by streetlamps. He was glad when the taxi pulled up. Climbing in, the air was stifled and musty and he angled his head to the cold surface of the glass, shutting his eyes as the car sped. Driving at night, seated next to his sister, brought memories of twilight journeys to Welsh camping trips. He told Clare with his eyes still shut. Needing to indulge his fatigue, he was glad when she took over talking.

‘Do you ever get the feeling, Toby, that... well, like, how in *Howl*, the Ginsberg poem? Well he talks about Moloch, like the city is a demon. It’s a biblical monster, *Old Testament*, demanding blood sacrifice. And there’s that bit in *Metropolis*. That’s the same. The old film, not the anime, that’s good too though, but the German silent one with,’ she yawned “with” and paused, ‘with the shitty ending. And there’s that scene when the underground factory. At least, I think it’s that film, one of the old ones anyway. And yeah, the underground factory becomes a kind of demonic force. It becomes an actual demon that’s wolfing up all the workers. And it’s not like there’s some kind of conspiracy, there’s just this force, this overwhelming, non-human force. And if you’re on the top and you work for this unthinking... unthinking *thing*, then you get privileges, but by and by it’ll eat up everyone.’

As his consciousness ebbed he semi-listened to her soliloquy.

‘Who knows, now’s probably not the time for pseudo-philosophising. Although perhaps “the time” is the time when you think, “now’s not the time”?’

And a little later he caught: ‘...to avoid sinking into thoughtlessness? Toby?’

And at some point: ‘I’m not really well read. I don’t really get anything. I need to read Marx...’

And it went on until the vehicle abruptly stopped and he alighted viscerally stricken by a carsick fug.

They were in front of the remnants of Sebastian’s house. Fire had gobbled gaping holes in the roof and partially torn through the rafters; the frame grotesquely stripped, like a bone stabbing

out of an open wound. Soot stained the once white walls, now mottled-grey to charcoal black. And steam clung to the gutted structure as evidence of what Clare and Toby had missed; he conjured uncoiling smoke plumes and desperate panic.

A night shower left a film of wet without any attendant downpour. A plump woman in a soaked yellow and cantaloupe coloured floral dressing gown approached; behind, a gawky man's cigarette drooped from his mouth. Toby noted the man's stoop.

'Awful what's happened—awful,' she extended the first 'aw' in 'awful', 'Can't believe it. Still can't. Poor guy.' She began in lieu of greeting. 'Friends of his? Said you'd come, I agreed to wait. Said you'd come, poor guy.'

'Yes, yes. Where's Sebastian?' Clare was terse.

'At my house, got him to agree to stay. He's not right, not now. Not right in his head,' she touched her own crown, 'He wanted to wait, but it's not good for him to be looking at...'

'Which is yours... your house?'

'Oh, one over there, see? Thank heaven, if you don't mind my saying, if it's not insensitive, that it's fully detached.'

'Too right,' added the gawky man, chucking his cigarette. 'Glad we didn't move into that terrace up at the east side. Could you imagine? Could have lost everything in a fire like this.'

Toby felt a wave of alarmed annoyance at their line of thought, but he did not have time to humour the sentiment. He was compelled towards the fully detached by Clare's clasped hand.

He was taken to a living room where a lean, suited, hairless man ranted at a young woman in a pink tracksuit; she gazed with an earnest, sad smile.

'...why the ancients faced up to calamity. Didn't matter to which school they belonged, they aspired to be free of burdens; Hedonists and Epicureans, Cynics and Stoics, Academics and Sceptics... a state of freedom, but not to enslave oneself to worthless ties, oh no, but genuine liberation. Their arguments were about how to achieve this, not whether we could or should. And in that sense Western civilization from that point *is* a digression, even, dare I say, a

degradation?’ The girl gave a stiff half-nod as though unsure his querying solicited reply. ‘An unpopular point of view, I know, but...’

‘Sebastian,’ Clare interrupted, ‘I’m so sorry. Are you alright?’

‘Clare, you’ve come. I’m fine; really, I’m fine. No, better. I’ve never felt so well before.’

‘He’s not sorry it burnt,’ the girl exposited, ‘Apparently it’s a... it’s a...’

‘A freedom, yes. I was just saying to Pauline...’

‘Call me Paul, everyone does; bit of a joke, but that’s the way I likes it.’

‘The very femme Paul, then, I was just saying to her how it’s all a liberation.’

‘What about your pictures?’

‘Burnt,’ Paul answered grimly. ‘Even ones of me. Gone, all that sitting...’

‘Yes, burnt,’ Sebastian confirmed, pleased. ‘The fire started with them. Knew its proper task. Call that a telos.’

‘Even the one you just finished of me? Solemn?’

‘Yes, even. All. Ashes to ashes. I can begin afresh, unburdened.’

‘You’re manic, Seb. I’ve never seen you like this.’

‘That’s because I’ve never felt this good, Clare.’

‘Could I speak alone?’

‘Naturally, you two don’t mind?’ Sebastian addressed the question to Toby, who inelegantly inhabited the doorway, unsure whether he was forgotten.

‘Naa, we don’t mind. Do we?’ said Paul, standing and taking hold of Toby’s arm. ‘Here, I’ll show you to the kitchen and we’ll give them their privacy.’ She pulled Toby through to the back of the house and a small cooking area with a Formica table the maraschino of candied apples, its glacé shine recalling American pop. ‘Fancy a tea?’

‘You don’t have a more caffeinated drink?’ Toby asked. ‘Coffee or Coke?’

‘Yeah, course we do, course we do. No coke, but we’ve Nescafé here and Pepsi in the fridge.’

'I'll get myself a Pepsi, thanks,' he said, liking Paul, but wondering at her distinction between Coke and Pepsi.

'Want a mug for that?'

'No thanks, I'll drink straight from the can.'

'You're welcome. Not used to entertaining this hour. But gotta be good neighbours.'

The woman and man came in; she was wearing a different fluffy white dressing gown and had a lime green towel wrapped round her head like a turban. 'That's right, love,' the woman said, 'never get the chance to be neighbourly, Christian,' she turned to the man, 'not like when we were young, right?'

'What you talking about? The likes never happened when *I* was young. These people we don't know coming in late. If you ask, and I know nobody ever does, but there you go, anyway, if you ask, the whole shebang's suspicious. And what's more, improper.' He looked at Toby. 'Strangers.'

'But we know Seb,' Paul countered.

'I don't know the guy at all. Not exchanged a word since we moved. And if you ask he's a peculiar fella. What we woulda called queer when you were allowed.' Toby flinched. 'Before health and safety and political correctness.'

Toby sipped from his blue can as he listened to the exchange. He could not square having so recently been lazily watching a docudrama with this novel situation.

'Who are you in all this?' The man added, addressing Toby.

'Clare's brother.'

'Ah, the girl there,' said the woman. 'His girlfriend, right? I mean we see all kinda models, Paul's done a bit herself, haven't you, love? Clothed, y'know. I don't mean modelling in the way of, well, like that. Not like slutty ones in the mags. Don't think he does that kinda picture, right, darling?'

'Mum!' snapped Paul.

‘Wanna be clear. He’s seeing this guy’s sister. Gossip is a sin. I keep telling you that, and I need to set an example.’ She looked to Toby for validation, ‘That’s right, isn’t it, love? Sebastian and your sister?’

‘I don’t know, really,’ Toby answered.

‘Well-well, you’ll find out I’d bet.’

The man snorted and the woman scowled at him.

‘What is it you do?’ The woman asked Toby.

‘Unemployed.’

The woman giggled. ‘Oh, shouldn’t ever say that, right? You’re not “unemployed” or “on the dole”, you’re “between jobs” like Paul.’

‘Well, I’m not “on the dole”, at least not yet.’

‘Well, that’s good. Our Paul was and it was a shame. A shame to us.’

‘Oh jeez, Mum. Shut up?’

‘Hey, don’t talk like that,’ interjected the man, ‘don’t be such a prissy cow. Apologise to your mum.’

The woman looked from her husband to her daughter, bewildered. ‘Oh that’s okay; please don’t fight. Look,’ she gestured to Toby, ‘company.’

‘Say “sorry” at once,’ the man said, keeping his focus on Paul.

‘Fuck off,’ Paul said and strode from the room, slamming the door after her.

The man stood dazed and then pursued, bellowing, ‘you don’t take that fucking tone. You don’t swear at me or your mum.’

The woman nervously giggled again, ‘I’m so sorry. So sorry.’

‘It’s alright,’ Toby assured as the din progressed upstairs, muffled through the ceiling.

‘What is it you wanna do?’ the woman asked.

Toby was caught in the vicious circle of the shy. He wanted people to like him, even people he didn’t, but cared so much he worried, which made him reticent. Especially under prying. And

he suspected standoffishness made him unlikable, which induced worry and further introversion.

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ he managed.

‘You gotta know a thing like that. And I betcha you’re intelligent.’

‘Not sure about that.’

‘You shouldn’t...’ a door slammed somewhere, ‘Sorry, you shouldn’t be down on yourself. Doesn’t do to lack pluck. Our Paul has none and she can’t make anything of herself.’

He heard himself say, ‘I’m sure that’s not true, your daughter seems a good woman,’ which sounded so unlike himself. ‘Sorry, you wouldn’t know what the time is?’

‘Just up there, over the cooker.’

He followed her outstretched finger to a novelty *Simpsons* analogue that read half-three.

‘It is late, isn’t it? That’ll be why we’re so testy. It’s not normally like this, you know?’

Toby nodded.

Clare walked in. ‘What are you doing?’ She addressed Toby. ‘We’ve a taxi outside.’ She looked at the woman, ‘Thank-you for your help,’ she said dismissively.

‘It was nice meeting you all. Thanks for the Pepsi. Thanks,’ Toby said as he left the kitchen.

‘Bye then,’ the woman replied.

Sebastian was already there. Clare was up front. When Toby got in Sebastian smiled and started to rant again.

‘You know, I know you. From the web, I mean. I glanced your posts on the network from a mutual acquaintance and I’ve even responded. I mean our mutual acquaintance is of course your sister. You’ve been on a lot more lately, haven’t you? Clare said you lost your job so that must be why. It’s good to put flesh and blood to an abstract profile; the World Wide Web is such a dead and deadening arena. You’re one of those radical left types, aren’t you?’

‘You know where your lot go wrong? I mean, sorry, just to go back a bit first, but we all recognise the world isn’t right, yes?’ Toby nodded and tried to keep his eyelids from sticking



shut, blinking, 'Well the religions all do at least, world is suffering to the Buddhists and you should read what St Augustine has to say about our mortal lot, but for them there's always an escape hatch, a nirvana or something like that. Okay Augustine has a utopia, a *Kingdom*. But mostly there's *something else*; it's not necessarily that horrible notion of an afterlife, but something, even oblivion. And Western thought achieves its apex by understanding that kind of pessimism more directly, less alienated alienation; Schopenhauer, you know, Zapffe is better, more advanced. Cioran, of course, I'm sure Clare's mentioned...'

'No.'

'Aww well, never mind, but the point is they're like the religious. They hate this world and see escape as our solace. Nevertheless, you guys: you Marxists; or what Engels' derogatorily called the utopian socialists; Zionists too; all the hippy communes; Leninists; Maoists, Trotskyists; maybe not Stalinists; well, you go wrong deluding yourselves that the religions and philosophers just didn't try hard enough to make this awful lot *better*. And that's, sorry, but that's funny. Real happiness is in liberating oneself from the cares, as the ancients knew. I've been telling your sister; you caught a bit when I was telling dear Paul. Isn't that great, by the way, adopting a man's name? She's uneducated and discovered post-gender identity.'

Even after the journey, Sebastian continued to orate to a wearied Toby. The blood in his head pulsed as a soundtrack to the uniformity of the rant. Toby took against the man, his verbiage and the hold he exerted over Toby's sister.

'This place is enchanting,' he said as they climbed up the apartment. 'Social realist, kitchen sink. Like a Leigh film, right? Seen those, Toby?'

And up and up.

Sebastian was ahead, so he stepped on the mess in the dimly lit corridor. 'Oh,' he said. 'Someone's thrown a bucket of red at your door, Clare.'

She was smiling.

‘This must be a reprisal, Toby,’ she said, touching his arm. ‘It’s good, really good.’ He was glad of her attention. ‘It must be one of those idiots who voted “against” at the meeting.’

‘I suppose,’ Toby said, trying to reflect her keenness about the vandalism, which he found horrible.

‘What’s that? Meeting?’ Sebastian asked.

‘Let’s get this cleaned and we’ll talk.’

‘I don’t think this will clean so easily,’ said Toby.

‘He’s right, Clare.’

‘Well, I’ll have a go at the worst. Doesn’t matter. It’s all a part of the thing. What I want.’

~

Monday 18:27—Tired of Mike Wilmot, can’t wait to be Andy Perkins. Rathbone ushered me from a group to talk privately, more perturbed than I’ve seen—worried he’d overstretched himself. As per orders I mollified his doubts and encouraged him to persist, the mangina was grateful. Afterwards he celebrated the ‘yes’ vote, which he attributed solely to his efforts, buying everyone a round. Think he’s nervous because he’s meeting up with that lawyer Graham, a relative of Rathbone’s.

Gaining Rathbone’s confidence so I won’t have to rely much longer on Toby. He follows me like a lapdog—to the bus, everywhere.

20:02—Addendum: intermovement disputes mean the higher up in importance, the more suspicion. Two are especially mistrustful: David and Alice. They don’t know, but they *do* dislike competition for seniority. Perhaps taking on a less key position I could allay unwanted attention, albeit by limiting my active role in decisions. Consult?

21:38—Toby phoned. Persuaded his mentally unstable sister, Clare, to join Helots. He's talked a great deal about her moods and the difficulty of living with her, which beggars why or how he has got her involved. She will be coming to the next meeting in a couple of days.

Toby is my strongest contact, so it would be a good idea to stick close to her too.

PS: Just ascertained they'll also be bringing an undecided candidate for membership. I didn't get name, but Toby doesn't expect him to be involved long—maybe not at all. This other guy is living with Toby and Clare so he might still be relevant to the occupation.

23:11—Time elapses, nothing happens. Sheer incompetence, disorder and laziness may upend all these plans before anything comes of the radical's endless talk. And this might prove just another group of fantasists and a waste of infiltration resources. Let's hope this doesn't prove a waste of ~~my~~ our time.

Wednesday 17:18—Met an overweight man pushing a baby down a hallway. Didn't know him, but he was familiar. After conversation it transpired he's a relative of one of the occupants, now living in the flats on a semi-permanent basis after his nephew disappeared, and caring for his grandnephew. Great deal of family dysfunction; wary where children are involved not to upset social services. I believe they're already looking into things hereabouts.

Asked if he knew about the movement's plans, keeping up my role as an advocate. Note, nevertheless, if my identity is uncovered we're open to accusation of provocateuring. Some bad PR could result from current orders, which I'm choosing to interpret cautiously. The man, identified as Philip Grange, said he was aware and that helping his sister and niece (Sarah and Ella respective) was one reason for coming, although their help with the baby is evidently the more prominent. He was affable and I doubt we need to keep serious tabs. Most of these residents, especially ones with little attachment to the place, should be unproblematic if we to decide to make a move.

Friday 22:19—David confronted me and asked tricky questions. I managed, but I worry he has ambush planned for meeting tomorrow. Smarter than initially seemed, much more keen than his lackey Alice and definitely Toby's intellectual superior. Not sure about Toby's sister; she's supposed to be clever, found newspaper articles in archives that show she was a childhood celebrity, clever. Apparently she takes the politics seriously.

Saturday 15:04—Briefly met Clare and her friend who's staying with her and Toby; he has the unlikely name Sebastian Lyme. Now *he* comes across as mentally unstable, up himself. Whereas she's no more deranged than Toby. Maybe grounded. Attractive, newly eager to join and fight for progress, etc. or some similar swill. She's fooled by her brother and shouldn't concern us. Will continue to associate with subgroup. Toby persists in relying on me and this Lyme likes anyone who gives him attention. Suspect Clare, most intelligent of the three, is warier, but also suspect she thinks highly of my 'commitment' and I'll continue to win approval.

17:23—~~This is becoming a strain though. Miss family.~~ I am aware it's important work, but hard and I will need time off in a few months.

~

Graham simultaneously yawned and clicked his jaw. Maurice registered this sign of boredom. He sometimes hated this middling, middle-aged petit-bourgeois lawyer who would only meet in chain restaurants and, despite valuable consultations, added obsequious praise to calcified contempt.

He would say with self-satisfied profundity, 'The world is as it is.' By which Maurice gathered he meant, 'The world's not so bad for me.'

‘I come back to what I said; none of this is a good idea. I mean it doesn’t affect me. As long as you pay, I advise and represent, but you’ll cause yourselves trouble. And for no gain. Also, a word of caution because you’re family,’ Graham paused and tilted inches towards him, staring into Maurice’s eyes, ‘they’ll not play fair.’

‘What does that mean?’ retorted Maurice with a dismissive gesticulation, frantic to escape his older cousin and Bella Italia, but unable to extricate himself from either.

‘Means what it means.’

‘Great, we pay you for tautologies.’ He picked up his coffee and sipped; he was trying to make the third one last longer.

‘All I’m saying is expect the unexpected when brazenly fucking with the law.’

‘Expect the unexpected? I hope if we’re taken to court I can *expect* better rhetoric.’

‘You will be and you can. I’m not Cato, but *you* won’t get better than your cousin’s special rates.’ He picked up a heavily loaded *bruschetta* and poorly navigated it to his open mouth.

Maurice looked away.

‘I know we don’t exactly see eye-to-eye,’ Graham continued, ‘But I like you. And I like your people, especially those young, idealistic girls.’ He smiled. ‘You people care; you’re a step above. I mean sure one day half of you will be us and the other will be old crooks wheeled in to inspire the next generation of wannabe revolutionaries...’ he paused. ‘Sorry, where was I?’ He took another bite. ‘Oh right, yes. I like you, really. Always have. Even when you were a kid you were always a bit more than the average brat. I mean it’s not just that you’re family, I appreciate what it is you’re doing. And I want to protect you as much as I can by making it clear this is bad; stinks worse than my ex-wife after she’s applied one of her thousand wondrous products from the orient or wherever. You know what I’m getting at, right?’

‘Yes,’ Maurice answered mechanically.

‘What then?’

‘What?’

‘What do you think I’m saying?’

‘That we should give it all up and settle with what we’ve got?’

‘I’m saying you’ll get hurt. They won’t go after all of you. They may be easy on the residents you’re conning into your adventure, but you? They’ll make an example. On principle they’ll do it. They’ll want your story to be told as, “He had so much potential, but then he rocked the boat and now look what it cost him.” And you want to inspire, and in a funny sort of way you and your closest will inspire. You’ll inspire fear of consequences.

‘And you do know why the revolution won’t happen?’ He raised his finger to signal a pause and finished his red in one slurp. ‘Because those consequences are still worse than the lives of the people who... how do you like to put it? Want something else? Who spend their days dreaming of better? People are essentially lazy. We all like to dream...’

‘What revolution? We’re occupying flats not inciting coups. I’m a Marxist, not a utopian.’ These bold words made him self-conscious, like a youngster caught playing make-believe with a gaggle of other children, asked to explain the game in adult terms.

‘Great, you agree. As I was saying, people have more to lose, even at the bottom.’

‘Only someone who has never seen the bottom could say that.’

Graham smiled. ‘You see, you’re wrong. I’ve seen. I’ve represented the lowest. And I tell you, the people you’re staking all this on don’t wanna pay, which means they aren’t at the *sine qua non* yet. I can’t believe someone so clever can’t see; there is no *sine qua non*. People find something to lose.’

After a pause Graham finished his *bruschetta* and leant back. Maurice felt the near reprieve; soon he could go. Impatience and expectation comingled.

Graham raised his hand to hail a passing waitress, ‘Hi err...’ he peered at her tag, ‘err... Beth. Could we see desserts?’

She smiled and curtly nodded.

‘I... I mean... I can’t stay any longer,’ Maurice blurted at the new prospect of watching Graham stuff himself on treats.

‘Oh why not? Come on, please?’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Come on. Most my of clientele are retrograde filth and I’m going through a shitty divorce so my own family won’t see me,’ Graham plaintively whined. ‘And you know, you owe me. It’s not like I charge the full... Oh, thank you,’ he addressed Beth as she handed him the menu, before offering one to Maurice.

‘No, thank you.’

‘Oh you must, don’t be such a...’ and he looked again at Beth, ‘Pardon my language before feminine company,’ then, turning back to Maurice, ‘ungrateful bastard. Just stay and have dessert. Can’t eat alone, can I?’

‘Alright,’ Maurice relented, taking the faux-leather-bound selection from Beth with a smile he hoped communicated unfelt sympathy for Graham.

He looked through his options and felt queasy about Cookie Dough Lava Cake or Godfather *Fragola*, deciding he would ask for a minute *Torta Cioccolato* when the waitress returned. Graham dragged out his selection, pestering him for his opinion.

‘Sorry, I should just decide. But whatever my decision I know it will be wrong.’

‘Then every decision is equally right.’

Graham spluttered with laughter. ‘That’s true, very true. Very droll. That’s why I like you.’

Maurice felt his iPhone vibrate in his right trouser pocket. ‘Excuse me; phone. I probably should get going.’

‘No, we’ve already had that conversation,’ Graham petulantly insisted.

‘Okay, I’ll step out to take this. Order a *Torta Cioccolato* for me. And another coffee.’

‘Sure. Of course.’ Graham grinned.

He answered the call on his way outside, ‘Maurice speaking... Hi Alice... What?... What?... Okay... Just tell me then... Yes... Well, you ought to have waited... Yes, I do think contacting the media should have been decided by a vote... I know that was the plan, still... Of course... Yes... Mary who?... No, never... Sorry, never heard of Pritchard... No, not him either... What does Borger have to... Well, sucks for her... We’re not so generous we’re giving charity cases to the unemployed press... What does it matter what David... Alice... Alice... Yes, okay, alright... You know I’m in a meeting, very important... Yes with Graham... I know... It’s still important... I know...’

An old woman coughed to get Maurice’s attention, ‘Just a second,’ he said as he realised he was blocking the entrance, ‘Sorry, sorry.’ He moved aside, but stayed pushed against the window to avoid the street’s bustle. ‘Listen, Alice, now’s inconvenient. You say she’s on our side... Well that’s all well, but if she’s not connected... Fine, if she’s “no longer” connected to an outlet, then will she be of ... If you say so... Well what choice have you left me?... No I can’t see her today... Fine, I’ll ring back and we’ll see.’

He hung up and returned to Graham, who was staring up at the ceiling.

‘Oh, you’re back.’

‘Did you order? I’m *really* going to have to be nippy.’

‘Don’t worry. And stop this protestant obsession with time. What’s it all those new-agers say? Enjoy the moment? *Cor aut mors?*’

‘Choose heart or death?’

‘No, not that. What’s, y’know your phrases, mine are muddled. Y’know, “seize the day”.’

‘I didn’t know Horace was “New Age.”’ Maurice replied, pleased to show up his pretentious cousin.

‘See, you enjoy my company. You love displaying wit.’

*Wit?*



Beth came with the tray of food and Maurice wished he had ordered Cookie Dough Lava Cake.

~

Picking another packet of rice from the supermarket isle he scanned it with his mobile's camera.

'What y'doin, Seán?' Phil asked, one hand grasping a basket of crisps, chocolate digestives, baked beans, diapers, readymeal battered cod... the other wheeling his sleeping grandnephew in a pushchair.

Seán looked at his phone and put back the rice. 'Found this new app, see?'

They started walking towards the back of the florescent-lit store. 'No, can't say I do.'

Phil's trainers squeaked on the lino.

'What it does, right, is... So I scan the barcode of any food item.'

Phil laughed. "'Food item".'

'Yeah,' Seán itched the nape of his neck. 'And then it consults the web, and looks at this database that's kept online of food companies. And it sees stuff they're involved in. Like if they fill the food with GM or are implicated in crimes. In the third world... It allows you to more easily shop ethically and healthily. It's samazing. Don't know how I got by without. Really.'

Phil looked at Seán's empty trolley and smiled.

'I could scan your basket?' Seán offered

'Naa, that's fine mate. I only buy stuff if it's unhealthy and made from the blood of starving Africans. Or NGO workers, I'll always settle for the sacrificed remains of an NGO. The little one too.' He looked at the baby. 'You just love feasting on evil, don'tcha?'

Seán scanned a box of grapes. 'Oh, this one's good. Ethically sourced.' He put it in his trolley. 'It's so hard to find anything good in this country. It's easier on the continent.'

'What'd'ya mean? This country's great. We're so wonderfully... anarchic.'

‘We’re rotten, what are ya talkin bout? How can someone with your brains not see how rotten we are?’

‘I don’t see with my brains.’

Seán inspected an aubergine, his back turned to Phil.

‘What’s not to love? We’ve the monarchy, gothic architecture, more rituals than you can learn in a lifetime and yet all that’s just to confirm we’re free of the encrusted past. We don’t believe the crap they do elsewhere, even where they don’t really have our kinda past. Our kids mix Caribbean, Hollywood and Cockney into mutable styles. Our middle-aged women collect kitsch to remind us of superficial splendours. All depth is found in surfaces and every Brit knows this intuitively. We know how to get drunk and escape the mind’s tyranny. We’re free of illusions.

‘Each day millions of us re-enact the best book of that portable library of such mixed quality. I speak of Job’s bellyaching in the face of the absurdity of existence, and we do it by complaining about the most humdrum factum, the weather! We see existence. We knows what it means to be. And we enjoy it wivout apology or pathology. It’s paradise. It’s utopia. And our current residence is the very city of God.’ Seán put a bunch of bananas back. ‘You just don’t know how to appreciate.’

‘Huh?’ Seán asked.

‘I was soliloquising on how I love life. Conveying to this sweet babe the joys of our fair land.’

‘Why’re you so chuffed after everything?’

‘It’ll work out. Fancy the pub?’

‘Huh? Yeah, okay.’

They joined the string of people winding up to a stressed cashier.

‘Why not put that phone to something useful and text Colin?’

They sat silently at their spot in *The Queen*, empty beers on Stella Artois and Bulmers’ cork coasters and Seán’s lemonade on the pseudo-mahogany. The baby slept in a pushchair Phil held

with one hand and gently wigwagged while humming rockaby. Colin swilled dregs in a sad circular motion.

In the opposite corner an old man with a dirty white growth of hair played accordion and a drunken woman shuffled in vague imitation of dance. Seán stared at this *mise en scène*.

‘Sounds like you’re screwed, mate,’ Colin put in, always first to interrupt a hush.

Phil shrugged his free shoulder.

‘What you gonna do?’ He pressed.

No response. Seán sighed.

Phil temporarily released the pram and took out a silver cylinder with a black top; he held the black end between his lips and inhaled while clutching the baby’s vehicle again. The end glowed red and emitted vapour.

‘What’s that? You know you can’t. And with the baby.’

‘What *is* that?’ Colin interrupted, leaning.

‘Can wiv this,’ Phil addressed Seán. ‘Electric,’ he added to Colin. ‘E-cig. The smoking of tomorrow.’ He was not talking to anyone specifically. ‘Idiots use’em to quit; I’m subverting rules. At least until our weed loving, tobacco-hating liberal mob pushes the benevolent tyrants to step in.’ He took another drag. ‘Merciful heaven it’s good to smoke in a pub again. Especially after a week like this. A weak week...’ he smiled at the baby, ‘right Junior?’ He pointed at Junior with his cig. ‘This one does nothing but sleep. So much fuss and all he wants is to kip and suck bottled formula. I don’t get it, what’s the deal? New life is easy; life is easy. People make it hard.’

Seán looked to the bar and other tables uneasily, ‘Technically legal, but you’re gonna get us in a pickle.’

Phil laughed. ‘Don’t worry, cleared it wiv the man,’ and he used his free hand to wave the device at the barwoman, who nodded. ‘Besides, I’m no monster. Don’t smoke wiv the little-un. The joys of smoking, Junior, come later. I’ve lots to teach.’

‘Lemme see that,’ Colin asked, reaching.

A group of teenagers huddled on a nearby table collectively laughed at some private witticism.

‘Sure.’ Phil wheeled over the baby.

‘Not the tot you wolli.’

Phil laughed and held out the cig. ‘You inject nicotine cartridges,’ he explained as Colin inspected the object, disassembling and reassembling like a child with a fresh toy, ‘and when you puff, water comes out the end, benevolent water—or at least innocuous. It’s like those bubble blowing pipes for the kiddies. A convincing replica.’

‘How’s it compare?’

‘Like piss to beer, lard to food, politicians to people, a granduncle to a daddy, but...’

‘But why can’t you just pack in the whole habit? The inside of your lungs must be a tar pit.’

The teenagers laughed again.

‘You’re a real puritan, Seán,’ Colin snapped.

Phil laughed.

‘Why’d’ya give a damn about smoking, you don’t even do it?’ said Seán.

‘Doctor said it’d kill me.’ Colin spoke wistfully. ‘Too many pleasures to sacrifice this beautiful body to one, even if it’s one of the best of life’s joys. Mind, Phil? Doctor never said about electric.’

‘No joy is diminished by sharing.’

Colin took the stick between his lips and inhaled hard, letting the faux-smoke out in controlled wisps. ‘That’s fucking marvellous. The miracles of glorious science. Phil, you’re St. Nick, you fat bastard.’

‘Yeah, I remember when technology was flying cars, spaceships, wonder cities and teleportation,’ Seán griped, ‘and our miracle? New ways to smoke and Frankenstein foods.’

‘Oh fuck, Seán, you’re not gonna bleat about GM. Not again,’ Colin rebuffed.

‘You might be happy to eat plants with fish genes and God knows the toxins they cram in. In my opinion it’s awful. The future is disgusting. It wasn’t always.’

Colin took another puff by way of answer.

‘What happened to all the dreams we were weaned on by sci-fi pulps?’

‘Mind handing it back?’ Phil asked Colin, smirking. ‘I also miss the good old days when the future was the good new days. I’m nostalgic for a time when I weren’t nostalgic! Retro-futurism, the desire the present be how the past dreamed the future. That most splendid sublation, golden age rendered speculatively.’ He laughed. ‘C’mon Colin, hand it back. Addictive, dontchaknow?’

‘Yeah, sorry mate. Been too fucking long. Too long by far.’

The abrupt stop of the accordion briefly caught their attention; the teenagers fell quiet too.

‘If this is the best we can do we should never have left the caves.’

‘Longing for the Golden Age Seán?’ asked Phil.

‘No such thing.’

‘Agreed. They’re trying to make something like it at the flat. It’ll be a laugh.’

‘Oh, what’s that?’ Seán asked. ‘Our Sarah involved?’

‘Yeah, my sister is for now. She’s a softy really.’ Phil let go of the pushchair, watched a moment to see if Peter Jr stirred and, satisfied, stood and raised his arms. ‘I’m a traveller from a new commonwealth. The Commonwealth of the Trot Block. Property in common; redistribution is easy when the filth is already liberally shared. Children will be educated about equality and the negation of the negation. From each according to ability, to each according to need. Love and peace and all that will burgeon. An international beacon. Except for the bobby, enemy of the glorious new city state; he will need to be re-educated. A Molotov cocktail pedagogy for the bourgeois’ trained orangutans. Flat troglodytes of the world unite, you’ve nuttin to loose but your Bingo!’

The teenaged group were spellbound and clapped at Phil’s conclusion, before turning to their own diversions, one performing an anecdote by placing two fingers in a v against his lips and wiggling his tongue out.

‘I’ll never getta handle on you, mate,’ Colin said, shaking his head as Phil sat back down.

‘Cos I’m educated; not just fat, y’know? Most of this is brain.’

‘The way you rant about government I’d thought you’d like leftists,’ Collin said.

‘I’m like Montaigne, a Guelph to a Ghibelline and a Ghibelline to a Guelph.’

‘Sorry, what’s precisely going on at the block?’ Seán asked.

‘Well, precisely,’ Phil started and stopped, his attention arrested by a tilt of Collin’s head.

Phil’s gaze was directed towards his errant nephew, who’d disappeared without his baby only to now reappear. Peter was standing oblivious at the bar. The proceeding week replayed in Phil’s mind: Peter’s seeming improvement until he vanished, leaving his baby with a cursory note and no explanation. How Phil had given up his apartment and gone to live with his sister and niece to help take care of Peter Jr.

As Peter reached out a handful of change, paying for a lager, they became simultaneously aware of each other. The former had just enough time to drop his coins and abandon the perspiring drink. During this process, as he turned, Peter caught sight of a bearded old man patting a woman’s back, hunched over and retching. Peter saw her shake off the old man’s hands and felt a surge of abhorrence and pity.

Phil hoisted himself to propel his weight to the door; his belly sluiced as he sprinted down the street where he would one day die, just to see Peter turn a corner and evade confrontation with either uncle or son. Phil shrugged to a wandering tabby and went panting back to his table.

‘A very weak week.’

~

Peter dashed a few more street corners, chased by a phantom uncle. He leaned into the brickwork of an abandoned office block. His chest shot with a gaping pain as he slid to a sit. He’d seen the baby, his baby, *my son*.

No matter how hard he threw his thoughts from their anxiety his mind boomeranged.

He'd met Geraldine at the park just to talk. He hadn't expected her to be gussied up—or the stroller.

'Called him Peter, like his daddy. Junior, meet your fuckwit father. Say hello to your brat, Peter. He cries all the time and gets on my tits, literally, so you two are from the same pod. Like my dad says, acorn doesn't fall too far.'

Why had he let her leave the baby and 'visit the little girl's room'? He knew she never went to public lavatories. He had stood with the pushchair for an hour before he let himself realise his mistake. He took the plastic handles and wheeled it to and fro and Junior's wailing petered. He had to get from there; all those women with their offspring looked at him with hate. Why had he let her leave the baby to 'visit the little girl's room'?

Back at Phil's he didn't stop to think. He couldn't face his uncle, feared another encounter with his mum. He'd left, without Junior; he had to try three different mates before he found a couch.

Now he had nowhere and didn't fancy rough sleeping. What had Phil thought when he got home to that screaming? Phil was the final relative who didn't hate him, who wouldn't give up on him.

Why had he let her leave the baby and 'visit the little girl's room'?

His body heaved and bile scoured his oesophagus. He felt a fibrous lump slip into his cotton mouth and had to try hard to muster saliva to spit out its taste. Looking up, relieved to see he was alone, he reclined into himself and saw the image of that old man and the woman at the bar, the hand being thrown off. An obnoxious gesture encapsulating life.

His mind went to that, then back to 'visit the little girl's room' and back again to the retching woman before he was emptied of thought.

'You alright, friend?'

Peter had been staring at the ground next to his left trainer, the grained grey sidewalk engrossed him as he heard and reheard 'visit the little girl's room'. He saw himself in his head:

limbs and body sprawled like a wounded daddy longlegs. He looked up and saw the short man in flowing white clothes with a neat trim of hair around his mouth, holding some bundle of paper.

‘Hey, you okay? Need assistance?’

Peter had phased out.

‘I see how it is,’ the man knelt and leaned by the barest fraction. ‘You’re lost?’

Coming back to himself Peter quavered. ‘I’m fine mate. I know where I am. I’m fine.’

The man shook his head with practised theatricality. ‘If you knew where you were,’ he looked up at a nearby skyscraper, ‘then you wouldn’t *be* fine, friend.’

‘What?’

The man smiled.

Peter shuffled up, released from his funk. ‘Sorry, mate, don’t need your help.’

‘Good, cos I can’t offer you *my* help.’ The man stood.

‘Eh? On drugs, mate?’ Peter was irritated, but he was also relieved at the diversion.

The man chuckled and shook his head again. ‘What I mean when I say “*I* can’t offer help” is that only one can. There is only one way to salvation.’ He held out a piece of paper from the sheaf, ‘Jesus Saves’ was written in bold on the top.

‘Oh, you’re wiv em,’ Peter said, truculently refusing the leaflet.

‘Listen, friend,’ the man retracted his outreached hand, ‘looks like you need more than the message. Jesus taught us to give material as well as spiritual assistance. You’ve got a place to stay?’

‘No, but I’m not gonna stay wiv you lot. Nuttin gainst you. Just not my way.’

‘Really? What’s “your way”? The ways of this city?’

‘Listen, I don’t disagree this is a shit hole, sorry, I mean...’

“Shit hole” is perfect. Don’t get the wrong idea. We’re faithful, not prudes. Only crude language sums up crudity. Bible is full of vulgarity, know why? Because it’s about us as much as Him.’ He stood and opened his arms, speaking baritone from his chest. ‘This is a horrible place.



Perfidious Albion, brutal Britain, streets paved with “man’s best friend’s” muck, bubblegum smeared and littered with fag ends. Our manna is tasteless larger, chips floated in vinegar, blandest fish deep-fried into a greasy lump. We host every species and variant of bigot, bred into prejudice by an inane admixture of shopkeeper’s miserly mendacity and the banality of self-love. Our colour is grey, our texture paste and even Pagan worship would elevate our spirits from a deadened reverence to common sense, passionless conservatism, received opinion. Our atheists preach a secularised and corrupted Gospel. Our dissenters would be regressive elsewhere.’

Pete blinked. ‘Yeah, well... I mean, I see you guys’re sayin, but I don’t think it’s for me.’

‘Forgiveness is for everyone.’ The man nodded to his own words, as though in appreciation of another’s.

‘I don’t know. Maybe.’

‘Maybe what?’

‘Maybe I don’t deserve it, mate? Maybe I don’t think I should be “forgiven” by your Jesus.’

‘No one does, forgiveness ain’t earned like the Papists think. Nor “deserved”. Nor is Jesus “mine.” Think of Christ’s forgiveness as a gift for which we ought to be grateful, not a privilege bought by works.’

‘Listen, I’m not one of you types. I’mma real bastard, alright,’ Peter backed up a step, ‘I abandoned my own son, for Christ... for fuck sake.’

‘Wait,’ the man said, with a raised hand. ‘Don’t go.’ Peter involuntarily relaxed against the wall again. ‘I’m sure your sins are terrible. So are mine. I’ve done some things. I could tell you. Betcha worse than you’ve done. I once... Wasn’t a good man in my previous life: worked for bad folk, hurt people. And we’re all sinful and live in a world that tempts. Takes us to the right and the left with distractions. Distractions from giving Him thanks. Tempts us from marching forward. So the best we manage is a crooked path. And then there’re worse than distractions, right? There’s backwards. You’ve the look of someone who’s been going forward very slowly, very crookedly, but who keeps looking over his own shoulder. Am I right?’

Peter nodded, not wholly following.

‘Now you’ve probably been lectured a few too many times and it’s never changed anything?’

‘I can’t change.’

‘Yes, that’s completely right. I couldn’t either. You can’t change. You are sinful, like me.’ The man evangelically nodded. ‘And alone it’s impossible to change, you need assistance. Supernatural assistance. People in your life, I’m sure they mean well and try to get you to change, but they fail, right?’

‘Yeah, mate.’ Peter somehow enjoyed how this man talked. It reminded him of his uncle.

‘And so you ended here, on the roadside, crouched and committing the worst sin. Y’know what that sin is? It’s the only real sin there is.’

‘Listen... I mean, no mate,’ Peter said, exacerbated again, feeling panicky.

‘Don’t worry, I’m getting to my point. That sin you’re committing is despair. And even though you can’t help yourself, despair is wrong. Cos although *you* can’t change, *He* can change *you*. The only real sin is to close yourself from His help, which is always available as long as there is life. It’s a sin you commit against yourself.’

‘I don’t think so, I mean I know you’re only...’

‘You don’t have to think anything. Or do anything. Or give *anything*. There’s no fee. What I used to peddle I’d also offer for free, at first, and then came the cost. But what I’m talking about comes with no later payments.. You just have to accept His loving gift. That’s all. And if it doesn’t work, if you can’t get the change you want, then nothing has been aggravated. And actually you’re better than you were because you’ll have had somewhere to get back on your feet. And you can still make the error of returning to the city that has you in its gutter. Isn’t that a bargain?’

‘S’pose.’

‘What’s your name?’

‘Peter.’

The man with the goatee laughed. ‘Course. Peter, I’m Azariah. Used to be Bert. I’ve a sense you’ll be okay. And I know you don’t believe, belief comes when it comes, so for now know I believe. That’d do. More’ll follow. More does.’

He held out his hand to Peter, who let his own be caught by the hard grip and felt his arm shaken by the small guy with an unexpected vigour.

~

The furniture had been shoved to the side of the room, a TV resting on the table atop a sofa. On the remaining chair Toby balanced a laptop, leaning over it in an uncomfortable posture. In the cleared zone Sebastian stood at his easel-propped canvas, a side table holding his palette and cleaning water, a brush, fat with inky blue, held aloft, paused before the picture. When Toby turned to snatch glances he discerned an abstract: a black, navy and purple thick bordered white monolith in the centre, intersected by lines of the same colour. And inside, what might be stick figures in repeating patterns. More of which were at the bottom, external to this structure. At the top were strikes of yellows and oranges.

‘What is it?’ he asked, relenting to befuddlement, allaying a strain he felt in this man’s company.

‘Hmm? This? Well... we need to be taught new heroics. Without glamour. Without sentiment. Without pseudo pop Buddhist or CBT detachment. That’s what I want to do in my painting. I will do. But this? Just practise. It’s not what I want.’

‘Okay then... Will you get paid for it?’

‘No.’

‘I see.’

He returned to his laptop, opening another email, this one to a deli’s vacancy ad, but he had piqued Sebastian’s attention. ‘Have you ever been in love?’

‘Have I what?’

‘In love, have you ever been in love?’

‘I’m busy, Sebastian.’

‘But Toby, you’re unemployed, like me. A man of... a man of leisure, no? How can you be busy?’

‘Our government keeps me busy, right? Looking for employment. I’m not able to stay unemployed.’

‘Alright, but have you?’

‘Have I what?’

Sebastian theatrically exhaled. ‘Have you ever been in love? God, your sister’s easier to talk with.’

‘I need to focus. I don’t have time for girlish twenty questions.’

“‘Girlish’?”

‘Adolescent then.’

‘But you said “girlish”.’

‘So?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Okay then.’ Toby was relieved when Sebastian offered no more reply. He felt the muscles in his upper back unlock.

‘Why?’

‘Why what?’

‘Why is it you “don’t have time”?’ Sebastian reiterated Toby’s voice as well as his words. Toby’s chest tightened.

‘Mike’s coming.’

‘Ah, the enigmatic revolutionary. I look forward to it.’

‘He’s not staying.’

‘Alright.’

‘I’ve to work.’

‘Alright.’

Sebastian returned to his painting, applying another streak to the monolith’s border. A few moments later he added, ‘It’s alright, you don’t want to talk about that. Not with me. I get that.’

‘Talk about what?’

‘Love.’

‘I’m just busy. Too much to get done.’

‘Alright.’

A few minutes later Toby leaned back from his laptop. ‘Okay then, yes, twice.’

‘Twice?’

‘I’ve been in love.’

‘Nonsense, you can only be in love once. Love is the greatest particularised relation.’

‘Huh? If you say so.’

‘I do.’ Sebastian spoke emphatically.

‘Okay then.’

‘Alright.’

They remained silent and Toby wondered how he would fill the trapped time before Mike arrived. He did not want conversation. Living with Sebastian was like being stuck in conversation with a bus stop stranger.

‘What happened?’ Sebastian asked.

‘Which time?’

‘The second and only time?’

‘He dumped me.’

“‘He’?”

‘Yes, “he”.’

Toby waited for Sebastian now; he knew the silence could only be an interlude. If only Mike would arrive.

‘Why?’

It was the question Toby expected; he had a ready-made answer, ‘He said I wasn’t a person he could argue with, because I didn’t argue, I “gave ground.” Said he needed someone who could defend themselves.’

‘I don’t think you can’t defend yourself... pardon the double negative.’

‘Well you’re not my type.’

Sebastian laughed. ‘Feeling is mutual.’

‘Good.’

They were silent and then they both laughed. For the first time Toby felt at ease with Sebastian.

Then Sebastian made him uncomfortable again. ‘Was it Mike?’

‘No.’

‘Sorry.’

‘That’s okay.’

‘I am sorry.’

‘Not necessary, a mistake.’

‘Alright.’

The next interlude was broken not by Sebastian, but by a door knock. Toby rushed clumsily and had to regain balance as his feet tripped. It was not Mike, just two kids, one Jamaican and the other red haired.

‘Hey, yeh not Ms Grange.’

‘No.’

‘Wrong place.’

‘Yes.’

‘Sorry,’ the Jamaican boy ran, the other following.

Toby sat back in the chair. ‘Okay, so it’s about heroics or something, but what *is* your picture? What’s it supposed to be? Is it some kind of building with people in it and its on fire?’

‘It’s the flats. And it’s not “on fire”; not all my homes burn.’

‘So what’s all that at the top?’

‘The sun. It’s rising from behind the building. Or setting. Who could know? Silhouetting. Light and dark, possibility and closure. East and west. That’s what this place is being made, don’t you think?’

‘I guess.’

‘No you don’t “guess”, you know. It’s what your people are making of it, so you ought to know. That’s the least you owe. The least...’ Sebastian’s thread was broken by a knock.

~

They pant through corridors. Their feet skid. Once stark white walls are now dirt speckled and graffitied, markings left by gangs that fought over the block half a decade ago, waging battles over the concrete pillar and its cubicle-like habitations. A green lion painstakingly pencilled by skinheads; the Afro-Caribbean’s swirl with a cross sliced through it. Ollie remembers when his dad told him about these remnants. It was during a sober interlude—moments of fake normality, gentleness, he hated for their false promise. Ollie never believed kindnesses; they became indistinguishable from his father’s cruelty. Fake-knuckling his head, that rare grin, asking about him—bitter-bitter. Joshua’s granny talked of life as bittersweet, but Ollie thought it was ‘bitter-bitter’.

When he was told about the gang, Ollie felt offcolour as his dad tried to interest him in his home’s history. He said he had been a part of it, ‘dumbest thing I’ve done’. Ollie listed other candidates in his head while he impassively listened on the old couch, spoon-scooping his dad’s

staple of supermarket brand beans from a paper plate. His dad was acting like a teacher at the school Ollie once attended. Before Ollie got bored and realised Joshua was right; the bluster about truancy came to nil, just begging-pestering visits by the socials. The worst they did was kicking his dad from a stupor.

That night Ollie stared at his orange hair in the sink mirror and thought, as he often did, of cutting it off or dying it like Joshua's Gran's. It was his dad's hair sprouting from his head, a fungus, alien matter. He fantasised about an electric razor shearing and buzzing. He knew where one was kept, at Joshua's. He couldn't. He wouldn't be able to go hairless. What would Joshua say? What would his dad do? He rarely *did* anything, but Ollie feared exceptions.

As he ran behind Joshua, looking at Joshua's short dreads, wishing he looked like his friend who looked nothing like his dad, Ollie thought about how his dad had told him of his time in the gang and some of the things he'd done. Machismo bragging. He laughed and said how awful it was, that it was the 'dumbest thing he'd got messed up in' and how lucky he'd been he hadn't gone to gaol like the other 'fookin idiots.' And as Ollie thought, the idea of shearing came back and was more definite, sensible.

They ran past a tall, familiar man in a black suit.

Joshua was ahead. Not by virtue of natural speed—he was clumsier, if stronger, and Ollie's spindly legs took him in bounds—but Ollie held back. That was why it was Joshua who ran into the woman, briskly turning the same corner ahead of her friend, 'Yes, I've sympathy. I can't guarantee, but what I...'

Joshua tumbled as he unwittingly came at her and swerved, scuffing his head on the wall as he fell with an 'oomph.'

'Oh sorry,' said the woman, kneeling. 'Are you okay?' She looked to Ollie. 'Is he okay?' Ollie did not know how *he* was supposed to know, but nodded with an intuitive sense of Joshua's invulnerability.



‘Course,’ Joshua said in an unconvincing daze. ‘I be *Jōnin*, not ah weaklin *Genin*. Yuh knock him once,’ he said, pointing back at Ollie, ‘him down fi’evah, man.’

The woman smiled, ‘Course.’

‘Yeh pretty, if we don a’ready av gorgeous *Hokage* we ah give yuh di job.’

She kept her grin. ‘Adorable,’ she held out her hand and helped Joshua gain his footing.

‘Hey, you’re that boy who asked the question... at the meeting,’ said a man standing with her, his thickset build, blackish-brown hair and unibrow counterposing a dandyish cream jacket.

Joshua let go of the woman’s hand, bowed and held out his palm to the man, who didn’t pause but nimbly took hold and gave the boy a firm shake.

‘Maurice Rathbone.’

‘Josh. Mi aks bout moving. Yuh promise we not av ti move, didn’t ya?’ The man smiled and nodded, letting go. ‘Mi fi keep yuh to di way ah di ninja.’

‘Good,’ the woman said, a fixed smirk. ‘Must watch these radicals.’

‘Yes, right; you said something about ninja back then? So that’s what you kids are into?’ *Into?* He regretted the second-hand phraseology, ‘I should tell you about the red army, better tales for kids.’ *Do I always sound like an anachronism?*

‘Not what we “into”, it what ah be, ah ninja.’

‘Are these kids going to be here? Surely it’s not appropriate?’ asked the women.

‘It’s their home, Mary. What’s the point if we throw them out?’

‘It’s dangerous,’ she said and shrugged. ‘You’re right.’ She looked over at Ollie, still hovering. His eyes ferreting up and down the corridor, afraid of the lull of activity. She also spied him sheepishly staring.

‘And who might this handsome young man be?’

‘Mi *Genin*, Ollie. Yeh ain’t “andsome” ah yeh, Ollie?’

‘Well I think he’s dashing to the nth degree. What hair, Ollie. A rare colour.’

‘He hates it, man.’

‘That’s a shame Ollie. I’d adore it.’

The man coughed. ‘We should be moving on. I said I’d introduce you to the residents who’ve joined up with us.’

‘Who?’ Joshua asked. Ollie was relieved to be out of their collective focus.

‘Some of your neighbours. Do you know Sebastian, Toby and Sarah?’

‘They with yeh guys, they wun’ah defend di place?’

‘Right, they’re sorta the reason we’re here to begin with.’

‘Where they live den?’

The man told them.

‘Yeah, we jus been dere.’

~

Struggling against empty time, Maurice was at a desk in a cheap office seat. Other than a bed it was the sole furniture he’d moved, the apartment still barren, a Spartan relief next to his parent’s home. It was located on the relatively unpeopled mid-floor (the seventh floor), providing fast access to the rest of the building. Corridors were littered by soda cans; Morrisons and Asda bags; McDonald’s Big Macs packaging. He filled adjacent flats with members who’d agreed to live-in.

And this Mary Pritchard Alice suckered in. Freshly fired from *The Watcher* Mary was a burden, but another eager body. He had introduced her to a place down the hall, the least crumbling on that floor. He was anxious to retain Mary, although she added nothing. An investigative journalist with the mantras of parliamentary democracy wanting to give ‘dissenting voices’ the ‘lifeblood of free speech’, he’d be impressed if she could get an article published anywhere more serious than a blog with a few dozen readers. What she provided, with her experience of the mainstream press, was a sense that his actions were sober. He felt more comfortable to be

watched by a former rag employee—an adult if puerile world of media-politics, where his radical dreams failed to penetrate.

Adjusting so he was on the chair cross-legged, an old habit developed from years in childhood poised oddly on oversized sofas, he felt satisfied to have everyone contained. Like a kid after organising trading cards into the assorted numbers of an official slipcase, realising he did not lack a single one. The only disadvantage to his living arrangement was being enclosed by Alice, to the right, and David, to the left; both too dedicated to advising him like court mandarins orbiting their beloved emperor, convincing themselves *their* machinations were singularly clandestine and clever. He wasn't even sure if they were a couple yet? It was inevitable. Maurice had put the newer Mike across the hallway to act as a bulwark to their pugnaciously on-message barrages.

Infinitely useful, available and never difficult to please, Maurice still didn't like Mike. Even felt intimidated by the burly mid-thirties man in a bargain black suit. Mike spoke only to offer help, mouth archaic slogans and quarrel with Alice and David. Maurice considered the throwback; a way of doing things that recalled his father's cautionary stories of his grandfather, attempts to dissuade a younger Maurice from pursuing an interest in the old man's politics. He recalled yarns of his granddad hoping for Russian victory, a pantomime radical in unflattering tattletales, reiterating risible speeches on historical inevitability and other caricatures of vulgar Marxism. Maurice readjusted on a chair that dug into his lower back.

He looked at the digital clock on his computer; for twenty-two minutes he'd been looking at his desktop's placeholder—a red kite angled in a cloudless sky. His mind in tumult, body rigid; he stood and paced the torn and stained grey carpet, stretched, performed push-ups and sat again. Careworn and bored, he returned to thoughts about his various people in their many containers.

Massaging his left shoulder, gently swivelling his chair with his right foot, the other held aloft by his crossed right leg, Maurice's eyes watched the flight pattern of a bluebottle whose buzz excused procrastination. His eyelids were settled in a half-open state and his vision of the Word document on his PC shifted in and out of focus. A stale smell permeated the apartment. He had opened the window to banish that odour. A spider had helpfully spun its proteinaceous trap across the opening; he hoped this might hinder the intrusion of more flies or at least bring down the resident population.

When was the last time he left? Earlier this morning, that was right. Why did it seem a different day, then? A different week?

David shifted paper with one hand so he could put down the fast food burger box with his other. Alice looked on. She had been quieter since interrupting his last meeting with Graham to announce her 'success' getting Mary onboard. His cousin had offered little assistance anyway.

'We're worried you're not eating. Doing such a fantastic fucking job of it all. You're more like a real apparatchik nowadays.'

"We"?' Maurice asked, standing from stomach crunches.

'Yeah, "we", Alice and I. The whole movement.' David took the swivel chair and rocked a bit, his shoulder length hair coming down over his face, his full lips in a smile. 'All that exercise and work, day-in day-out.' He tapped some of the keys on the computer's board. 'How do you sustain yourself is what we want to know?'

'Enough hagiography, save it for the dead; if you must know, I sometimes stare at the ceiling as much as "work" and that sustains me.'

'How petit-bourgeois.'

'What's so "petit-bourgeois" as the phrase "petit-bourgeois" tossed about? What you want David?'

'Just to give you fuel. Keep our leader from becoming Skeletor.'

‘Thank-you, *comrade*.’

Alice stayed when David left, which was unusual.

‘The elevator needs maintenance,’ she said. Maurice could tell she wanted to discuss something else.

‘What’s up Alice?’

‘Your browser history.’ He blanched as a pall came over. His sequestered and shared selves folded. ‘That S&M stuff is disgusting Maurice. You shouldn’t be looking at it.’

‘I’m sorry. It won’t. I...’

‘That’s fine. Just no more.’ She walked out.

Klimt’s arm waved as he ranted on the videoconference. Earlier in the Clash of the Left debate Maurice invested more vim against his opponent, mocking permaculture, self-sustaining communities, the beauty of the small. Explaining that, ‘during the great clearances of the high middle ages population peaked, to use a generous estimate, at one hundred and twenty million. Malthus was only wrong because the success of the agricultural revolution, the reversal of which would tie up labour, accelerate deindustrialization and, with a global population somewhere in the region of seven billion, result in the largest loss of life of any political project conceived.’ Yet after fifty-three minutes Maurice wondered what representatives of the Internet might compose the audience of this charade. And with some elation he found his opponent more absurd as his own engagement tapered.

‘So would you say what Helots is trying to do is futile? There is not even some good, perhaps raising consciousness?’ weightily interjected the young women moderating, to break a speech that had grown in intensity since Maurice had surrendered engagement.

‘Obviously, haven’t you listened? Worse than futile. They’re privileged Generation ‘Y’ larpers. They’re not intelligent enough to even role-play Bolshevik travesties, so they play at protest, confused nobody takes them seriously. If they’d ambition it’d be offensive, as it stands it’s

pathetic. It's a mockery to call'em the left. I mean, okay... I mean, Mr Rathbone, do you... do you realise were you to get what you wanted and have your little carnival then you'd be one of the ones, most likely, you'd be one of the ones up against the wall too? Right?

'A price I'd gladly play, Klimt, if I was standing next to you.'

'That's very nice. All the Leninist, Trotskyist, whatever factional group's fatuous rhetoric and... y'know, all the posturing and topical theory. Well, what do you find? Bog standard, sociopathic, grandstanding posturing. That's all there is to you, right? Just another privileged radical who'll be shocked, I mean it, shocked, by what's coming. Who is unprepared? And worse, who is leading children.'

'And what about you, Comrade Rathbone, do you have anything to add before we wrap up?'

'My anarchist friend has his ideas. And fantasies. I've laid out what we're doing. I think it's clear who has a constructive proposal for the working class.'

'So you've nil to say?' Klimt retorted.

'Even if things are as bad as he says, who the hell turns the apocalypse into their manifesto? If I must add, I'd say it is funny to see you display your vulgar Marxist roots by constantly restating issues of my class background in this debate. And that there's a deeply comic quality too...'

'I wasn't the first...'

'Deeply comic...'

'I wasn't the first,' Klimt came in again. Maurice put up his palms in a gesture of mock forfeit and leaned back, 'to raise class, I believe that was you. Yes, you were ...'

'Please, Mr Klimt; you've had your say, let him speak.'

'Fine, go on, say your bit.'

Maurice forced a smile, 'I was just saying how amusing I find it that an anarcho-primitivist accuses me of insensitivity to the risks, considering your bourgeois vision...'

'So who is bringing up class again?'

'Please, Mr Klimt.'

‘Since your pastoral Arcadia has, as its prerequisite, the deaths of the majority of the human species, I’m reminded of another, different flavour of utopian, H. G. Wells, who similarly required that paradise would be unlocked by the blood of innocents.’

‘And of course Trotskyism or whatever Bolshevik nonsense your *movement* champions has no blood on its hands; you guys as White as the Stalinists claimed?’

‘Sorry, but we have to cut this short. I thank you both for participating in this week’s Clash of the Left. Thanks Mr Klimt, Comrade Rathbone. We will be on a hiatus for the next two weeks, but there will also be a tour. Details available on our website, where you can donate and read through the names of notable contributors, as well as purchase books and leaflets from our store and catch up with our latest happenings. This week I want to give particular praise to Lucy York, Gregory Jacobson and Alexander Brown. When we return we will be interviewing Professor Henrik Sorrel on his new book *Foucault and Neoliberalism: Prophet or Convert?* and discussing issues of poststructuralism, Marxist influence on continental thought and the ex-Marxist, Neomarxist and post-Marxist theory. Stay tuned, stay informed and stay critical.’

The Skype call closed and Maurice leaned back again. A bluebottle passed between his face and the computer screen.

Alice and Peter’s row with Mike was muted. Maurice rested his head against the new cushioned black office chair Toby’s sister had brought. His eyes shut, lips parted. While his people bickered, he cast his mind to when he had been in a Trot party in which all touted prole credentials, closeting wealth like insignias of plague. Maurice had distinguished himself by making no fuss of his affluence and displacing rivals with charges of workerism. Despite accruing the trust of a large section, the stratagem was doomed. His enemies reprisal had him outmanoeuvred, ousted, out. And in retrospect he did not blame them, even respected their ingenuity.

They gave him authority over the electoral campaign of an oldguard, which was sure to lose the candidate deposit. Criticized for humiliating a hero, he poached his staunchest allies and

helped form Helots, taking reluctant leadership. Given free reign Maurice engaged ideas his erstwhile party dubbed ultraleftist dogmas, opportunism or some other derogation, borrowing as much from Luxemburg and Bordiga as the Russian tendencies, and eventually taking on anarchists—preserving imperfect stability with the Fawltyesque sanction, ‘don’t mention Kronstadt.’ Still, he retained kinship until his former party became a circular firing squad after an internal rape accusation.

‘We should be helping the dispossessed. What was it Robespierre said? A revolution without revolution...’

‘You’d cite a bourgeois.’ David broke in.

‘Fuck sake I’m sick of *that* word. Tosser.’

‘Tch,’ Alice derided, tucking a strand of red hair behind her ear.

‘You’re all a fucking joke. I need to come out and say this, but you’re jokes. Like seventies students obsessed with apparitions of revolution.’

‘Watch it.’

‘You want to occupy underoccupied flats with a smattering of the membership; we only stand a shot if more than... what, say seventy five percent of the places have residents? Desperate residents with nowhere ...’

‘We...’

‘I’m not done. I’ll say mine and then you can say yours.’

‘Fine, embarrass yourself.’

Another voice cut in from behind Maurice, a woman’s. ‘Is it getting claustrophobic?’ *Toby’s sister? Clare?* Maurice had forgotten she was still in the room. She had been around a lot, prompting him to sermonise. He strained his head, not wanting to turn his seat and supplant feet from their comfortable position on the desk. His legs ached and he had just gotten them to stop their blood throb. She was standing sideways to him, arms folded, looking out of the rain-splattered glass, the sky beyond as grey as it had been for weeks. *Weeks? An embellishment?*



‘If we opened the flats to local homeless we could do it. I know a shelter,’ Mike continued, oblivious to Clare’s question only Maurice had heard, as if it had been whispered in his ear—like one of his own thoughts.

‘You done?’ David snapped.

Mike grimaced and nodded.

‘You wanna fill the place with lumpens.’

‘Oh, fucks sake, it’s already full of lumpens,’ said Mike

‘I’m not done; you said I’d have a chance to speak.’

‘Maybe what you’re saying is too dumb.’

‘I can only put up with so much,’ Alice butted in, her freckled face angry.

‘Please. All of you, please,’ Maurice said. They quietened and looked at him expectantly. He wanted their silence; the only noise a pitter-patter on glass. He sighed and began, as though reciting. ‘Mike, you’re right, these people aren’t the industrial proletariat and this is not the Nineteenth-century. I don’t think Marx is irrelevant for all that, and neither do you.’

‘No.’

‘Now, there are *lumpen* and then there are lumpen. These homeless, many are addicts? Alcoholics, even worse? At best deeply troubled. Unreliable, no investment in the place or movement. We’ve been doing well; a lot of hostile people are now working with us. There’s even the communal food sharing, car sharing... some people have found jobs.’

‘When you disassociate from undesirables you can build anything. That’s our future?’

‘Of course not.’

‘And do you think this can work if more than half the block is empty? I mean, they might even have a point. This building is a big slab of ugly concrete, mostly uninhabited, with rooms barely fit *to be* inhabited. You think the police will respect our functional little commune.’

‘No, they won’t.’

‘Then we’ve to make a choice.’

‘Not that choice,’ David said. He moved to stand behind Maurice, arms folded.

‘So what choice?’ Maurice asked, regretfully swivelling to face David. ‘I... we need to put the matter to a vote.’

‘Urgh,’ grunted Mike.

‘Yes, this is a matter for the membership,’ said Alice.

‘What do you think about that, Mike?’

‘Does he get to decide what is and is not put before members?’ asked David.

‘I’m willing to put it to a vote.’

‘How fucking generous.’

‘Good then.’ Maurice leaned his head back. He felt a stitch run his right calf, a creak in his joints.

Sixteen seconds. The longest the bluebottle stuck to the same location and stopped buzzing. Maurice counted and never got further than sixteen. But was there only one? He thought he had seen two, perhaps more? And if one, was it the same one for days? *How long do they live?* Had it been weeks since he had first heard the episodic buzz.

A knock interrupted his vacant thoughts. He got up from the swivel chair and opened the door. Toby, hair plastered to his face. Too much stubble. Maurice asked, ‘What’s wrong?’ as he escorted the younger man in.

‘I got turned down at another interview. I’ve been turned down for dozens more before I’ve even got to the interview.’

‘Sorry,’ Maurice said, unsure what he could do

‘This interview was different.’

‘Yeah?’ Maurice asked as he resumed his normal position at the desk, beckoning Toby to take a vacant office chair.

‘Toby collapsed. I don’t know what to do anymore. Clare...’

‘Your sister?’ Toby nodded. ‘I see a lot of her,’ said Maurice. ‘Hangs out with Mike a lot too. Is she alright?’

‘Fine. She thought I should come to you, you might be able to advise. I didn’t think... but what’s the harm? Besides, I thought you should know.’

‘Know?’

‘Woman said the company saw about my attachment to this group online. Didn’t want anything to do with me.’

‘Yes?’ asked Maurice, ‘Ah, okay... Let’s think.’ Maurice felt uncomfortable. What was *he* supposed to do? ‘I’ll give you work. You’ve been with us long enough; I’ll find some role.’

Toby straightened. ‘Thank you. Thank you. Really? I mean thanks.’

‘It’ll be minimum wage.’

‘Yes, I gotcha, that’s great though. Thank you.’ Toby hurried out as he spoke, as if he worried sticking around would jeopardise the offer.

~

*Wed*

Life is unrecognisable. ~~People, or at least I~~ I’m always unable to imagine something different, that is, except in transition. That’s too abstract, how to write what I’m thinking? There’s what exists & it plays like a continuous note, G flat. & then it’s no longer G flat, but D. & for me D becomes so continuous, ubiquitous, it’s like there’s only ever been D & I don’t believe talk about G flat because anything that isn’t D cannot be imagined. When people call attention to the previous G flat I know they’re right, but I don’t believe. Like in sci-fi when somebody changes the past, but in changing it, erases the memory of changing the past. That’s what common sense is like, backwards causation.

There’s a big difference between what a person can know & what they believe.

& what if it's like that for societies? The idea of overhauls (total shifts) is 4ever preposterous, but they've happened & it would be unusual if they stopped, no? & people across the world already live differently. What I'm trying to write... it's not so much people are conservative, but perception. People can change in a second, but they always forget.

Soon this unrecognisable new life, this good life, will be normal. At least I hope.

*Sun*

What next? We all get along. Except S. I barely visit the apartment except to sleep. He's always there; I don't like how he talks to my brother. I don't recognise him since his house fire. He stinks, barely showers. & his painting is nonsense. Maybe I don't recognise *me* anymore. The 'me' that needed S, excited to visit his house every week. Did he set that fire? Don't know. I'm just glad I'm no longer the person who allowed her whole mood to be dictated by his whims.

& the new *I*; each day I find myself looking at her in the bathroom mirror before bed & I don't know her. The face is not *mine*: its roundishness, brown eyes that go a bit green if I look really hard; I feel like I must have a different face, or no face at all. & a different body, or no body at all. Like I can't be this *I* who looks from the reflective surface with her face so set & unreadable. & I know this is ridiculous, but then I use this journal to write ridiculous things; when I'm looking at the new me, I wonder what she's thinking. No, that doesn't make sense; rather, what I wonder is if I wasn't her, what I would think about this woman & how it'd be not knowing what's inside her head. Just like I don't know what's inside Mike's or T's, Maurice's, S's. Or Karen's & Edward's. It's like Wittgenstein's beetle, they've their boxes & nobody can see inside, but everyone just agrees they contain beetles.

& I imagine that I would come up with all kinds of wrong ideas if I were looking at me from outside. Nobody could realise that behind these brown eyes that go a bit green under close inspection, & through those black pupils that give nothing away, there's a new *I* that's not the same as the old one that resided in the same skull.

I don't know how to write what I'm trying to think.

### *Later Sun*

I help Helots however able. @ first I made the mistake of asking Maurice for tasks; he's the sort of nominal leader, but I realised I was wasting his time. He's stuck in that room working & working, arguing & arguing. He's blue, I feel that he's the unhappiest person I've ever met; I wonder if someone could help Maurice as he has helped everyone. I observed instead of pestering Maurice. & then I went to Karen's interval training classes & it made sense. She said she voted against the occupation, but decided it's 'nice while it lasts.' Why shouldn't it last forever?

Karen's great; early 40s, never taught anything before, but did callisthenics in her living room & now wants to help people with what she's picked-up. She wears pink spandex & her group has got children & pensioners & everyone in between. & some of them can't really do it & kind of shuffle. & some of the men have no tops & are doing it really seriously, showing off. & others wear old sweat clothes. Those 2 kids I wrote about before, their names are Joshua & Ollie. They're funny, call themselves ninjas & say Karen, who goes along with it all, is their instructor. & they say this girl who I've not seen is their leader. It's weirdly fantastic.

I also work with Edward's group, delivering food around the apartments, cleaning up the building & buying economy stuff to reduce costs. They got a whole load of gym material for Karen: clothes, weights, even one of those standing bike things, but that broke. Edwards's really driven, just like Mike. He was having problems disposing of the trash so he gathered it into a hire van & dumped it in the city centre during the middle of the night. Right outside this big mall entranceway & the library.

Maurice was incensed. I admire Edward, but Mike says Maurice is right; it wasn't clever. Must we always be clever? There are squabbles; they're like a family. Not like mine; like a *real* family.

For the first time since I was a kid I feel I'm in a family with Toby again. I never felt like I was in a real family with Mummy & Daddy.

#### *Next Sunday*

Toby works with Mike now, finding homeless people.

That's just as bizarre as it sounds. They scour streets & look 4 people with no shelter & then bring them. Loads stay in the bottom floor, but many leave the next day. However gradually, day after day, more & more stick. A bunch of the residents walked because of them. & because they think the police are coming. Even Karen can't stop talking about 'when the police will come', but day after day it feels less & less likely. I *know* they will, but it feels too unreal & I don't *believe* what I know.

Anyway, the homeless are the main contention. & even people who didn't leave moved up into the higher floors & away from the turmoil. David & Alice, they're like Maurice's lieutenants, or his satellites, they want rid of all of them right away.

Mike says they're necessary, that we have to make hard choices. I want to be like him.

#### *Mon*

I have no time to write. Or thereabouts.

#### *Later Mon*

I'm worried about the first floor too. Mike's persuasive, but there are goings on down there; 'goings on', that's like one of my mother's expressions.

Karen threatened to leave after a group of men harried her. Maurice sorted it; found the culprits & had them thrown out. Then he had an argument with Mike. & then I talked to Mike about Karen & we rowed as well, our first. I want to see things like Mike, but it's worrying. & there's so much good here to imperil.

He's a good man though. I help Mike out more than my brother; as well as helping Mike officially, unofficially Toby is with David's group doing organised protests near government buildings. Just a few days ago Maurice had to pick him up with a bunch of them, even some of the non-members, from the station. They looked happy when they got back, laughing, & even Maurice smiled, if briefly. Toby's losing all that weight.

Even S is doing better; he spends time on the first floor doing portraits of the homeless. He's made a few friends. Although he did get this black eye he won't discuss. There's so much S won't discuss; we hardly talk anymore.

& then he tried to kiss me & got embarrassed when I told him not to. He's a bit of an idiot. At least he's a good painter. I don't know what he's doing here though.

*Fri*

This will be my last entry. I just don't have time 4 these reflections. Yes 'know thyself' & all, but there are better things to do. Mike's right; Maurice has to learn to take risks. & Mike knows about this stuff; he's done it before, but Maurice & David & Alice have no experience. Or not much. They should be grateful.

~

## Mary's Block Blog

Three losses changed my life in one month: the first was my job at *The Watcher*, the second my father, Arthur Pritchard, for whom much has been justly said in obituaries and remembrance; the third made less public impact, despite its import for more people. An eviction delivered to a

whole tower block, which stipulated no alternative accommodation beyond vague assurances of emergency B&B rooms. It was not the first of these in our city, but like the others it received no media coverage. The juxtaposition between the public spectacle in my life and this furtive injustice was my first thought when I was asked to join a group of activists, Helots, and help occupy the building as a witness to the events there. That is where you find me. I have also been preoccupied by another narrative in which I played a more marginal role: Bret Borger's, a man so recently sentenced to a maximum-security prison. As one of the few who spoke to him after his murder of a government minister, my opinion is that madness did not motivate his crime as many speculate, but desperation within the same debased society that steals homes. It was for hinting at these sentiments I lost my official access to the loudhailer of the press, which is why I communicate through a more humbly democratic medium, the blog.

Helots are self-governing in structure, but at the head is Maurice: a quiet, intense, giant. In appearance and temperament he's a hybrid of Neanderthal and Professor. He keeps the building running, addressing complaints and heads-off disaster. I was not here before his group, but from piecing together the testimony of residents I can discern their impact. The building grew from a disparate set of closed cells to an organic, living creature working towards a single idea. Neighbour and neighbour, formerly strangers, united to a single end. If this sounds dreamily utopian, that is an accurate summing up of the atmosphere. What was once a place for the forgotten (or a way station in circuitous journeys out of poverty) is now a shared destination, a new way of living that possesses its own unique energy. As if everyone here has been awakened from a fairytale.

Each day, on a mid-floor room, people talk about what they need, the problems besetting them. And solutions are found. The most consistent grievance surprised me. Science fiction writer Philip K. Dick wrote about kipple, wherewith he meant the quotidian bric-à-brac that



accumulates as so much junk; Dick addressed it as a metaphysical war, a constant vigilant battle between order, civilization, dignity and... kipple. He spoke a truth known to these residents. The early complaint was not poverty, lack of opportunity or the prospect of eviction, but garbage—mounds and mounds, a festering rot of miscellaneous trash. So much that when a member of Helots organised to clear it up even people who lived here a decade and saw it accumulate could not believe the heap. Some solutions arose more spontaneously, from people's good nature: a class for illiteracy; another for innumeracy; a third doing art with younger residents; even an exercise course. Some problems were too obvious to need stating; economising has proved the most powerful idea Helots has introduced. Food and supplies are bought and distributed by everyone who opts in and, while it took time, there are now no opt-outs. People with the ability have taken to cooking meals to distribute to residents in need, and this culinary charity has doubled as an opportunity to teach those without ability.

Nevertheless, I did not join to produce agitprop for Helots. Not all of their decisions prove universally popular. And they are not always efficient, as evidenced by a weeklong breakage of the elevator that was more than inconvenient to elderly and disabled residents. Also, their participation in protests and civil disobedience has been contentious—especially after younger residents became involved. But by far the greatest controversy is floor one. If I am ever in a group I merely need utter 'ground level' and I can expect an animated argument. It is where Helots' have opened the doors to the local homeless; in fact, searching them out and inviting them, to encourage them to stay more than a night. This has obvious advantages. It extends the beneficiaries of Helots' occupation; it embodies the spirit of egalitarianism the organisation champions and undermines one argument behind eviction, that the flats are underoccupied and the building ripe for better use. Moreover it would make eviction harder, argues Helots. A widely doubted idea, as many suspect addicts and the mentally ill residents could serve as the pretext for police action. And this suspicion, which some (not all) Helots dismiss as prejudice, has fuelled

other fears borne out after one middle-aged woman was harassed. It is ironic that an occupation hoping to keep people in their apartments has driven a minority either into others on upper floors or entirely out. Additionally, in the fight against kipple the ground floor, which only a few weeks ago was pristine, has been surrendered.

But, I have never felt threatened there. I have talked amongst the homeless and the majority are honestly, touchingly grateful for the break from the cold and, even more vitally, the relentless wet of the last few weeks. And integration has occurred: one young homeless girl has taken a flat on a higher floor, joined several classes and, aiding cohesion, earned friends by regularly contributing as a *sous-chef*. And here's the rub, from the beginning this project was going to be difficult and it may still prove unsuccessful, but what I have learnt, and everyone here has learnt, justifies risks.

Human nature is not what I supposed; it need not lead to the desperate acts of Bret Borger. We are more malleable and, potentially, generous. I continue to observe with interest and optimism; will I be proved a Pollyanna in this drama?

We will all find out.

~

Maurice felt a stickyness under his arms, his heart palpitating as he waited for the elevator. 'I've a mobile. I should've been texted,' he said to David, who leaned dejectedly against the wall, long arms gangling limply. 'Why didn't anyone tell me?'

'Mike and Alice are down there. Edward's out though.'

'So?' Maurice shouted. *I have to get myself under control.*

‘Sorry.’

The door opened for Maurice. David glided in before they slid shut.

‘Finningham said the police would phone before their first move.’

‘*Probably.*’

‘What?’

‘I was there, he said they’d *probably* phone.’

‘Probably?’

‘Definitely probably.’

‘Oh, God,’ Maurice’s voice rose again.

‘What?’

‘Has anyone alerted Finningham?’

‘Yes, Alice.’

‘You said they’re in riot gear?’

‘Yes.’

‘I need to know. Tell me everything.’

‘They turned up and started questioning on the ground floor.’

‘The homeless?’ He hated his note of panic.

‘Yes.’

Maurice breathed deeply. ‘Then?’

‘Then Clare saw them and went to get Mike from the second floor. And she bumped into me and Alice.’

‘So you came up to get me?’

‘After checking the situation.’

The lurching sensation of the elevator slowing to the requested floor made Maurice woozy.

In the entrance stood seven men heavily armoured in black rubbery padding over blue-black uniforms; masks, protective helmets and visors concealed their identities. A more regularly attired policewoman stood in the centre and next to her a woman and a man in suits.

Alice was irate with the suited woman, her orange-red hair held tightly back by a band that accentuated her anger. Clare and Mike were off to the side comforting one of the homeless men, squatting against a wall and crying.

‘What right do you have to come dressed like the fucking Third Reich and push people around?’ Alice demanded; she looked small surrounded by officials, her oversized Norwegian cream sweater no match for their bulkier apparel.

David kept behind Maurice as he worked up an ecstasy of wrath. ‘What you want?’ he demanded, looking straight at the policewoman.

‘If you’ll calm sir,’ said one of the masked officers, flanking Maurice. His body calmed at request; his seething hardened into purpose.

‘Thank you Alice, I’ll talk with them.’ He touched her shoulder.

She shrugged, ‘If you can make sense of these cretins be my guest.’

‘You’re in charge?’ asked the suited man.

Maurice almost started explaining the complex system of shared authority in Helots, but replied with a simpler, suitable, ‘Yes.’

‘Then you should be able to help,’ said the man. ‘There are truanting children in this building.’

‘Truanting?’ Maurice said.

‘Yes. And for many years.’

‘You came here with riot police for truants?’

‘Yes,’ said the man.

‘No,’ conceded the woman. ‘Not exactly, we have other concerns too. Welfare concerns.’

‘What welfare concerns?’

The suited man looked over at Clare and Mike. ‘We’re tipped that one of your vagrants...’

““Our vagrants”,’ Maurice echoed.

‘Yes, your vagrants, is on the sex offenders register.’

‘Okay.’

Clare stood up. ‘He flashed some people years ago. He’s not dangerous. Mike knew about it, but he decided... Besides, he’s nowhere near the children.’

‘In any case, we decided this presented a welfare concern,’ appended the suited man.

‘Agreed,’ Maurice said, ‘I will find him a place at a shelter. Were there any other concerns?’ he asked.

‘Well, yes. More general welfare concerns.’

‘You can’t send him away,’ Clare said angrily to Maurice. ‘Mike found him in a shelter. He can’t stand those places.’

‘We’ll talk about that another time,’ Maurice pithily rejoined, annoyed by having to negotiate with residents while trying to get rid of the police. Then, to the suited woman, he asked, ‘what other concerns?’

‘Well, this thing... this arrangement. And the fact they’re not going to school.’

‘I’ll deal with that too.’

‘That’s not good enough,’ said the policewoman, speaking for the first time. ‘We’re here to retrieve the children. Afterwards we’ll see what happens.’

‘What do you mean “retrieve”?’ Said Alice, ‘These children *have* parents, they’re not yours to retrieve.’

‘Neither are they yours,’ said the suited man, ‘nor their parent’s.’

‘Right, they’re their own,’ said Maurice, ‘we’ll gather them. And howabout let them decide if they leave or not?’

‘We’re not negotiating,’ said the policewoman, ‘we know how many there are...’

‘How?’ David asked.

‘That’s irrelevant. We know how many,’ she repeated, ‘and if we don’t account for them all, these men will systematically search the building.’

Maurice breathed deeply. The cluster stood silently, looking at him while he thought. *What do they expect from me?*

‘Okay.’

‘What?’ Alice trilled.

‘We’ve no options. David, Clare, Mike, round up the children. Tell parents and guardians we don’t have a choice, but I will not let this stand. I will remain here with our guests until they leave. Alice, get Finningham.’

‘Right,’ said Alice, less riled.

~

The suited woman opens one side of the swing door for Ollie and totters back into the bare, grey-carpeted room lit by incandescent tubes on the white panelled ceiling. He proceeds to one of three tables in the centre where he joins Ella, Joshua, a few teenagers and some children from the block he does not know. In the corner a policewoman stands over a buggy with a weeping, spluttering baby.

Joshua smiles at Ollie. ‘Yuh tell em any’ting?’ he whispers.

Ollie shakes his head.

‘Wah they aks?’

‘About the ground floor and not going to school and stuff.’

‘Same fi mi. Same here.’ Joshua tips his head to Ella, sat on the other side of him, back straight, looking in front, gaze raised, averted from the face of the boy opposite. ‘Okay, *Hokage?*’ Joshua asks Ella.

She jerks, blinks and then smiles.

‘When we gettin the fook outta here?’ says one teenage boy on a chair, tilted on its rear legs.

The woman looks up from the baby, shrugs and looks back. The boy repeats louder, ‘I said, “when the *fuck*”,’ emphasising the obscenity, teasing out its phonetics, “do we get out?”

The baby responds to the outburst by wailing louder and the policewoman snatches a glare at the teenager, ‘Shut it, little shit.’

The teenager laughs and is joined by others of his set—and some of the older kids too. And then also by Joshua.

“‘Shut up you little shit’,’ mocks one teenage girl to more laughter.

Then another parodies in a higher pitch, bested by a third.

The first interlocutor laughs loudest and almost slips backwards, clumsily stopping himself with his legs but allowing the chair to collapse with a clatter that further distresses the baby. The laughter continues at this new stimulus, and progresses on its own momentum until even Ollie joins with Joshua and the others, with the exception of Ella.

‘Shut up!’ shouts the woman vainly, only momentarily interrupting the hysterics, adding further fuel with the abrupt silence.

When the mirth dies the teenage boy, still standing, walks to the policewoman and crying baby.

‘Sit. Down.’ The policewoman shouts.

He leers, bends and picks up the baby to hold in his arms. It slowly stops crying.

‘Fookin feds don’t know nothink,’ says the girl, the first to imitate the officer.

‘*Police*, dip shit,’ says the teenager with the baby.

‘Put the baby back,’ says the policewoman.

‘Fine, whatever you say.’ And he does as requested, walks back to his seat, rights it and, as he sits, listens to the baby scream its pleas again.

Phil paced as he talked on the phone; except for Clare and Mike, all attention was on him. They sat together with a small, portable radio. ‘...having made a splash on the political blogosphere, contentions rose about the recent spate of evictions...’ the device whispered.

‘That’s great Seán...’ said Phil, ‘yes, they’ll be really happy.’

‘Mayor Hendrickson was asked his opinion of the occupation of such buildings and condemned these activities as dangerous, futile and undemocratic.’ Phil folded his mobile and put it back in his pockets, which he patted. Clare switched the radio off.

‘Done,’ he said to the distraught crowd eyeing him.

‘Done?’ asked Maurice.

‘Yep.’

‘Your contact?’

‘And yours. My friend Seán says your friend Finningham is a scary lawyer.’ Phil took a plastic seat in the abandoned apartment, converted into a meeting spot weeks earlier.

‘Y’know about Ella? And Peter’s babe?’ asked Sarah, her voice less anxious than it had been that afternoon. A few other parents’ presented their desperate requests for information too.

‘Seán says Ella and the little one are fine. And all the others. A certain Daniel,’ a woman from across the room looked up at the name of her son, ‘got into a spot of trouble. Don’t worry, that Finningham bloke scared the figurative pants off of them at social services; this whole operation is... dubious.’ Phil smiled, cherishing the role of hero even if his part was only as an intermediary between his friend at social services, this lawyer and the scared residents.

‘When tay be ere?’

‘Soonish, Ms Urquhart,’ answered Phil, frazzled. ‘They’re being bundled into that van and brought straight back.’

‘Whew, thank God’ exclaimed David, leaning against the door.



‘God no’ting ti do wi dis. Tanks tis mon we get kids bock,’ said Urquhart, indicating Phil.

‘That’s what he meant by God, right?’ said Phil with a smile, eliciting a small laugh from Urquhart and a few others, as well as a disapproving cluck from a man at the back.

Clare asked, ‘What are we going to do now?’

‘We’ve got to end this,’ said Alice, who had been quiet for hours.

‘What?’ said Mike, standing.

‘We have to cut our losses. This is too much. With the homeless down there, finding out one of them is a sex offender, and then the police. It’s too dangerous, especially for the kids.’

‘Aren’t you paying attention? We just won,’ Mike rebuked.

Urquhart, Phil, Sarah and a few others left the room.

‘Perhaps you’re not paying attention,’ she shouted back, ‘we nearly lost these peoples’ children.’

‘But...’

Mike was cut-off by Maurice, ‘But what? Alice, I think you make an important point. We shouldn’t just give up...’

‘W...’

‘Just hear me,’ he said, stopping her attempted interruption, ‘we shouldn’t give up like that. This is a turning point. What’s happened can’t just be ignored, but we *have* won, as Mike puts it tactfully, and we all have to decide how we proceed. Do we succumb to the eviction?’

‘Screw that,’ said one resident from the rear of the room.

Phil was watching this debate with amusement, ‘Seems you guys might be getting into more trouble than this ruin of a building warrants?’

‘Do we stay?’ Maurice asked everyone. ‘It’s the same choice as when we first came, but it needs to be put to a vote again. And I want to put the question of the first floor to a vote again too.’

‘Get rid of it,’ said the same heckler.

‘We’ll see,’ said Maurice.

‘Just a moment,’ said Mike, ‘are we really considering throwing them all back onto the streets after we voted to let them in?’

‘That can be your argument to put before everyone,’ said Maurice.

‘And if the tower voted to murder every firstborn?’ asked Clare.

‘Then obviously we’d go through the building and butcher them,’ retorted Alice.

‘Everyone, please, for now we ought to get outside and greet the children, okay?’

~

A fly circled over Maurice. He was fatigued after all the action, but he was also happy they had pulled through. This occupation was going to work. His mobile vibrated on the desk table and he picked it up.

‘Hello, this is Maurice,’ he said. ‘What, who did you say you’re... those people with the leaflets... what is it you want... no... okay ... yeah, we’d be happy for help... no we don’t have a problem with Jesus Saves, just as long as you don’t mind heathens... that’s cute... great.’

He put down the phone feeling a bit more estranged from the world; he couldn’t keep up.

~

Alice tucked red hair behind her ear in a mannerism Maurice frequently observed. He sat back and watched her and David as she hunched over one of the two new desks, writing up her oration for the next day’s vote. David next to her, his overlong legs and arms splayed. Azariah stood over by the door quietly muttering into his mobile. The small man with jet hair looked, to Maurice, like a sort of human mole. And yet he projected presence.

Azariah had phoned on the heel of the social services raid to arrange this meeting a week later between Helots and Jesus Saves. During that period everything was preparing for the next round of voting, Maurice's perpetual democratic chore.

Azariah said 'Tarrah,' and tucked the phone into his jacket. 'Sorry bout that,' he addressed Maurice, '*He* makes so many demands.'

Maurice forced a smile. 'That was Him?'

Azariah smiled in kind. 'Where were we?'

'You said you want to integrate your group?'

'Yes. Right. A whole buncha us are downstairs, they'd all like to meetcha. We respect your work.'

'Even if I'm not...'

Azariah interrupted, 'I recognise His purpose when I see it.'

'It will have to be put to a vote tomorrow; we can combine it with the vote to decide whether we stay here at all. Obviously if that's not carried your integration is rejected too.'

'And what outcome are you hoping for?'

The door opened and Clare entered, followed by Toby. Her already wan skin ashen and her brown eyes wide locked.

'What's wrong?' Alice asked.

'Everything,' Toby replied, pulling his right hand through his brown hair.

'*What?*' asked Maurice, niggled by suspected exaggeration.

'I saw Mike,' Clare managed.

'We all see Mike. He's everywhere these day,' moaned Alice, looking up from her work.

'Shut up,' Toby demanded, 'let my sister speak.'

'I saw him with a homeless man,' Alice interrupted with a 'pfft', but Clare continued, 'And later. Later that same day I saw the same homeless man and the policewoman. The one from yesterday. The one that took the kids.'

‘Sorry, I don’t follow,’ declared David.

‘I saw Mike communicating to the police. I think...’ she looked down.

Azariah sighed, ‘we had this too. A while back. Undercover officers infiltrating; something to do with a founder member working in Latin America.’

‘It can’t be true,’ Toby spoke to Maurice, willing him to offer an alternative.

Maurice felt unwell. *The homeless, the vote...* his phone’s vibration on the desk left a void in his thoughts. He picked it up and answered in a quick jerk, ‘Mike... Shut up, I’ve just been speaking... and what... Whatever you have to say this is a lot more fucking... Shut... What? Now?’ He looked over at David and Alice, who stood. ‘We’ll be right there, don’t do anything, Mike.’

He slammed the phone.

‘What is it?’ asked Toby.

‘The police.’

‘But we didn’t have any time ...’ Alice’s voice trailed.

The thin, long lobby downstairs was packed by white robes, otherworldly in the ramshackle setting, and in amongst them, the less uniform in disparate layers of threadbare hoodies, jeans, t-shirts, and duffles, variously dishevelled. Amidst the eclectic medley Sebastian and Mike were talking to a young man, one of those dressed in white; Sebastian pointed to the transparent glass of the door and the legionary wall of riot police assembled beyond, as if a reenactment society were preparing.

‘Who?’ was all he muttered.

Mike had done no more than cursorily glance before he picked up his mobile. ‘Hi... Yes, that’s my... listen... Listen, this is more... I... The police are here.’ He folded his phone.

It did not take long for the people in the white robes to take note of situation. They acted as if drilled. They left the block in orderly twos, coming together, joining hands and spreading to surround the entrance in a human shield.

Sebastian watched with Mike, 'To use modern parlance, what's going down?' he asked.

Mike ignored him.

Dazed by the succession of events, the appearance of these Christians and now the police, Sebastian took the hand of a girl in white. 'Mind if I tag along?' He felt a cold wind on his face as he exited with them. The girl, formerly composed, recoiled and then offered a tiny nod before continuing with him to the group.

When they were all standing in line, a voice of one of the men intoned, 'We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord,'

And a woman's quickly joined his, 'We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord,'

And another's, 'We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord,'

And together they sang, 'And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love,'

This continued until they were all singing in harmonised union. Sebastian quietly mumbled, his eyes trained on the plastic shield wall about thirty feet away. It would make a great picture, rendered less figuratively. He listened to the girl whose hand he had taken, 'And they'll know we are Christians by our love.' Without being tone-deaf she had no evident training and yet *I like that sound...*

The group swayed in their joined-up circle. The second verse began, 'We will walk with each other, we will walk hand in hand...'

A woman's demands amplified and distorted by megaphone cut through the song, which nevertheless persisted without a tremor, 'This is the police. We are authorised to end the occupation occurring within this Block. We want to proceed peacefully. Everyone outside will have one minute to disperse.'

‘We will walk with each other, we will walk hand in hand.’ Sebastian felt the girl’s grip intensify, the wind chilled his naked head.

How old was she? Fourteen? Eighteen? Somewhere between? *What could her name be?* He wondered what Clare and Toby were doing, why the enigmatic Mike had acted so strangely and what was to become of his peculiar new home. His voice faltered and in his head he found a countdown, each numerical symbol following deliberately, *forty, thirty-nine, thirty-eight, thirty-seven, thirty-six...* What would the police do after a minute?

‘And together we’ll spread the news that God is in our land,’ went on the song.

But for Sebastian there was only finite moments impregnated with fatalism and calamity, *thirty-five, thirty-four, thirty-three, thirty-two, thirty-one, thirty, God... God?*

The voices crescendoed. ‘And they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love. And they’ll know we are Christians by our love.’

And then, in his mind, pouring the canister of oil over the canvases collected in the centre of his art room. His decision to burn the house his dad had bought him. That choking escapist drive clashing with panicked cowardice. *This is illegal, I’ve got to...* And to his own horror he wrested his hand from the girl’s, who was silenced until the woman on the other side, from whom he released his hold more easily, took her needful clasp. And Sebastian ran. He ran past all the people in white, down a wide tunnel formed by the half circle around the door and the wall of riot shields, and away, onto pavement and away again, until he was far enough away and he folded panting.

In the lobby someone loudly sneezed. A middle aged woman in a pink tracksuit stood near the door with her mobile unsteadily held out recording, watching as the police forced each person in the prayer circle to their knees and put plastic cuffs on their wrists. It was only a few feet away. When the process begun the song faltered, but soon one of the voices picked up again, one following another with improved verve. And the song became a constant, as not a single one

resisted arrest. So it went on, until they were all corralled, four to an officer, towards a newly erected cordon where the police line hitherto stood. There they were gathered and forced back into kneeling. The women put her phone away and saw the elevator doors open.

People squeezed out of the metal compartment.

Mike walked straight to Maurice, 'They've arrested the Christians.'

Maurice looked at Azariah, who shrugged, 'They're trained,' he said, with a trifling laugh. 'My people will be fine.'

The megaphone voice recommenced, grabbing the attention of homeless, residents that had accumulated with the group from Maurice's room.

'This is the police. We're authorised to end the occupation of this Block. We wish to proceed peacefully. Everyone inside will have ten minutes to leave; we have an officer and several people from the social services who will help you find somewhere to temporarily stay, if required. Nevertheless, if you do not leave we can make no guarantees you will not be arrested when we enter. This especially applies to everyone inside.'

'We have to go,' Mike shouted, looking at Clare and then Maurice.

'What?' Maurice asked.

'So this is your agent provocateur?' Azariah asked, still grinning. 'Suffering the poisoner to live amongst you, tsk, tsk.'

'Who the fuck are you?' Mike asked, turning on the smaller man.

'A humble messenger,' Azariah replied, hand held on chest.

Clare quivered; Toby noticed, and so did Azariah.

'What *are* we going to do?' Alice asked.

Toby echoed, 'Yes, what shall we do?'

'We. Have. To. Go.' Mike repeated, this time to Toby. And then back to Clare, holding out his open hand. 'We walk out. Everyone, you have to join us. If we stay, we'll be in trouble.'

Clare angrily hit his hand away. ‘Bastard.’ She ran back to the elevator and summoned it, the door opened.

‘What you doing?’ Mike demanded.

‘Shut up,’ Maurice hissed. ‘If you want to go back to your colleagues, do it now.’

Several of the residents and homeless eyed the two, as if deducing the source of this drama-in-a-drama as a key to undoing their quandary.

‘Everyone,’ Mike shouted again.

‘Will he just shut it?’ Alice asked no one.

‘Seems not,’ said David, leaning on one of the doors, but not so nonchalant as usual—his body tense, shoulders stiff.

‘Everyone,’ Mike repeated at volume, ‘if you wanna leave you must come now.’ And he walked to the door. Most of the homeless and many residents hesitatingly followed as the elevator closed on Clare.

The group piled out, forced by a funnel of police to a single spot where, except for Mike, they joined Jesus Saves, forced to hunker for systematic mass arrest. At first some struggled and protested. The woman officer with the megaphone walked up behind Mike; he was looking at some fixed point in the sky. She patted him on the shoulder and he turned to her, away from the flats. They stood for a moment and Toby, still inside, transfixed, wondered what they said. She walked away first; Mike gave a look back to the door and Toby felt undone. Then Mike walked away too.

‘They promised,’ Toby reasoned. ‘They said if we came out. How...’

‘It’s okay,’ Maurice said.

‘What the fuck do you mean it’s okay?’ shouted Alice.

‘It’s expected; it’s how *they* work. We prodded and they respond.’

‘Were we idiots?’ David asked.



‘You lot did well. You’re inexperienced. I wish I’d been here sooner.’ Azariah put in, still upbeat.

Maurice involuntarily baulked at the condescension, but that emotion was doused by apathy.

Several more confused residents and some party members exited the elevator and joined the gathering.

‘Has anyone seen my son?’ asked a potbellied, unshaven man with red hair and freckles. ‘Anyone seen Ollie?’

‘How long do we have?’ Toby asked.

Ella observed Philip shuffle the corridor, his head at a tilt. Peter was here. And that was what he wanted, *truly*? Peter would inevitably return for his child, but something was wrong about relinquishing the baby. She knew Philip liked having Junior. And for the first time maybe her uncle did not want her brother back. Behind, Ella walked silently, adjusting to Phil’s slow step, wheeling her sleeping nephew in his pushchair. Trying to appreciate the gurgling boy. How did he make her something so adult as an aunt? When she’d gone to school younger girls would boast of aunthood, but she’d never imagined the strange appellation pinned to her. To Peter Jr she would be ‘Aunt’ or the more belittling ‘Aunty’, ‘Aunty Ella’ who must be an old woman or ‘Aunt Ella’ who must be an even more severe old woman.

Baby Peter’s eyelids twitched in REM.

She saw how they were all enveloped in themselves, but only Peter Jr failed to register the dazed woman as she ran up to them.

‘The police,’ the woman panted. Ella knew how her overweight uncle was cunning and coarse and somehow dependable. And knew the relief people felt finding him when something was wrong. How he fixed problems.

‘Again?’ Phil asked, one eyebrow up. Ella noted the young woman’s distress.

‘Oh,’ Ella added, thinking about her time at the social services, trapped.

‘They’re serious. It’s a proper raid.’

‘Okay,’ Phil replied, his voice appropriately modulated to her insistence. ‘Ella, find your mum and bring her here, right?’

Ella nodded.

‘I’ll phone that useful Finningham in case Maurice neglected to be sensible. And you... err... Clare isn’t it?’

Clare stared at Phil, who took his phone and dialled. ‘I have to warn more people,’ she remarked, half to herself. And she ran back the way she’d come.

Ella turned the pushchair and drove it forward. Peter Jr made a small babble, but otherwise slept soundly. As Ella turned a corner at the other end of the hallway she narrowly evaded collision with Joshua, running like normal, arms behind, body bent straight in imitation of how ninjas ran in his favourite anime, which Ella had reluctantly agreed to watch with them.

Ollie and Joshua watched as their *Kage*, Ella, sped off. And saw Phil standing, talking into his phone. Ollie followed Joshua to Phil, yawning, eyelids twitching. Josh had kept him up last night to play on the console in Joshua’s cupboard room. They fell asleep there, the game still playing its soundtrack of traditional Japanese instrumentation, rock riffs and electric solos plagiarising Bach organ music.

Moreover, Joshua’s granny had the radio loud enough for her weak hearing and woke them early. One part of her seven o’clock breakfast routine centred on the heavily salted water-cooked porridge and rooibos she gulped, emitting steamy breaths. When given this food and drink, Joshua claimed a conspiracy to poison him for an alleged fortune his parents left, but Ollie enjoyed whatever he was offered. Somehow, Joshua exerted his usual vitality with the same sleep deficiency, which Ollie regarded with a mixture of jealousy and awe.

‘Wah yuh dun?’ he said breathily, finger pointed at Phil.

Phil smiled, ‘I didn’t *do* anythink.’

‘Why di *Kage* be runnin like that then?’

‘On a mission. She’s on a mission’

Joshua opened his mouth, but Phil stopped him short. ‘Listen, you and I will have to reconcile... a truce.’

‘I *knows* wah “rec’cile” mean, man.’

‘The police are back.’

‘When?’ Ollie asked, alarmed at the implications, understanding Ella’s fright.

‘Now. And we need to be calm because the bastards’ll be rushing through any moment. I’ve phoned help, but I need you two too.’

“‘To, to?”’ Joshua echoed, confused.

‘I need both of your help.’

‘We will,’ Ollie answered, finding it odd to take over as spokesperson of the duo. Joshua gave him a quizzical look.

‘Right. We need somewhere near. An apartment. We shouldn’t be in the hallways. Fuck, I shouldn’t have sent Ella off like that. Not thinking straight.’ He looked up at the ceiling. Then he looked back at the two boys. ‘Ella should be back soon.’

‘Ah mus get Granny,’ Joshua said.

‘Good idea. You’re on this floor, right?’

Joshua nodded and turned.

‘Wait. Gotta wait for Ella, for the *Kage*.’

‘Yah man,’ Joshua agreed. He crouched down as they lingered. Ollie looked back and forth from Joshua to Phil.

Nobody spoke.

Sarah came round the corner holding Peter Jr, shaking him up and down to keep him giggling. Ella followed, tucked behind her mum and more afraid in appearance than even she typically managed.

‘Thank God,’ Phil shouted ‘Look, the pol...’

‘Yes-yes, Ella’s told me. I’ll rue the bloody day I voted for all this.’

‘We’re going to the young ninja’s apartment, nearby.’ He patted Joshua’s head, ‘Lead the way my temporary ally.’

Sarah had a pinched, bemused expression.

Joshua and Ollie were close, backs pressed against a radiator so there was seating enough for Philip, Sarah and Joshua’s gran in the sparsely furnished living room. Ella paced behind the settee where her mum and uncle hunched. Everyone was quiet. Philip’s hands tapped. And Joshua’s foot imitated the rhythm. They all tried to hear if anyone was coming.

When Ollie spoke he broke such a prolonged hush he caused a start in the adults. ‘I have to get my dad.’

Joshua stopped tapping and slowly looked up. He responded before anyone else with an ironically lilted, ‘Why?’

‘Stay put lad,’ Sarah said, pushing her specks up the bridge of her nose after wiping them on a tissue. ‘Your dad can take care of his own self.’

‘No,’ Ollie insisted, ‘I have to get my dad. He hates the police. Something might happen.’

‘Sit down,’ Joshua urged, pulling on Ollie’s green-black striped t-shirt.

Ollie pulled away and went to the door.

Philip stopped tapping and followed in a slow shuffle, he felt unsteady. ‘You know you shouldn’t, right?’

Ollie nodded. ‘I *have* to.’ He felt the momentum of his own mettle spur him. He knew he must save his dad. He knew as much as he knew he hated his dad and as much as he knew his dad would be looking for him.

‘Then mi av ti go too, Chūnin,’ said Joshua, also standing.

‘Genin.’

‘Today yuh ah Chūnin, man.’

The three left and Ella slipped after them.

They did not meet anyone down the hallway. The four walked and walked in silence, guided by Joshua and Ollie, unaware of Ella.

*Isn't it normally this quiet though?* Philip wondered.

At the elevator he took out a fag to slow his heart while they collectively watched the metallic outer doors. He lit it with his Liberty Statue. The doors cranked open and from inside a group of riot police leapt, taking hold of Philip, pushing him down and locking his arms behind his huge body. Ollie and Joshua both passed Ella in a sprint.

Phil was being secured in plastic handcuffs and so Ella ran after the two boys. The three came to the stairway doors. Joshua and Ollie often used these winding passages; one of Josh's training exercises was to run Ollie up and down the building until both returned exhausted to his Gran's fake acrimony.

Ollie opened the door first and as he came through heard men hurtling down. He turned soon enough to see one of their squared riot shields slam into his side and steal his footing. Then the world stopped as the floor gave way and Ollie fell.

~

The wind still galed. A snappish shower coated the grass and canvas of tents, forming puddles on uneven surfaces. More people were lead to the cordon and canopies, forced to kneel to be placed in handcuffs. Clare was next to Maurice, who stared at the grey slab of sky. Mary was not far. Her eyes darted so that she looked as rapt as a meerkat

‘Where are David and Alice?’ she asked. She felt excited despite herself, to be apart of the events she was reporting.

He did not look at her, but kept his gaze fixed up. 'David was hurt by a baton. I think. Alice went with. In an ambulance.' Each word was slower; his voice trembled. 'David was badly...' he became quiet and at last looked at Clare, 'you okay?'

She smiled and nodded. She lied.

A new, elegiac group was cajoled from the building. Ms Urquhart and Sarah steered forward, Sarah carrying Peter Jr. And then Phil, in handcuffs. And then a stretcher with a body bag, half-filled. Walking alongside, their necks hunched, Joshua and Ella trod, holding hands tightly, flanked by men in riot gear. With additional brawny warriors shadowing the procession.

Joshua softly whimpered, 'Ollie is gone. Ollie is gone.'

The female officer in charge addressed the group. 'Every member of Jesus Saves is to be released. We're informed we've no grounds to hold you, but if you don't leave immediately, that'll change.' Officers circled them and broke off plastic cuffs from anybody in a white robe. Peter pulled his hood down and watched Phil as he was forced to join the captives. Phil looked back.

Ms Urquhart, Sarah, Joshua and Ella were led to a tent for younger and older people and people with babies. When Ella and Ollie were inside Sarah pulled away. 'Get off've me.'

'Don't cause trouble, miss.'

'Go "miss" you'self,' she snapped. 'That's my son and I've his baby fer'im.'

*'Please* just get in the tent.'

Ms Urquhart also pulled free. 'Let da baybee av is fadder.'

They stepped back. 'Go ahead,' the man said, looking bashfully to the side.

'If there hell, yeh not buried as far with rest dese mun,' Ms Urquhart decreed, to the cop's perplexity.

Sarah walked straight to Peter.

'Hi Mum,' he said, still looking at Philip.

'I never thought I'd see you like this. Found God, did'ya?'

‘God found him,’ Azariah said, flexing his arms after being freed.

‘Good, hope the almighty sorts you out, nobody on this earth ever will.’

‘Your mum?’ Azariah asked, ‘and your son?’ He looked at the baby.

‘Yeah,’ Peter acknowledged.

‘She’s a smart lady.’

‘You take your son back and do right by him; I’ve gotta look after your traumatised sister.’

‘Is Ella alright?’

‘When have any of *my* kids been alright?’

‘Sorry.’

‘Not your fault. This time you seem to have tried to do well. Unlike me, getting my whole damn family dragged into this sorry affair.’

‘I’m still sorry.’

‘Yeah?’

Peter nodded.

‘Good,’ she said, her voice softer, notched.

‘I’ll be seeing you for now,’ she said, passing the baby over to him and walking back to the tent where she had to argue with the guard to be let in without the baby. Peter caught, ‘my daughter is in there so let’er go or lemme in.’

‘Azariah?’

‘Yeah Peter?’

‘See that man looking at me?’

‘Yes.’

‘Can you pretend he’s wiv us to get im released?’

Azariah grinned. ‘I’ll be happy to try.’

Navigating through prisoners, Mike sees Clare’s face. He crouches. She looks at him, insouciant.

‘Clare?’

She phlegms loudly and spits in his face. He ignores the viscid mucus and reaches behind, removing her cuffs. They stand together

‘Go. I’ve arranged so you can go.’

A second gummy spittle hits him.

‘Leave, get away from here,’ her brother urges. Clare had not known Toby was still there, lost in thoughts and despair.

Clare ran by Philip and Azariah, who were exchanging a fag after the latter obtained the release of the former. They both heard her sob and looked at her run off. They looked at each other too.

‘She’s not okay.’ Azariah said.

‘Who’s okay?’

‘I’m following her.’

‘Whah’bout your people?’

The Jesus Saves were marching off, Peter carrying his baby. ‘They know what to do.’

They walked spryly.

‘The activists have this lawyer, should be here soon,’ Phil said, for the sake of speaking.

‘An Angel’s advocate?’

They followed the weeping girl through streets, away from the towering block and police cars. The rain was harder now and the lapis sky darkened. The two men walked in silence through the suburban landscape. Past tower blocks, terraced houses, newsagents, a board promoting Kangaroo burgers, off-licences, derelict shells and a lone tattoo parlour displaying skulls, roses, hearts, Oriental characters seared on pink sore flesh and flashing neon lights on puddles with electric greens, blues, reds. In the distance was a column-guided gasometer, its gas bell envelope empty so only the outlining telescoping walls showed like the support assembly for a promised



edifice. They walked by a bus stop where several teenagers huddled, one girl with a streak of claret in her black hair. The sky was lead; a weak spring sun was dying in a ceremony of ochre and saffron edged by tawny russet.

They came to a redbrick bridge marred by lichen, where they saw her climb onto a large barrier overhanging a drop onto tracks. Both men's pace sped from a fast walk to a quick jog, Azariah overtaking.

'Please stop,' he shouted.

She did not look round. Philip caught up puffing.

'I know you've been following me.'

'We haven't kept ourselves secret,' Azariah said, 'please come back.'

'No.'

'Okay, but I've height issues. Just thinking about it makes me wrongheaded. So, if you won't climb off, mind sitting?'

'Yes, I mind.' Clare kept her gaze in front, neither up nor down.

Phil took a cigarettes packet from his pocket. He took one of the last and put it in his mouth.

'Often thought about smoking too,' she muttered. Then, facing him with puffy eyes, 'Don't like the smell. Or the idea, but I see a poetry in smoking. The actions.'

'Please don't spin round so fast.' Azariah said, looking to the pavement for stability.

Phil grinned. 'Ought to smoke. And eat more. If you're gonna kill yourself do it like *moi*—slowly, pleasurably. Do it by living.' He lit a second and handed it to her. She reached and took it, put it in her mouth and breathed in. She let the smoke trail.

'You're a natural,' Phil said.

'It's disgusting,' she answered and threw the fag onto the track. She looked down; jerking back, she sat on her knees, dry heaving.

'C'mon,' Phil said. 'Let's climb down to the safe side.'

'You...' she suppressed a heave, 'you think life's a joke, don't you?'

‘Because I was an idiot, a kid died today. Life is not a joke, unfortunately.’

‘Why should I stay alive?’ she demanded.

Phil shrugged. ‘Because life’s good or something. If it weren’t who gives a fuck if some kid dies and why prevaricate on the wall?’

‘And you?’ Clare looked at Azariah, ‘your sell?’

‘If you’ve the courage to jump you *must* have the courage not to! Listen. I couldn’t bring myself to get up there, but I know what it’s like. And not...’ Clare cast her eyes at the trajectory of the fall. ‘Listen!’ he held out his hands in an urgent entreaty. ‘Please. Not because I was hurt, but because I hurt. If the blameless throw their lives away, they *must* demand the guilty do the same. Please don’t. I know life is awful, but...’

‘What’s that nonsense?’ Phil interrupted, ‘Life is not *only* good, it’s *the* only good, that wivout which... Life’samazing.’ He looked directly at Clare. ‘What’d’ya think you’re disposing of? Something of yours?’

‘You don’t need commands,’ Azariah came in again, his calm fraying.

‘What do I need?’

‘Patience.’

She stood up and turned back towards death.

‘Don’t,’ the two men said together.

‘Why?’ she screamed, still looking forward.

‘Because you’re not alone. I don’t know you,’ Azariah begun, ‘but I know you’re part of other peoples’ lives. And right now patience is the most daring... the best... what’s worth not jumping.’

They stood in a tableau, the two men begging the young woman to stay. Phil heard the distinct rap of a distant train. He remembered the cliché about the trauma of train drivers and suicides.

She turned and crouched again, dropping her legs over the bridge side so they dangled out of danger. She felt the cold of the barrier wall against her buttocks. She looked at them. The three were quiet. They could hear running steps from the other side. She looked and saw a woman in a fur-rimmed hooded coat.

‘It’s hard now,’ Azariah said. ‘Here.’ He held his hand out. The moment they made contact he gently pulled. She grabbed hold of the small, repulsive man and cried into him. He stiffly patted her.

Phil watched the smoke curl up from his mouth, felt gooseflesh up his arm.

‘She okay?’ the running woman huffed.

‘Don’t know,’ Phil answered, his cadence flat.

With a tremendous clackety-clacking the train rushed beneath them.

~

The car disturbed a seagull desperately picking an emptied kebab packet. As they travelled to the less dense suburbs in the metropolitan area, Finningham took a sharp turn that bumped Maurice.

‘How much was bail?’ Maurice asked.

‘Not enough for a first-class criminal.’

‘Know anything about David?’

‘No.’

‘About the kid?’

‘Oliver Brown? You know what there’s to know.’

*Is there censure in his voice?* They remained quiet. *There should be.* The second raid had ended the occupation in arrests and even a death. Maurice’s Helots had failed.

‘So foul and fair a day I have not seen.’ Maurice spoke, his speech cracked.

‘*Macbeth*? Feeling melodramatic? Wife loves the tragic bollox. God knows how many times I’d to sit through such plays, to slit your throat to. Prefer romances myself...’ Silence. ‘O world, That has such people!’ added Finningham.

‘Here is everything advantageous to life?’ Maurice sighed. ‘Public school boys better suited to theatre than utopia... The block was a nostrum; I’m a snake-oil salesman.’

‘You did what you thought right.’

‘Read Marx, but still put Hegel back on his feet... and made Plato’s castles float high to come crashing... Meantime *they* bleed, but not enough. Utopia, the ultimate MacGuffin.’

‘Shut it will-ya? Won’t help.’

‘We’re beyond.’

‘Enough bullshit, alright?’ Finningham diverted his eyes from the road to look at Maurice, straying a little towards the guardrails.

Maurice nodded. ‘Enough.’

## Part Two: Dystopia

In which the barbs of defeat &  
impasse claim victims & the  
remnant find new friendships in  
hitherto unfriendly territory.

‘We wear out so early,’ she said to the mirror, not really  
sure who the ‘we’ was.

— Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*



Dear Hernán P. Oquendo,

Thank you dearly for your letter.

Please don't consider it churlish if I worry that you desire forgiveness from an idol. I cannot fathom the sumptuous rectitude of hypocrites, let alone play the part; my sinful pride protects me against sinful self-deceit, as so often vice counters vice. I do not have a direct line to God, who nonetheless needs no mouthpiece. Nor will I be PR; you will not find useful idiots in Jesus Saves. So from the onset you should know I offer a salve, but only the living Christ offers salvation. And only salvation has value.

Yet I am grateful for your letter and would happily meet, even knowing your reputation. Against my fallen nature I look to the life of Our Lord and Saviour for guidance, and He sought the company of those least regarded by the Pharisees—purveyors of public opinion. But I need to stress, I can only point to His example.

And I am unlike those soul collectors of whom you speak, arduously dragging grubby burlaps of the converted to the gates of the Kingdom; confident He works from a spreadsheet. Their haul won't be sacralised, their seedy metaphysical puffery reeks of the sorriest desperation. Unlike the simple joy of the saved. I should not speak further; contempt is ugly, for its execrable asymmetries.

If you contact my group with specifics, a rendezvous will be organised.

In sincerest faith,

Clare Grange

~

With heightened strain punters watched rugby in a corner of *The Queen*, as if their unblinking, soused scrutiny decided outcomes. Drinks perspired before Philip. He raised his. 'To Colin.'

'To Colin... Is it in good taste to drink to the poor bugger's memory?' asked Seán

'The best. Colin damned his liver for love of life. And as I'm barred from damning my lungs in kind, I'll imitate a friend triumphant.'

The two men downed the dark ale and plonked their glasses on the hard wood. Philip adjusted the skinny black tie that completed his beige three-piece. They took further gulps of the bitter liquid and Phil stuck a fag in his mouth and sucked the unlit cigarette.

'Faugh! Must you?' Seán looked characteristically and uncomfortably to the bar.

'If I'm gonna quit for your girlfriend...'

'*Your* sister...'

'If I must quit, canna least keep the trappings?'

'Wish you'd kept your tache instead. You look like a great big baby.'

'Nice.'

'C'mon, take it out.'

'Afford me this luxury? I'm already attacked every angle. Our benevolent rulers decreed, in blasphemous abnegation of sacred duty to preserve liberty—in accord wiv the Norman Yoke of their governance—to ban even harmless emitters of water from such establishments as your royal highness. And here I'm,' his hands held wide, 'facing tyranny in home and country, enjoying merely the remembered appearance of a fucking puff.'

'We should get back.'

'No rush, sis likes ample time alone.'

'Isn't Ella there?'

After a pause Philip asked, 'Ah, is she?'

'What?'

'*There?* I don't think she's anywhere nowadays. Lost...'



‘She’s okay.’

Philip dismissed the topic in a vague gesture.

‘When you going back?’

‘Just lemme enjoy peace. I’m a proud working man now, unusual for the male line of the illustrious Granges; I’ve joined the ranks cleaning spilled icecreams in Play Land so brats run untroubled by the menace of sticky feet. Isn’t it my prerogative to enjoy insobriety and kill all impulse to rebel? To rinse and douse my brain in poison and reduce my faculties to match my livelihood?’

‘You’re chatty today.’

The punters all started shouting and cheering, then settled again.

‘Verbosity is a natural inclination after working alongside such fine specimens of the species as I have for colleagues.’

‘Pleased you think I’m a better audience.’

‘Seán, you’re the best.’

~

The little boy lay on the patio concrete, skinny chest bared shirtless to the sky, rib cage visible. A woman put a glass of lemonade beside his head. Her grey hair was tied in a bun and her brown dress covered in a yellow lily pattern.

‘What are you doing Anthony?’

His eyes, so like Jacquie’s, furtively skimmed her, ‘Sun tanning.’

‘You know in the Middle Ages being burnt was a sign of poverty?’

The boy dexterously jumped up and folded his arms.

‘Also, its overcast. And too late in the day. Why do you want a tan?’

The boy stayed quiet.

‘What was that, I didn’t hear you?’ she put a hand flat over an ear as though straining to catch a sound.

He scowled. ‘Elena, from school, she says her dad gets in this bed. But it’s not a bed; it’s a sun bed. The bed has a sun in it. Like a pretend sun... I think she’s lying.’

‘Okay,’ the woman said, nodding with mock gravity. ‘So why were you?’

He shrugged, bent for the lemonade and started slurping.

‘Vera!’ cried another old woman from inside the house. ‘Vera!’

‘Coming!’ the woman shouted back, smiled at Anthony and walked away.

Vera slid the glass door to the living room and walked through to the kitchen. The room was chocked with smoke and Jacquie was clumsily shovelling a burnt lasagne into the bin with a spatula.

‘What?’

‘Sorry,’ Jacquie said.

‘But I asked you to watch it.’

‘I forgot.’ Jacquie looked at Vera, her eyes, crowfeet creased, were wet. She put down the lasagne tray on a nearby surface.

Vera walked over and took hold of Jacquie. ‘That’s okay, sorry I snapped.’

Jacquie looked up, their faces inches apart. They kissed.

A little girl, younger than the boy and in a knee-length pink dress came running with a bucketful of water splashing on the tiled floor. ‘Fire! Smoke!’

Vera quickly took the bucket, kneeled and held the girls arms. ‘That’s okay, Susie. Just a petite mishap.’

The girl nodded gingerly.

‘We’re not going to have lasagne.’

The girl pouted.

‘But we’ll have a takeout pizza instead.’

Susie grinned.

‘Go and tell your brother, okay?’

She nodded and ran out to the garden shouting, ‘Pizza! Pizza!’

Vera stood, ‘I’ll pop round the corner and get the pizzas.’

‘You could phone?’ Jacquie’s question was a plea.

‘It’s lazy to get a delivery from somewhere so close. I’ll take the scooter and be back soon. Keep an eye on your grandkids. That Anthony’s weird.’

White light stung the takeout waiting room. Vera sat next to a middle-aged man whose drab salt and pepper hair betrayed chestnut hints. He wore a dense wax jacket.

‘Excuse me?’ a bored adolescent girl with pigtails at the counter directed to the man, ‘I’ve gottcha pizzas.’

He sighed, walked to the till, paid and took them.

~

Outside Finningham held his pizza boxes over his head to get through a drizzle to his car, passing them to Maurice on the passenger seat. ‘Sandra’s asked me to have a word,’ he said, as he drove by a series of prefab suburban houses with little glass porticos and identical, well-cut lawns contained in latticed fences; windows lit up in the dark. ‘She’s not changed, but I love the cow.’

Maurice stared silently.

‘Exchanged words with any of the old gang?’

Maurice shook. ‘Toby.’

‘How’s he doing?’

Maurice took out his iPhone and put it on the dashboard. 'You can read the stream of texts. It's texts all the time. And calls.'

'It went to shit, didn't it?'

'Yep.'

'Your next move?'

Maurice shrugged.

'Say something. You're so bloody morose.'

'I'm scum. You ought to kick me out, how long've I been crashing?'

'You realise you don't have enough vanity to sustain an inferiority complex?'

'I might surprise you.'

'*Please* do.'

The car trundled for a while longer.

'Visited your parents?'

'Yeah.'

'Good. That's good... And?'

'Told me to fuck off, in as many words.'

'Right.'

Silence.

'What'd you do to piss them off? Besides, of course, getting yourself locked up. Nice folks.'

Maurice shrugged. There was another let-up as they waited for traffic.

As the car started again Graham started too, looking straightforward at the road, 'Listen, this mightn't be my place, right, but... everyone enjoys a drink.'

'Yeah.'

'I mean, moderate. What'd your parents think?'

'Yeah.'

'Where are you? Where've you gone?'

‘What?’

‘I mean, well... what you did was astonishing. What you all did. No matter how it turned. And you paid for your mistakes, can’t you go back to who you were?’

‘Worthwhile? Getting a kid killed?’

‘No. I mean it was stupid how you went about things. That was long ago now, though. I...’

The iPhone vibrated and Maurice snatched it up, looked at the screen, ‘Speak of the devil,’ and brought it up to his ear, ‘Hello Toby... what do you ... don’t know who... Sorry, course, *that* Sebastian... yes-yes, guy whose head looks like a chicken egg... no, can’t... yes I’m busy... *au contraire* Toby, I don’t want to... I haven’t forgotten... no... no I haven’t... bye Toby.’ He put the iPhone back.

‘You’re “busy”?’

Maurice shrugged.

~

Toby slid his phone back into his pocket as he nudged in and took a foldout chair at the back of the bookshop. The Waterstone’s had the sweet, fruity smell of cheap, free wine. He was next to the Military History section; adjacent rows of spines with titles like *Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival*, *The War That Ended Peace* and *Catastrophe 1914*. To his right was a young boy playing on a handheld with earphones. The quiet babbling of hushed, bored voices in a crowd of mostly young women flanked by the store’s cheap blue uniformed staff. A small section was cleared at the back to which the audience faced, elevated by a step, where a single chair stood in front of a microphone stand next to a table holding a glass of water and a pile of books. Behind was a black board backdropped with repeated instances of Waterstone’s name beneath their ‘W’ logo.

At intervals Toby looked at the man on the chair: alone, biting his lower lip. The blue eyed bald in a dapper suit and thin tie, an ensemble coloured the light purple of wisteria.

Sebastian.

A different man in corduroy trousers and thick cotton turtleneck sweater stepped up to the stage and took the microphone. ‘Hello everyone,’ he started sonorously, the audience hushing as though the whole room had been interrupted midsentence. ‘Thank you. I’m not the one you’re here to hear...’ he scanned the audience as if seeking confirmation, ‘I’m just representing Mr Lyme’s publisher, Radical Volt, in saying how glad we were to release his testimony to the modern politics of dissent. This book,’ he picked up a copy; it had a picture Toby recognised.

The abstract he saw Sebastian paint when they shared an apartment; dark colours swirled into a central, white shape, a tower through which jagged lines cut. Vague human forms lived on these lines in repeating patterns. Fire colours jutted from the top, over which was written ‘*Stories from the Block*’.

‘...is as much a Romantic quest as historical document,’ went on the introduction, ‘It’s honesty is magnetic. I remember talking to Rose, she edited it, about how hard she found changing anything. Because the genuineness, the truth, was pregnant in every single word. It’s an amazing account of an experience. And I am privileged to welcome Sebastian Lyme to give a reading and Q&A.’

As the publisher took a seat, a few people clapped, uncertainly until the rest took confidence and applauded too. Only Toby and the child next to him sat still, the boy’s eyes locked on a sword-wielding knight fighting a demonic creature on the screen in his little hands. Toby crossed his arms and stared at Sebastian as he stood to take the mic.

‘Thanks Sam. And thank-you all of you here today.’ Sebastian grinned. ‘I’m hoping to earn your time. First I’d like to read...’ and he proceeded to pick up one of the copies, flick through and bend it in half down the spine. ‘How had I arrived at this place?’ he begun in a reading voice, ‘Only weeks had passed since my house burnt to embers and the police tried to incriminate me

for the fire. The insurance hadn't paid, but I was not stuck in this apartment. I had money to rent somewhere less... *illegal*. And I was an artist, not a radical. I had nothing in common with these people. With the *femme fatale* and her anarchist brother. Their crazy, unhinged dreams compelled me. I was a bohemian pretending idealism. And yet I felt my significance in the group.' Toby felt the neighbouring boy's shoulder brush his arm. He positioned himself closer to the books on war. 'They would look to me for assurances; it was as if they thought convincing me was victory.

'In Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* the pessimist Grantaire is a member of the revolutionary Friends of the ABC; he doesn't hold the morals of that group's leader, Enjolras, until he elects to die alongside his comrade. Was he finally convinced of utopia, or was this the perfectly meaningless demise of one who never believed in meaning; it's a fate that could confirm either ethic. I couldn't see *myself* dying alongside our glorious leader, whether of loyalty or despair. Maurice couldn't inspire sacrifice from a mature mind, and in that I was right, but then I didn't expect *anyone* would die. I was a character in a drama written for another actor.'

As Sebastian progressed Toby's attention roamed. He watched the child's game as he stuck a sword into a half giant arachnid and half Frankenstein's creature. The knight disembowelled the beast in faithfully rendered graphics, entrails spilling on the fighting arena.

What was he doing? Why did he care about Sebastian? He was a convenient substitute for Andy—Mike's real name, that fake friend who had betrayed him and his sister. Toby's fists clamped. Everything had gone. There were no Helots; they had used up their last savings paying bails and other court costs. And then everyone dispersed. Some joined Trot groups and Eco-protestors. And Jesus Saves, willing to soak up anyone; like his sister. Most settled back to old lives or made new ones. He and Maurice suspended theirs, the latter in regret, but Toby? He had taken his anger and fashioned a seed of white heat, pure and distilled. But so far he could only lash out at the opportunist Sebastian.

Soon even the tower would go, scheduled for demolition. There would be no sign left of the life he had with Clare and Helots. Clapping interrupted Toby's reverie, and for a bewildered moment he thought these people were celebrating his desolation. Then he realised, in some sense, they were.

'Thank you Sebastian, now if anyone has questions?'

Toby stood like a puppet whose strings had been yanked too hard. 'It's all bullshit.'

The corduroy man and Sebastian blanked and then Sebastian took the mic. 'I believe it was questions and answers, not declarative statements.'

The audience laughed uncomfortably. The boy next to Toby looked up with wide eyes.

'You're a liar. Everything you write is lies,' Toby heard himself speak.

'Well, if you know the truth better, why not write your own book?' put in the corduroy man.

'Excuse me, sorry,' said Sebastian, 'Toby, I *am* sorry that's how you feel. Could we talk some time more privately?'

'Oh fuck off.' Toby walked away, clumsily past the chairs. And thought he heard a laugh as he shut the door of the shop. He shuffled down the road, retched; he had planned to be eloquent, to rebuke and humiliate Sebastian. His phone vibrated.

'Hi Maurice... Clare!' he paused. 'I've been fine, where are you... I don't give a damn about Jesus Saves; I'm worried about you. Dad and Mum... no... please Clare... Yes, I know... I just saw Sebastian, did you read... but aren't you angry... you don't... how can you forgive... I don't, no... Please tell me where you are... What's this Peter... What do you mean married... That's... Yes... No... Sorry, phone again soon... see'ya Clare, I miss you too.'

~

Clare handed the phone back to Beth, 'Thanks. I musta put mine down.'



Beth smiled, pushing her flaxen hair from her face with the hand holding the mobile. Clare liked the woman who had stuck to her like a limpet to briny beach rock, pleased by Beth's sullen intensity and how she only addressed herself to one person at a time, even in a group.

'Is your brother a'right?' asked Peter, throwing a yellow ball to a kid in dungarees who picked it up and rolled it back. 'Catch daddy.'

'There you are mate.'

The three stood in the rear room of an abandoned music store Jesus Saves bought to convert into a new barracks, a branch of their expanding mission. It was still bare of ornament, but for a whirring ceiling fan. It was dark and smelled of the fungi that crept about the petri dish between walls.

'No, Toby's not okay.' Clare said.

'Sorry.'

'Not your fault.'

'What's what?'

'Same thing. He's stuck, never left the block.' She spoke pensively. 'Still wants to get back at them: police, Andy or Mike or whoever, even Sebastian for some reason.'

'That bloody book...'

'I don't care. And my brother won't be happy until he forgives. Thinks he'll find a villain, but there are none. Only weak, scared people. He wants someone to give him an epilogue that explains the point, the chief of a secret police or evil dictator. He has his path.'

At the familiar word 'path' Beth and Peter bowed heads slightly and an interlude of silence was erupted by the toddler's instinctive laugh as he threw the ball with his arms raised high and athletic. The toy bounced from Peter's chest.

'Give me some good news,' Clare said as Peter sent the ball back to his son.

'You mean Azariah?'

She nodded.

‘None on offer, fraid. Not since that cheque, if it was him.’

‘It was.’

‘Why’d he go all of a sudden?’ Beth fiddled with the cross she wore over her white robes.

‘Don’t know, but I’ll need your help Beth, and yours Peter, if I’m really going to lead. We’ve been issued this situation by God and must see it through.’

‘Of course.’ He walked over. ‘That’s what I promised Azariah when he married us.’ He took her hands, ‘He said you’re special. He could only trust me. And everyone thinks you’re special.’

‘I’m new to this.’

‘You’re *for* this,’ Beth spoke with enthusiasm.

Although pleased, Clare ignored the comment. ‘Has Jeremy been eating with the group?’

‘Naa, he’ll only eat by himself.’

‘We need to push. It’s important nobody else gets the same idea. The meals are vital,’ she stressed the word and repeated it, ‘*vital*, to the group.’

‘Yes.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Been in touch with your family?’ Clare looked directly at Peter.

‘Yeah, Uncle Phil says he’s holding body and soul wiv mam and sis. Says they’re scraping.’

‘They know they’re welcome.’

‘He’ll never go for that.’

‘A shame.’

‘Yeah, but their doing a’right. Sounds as if mam’s found a good thing.’

‘Not as good as what I’ve found.’ Clare kissed Peter.

The toddler in the dungarees slumped to the floor with his ball raised again, watching for a moment to strike.

~

How does Mary Pritchard arrive at this point? Andy's been twelve minutes in the café toilet, Toby due three of those. On the tinny behind-the-counter radio 'On The Beautiful Blue Danube' plays at a barely audible volume. My eye follows the second hand of the watch dad gave before he died. Bound by the thick leather strap that makes my wrist slender. With chipped red nail varnish on my right index. This is my comeback for *The Watcher*, a two-way ultimatum. If I produce a good story from the collated block raid material they'd want me permanently; if they let me I'll trust them again. So why, as I look at a stained mug of PG, untouched and steaming, waiting to see if I can forge a truce between participants, why am I indifferent? I remember him, Arthur, my dad, a titan eaten by his own flesh, by cancer. I remember his hands as I look at mine. Before, thick and strong and veined, but then? Abraded and stretched, like skin grown over porridge.

When did the world become ailing?

The man I'm waiting for is hunched, washed-out; over the previous months I've watched Toby become more pensive, stilted. He comes to the table directly, flings his hooded coat over the back of a chair and sits in lieu of greeting.

'Can't be long, I've work.' He looks at the other, unoccupied place with its discarded coat, 'Invited someone else?'

I move my eyes from the watch, fifteen minutes, to my pad, the scribbled notes next to a pen, and looked at him. 'Hello, Toby.'

'Hi, yeah...' he diverts his stare.

'There's someone else, yes, and if we're going to continue...'

"If?" His voice betrays panic.

'...you'll need to make a promise.'

'What?'

'That you'll hear what he has to say.'

Toby frowns, then someone behind catches his attention and his frown becomes a sneer that twists his nose. ‘Mike? Is this a fucking joke?’ he asks, standing.

‘Wait a minute mate,’ Andy’s voice is charged with worry.

‘Both of you sit, please,’ I say, assuming the authoritative timbre I remember from my father.

It works, but neither speaks. Andy sits, uncomfortably in his taut Levi’s. I want to give them the chance to initiate. I can only orchestrate.

‘Toby, Mary and I...’

‘How long?’ Toby undercuts, addressing me as though Andy hadn’t spoken.

‘From the beginning. I’ve worked with Andy since I approached you. I thought...’

‘So when you said you’d help me get back at them...’

‘That’s what we’re doing,’ Andy says, ‘that’s *exactly* it. To get justice for how it went down, how they fucked everything up.’

‘Are you here as a cop?’ Toby asks.

‘I’m not a policeman. I left. Had to. Lost everything. Like everyone.’

‘Not like everyone.’ There’s spittle in Toby’s voice. ‘*Not* like my sister, like that bloody kid. Not like that crippled man. Not like Maurice. *You* betrayed.’

Andy stares at the repeating dot pattern on the glassy surface of the table.

‘You want to get back at Andy?’ I ask, ‘Congratulations, life’s taken your revenge. Or do you want me to tell our story?’

‘I’ve had enough of stories, go to Sebastian if you want stories.’

‘I want your story. His story,’ I indicate to Andy, ‘Ollie’s story. I want *the* story. Not Sebastian’s narcissism. And that’s what you want. So let’s work with that?’ Is it too much? Am I too patronising? I hate this bantering role; I want to help, not manipulate.

Silence. The suspension of a fall? And Toby assents with a single, jabbing nod. His expression unchanging. I want both involved. Andy suffices, but for my conscience I need more. And it cannot only be Andy. I’m collecting. When I’m done, the article will follow.

~

While I sort towels into colours—pink, white, navy—and fold them into the white cupboard under the stairs, I realise Jacquie’s vacuum’s been my soundtrack all morning, since we’d parted to our chores and we kissed.

‘How could I get on without you Vera?’ she asked.

Since then the ruminative murmur of the instrument’s suck had been a constant, for hours from the living room. What was Jacquie doing?

I found her there, lying next to the Hoover. Two parallel bodies: the live machine and the dead woman. And on the CD player, her favourite album, ‘The Greatest Selection of Classics’ played ‘On The Beautiful Blue Danube’ just detectable beneath the whine.

A week later Harold sipped from his mother’s china teacup. It rung as he returned it to the saucer. And I knew he would talk to me like one would a child. Not because he means ill, but Jacquie’s son’s like that. Maybe because *she’s* always been fragile, although before she changed I knew it was an act.

‘You know we all care for you too. You’ve been good with her, for her. And with the kids. What I’m saying... Me and Rosalind hashed it out, you see?’ I nodded while he navigated his thoughts. He was lucky to have Rosalind. He was Jacquie’s son, but he hadn’t inherited her genius.

‘We want you to stay with us, Vera.’ Rosalind said.

‘Yes, that’s it, not like you’re going to be palmed off,’ agreed Harold.

‘After the funeral, Vera, you said this place reminds you too much of her. How she got. And you don’t want to remember her that way. You two were sweet.’

‘Yes, we were great friends,’ I interrupted, uncomfortable.

‘Yes, friends,’ said Harold.

‘And I don’t want you living in this area,’ said Rosalind. ‘There was that horrible business on your walls.’

I remembered the scrawled, ‘FUCK OFF DYKES’.

‘Will you come and live with us, Vera?’

I’m not a naïf. I knew they wanted a live-in, cheap babysitter; I knew they wanted to sell Jackie’s house without giving me the boot. Two birds, one stone. But people can be cynical. Rosalind is a good woman. They had financial problems. And I loved the kids. And feared being alone as much as I feared the confines of those prisons for the elderly. And that is how I came to that small terrace. And how I got to know the Grange family.

~

When it happened, it wasn’t like the movies.

Graham dropped me off on his way. ‘Don’t know why you want to see this,’ he muttered. He stared at me through the open passenger door. ‘Maurice, you’ve got to get yourself sorted.’

How long would he continue to keep me? If I had any pride, I’d refuse the charity of a man I once hated.

Before the detonation my iPod shuffle selected ‘On The Beautiful Blue Danube’ which promised an apocalypse, a climax, but after the rumbling boom the fifteen-storey building collapsed neatly on itself as if it was a fold up tent. It possessed all the bathos of erasing an Etch-A-Sketch lithograph, like it wasn’t made of concrete and steel and lives, but was a mere inkling—an idea to be dismissed from the skyline as a thought from a head. An image came to me of a spider weaving her home over an opened window, and of bluebottle flies.

From beneath the music, blearing through headphones, I heard the applause of locals who came to witness the minor spectacle, like a fireworks display. They were well wrapped. One

woman had a few kids clustered, probably stopping on the way back from school; a boy in a red woollen hat that hugged his whole face gaped up and rubbed the tiredness of his eyes.

I remembered too much and turned away, not daring to look back for fear of becoming a pillar of salt. I walked into the first pub, it was mid-afternoon and this place was serving drinks. I think it was called *The Queen*.

~

## Does Jesus Save?

Exclusive with Clare Grange, new leader of Jesus Saves, by Mary Pritchard

They have been called a cult, their recruitment decried as aggressive. Politicians have defended them as a misunderstood charity or denounced them as a troublemaking ragtag of drifters and ex-criminals. These white-robed Christians wander our streets like ghosts, insistently handing out tracts.

Shepherded into a musty room in a half derelict office, a teenage girl greets, shows me to a seat and offers to take my coat. Most of Jesus Saves is young and female, and now the head of the organisation too.

That is, after the disappearance of the self-styled Azariah, formerly Bert Colman—a small time drug dealer who landed himself in prison for half a decade where he was converted to his vocation as a fisher of souls.

The room was full of mismatching sofas and chairs. Tables were placed with disregard for *feng shui* or style, their ubiquitous leaflets in collapsing heaps. Once seated I was quickly offered milky tea and digestives and minutes later Mrs Grange strolled in, informally chatting to a small

coterie. I knew her from an intensive investigation on a far-left tower block occupation; perhaps why she permitted this unprecedented meeting. Whereas before she was revolutionary, now she is a religious teacher. I start my inquiry on the contrasts and similarities.

‘I believe in providence,’ she told me enigmatically. This would prove to be symptomatic of all the responses during our encounter.

I mentioned controversies about Jesus Saves and she talked abstractly on the importance of Grace, citing theologians, historians and secular philosophers in ways that tacitly suggested a complex system of thought buried beneath aphorism. Or a maddening bent for the obscure common to cult leaders.

I mentioned the logistical pains she must have negotiated and heard a sermon on the interrelations between the virtues. I adulated the good works with which the group has been credited and I was treated to a half-hour essay on the ideas of Kierkegaard and modernity.

At last I tried to make my interrogation personal. ‘Are the rumours true that you and Sebastian Lyme were a couple?’

‘No.’

‘So Mr Lyme is a liar?’ I spurred.

‘We had a platonic relationship. He was a good man. I pity and pray for him.’

‘Would you let him join Jesus Saves?’

She looked at me quietly, as though weighing my character. ‘I have paedophiles and rapists in my group. Redemption is for everyone. Yes I would let him join. I hope he does.’ Then, like an afterthought, ‘you too.’

“‘Rapists and paedophiles’?” Don’t you also have children and other vulnerable people?’

‘Natch, but we’re not amateurs. We work with homeless charities, food banks and, yes, the social services and police when we must. Anyone with access to children has police checks, and anyone dangerous is carefully managed.’

I pried into her past to get at her own religious development.



‘I was never a Christian until I met Azariah,’ this was the first mention of her predecessor, ‘but I was religious, unfortunately, which is not the same as being Christian at all. In my childhood I was furthest from Christ as it is possible to be,’ she pauses, ‘I was an Anglican,’ she mutters, ‘and only when I lost an idolatrous God and found a moment of despair in which I nearly lost my life did I come close to my saviour.’

‘So Anglicans are not Christian?’

She stares at the floor, ‘some are, I imagine. Sometimes I think Nietzsche was right, the only Christian died on the cross.’

‘That’s incendiary, in your position.’

‘Jesus said incendiary things too. We’re not here to lie to each other.’

We were sufficiently comfortable for me to push further. I asked about homosexuality and homophobia in religious movements.

‘I tolerate no hatred, but I also permit freedom of conscience.’

Try as I did, I was not permitted to delve further on the topic. So I opted for an issue

she might struggle to evade, her rumoured meetings with the infamous General Oquendo—a man associated with atrocities and human rights violations—and his subsequent public financial support.

‘I won’t divulge the content of our private talks. More generally Jesus Saves will give spiritual comfort to any human being.’

‘And accept any donation?’

To this question she lost some of her confidence. And we took an increasingly Socratic turn. Back and forth arguments that moved from her outlandish claims about belief to her aggressive indictments of the government, society and even humanity. I learnt that she objected as much to blasé optimism as hopelessness and misanthropy, but little about the donation.

When I’d previously known Clare she was inward, now she was turned out, an evangelist with followers. An inherited role that continues to demonstrate this new social force is resistant to expectations. She retains her intensity from all those years ago, but with new convictions.

Perhaps she is a testament to the power of Jesus Saves.

~

At the back of the Spar, Ella stood before a mixture of yogurt flavours (rhubarb, honey, chocolate sprinkled) and cheeses. It was a deserted place, where people explored aisles trying not to catch one another's eyes. The tips of Ella's hands, exposed by fingerless gloves, froze in the icy hummed emission of the cold unit. She tried to calm her mind by breathing.

How long had she been standing mute? Had anyone noticed?

She had made it down the road and round the corner. She gulped chilled air when she walked by that loitering group, including the one with the cobra tattoo on his neck who gawked and ogled. She managed the obstacle as her thoughts jumbled, jabbered, mixed, repeated, somersaulted, leapt, burst, danced and crested watching those watching faces watching her. Then through the automatic sliding doors, picking up a basket. Only at the cereal section had dread risen solidly from her abdomen and into her heart and head.

And her feelings kept pulling back to him, his hand in hers as they walked out into the light with the little body zipped up—a sacred parade of death.

'Excuse me, dear, could I just...' spoke an old woman's voice, as a blue veined and wrinkled hand gently pushed by Ella, illuminated by the flat light, and grasped a large block of cheddar.

Ella involuntarily shook and faced the woman, who was wearing a blue dress and knitted overcoat. Side by side she was shorter than Ella.

'Sorry.' Ella shifted her feet in a crab-walk, looked farther down the aisle and spotted plastic bottles bloated with milk.

'Are you okay, love?' asked the voice that was both assured and frail.

'Fine,' breathed Ella. She felt her moist palms, pressure on her chest, a rush of inchoate thought and tried to make her gasps steadier. It was vain, the attempt reinforcing her alarm with

the realisation of how absurd she must seem: standing in the dairy section panting like a jogger before the harmless pensioner.

‘Inhale slower,’ Ella was told, the woman’s eyes meeting hers, ‘now exhale. Calmly does it.’ Ella felt a soft touch on her left arm. ‘That’s right, you’re good dear.’

With the ease of a soldier Ella found her body obeying commands and a faint tremble in her right leg ceased, of which she’d been unaware.

‘Good, you’re okay, aren’t you dear?’ The woman released her barest hold of Ella’s arm. ‘I’m Vera.’

Ella nodded. ‘Ella. Sorry. Thank you.’

‘You’re welcome, Ella. Now, what are you here for?’

‘What?’

‘What were you buying?’

‘Oh, milk and...’

‘Okay, let’s do our shop together?’

Ella nodded again, reflecting on the surreal nature of her rescue.

Vera walked around the food store with Ella, allowing her to gather milk, bread, eggs, pasta, kitchen roll, toothpaste, a bar of Cadbury’s and a copy of *The Watcher*. Working through the mental checklist with obsessive’s fidelity. Vera picked up the occasional tin, coolly considered its contents and tossed it in her own heap. They both paid with a hotchpotch of loyalty coupons and tatty notes modelling pictures of Elizabeth Fry. Ella put some of her shopping in a dog-eared haversack Peter had got her from an army surplus and the rest in a five pence plastic shopping bag.

Outside the shop Vera smiled. ‘Good. So, are you okay getting where you need to be?’

Ella nodded. ‘Thanks... thank you.’

They both walked in the same direction. Their feet coming to tread in time.

Ella hugged her brown cotton coat, warding against a tugging gale that carried a thin shower. She scanned a neighbourhood watch sign, the benign Bobby huddled by grinning citizens.

Vera fell into step with Ella's timid gait.

'I'm going down there, you?'

'Me too.'

Vera laughed and Ella ditheringly imitated.

'Who's this?' Ella recognised Uncle Phil's jovial voice. He came towards them cradling a carrier that smelled of battered cod made clammy by vinegar.

Ella looked from him to Vera.

'Hello,' Vera tipped her head, 'I'm Vera and I would guess you're this girl's father?'

'Uncle.'

'Vera.'

'Phillip.'

'I found her in a predicament, but we worked it out between us.'

Ella's gaze wandered from the one to the other. The three resumed walking.

'Well we're mightily grateful for aid, aren't we Ella? Granges always find inventive predicaments.'

'Glad to be of help.'

'You've today's rag?' Philip addressed Ella.

Ella put everything down on the watery pavement, took the paper out and handed it to him.

'Thanks love,' Philip stuffed the rolled Watcher into his belt. 'Live close by?' he asked Vera.

'Just in that house,' Vera indicated, half raising a hand weighed by two matt bags-for-life overstuffed with groceries.

'So you are literally our neighbour. And you must be livin wiv the Lintels?'

'Yes, just moved in.'

Ella smiled at Vera. ‘Thank you.’ And she ran to the door while Phil and Vera remained near the gate, talking.

~

Spilling from the white vest, curls of Seán’s black hairs caught Phil’s attention as both comfortably ordinary and grotesque.

‘Could I lend that of off you when you’re done?’ Seán asked. He was nestled on the sofa next to Sarah; his arm locked behind her back, her head rested on his naked shoulder, going up and down with his breathing like an ocean buoy.

Phil was on Sarah’s old chair, to which he felt entitled after dragging it down flights and flights of stairs at the flats, receiving minimal help from a few mates, working turns with crushing difficulty and special puzzle solving.

‘You can’ve it now. I’m done.’ He held out the sheets, ‘Check page thirty-four.’

Seán cautiously freed his arm, took hold, wetted two fingers on his tongue and flicked through, ‘This bit about the meteor shower?’

‘No, above that.’

‘Does Jesus Save?’ he read out. ‘Oh, them.’

‘Yeah, and I met the journo. She was wiv us when it fell apart at the block.’

‘What d’ya make of all this?’

Sarah shifted herself up, ‘is this gonna be another bleedin conversation about Peter. He’s staying outta trouble wiv the Bible bashers.’

‘Not sure “staying out of trouble” is their *raison d’être*,’ said Phil, ‘Could get him into more than drugs ever did.’

‘What are they then? Like Jehovah’s or something?’ asked Seán.

‘Don’t think so.’

‘It’s none of our business, is it?’ Sarah asked. ‘We’ve enough trouble a’right? Don’t get involved, Phil.’

‘I *am* involved, if Peter is.’

‘He’s a married man now, let im get on with his life and we’ll got on with ours. You’ve been a godsend, really, things’re getting okay again. Our Ella’s getting better.’

Phil and Seán exchanged a glance and Sarah scrutinised them. ‘What? Something happened?’

‘She’s not so great,’ said Phil. ‘She’s even more nervous.’

‘He’s right,’ said Seán, ‘Ella’s a doll, but she’s way-in-a-way too mousy for her age.’

‘She’s always been like that.’

‘It’s gotten worse when it ought to have got better, Sis. Listen, I found her being brought home by a pensioner woman. There’d been some incident. Maybe her older brother could help?’

‘Incident... Phil, when has Peter helped?’

‘He took his kid back, got married to a woman now interviewed in the papers, maybe he’s changed too, for the better?’ posited Seán.

‘I think so,’ added Phil.

‘She doesn’t want Peter. She wants that black kid.’

‘Joshua?’

‘Yeah, never seen her miss anyone,’ Sarah admitted. ‘That boy got to her, after what they went through. But I don’t want it dredging up.’

Phil shrugged. ‘Peter’s the best we’ve got. Look, I asked that old woman if she could tutor Ella in maths. She used to be a teacher or something, feeling neglected poor old thing.’

‘How in the hells we gonna afford that?’

‘Said she’d do it for practically nuttin, even though I offered a little.’

‘Charity?’

Phil rubbed the back of his neck. ‘She wants to; she took a liking to Ella. Just lives next door too.’

‘Wiv the Lintels?’

‘Right,’

‘I teach their lad piano.’

‘You should knock sometime and hash it out.’ Phil breathed in and heaved himself up, steadying his mass once righted. ‘I’m off then.’

‘To *The Queen*?’ Seán asked keenly.

‘No, I’ve been keeping a gift for my nephew to congratulate his wedding. Since it was all done in their little club, I haven’t had the chance. Thought I’d pay’em a visit.’

‘Now?’ asked an incredulous Sarah, ‘Just on a whim you’re gonna march over there?’

‘You know me, sis, everything happens on a whim or not at all.’

‘Do whar you want,’ Sarah waved him away.

‘You’re not finding God, are you?’ Seán asked.

‘Already did, I’m God enough for me.’ Phil smirked.

Once alone, Seán repeated his recurrent declaration, ‘I love you.’

‘A’right, but I’m just stringing you along till I find better,’ goaded Sarah.

‘That so?’ was all Seán could manage in riposte.

They kissed.

It threw down harder as the scudding pewter clouds above diminished into a murky sweep on the horizon. Phil’s head bent to guard his eyes from the thick droplets.

‘Have you come to learn about your personal Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ?’ asked the girl with cracked lips. She wore a plastic sheet over her robes and stood at the entrance of the disused music retailer.

‘Sorry love, I’m come to speak wiv the boss on earth. I’ll leave’em folks up there to themselves.’

The girl’s mouth parted, flummoxed.

‘Could I have a word wiv a Peter Grange and his missis?’

‘I... could you step in?’ She lead him to a dark room where the robed huddled quietly on wooden chairs around electric fires. ‘Just wait here please,’ said the girl.

Phil leaned against a wall while she walked off, spilling drips from her pellucid covering. She came back with another woman.

‘Mr Grange?’

‘Yes.’

‘Mind dillydallying? They’ll be here from another barracks.’

‘Sure.’

He reached into his large pockets and took out an e-reader. He was through four chapters before he heard his nephew.

‘Uncle,’ Peter welcomed.

‘Hey Pete. How’s Christendom?’

‘Eh... great. How’ve y’been mate?’

‘Rancid, I don’t smoke and I’ve work.’

Clare arrived, wishing goodbye to someone on a mobile. ‘Hello Philip.’ She kissed his cheeks and sat opposite with Peter. The two other girls had places to either side and sat without a whisper.

‘What brings you to our new sanctuary?’ asked Clare.

‘I need a reason to wanna see my nephew and the wife he wouldn’t deserve in a million reincarnations?’

‘Pleased to see you again Philip, my husband, your nephew, talks about you all the time.’

‘Does he?’

‘I’ve more than a few theories about you.’

‘I must hear those sometime.’ Phil reached into his pocket and took out a small chain with a cross. ‘A wedding present.’ He held it out to Peter.



‘This is Grandma’s?’

‘Yeah, the old Roman got it from hers too.’

Peter looked doubtfully at the crucifix with the little representation of Christ.

‘I can’t stand the thing, but it’s something of a heirloom.’

‘Shouldn’t it go to Ella?’

‘What’d she want wiv it?’

‘It’s just, we don’t really do the crucified...’

‘Thank you, Philip,’ Clare interrupted, ‘It’s a kind gesture. We’re grateful.’

Phil nodded to her, ‘You’re welcome.’

‘Phil, you keep up with anyone?’ she asked.

‘From the old block?’

‘Yeah?’

‘Looking for someone?’

‘Maurice?’

Phil shook his head. ‘Don’t know where the poor sod got to. Heard that group—what was it? Helots or some acronym?—went their own ways.’

‘Right.’

‘I’ve sorta been looking for that boy though. Good old Kee’hotey. Y’know, the Caribbean wiv his old Gran?’

‘Sorry,’ Clare said, ‘we don’t know about him, although it would be good to find out. So many have vanished.’

‘They must be traceable in this day and age, if I’d the time.’

‘Yeah, but our problem’s the same.’

‘Fair luck,’ Phil granted. ‘Where did Azariah go?’

‘That brilliant fool must’ve planned to get lost somewhere,’ answered Clare; Peter noticed how she referred to the founder, when she mentioned him at all, in ways contradictorily acrimonious and deferent.

‘What about your brother?’

‘Yeah, Toby’s in touch.’

‘Well, that’s something.’

Clare nodded. ‘And the other Grange’s? My in-laws?’ Clare asked, saying ‘in-laws’ with experimental trepidation.

‘They’re okay. Hey Pete?’

Peter was still looking at the tiny crucifix.

‘Yeah?’

‘Mind coming sometime? See your sister? She’s a bit shut-in.’

‘He’ll come,’ promised Clare.

‘Won’t mum mind?’ asked Peter.

‘I’ll make sure she’s okay. And Ella needs it. Just don’t come towing the whole God thing.’

‘We don’t harass, Philip,’ Clare assured.

‘Course not.’

The five sat in a fervent quiet. The girl in the plastic sheet shot up, startling her neighbour. ‘There’s nobody on the door,’ she announced.

‘That’s alright Judy. We’re okay for the night.’

Judy looked like a child awarded a lollipop at the dentist’s for good behaviour and retook her seat.

‘Do you know what you are?’ Clare asked Phil, àpropos of nothing.

He chuckled, sensing an attempted sell and intrigued what Clare might have up her sleeve, ‘I always wanted to find out. *Gnōthi seauton*, know thyself.’

Clare took out a notepad, wrote something, ripped out the page, folded and handed it to Phil, 'What do you dislike most about Christianity? Answer first.'

'No offense, but it's hard to pick one thing.'

'Pick randomly. Either I'm going to look like a fool or this will be quite good.'

'Okay, that we're all despicable for our base urges. I'm an apologist for ol'Lilith.'

'Okay, open the paper,' said Clare, already grinning victory.

Phil rumbled in laughter, 'Neat trick.'

'What it say?' Pete asked, peering.

Phil handed him the paper that read, 'Original sin' in Clare's looping scroll.

'So, how'd you do it?' Phil asked.

'You're a Pelagian, Phil.'

'I'mma curious fat cat wiv too many lives.'

'...and you're self-taught so you don't know where your thinking derives.'

'That right?' he more stated than asked.

'An old friend thought like you, but he's a totally different type. Seems ideas don't determine everything.'

'Oh I don't know, they cause enough trouble,' Phil proffered, enjoying this wavelength and rapport. 'I just like to be happy.'

'Never trusted it,' said Clare, 'a Venus flytrap makes the fly happy, until it doesn't. Would you like a drink, of the non-alcoholic type?'

'That's fine love,' he cast an eye to his watch, 'I should be skedaddling, as aggrieved as I'm to admit it. You'll not forget to drop by, Pete?'

'Yeah, I won't forget it.'

~

Sliding his index and middle fingers in opposite directions on the track pad, Maurice zoomed onto an Internet discussion thread about intersectionality. It had spun off another scholastic argument between post-Marxists and Trots over the tendency of the rate of profit to fall as an explanation for neoliberal hegemony, itself a tangent from the merits of structuralist analyses. He sipped a glass of Bells he had on the desk. And dextrously typed before pausing to edit:

This trite handwringing is silly. How many of you have read theory by someone outside your political allegiances? Even if you read bourgeois nineteenth-century economics it'd be preferable to the echo chamber blogs you spend yourselves on. Nursing delusions of comprehension when even the establishment you sham-fight is ignorant.

Think this is a personal attack about you? Then you're right. You defend striking academics on massive salaries and guilt trip relatives about puritanical boycotting and all you're really thinking about is guarding a retreating set of hand-me-down privileges. I've seen enough circle jerks. God, you're Marxists defending what? Breadcrumbs for the masses? What a revolutionary dream! You're angry on behalf of others because you lack your own anger. That's offensive when there are reasons for rage. Go find an outrage and bury it deep. Let it grow into something felt and useful.

He noted a post count of over nine hundred; he had participated in this playground for days, since its inception on a topic he no longer recalled. So long as he crafted sagacious replies life was obscured by the parochial and self-important virtual world, which only made him feel a more intense self-reproach later. He was vanity sick and hated himself. He drifted to a different thread on the comment section of a *Watcher* article:

These statistics are bull. The figures have been massaged by part time work and zero hour contracts.

Source? Or are you just making stuff up? Anyway, you clearly haven't even read the report; it says people are working more *hours*, not just that more people have *jobs*. See the difference?

If someone has a zero hour contract they might still be working more hours.

Dafuq? The clue is in the name, ZERO.

Maurice clicked on the reply box and typed:

I prefer not to address someone who can't understand that the 'zero' in a zero hour contract doesn't mean how much one *actually* works; seriously, trolling? But, the main problem with zero hours (not the only) is people might not get enough work and therefore income. If zero hour contracts are giving more hours, that still says the same thing as the government's interpretation of the statistics. Nevertheless, and the real point, these figures are lousy anyway, representing a small, almost meaningless adjustment.

'Hey,' Sandra broke into his thoughts. 'I'll need access.'

Maurice posted his unedited contribution and folded the slim laptop he'd placed in front of Graham's computer.

'Here you go, sorry.'

He relinquished the office chair.

'That's alright. Graham's looking for you.'

'Thanks.'

He found Graham in the living room, Al Jazeera English at low volume, a computer tablet on his lap playing a game of digital cards. The pet rat terrier, Rag, dozed next to him, one eye surveying, mercifully resting from its ceaseless yipping and zany assaults on Sandra's potpourri—scurrying about in pungent drifts of shavings, bark, cloves, jujube flowers, blooms and cones. Rag often bothered Maurice for attention, get bored, deposited a sulphur fart and trotted off.

'Ah Maurice. How'd you like to get out? I've been invited to a soirée thing and the old hag's moody.'

'Not sure.'

'Seriously, you owe me. And you need to get out too.'

'Maybe some other evening.' Maurice itched to get back to his web debacle.

'Oh you can't leave me lonesome. It's the least—absolute least—you could do. Done dawdling.'

He shrugged.

Maurice found an abandoned armchair shoved into the corner of a room lined by leather books: display collections like *The Complete Works of Dickens* and volumes of Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Next to his sequestered seat a globe displayed a richly detailed and labelled map of the world circa nineteen hundred. In his hand he had his fourth glass of a blue liquid that blistered his throat and smelled like a chemical dump. He had grabbed it from a proffered tray, declining canapés: tartlets, parcels and other dainties with ingredients of gruyère, mushroom, shallot, artichoke, spinach, salmon, asparagus, tomato, feta, quail's egg...

His eyes were pulled to a grandfather clock: quarter past eight. Not that it was quarter past eight; his phone gave half past eleven. The heady, mahogany room lulled Maurice into a thoughtless stillness. Nobody stopped to talk. The other guests politely muttered like at a parlour

funeral gathering after burying someone disliked. Graham had gone off with a thirty-something in a shiny black backless.

Sometimes Maurice eavesdropped disconcerting fragments, discovering people who spoke in truism and pleasantry:

‘How can you vote Pragmatist, haven’t you heart?’

‘And you want to forget where the other lot got us?’

‘I’m not saying Realists are good, but at least they’re not evil.’

‘Getting this country back in working order isn’t evil. Now look, I know what you’re thinking, and I’m not a loon swallowing everything about spongers and how we’re all doing our bit. There’s plenty unfairness. How the world is, right? Who promised entitled kids things would be fair? Politicians. About time politics communicated home truths.’

‘Yeah, that’s that, but...’

‘We’re all middle class now, right? Even the poor drink Shiraz and take foreign holidays.’

Maurice thought he heard the name Sebastian. And later on from another pair:

‘Yeah, first world problems, but we can’t get it right. Driving us to distraction. And our painter, does the job, but can’t make sense of him half the time. Can’t get his prepositions straight.’

‘Have you tried a pale green?’

‘We’ve repainted umpteen times, I don’t know anymore. It’ll probably make her queasy. *Everything* makes her queasy.’

And:

‘Has it been yet?’

‘The shower?’

‘Yeah, that’s the pretext of this lickassery, right?’

‘Oh they’re trying to see it now, it’s overcast. Just freezing themselves stupid.’

And:

‘You’re kidding? You’ve got to be having one over?’

‘No-no, for months, like rabbits, office joke.’

‘He doesn’t have a clue?’

‘Not a whiff.’

Maurice tried to stop listening. It was his parents in replica, the end of an obscene mass production line for the simulacra of incarnate inanity.

He tongued the cave of his mouth, which tasted like the sweet drink. He took another tippie to find his glass empty. So he aimed himself back towards the table where bottles were ranged for his thirst. It was there he overheard the name again:

‘Yeah, Sebastian. In the other room. Just arrived, making a splash.’

‘God I should say how much his book touched me. I mean it. I wasn’t the same after.’

‘He’s in there, signing I think.’

‘Who’s he with?’

Maurice edged his way in shuffles. He bumped two people, a man whose eyes narrowed, then a lanky woman in a twinset whose laugh belied a slight frame, ‘Watch out there,’ she spoke between bellowing, ‘no hurry.’

The other room had a wall almost wholly given to window and a seamless glass door, opening to a well-lit patio where people gathered looking and pointing at the impenetrable black-brownish heavens. At the centre a pool table dominated, its green felt littered with half empty glasses of the various coloured liquids. Sebastian was holding forth to two women. Maurice sauntered, keeping perpendicular with the prop of furniture. Almost spilling his glass of primary green on the laminate floor.

‘Maurice,’ Sebastian cried, looking past his small audience. ‘I’ll be. And here!’

The two women shared a look.

‘Tamara, Jessica—Maurice.’



One held out a manicured hand, trimmed cuticles with pink nails and matching lipstick. Thickly applied taupe eyeshadow like a Hollywood version of Cleopatra. Maurice put down his drink and took the outstretched hand, she clasped harder than he anticipated. ‘Good to meet you.’ Her salutation dripped like molasses. ‘I feel I know you, after reading our Sebastian’s book.’

*Our Sebastian?* Maurice couldn’t process this statement as she released her grip. He looked down and saw she was wearing constrictive open toed black stilettos, with more pink nails.

‘Are you okay?’ Sebastian asked.

Maurice felt acid rise to his larynx, stifling reply. He coughed and that became a rasping heave as the pink woman with the strong hands retreated to her heavily mascaraed friend—with spidery lashes.

‘Hey,’ said Sebastian, pressing in. ‘There’s a bathroom.’

Maurice feebly nodded and hurried in the indicated direction.

He felt ill from the sugar-poisoned alcopops, the tepid stink of other bodies, the clash of narcissisms starving for an affection that was like gorging on oneself. And he vomited that bile in the toilet bowl so bits of stomach-churned gristle floated flaccid and all that was left, held in his skin, was love. That was the thought he had in his moment of pitiful remove. It was a cold love, a sweated sensitivity, a caring despair for each of its interchangeable objects. Finally, staring dazed at his bathroom doppelgänger, he wanted to ignite deep inside and burn all the hated suffering that composed every particle of his bilious world.

Outside the toilet Sebastian waited alone. ‘Alright?’

‘Yeah,’ Maurice felt sobered by the spew.

‘Fresh air?’

Maurice nodded and followed Sebastian outside, where the expectant crowd had surrendered their desire to catch celestial displays through the obscurity of light pollution and city dirtied cloud. The air was like a cold shower and let him recuperate.

‘Your book was fucking awful,’ Maurice said.

‘Read it?’

‘Yes.’

‘Sorry,’ Sebastian said.

‘Don’t need to be. At least something exists to mark our stupidity.’

Sebastian nodded.

‘And you did get one thing right.’

‘What?’

‘Me.’

The two men stood in silence. Maurice saw a patch of sky was hazy white, the full moon’s reflected brightness subdued by lower atmospheres.

‘Life’s fucking awful,’ Sebastian said.

Maurice opened for the first time in years. ‘Yeah, I’m living with my older cousin, whose wife is right to hate him and even more to hate my intrusion. And I exist on the web, like a fucking teenager in a parental basement whinging resentment for a politics that doesn’t exist and would probably—definitely—prove disastrous. And I still feel superior to these vapid shits and their provincial investments in lives without consequence or passion, but just this appalling odium for everything to sustain their chronic inferiorities. Society’s got so bitter. I prefer to be a Grendel in my cave. I think Pascal said there’d be no evil if people shut the fuck up and sat quietly in a room to do fuck all, or words to that end.’

‘Smart man.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Did you know the love of my life married some fuckhead fundy?’

‘Clare.’

Sebastian laughed. ‘Clare, right. Hear she took over the asylum? Better to rule in a mental institute than serve in a cardboard utopia.’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about, but sure. Clare was different, wasn’t she?’

‘Her brother stalks me.’

‘He’s bitterest for what never was,’ said Maurice.

‘So you still talk to Toby?’

‘Toby still talks to me.’

‘How’s he?’

‘How you think? He’s working with that journalist...’

‘Mary what’s-her-name?’

‘Right, they’ve a scheme he wants me in on.’

‘Does he?’

Maurice nodded, leaning against the red brick wall of the house.

‘Know what?’ Sebastian asked, ‘Come live with me a while.’

‘Eh?’

‘I’m serious. You’re not happy where you are, I’m offering a substitute.’

‘Why?’

‘You’re not boring.’

‘Thank you.’

‘I mean it. Get you back on your feet.’

‘Hmm.’

Another interlude; Maurice cast an eye inside. Few of the ‘revellers’ remained. An angular man slow danced with a little girl tiptoeing on his polished black shoes. A couple of older men were engaged in an absorbing conversation with wild gesticulations.

‘Sure, if you’re really offering. Owe it to my cousin and his long suffering Mrs.’

‘Good.’

~

# Fear and Loathing in Utopia

by Mary Pritchard

The loving, hating, moving, eating, sleeping, shitting, farting, dying, fighting, laughing, talking, sulking stuff of your future world—human beings. Can you plan for all that mess? For everyone interested in politics, that is what's at stake. Few know of the mass of police takedowns targeting protesters a few years ago. The media silence has been at points so pokerfaced it encourages whispered rumours of vague conspiracy, but in truth no masterplan is needed to engineer and coordinate the apathy of the press about such trivialities as endemic police brutality and the political suppression of leftist groups. Rules of exception can always be applied to ease middleclass suspicions and apathy as a trait engendered by journalism's makeup. Coercion, always justified when protecting officers from the consequences of their misconduct, fails even to enrage the hollow sloganeering of a political yesteryear. Freedom of speech: a principle more commonly applied to defend the right of paparazzi to take candid shots of celebrities over their garden walls, than expose abuses of power.

I know and write about this from the position I also decry only because one day I wandered from the confines of my world into that, coincidentally at the right moment to see what my world does to its hidden neighbours. I was at the occupation of a tower block, momentarily without employment, recording impressions on a trifling blog. In one post I used the metaphor of a castle for my brief utopic home; now I have a more precise metaphor for what became a tragedy, Troy. The occupiers have been called fools. And they had an untainted foolishness, one that gripped me when I was most jaded. It's a foolishness to act in moral ways, for simple idealism, a foolishness we desperately need.

And which was consequently stamped out. Many have been sympathetic; although, little was said then or now, as such goings on persist with unmediated viciousness. Minor scandals erupt at some police tactics, nothing in the world is as clear cut as Machiavellian fantasies and even commentators on the Right express casual unease

at images of heavily armoured men dragging a pregnant woman over concrete, pushing a disabled man onto the ground and so on. Although who grasps the routine nature of such assaults? Only last week Caleb Everts wrote a measured column attacking the shrill violence unleashed by an establishment that has lost proportionality. Nevertheless, even this rare sympathy is expressed as an adult expresses pity to a bullied child, aloofly castigating the victim as much as the perpetrator. In her apocalypse *The Last Man*, Mary Shelley writes of, 'that disparagement that the worldly wise always attach to enthusiasm.' It is the wrong tone; what I saw was put down because it was a threat, it was destroyed by evil people using evil means for evil ends, and what happens should incur reverent rage rather than supercilious apprehension.

Police heavy-handedness cost one man the use of his legs and a small boy his life, but it's easily put down to human error. The difficulty of the moment offers law enforcement a blanket excuse. Less easy to justify, more obviously cynical and utterly destructive of everyone involved, has been the deployment of agent provocateurs who embed themselves in benign political organisations and even seduce unaware members. Such a man worked clandestinely in the block and felt encouraged to enter such a disingenuous relationship with one of the protestors. Andy Perkins was a young, married man when he started his surreal assignment to become Mike Wilmot. Allotted a pile of 'radical' books to read in a month, he found himself the intimate associate of Helots, an umbrella group with roots in environmentalism, Trotskyism and anarchist splinters.

'It was difficult at first. I had to strike a balance between fanatic and novice. Eventually I found my way in through Bernard, who was also new and made an excellent cover.' Bernard (a pseudonym) was taken in. 'I didn't suspect a thing. Never thought about police pretending to be one of us. I was stupid,' he admitted to me. After the raid on the block Mr Perkins took some time off; he later left the force, unable to reconcile to the job's realities. 'It's not as though I'd been recruited to MI5. I thought I'd be stopping drug pushers from selling to kids and breaking up domestic violence. My mum was abused and I wanted to arrest people like my dad. In the end I think I've become him. Or at least no better.' After he disclosed his secret activities to his family, his wife left. 'I can't blame her,' he says.

Against this sordid travesty I want to contrast the aims of Helots. What was their subversive goal that it demanded manipulation, mutilation and death as its price? Simply to save the long-term homes of the city's poorest residents and organise them into an alternative vision of society. One that was falteringly democratic, impressively cohesive and told the lie about mainstream politics constricted scope for change, the ways in which we are allowed to collectively lead our short lives. And what happened to these residents? It is difficult to get a full picture, many scattered. Nevertheless, those I did track gave a stark and uniform picture.

Karen is representative; assigned a B&B, she stayed three months, despite promises she would get a better place in weeks. Then she barely avoided homelessness by living with her daughter in a house already too small for a young family. Now she sleeps on a couch and looks for means to move within traveling distance of her relatives, the only people she has in the world. In a shrunk job market and with no valuable skills she finds little hope in the future. She warmly remembers her time in the block while it lasted. 'I'll never see anything like that again,' she tells me wistfully. 'You know the Pragmatist party always tells us about how they want more community and traditional values, well there you had it exactly like that, a group of strangers who became like a family, and they smashed it to pieces. I mean, like, people were watching out for each other, helping each other. We all thought Helots were a joke at first, and I don't really know when we stopped thinking that, but life was good for a while.'

'I feel like I was part of destroying something special,' Mr Wilmot told me, looking haunted. 'It was like being the bully on the beach who walks over and kicks some other kids sandcastle. That's no way to use the police.' Five people went to prison after the raid. Despite the death of a minor and the crippling of a protestor, no police were charged. All of them were members of Helots, and for each their crime, expressed in various euphemisms, amounted to causing a nuisance to authority.

~

For all their acute differences Maurice considered Sebastian easy company—easier than Graham and Sandra. And Sebastian reciprocated. It was uncomplicated because Sebastian was a simple dilettante, solipsistically undemanding.

Sebastian kept a two-floored apartment with a carefully carefree absence of normal décor: pale wood flooring, stucco ceiling, white walls adorned by sparsely placed abstract minimalist paintings, white leather sofas and chairs and cubes (glaringly white) with meticulously placed anodyne exotica, *objet d'art*, curios and trinkets. An elegant black ceramic at a gravity defying incline; a kitsch St. George flag held aloft by a detached hand with gnarled nails, an oversized crinkled fibreglass Coca-Cola can, a playing card pyramid glued together. Well-positioned windows let in as much day as could be hoarded and electric beams excised shadows where natural sources failed or the shape of a room stipulated.

Maurice slept beneath an eiderdown in a spare opposite Sebastian's painting studio, the only territory from which he was barred. It was next door to the bathroom equipped with a wheezing dehumidifier. The oddness of living with this stranger circumnavigated guilt he might feel about taking advantage. And he was relieved of the pressure to rehabilitate. Sebastian encouraged Maurice to think better of himself, but apart from averring that he be cheerier there was no expectation. Sebastian did not mention Maurice's drinking or push him to rejoin society. Instead, from their different stances, the two bonded in misanthropy and regret—and in competitive self-deprecation.

'I deserved those months, a kid died.'

'Not your fault. I knew the best woman in the world, could talk about anything, and I treated her so cheaply she joined a circus.'

'I don't think Clare got sucked into the fundies because of you.'

'Are you going to take the blame for that too?'

'If it hadn't been for the occupation...'

'Unfair, Clare is definitely my fault.'

'Then you have to allow me David.'

'He didn't blame you, why should I?'

'Because I blame me.'

‘Maurice, my friend, you’re so arrogant you secretly blame yourself for creation.’

‘You blamed me in your book.’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘You did.’

‘Sure you read it?’

‘Yes.’

‘Read it again, then.’

He did.

Otherwise they barely met. Other people’s routines gave weight to Maurice’s as they conflicted with his own arrangements; as time was felt only as friction, to be so alone was to be timeless, in a dizzying stillness. Sebastian used his flat as a base. And when home for any extended period committed ceaselessly to painting, wandering shirtless and speckled with splashed colours like one of Boudica’s warriors readying to gibbet Roman settlers. Mostly, Sebastian had opportunities to be elsewhere, especially in an assortment of women’s beds. Maurice was therefore the primary resident, given a chance for an isolation that came with no demands, not even that he eventually seeks employment.

Days fell without human noise, so he took to reading: novels and economics, political theory and epic verse, dry sociology and graphic horror. No coherency, no project and no self-betterment. He’d re-read the same Irish novella three times then cast it aside on the fourth for a collection of Polish love poetry; rummaging for an arcane secret in every text; a hermit divining a clue to salvation. He drank, a habit Sebastian not only failed to hinder, but enabled. And he ran, not for health, but for the loss of self that accompanied exercise.

Sebastian had an unused treadmill and Maurice liked to plug his ears into an audiobook and jog to a perky voice piping things like, ‘The Futurists relationship to time was therefore as split as their relation to fascism. To the past they manifested what the Sinologist Simon Leys might describe as a characteristically Chinese iconoclasm, venerating perishability—misaligned with the



classical aesthetics of their political benefactors. To the future they dreamed a mechanical romance, an ode to speed that was European and unapologetically vulgar...' He preferred female narrators and often imagined their voices describing his daily actions.

At first he went for ten-minute sessions, then twenty became forty and forty an hour. After a fortnight he did two-hours, but this waned as his body succumbed. He had lengthened the time not so much to break his record but for the satisfaction gained only from excess. Surplus enjoyment became his all-purpose dictate: how long he could go offline, without sleep, how much he could drink or read.

Holding down the intercom button a woman's voice hissed, 'Sebastian? It's me.' Maurice had been distracted from reading *Sátántangó* by the door signal.

'Sorry, he's not in.'

Nothing for long enough that he almost left the intercom, then, 'You're a friend? You're covering?'

'I can let you up,' Maurice offered.

'Do.'

Maurice buzzed her in, told her the apartment number and left the door open before resuming his activity.

The young, sporty brunette in a short skirt arrived a few minutes later. A gossamer pink top boasted her flat midriff and mammoth Velcro sports sneakers made her uncovered ankles look incongruously petite. Svelte hair was fastened back so tightly it dragged her scalp.

Maurice gave the intruder a casual look. In person she was tentative.

'Can I search?' she asked, now more lamenting than insisting.

'Go ahead.' He turned a page.

He kept on to the end of the book before he remembered her. She had gone through the rooms and disappeared. He put *Sátántangó* on top of *Situationalist International Anthology* and *Helots*

*and Their Masters in Messenia and Laconia: Histories, Ideologies, Structures* to find her sitting on the top of the slatted staircase.

‘You okay?’ he asked

‘No.’ She spoke this with a ‘w’ on the end and an extended, throaty ‘o’, so it made a pitiable, rounded sound. Her eyes were rheumy.

‘If I were you I’d forget Sebastian, he’s a bastard.’

‘Thank you.’

Maurice nodded, unsure why he was being thanked. Really he wanted rid of her, he had not felt well for days. Woken by night shakes, profusely perspiring, weak with hunger, but unable to eat. It occurred to him Sebastian arranged this girl to be here as a depraved gift, although he dismissed the unkind presumption.

‘Guess it’d be trouble for you if I smashed the place up?’ the woman asked.

‘I’d probably be chucked out,’ Maurice confirmed.

At the door, after Maurice helped her up, she held his hand. ‘Paul.’

He registered the ill-fitting masculine name. ‘Maurice.’

Maurice once found Sebastian using his laptop.

‘Hey.’

‘Sorry, I didn’t think you’d mind. I wanted to use yours to do an edit on my wiki page.’

‘You’re a narcissist, Sebastian. Who the hell even has a Wikipedia page?’

‘I do.’

‘What embellishments?’

‘No, no, not embellishments. I’m adding a controversies section. There was nothing mean spirited.’

‘So?’

‘You can’t be a serious public figure unless someone hates you, that’s what you never got with the whole Helots thingy.’

Maurice cringed, but more for show than rancour. ‘How are the hands going?’

Sebastian’s latest paintings were all grasped hands against a grey backdrop. Little could be discerned and Sebastian refused to confess. They were ugly, with a hyperrealism that gave a deformed appearance to the familiar body parts. When Maurice asked, he found out only that the man’s hand, as he suspected, belonged to the artist. He’d guessed it was autobiographical.

‘It’s going badly. I’m giving up. Got a mosaic thing.’

~

A string of boarded-up shops flashed as they turned onto a dual carriageway and silvery cat’s eyes dotted the way, catching in the distantly projected glow of the vehicle’s beams. It smelled of tobacco and Phil drew in the scent like a cognac connoisseur. The driver gripped the black steering wheel while they were caught among commuters, inching towards the city’s largest roundabout. The syncopated sub-bas and riff-overlaid percussions of dubstep came subdued by the chassis of the next car along at some lights.

Away from the pristine city centre he spotted a crooked ampersand on a chippy shop sign, a mosque supporting a cobalt minaret and the prostrate carcass of a trolley cast off by predators to lie pathetic in the thoroughfare bank, like the cleanly picked bones of carrion on the Serengeti.

Opening the door, he sidled out of the beat-up, nondescript white Citroën ZX, squinting piggy-eyed against the angle of the sun. The sultry evening was the perfect muggy climate for midges, which irritated his skin. They swarmed in menacing clouds, congregating about the hem on his fleshy neck to pinch out ruby pricks of blood. He rubbed where it itched worst and worsened the soreness that already grated tenderly against an asphyxiating polyester workshirt. He rolled his shoulders in turn to loosen his joints.

‘Sorry Phil, very tough break. It is not fair,’ said the driver with a smooth Anglo-Indian accent, leaning towards the passenger seat so he could speak more directly to his former colleague.

Philip shrugged and raised his arms in a trivial sign of comic resignation. ‘I’ll find another, Samir. Cheers for the ride.’

‘Things will not be the same without you Philip. All the others are uneducated slob.’

‘Yeah, a great bunch. I used to be a professional slob.’

‘That I cannot believe,’ he gave a summary wave. ‘Keep yourself well. And look after your health.’

The car drove away and Phil turned to the tiny house as Peter came out. Sarah behind him in the open doorway.

‘Hey uncle,’ Peter greeted, ‘I was visiting.’

‘Good lad. How is she?’

‘Different.’

‘All the Granges are “different”.’

‘From how she was.’

‘Yeah.’

‘How’re things at work?’ Sarah asked.

‘Lovely jubbly, but I could use a nightcap; care to join me at *The Queen* Pete?’

‘Don’t drink, but sure.’

‘Yeah, we’ll order a lemonade, but first to change from this hairshirt.’

‘Y’what?’ asked Sarah.

Phil made his way in, agitated by the gnats. ‘These torturous garments, sister—what chafe the life from my bounteousness. Penance be done; lemme revel.’

Putting a beer on Peter’s placemat, Phil wedged himself into his customary chair.

‘So, we get to talk, properly, man to mountain—rare occurrence.’

Peter lifted his glass and they clinked. ‘To family,’ Phil cheered.

‘To family.’

They gulped beverages in synchronous movements.

‘So...’

‘So?’

‘How’s Junior?’

‘Well.’

‘Well?’

‘Yeah, well.’

‘In what way ‘well’, monosyllabic nephew?’

‘How ain’t he? Wish I’d his rearing.’

‘How so? Details make the anecdote.’

‘All the women think he’s the best thing since our Lord.’

‘*Your* Lord.’

‘He has a whale of a time wiv it. Loved to bits. I never thought I’d give a child such a good start.’

‘What school?’

‘Naa, Clare doesn’t like em. The kids learn wiv us.’

‘And the socials okay wiv that?’

‘I wouldn’t have thought so, but apparently it’s legit. Wouldn’t mind words of advice from Seán. We’ve heard of folks who got in trouble for homeschooling.’ He took another swish of beer. ‘I miss alcohol.’

‘And you and Clare?’

‘Full of questions. We’re great. Don’t know what she sees in me. She’s *proper* smart.’

‘Yeah, like our Ella.’

‘But she’s more like you.’

Phil laughed. ‘I don’t see it.’

‘Oftentimes she talks like you, but it’s not always jokes.’

‘She’s a knack for deadpan, eh?’ Phil scratched the back of his neck, where little burning spots had risen. ‘You met her family?’

‘Toby, her brother, and her dad once. Not together. She doesn’t get on wiv parents. Apparently her mum doesn’t approve.’

‘Of what?’

‘Of anything, so it seems. The dad came all puffed and sulky, told us he hadn’t raised a daughter to be the next Charles Manson. When challenged he got shy and said it was just good to see her. And the bastard asked, point blank, whether she was using protection. Looked straight at me like I’m a mangy dog.’

‘Shame, but don’tcha two forget the Granges. Even if we’re not part of your religious thing, don’t cut out family.’

‘Course not. Clare wouldn’t lemme forget you if I wanted.’

‘You two’ve something in common, no?’ Phil asked, picking up his drink again.

‘How’d’you mean?’

‘I was there both times. When you tried to kill your sorry selves.’

Peter turned his head. ‘I wasn’t *really* trying to kill myself,’ he eventually muttered.

‘I know. She was. You’ve found someone interesting; take care of her, right? Interesting things have a way of being delicate.’

‘You’re sounding serious, Phil.’

‘Every clown must be as uniformly proficient in severity as merriment,’ Phil began in theatrical mode. ‘Entertainment has twin-faces, one a hideous grin, the other a wilting despair. In philosophy, the best entertainment, there is always a Democritus and Heraclitus, a weeping and a laughing truth seeker. As the one is mirthful the other pours misery, expressly for wisdom.’

‘That’s more like your normal self, can’t understand a thing of it. That’s exactly what I mean when I say you’re alike.’

‘...besides, anger makes for severity,’ Phil continued, ‘and death’s all I hate. That great antipathy stripping our world of life, and all the profound gossips life births; not fear, mind, but I *hate* death.’

‘You’re not afraid?’

‘I want as much as I can get, but if I live as I’m made I’m not scared of what comes. Maybe I don’t even hate my own death; life’s a wonder, but I can’t be robbed of myself, can I? Yet that scythe-wielding farmer can thief you. That’s what I hate, cause I’m an old sop and people are precious. Science hasn’t lived up to itself till it’s stayed the grim and bony claw.’

‘What’re you sayin?’ asked Seán as he approached with a brimming Guinness.

‘Something about dying, mate,’ explained Peter. ‘Can you follow a word of him?’

Seán chuckled. ‘It gets easier to comprehend with a few of these under your belt.’

‘That puts my poor nephew outside the purview of my discourse, he’s a teetotaller.’

‘What’s that then?’ Seán looked at Peter’s glass.

‘Non-alcoholic Ginger,’ Pete said as he raised the suspect article, ‘unfortunately.’

‘Good on you. Your uncle can’t ever seem to take care of his health.’

‘I gave up fags, didn’t I?’

‘And the second you leave your sister’s sights long enough, you’ll light up again like that.’

Seán clicked his fingers.

‘Sure.’ Phil rose. ‘I need a piss,’ he announced and wandered off, leaving Peter and Seán alone and tongue-tied.

The toilets smelled of ammonia. Two men in camo took up alternating urinals, talking in cropped sentences about one of their latest screws.

‘Her hair was fookin blue.’

‘You mean down under?’

‘Yeah, that’s I’m sayin. The fook izzat?’

‘Maybe she’s a natural blue.’

Phil pushed his way between them and relieved himself. The two men cast looks and one mock-stifled giggles.

‘Hey, fatty, you’re invading my air,’ said the other.

Phil did not acknowledge the jab. He washed and blowdried his hands. When he got back to the table Seán and Pete were engaged in ferocious debate.

‘In the modern world you can’t teach him everything he needs, it’s not responsible parenting.’

‘Clare says he only needs to know enough that he can learn whatever he needs on his own.’

‘Sure, but you don’t know all he needs, you don’t know what he’s gonna wanna do. And socialising? There’s a lot going for him there, I don’t have anything against the whole Christian thing, bedrock and all, but other kids?’

‘There’re loads of other kids.’

‘And kids from different backgrounds? Even, and you might not like this, but different religious backgrounds. You don’t want him growing up thinking everyone’s got the same beliefs.’

‘We can teach him about that.’

‘Hey,’ cut in Phil, ‘Children, children, this is happy hour for sanity’s sake. Save the harangue.’

Seán put up his hands and smiled. ‘Fair enough. And listen, lad, I respect everything you’re doing. Really. Hell, if I had kids I might do the same, there’s a lotta problems with the system. And it’s totally your choice, I agree with you there, but just be prudent you’re not...’

‘Hey,’ entered Phil again, ‘let’s put a moratorium on friendly advice, couched opinions and all the rest of it?’

‘Ha, right.’

~



Sebastian flicked through emails on his touch phone, deleting swathes of spam. He was splayed on a wooden chair, which the receptionist assigned with piped and affected inflections.

‘Mr Hendrickson will see you soon about the mural. Please take a seat. Would you like a hot drink?’

‘How soon?’

‘Soon.’ She beamed, her mouth an enthralling shock of ruby.

Through empirical trial he discovered the adverb covered a longer duration than forty minutes. Other than with his mobile, he satisfied impatience by attempting to meditate in public, a mindfulness exercise suggested by a fling, Jessica, but his attention was seized by the business of each passerby.

‘What we’ll do is... okay, the tests are hard and we could make them harder, so people just back out. We generate statistics about fraudsters,’ said the younger of two men.

‘I won’t deceive.’

‘Won’t have to. Your city can’t afford to pay the feckless; more crucially, people don’t want to. You’ll be making them feel easier if you approve this, that’s why they elected you. That *is* your job as their representative.’

‘I’m not a monster. We do things right.’

‘Yes, but this is right.’

The man nodded curtly and turned to Sebastian.

‘Are you the ruddy artist?’

Sebastian stood and tilted his head forward. ‘I am he, court jester humbly at your beck and call. Is a public works in order? Or I could juggle, dance, make merry?’

The man with grey whiskers and a receding hairline looked at the young suit beside him as though expecting an explanation.

‘What is it you need?’

Sebastian smiled. ‘Particulars. I need details.’

‘She can give you that,’ the politician waved his hands at the secretary before going on his way.

Later, when he told his day to Maurice, the only comment elicited was, ‘That Bret Borger guy had the right idea. There’s not a wall long enough.’

~

One blue eye and one green; Grandmother told me, ‘When they’re like that the child’s a changeling, Beth.’ I can’t remember why she said those things. There must have been someone in her life, like little Peter.

I love the boy as I love his father and adopted mother. Clare and Peter and Jesus Saves belong to me and I belong to them. That’s what Clare told us. We’re not a religion, or a cult like people blab. We’re a family, but one open to every person on the planet. Regular families are small, but ours is as big as the human race. Coming back after waitressing, I am happy knowing I’m a small part of something massive. All I have to do is say ‘yes’ to this place and these people and I will be fine.

I know he is not one of us as he follows Clare into the room where I help Junior with his arithmetic. Although we mess around more than learn, pulling faces. We can always tell when someone’s from outside, no matter how many join and leave, because unless we’re at work we wear the robes. This man wears a thick brown leather jacket; he has an unshaven, handsome face.

‘I wanted to say sorry for real.’

‘Fine. Get out.’

I had never witnessed Clare cross. At first I put it down to her fasting.

‘Okay,’ the man paused, emptied, ‘I’ll go.’

I went to Clare. ‘You okay? Who was that?’

She gave me a frightened glance that hurt, but smiled. 'Sorry Beth. He's nobody.'

'But he was asking forgiveness.'

'He doesn't deserve it.'

I took a moment to translate that into something that worked with my idea of Clare.

'Everyone deserves forgiveness.' They were her words.

'I...'

'Forgiveness isn't about how you feel,' I echoed her again. I felt uncomfortably aware of Junior, the little'un probably trying to make sense of something I couldn't apprehend. Then it fell into place.

'He's the policeman,' I realised. 'He's Mike... Andy. That's good, he's the one you need to forgive.' Again, her words; I reminded the teacher of her lesson. This was it, I realised; I was here for this, to help someone better than me stick on the right path.

'You're right Beth. You're right.'

'Who was that man?' asked Peter Jr as Clare sped off.

'A lost sinner.'

'Will mummy help him?'

'Right. Now let's open up the book?'

He pulled a face that stretched his mouth and stuck his tongue out and down. I gave him a monster grin and opened the hardback to division and multiplication.

It was hours later when I realised I had managed only one five-page chapter with my changeling. When Peter asked about our progress I glanced up, helpless, and admitted, 'He's learnt some more funny faces.'

Peter tousled his son's mousy brown curls into mussed disarray. 'You'll have to show me, won't you?'

Over the previous months Peter Jr had lost his baby blond, the same colour as mine, for the pedestrian shade, although his cherubim beauty had not diminished. The boy looked up at his namesake with an unintentionally hilarious dimpled severity and earnestly rearranged his hair. He approached every task with so much seriousness, an attribute he could only have picked up from his stepmother, revering Clare even more than any of us.

It was not long after *his* disappearing act, which was not long after she had joined and been given the new deputy position. Clare had inspected everything and said to a few of us in an emergency worship session, 'Jesus Saves is a miraculous mess. Just like Helots. And it's a mess because, like Helots, it's been run by a well-intentioned, micromanaging, megalomaniac. I will not lead without consent, if you give me that, I will make sweeping changes to help keep the mission alive.'

The 'sweeping changes' weren't controversial. She laid out a plan in three steps, 'Delegation of authority; uniformity of practise; oversight.' She argued Azariah had already implemented the first by making her deputy, which she merely extended by appointing eight more, including Peter. In the future she intended an anonymous ballot in cells to rotate the deputies. The second step revolved around communal meals, funds and the balance of time in secular society (jobs, proselytising and charity) with time in barracks. The third was to circumscribe her role; the goal of which was her replacement and, she hoped, the redundancy of any leader.

'It's bullshit they call us a cult,' she told the assembled, standing in one of our many bare, concrete rooms before the seated rows in white, 'but we must make sure it stays bullshit. If we correctly interpret the bans on idolatry we are blessed with a blueprint on how to avoid personality worship, insular sectarianism, the insidiousness of new age Gnosticism and superstitions. I want this to be a mantra in all your heads all of the time, "I'm not better than everyone else. I'm made from the same dust and dreck. Just because I've accepted Him doesn't

make me better. It only means I've more responsibility. And that responsibility doesn't justify my bullshit. If I think I'm better, I'm worst.'"

I remember how inspiring she looked. I heard she had once been a wreck, but had grown into herself with Azariah's help. She would pace about before speaking to a group, using Peter and me as sounding boards, talking about how paganism was all cycles and Judaism had, 'subverted Gilgamesh with a covenant that established a non-cyclical linearity.' Then she would explain this to a group in a way that made sense.

'How's Junior?' Clare asked.

'We learnt math mummy,' he answered before I could say anything.

'Good, education is important.' She turned to the elder Peter. 'That was Jacobs. He's still having problems with the communal meal and now he's pestering about doing this group marriage.'

As usual I silently listened.

'What's the problem with the meal?' he asked.

'He has tabulated it and his lot mostly work nights, by a small majority, so they wanted to make it a late breakfast, what my parents call brunch, rather than dinner.'

'So?'

'Some of the ones who work during the day had objections.'

'But people can miss the meals for work.'

'That's what's good about all this, nobody wants to. The meals are a success, but that means logistical difficulties accommodating people. And that means all this marriage business is going to have to stay on hold.'

'Azariah promised the next marriage for six months ago,' Peter observed.

'Yeah, but he up and went.'

Pete nodded, 'It might help things. Look what it did for us.' And he grinned like his son.

‘There are other problems.’

‘What?’

‘The male to female ratio is tipped too much to the latter. And more of the women agreed to anonymous weddings than men. There aren’t many who have actually decided on anyone. And some of the men who have put themselves forward aren’t suitable. A few were already ruled out before I took over. It could end badly. There were a lot of problems last time too.’

‘But we can’t delay forever,’ I spoke up.

Clare looked at me as though my presence equally fascinated and caught her offguard. ‘No, Beth, you’re right. First we need to get our house in order, but you’re right. It’ll bond the group.’

In the city square I mutely handed a leaflet to an elderly woman with a kerchief tied round her head. My legs ached, the humid sun made the stretch of brick into a giant’s cooking implement in which shoppers were slowly broiled in their own juices. The glare from a nearby glass public library blindsided me.

‘Fook off, will ya, I’m trying to get by.’ She weaponised her cane to shove her way onwards.

I offered it to another, a man in a suit who pretended not to see me.

Then a mother with a pushchair gave me a sympathetic smile.

A man with tremulous jowls in tie-dye and khaki shorts only scowled, lugging a cumbrous armful of acquisitions.

Across the square a man stood on a pedestal dressed wholly in grey, with a grey cap covering his hair underneath an antiquated top hat. He had grey face paint on his skin. He did a human sculpture act in front of the fountain, which sprayed water from the mouths of lions surrounding a Victorian monument to an eminent man—an industrialist or general. I watched the grey man, trying to perceive the barest movement. Sometimes I thought I did, but if so it must have been slight because I wasn’t sure. His resolve was more formidable than mine.

‘Oh piss off,’ said a man in blue jeans. We were not allowed to reply, especially to opprobrium. We should only speak when directly questioned. And always remember, every soul could be a new addition to our family.

By the end of the day I mustered two successes: an Arabic man with a jet beard took my leaflet and politely thanked me, and a teenage boy in a maroon beanie trailing his younger sister in a modish tartan pinafore; he read it as he hurried off. I remembered something Clare told me: how we do what we can in good faith, and shouldn’t think like people in the secular world about how much we do, or reduce people to problems needing our solutions.

I was eager to do well, I had been assigned such a good spot; the city square was the most central location, particularly important for an urban jungle that otherwise felt like clusters of smaller, identical cities contained in one large city, with the same brands repeating so that one area would have a café and bookshop and three or four clothes stores and then the next would have the same café and bookshop and three or four clothes stores. With its fountain and library the city centre was a landmark in which it was possible to find oneself.

It was time to leave. Despite the rules I decided to say farewell to the street performer. The evening had cooled, but I was still glad to feel the just detectable spray of rushing water picked up by a breeze.

‘Hi, it’s been fun watching you.’

He bowed with his mechanical, over-the-top panache. ‘My pleasure.’

After so long watching his theatre, hearing him speak was funny, like talking to a real statue. Perhaps he thought the same.

‘Hey,’ he reached out a hand, ‘can I have one of those?’

‘Yes, definitely.’ I handed him a leaflet.

~

Closing the colossal maths book, Vera let the hundreds of thin pages thump.

‘You’re good at this. Really good,’ she assessed. ‘I’m impressed. The way your uncle spoke I expected more of a challenge.’

‘I’ve been struggling though.’ Ella was relaxed in this woman’s company, a rare occurrence with someone new. Dressed in her jeans and a loose fitting ribbed shirt, the head of the desk fan turned from her to Vera, intermittently billowing her top and cooling her skin. The flash heat had lasted eight days already, but forecasts promised a storm would break tomorrow night and unleash a freshening torrent on most of the country, sweeping up from France, a wet whip of raincloud.

‘You take notes fast.’

‘I took a course on it. And touch typing.’

‘I think you must have taken a course on everything.’

‘Mum says it’s essential to study.’

‘Ella, can I ask you a personal question?’

Ella nodded.

They were seated on tatty old office chairs tucked tightly into a second-hand repurposed school desk where Ella kept her current module materials and ancient desktop computer, its grey clunky plastic dominating most of the surface.

‘Why have you been struggling? When I found you in the Spar, what were you thinking about? Is there something wrong? Is anyone hurting you?’

Ella shook emphatically. ‘No. Who would?’

‘Nobody,’ assured Vera.

‘I just...’

‘Yes Ella?’

‘I miss it.’

‘Miss?’



‘When I lived in this tower block. Everything was better. Not everything is bad now, I’m glad Seán is wiv us. And...’

‘Slow down girl.’

‘Sorry.’

‘You said you lived in a tower block, and you miss your old home? I miss mine too. Sometimes I think of wandering back to have a peep, but I don’t like the idea of someone else living there.’

‘The block was demolished.’

‘You moved from there...’

‘We were forced to leave,’ Ella talked as if she spoke inside her head, not looking at Vera.

‘Sorry about that, Ella.’

‘It was horrible. The police came.’

‘This was one of those occupations?’ *Someone must have died.*

Ella nodded.

‘I read about it, a piece in *The Watcher* a while ago.’

‘Yes, that was us. Our place.’

A gap bifurcated their conversation.

‘Someone got hurt?’ Vera asked.

Ella gave one of her customary little nods.

‘A friend?’

Another nod.

‘Tell me.’

‘He was just a little boy. He got thrown. He didn’t get up.’

‘That’s awful Ella. And you saw? I knew someone who died recently, someone I loved very much. And it hurts all the way through, doesn’t it?’

‘Yes.’

Vera looked to the clock: twenty-five minutes over time. She dismissed the fact. 'Is there anything that would make you feel better? Anything you would like to do?'

'Yes, I want to see Joshua.'

'Was that the boy who died?'

'No, his friend, my friend. We were friends and Ollie died and Joshua disappeared.'

'I see.'

'And I want to meet Joshua.'

Vera compressed her lips. 'Okay.'

'Okay?'

'Okay. Yes, I will try to help you find this Joshua—if he can be found. Any friend of yours has got to be worth meeting.'

Ella walked gently down stairs behind Vera. She could hear an A Major in one Octave played inexpertly, a student's early attempts at the piano.

'How's he coming along?' Vera asked through the doorway to the room that multitasked as living, music, dining and Philip's bedroom. Like the others it's walls were an oppressive seventies magnolia, a colour Phil described as, 'somewhere betwixt white and sick.'

'Very good, aren't you, Anthony? And it's not easy to concentrate. It's scorching.'

The severe looking boy said, 'I am doing terribly well because I practise every day. And twice a day if I can. And Susie is doing terribly terrible because she never practises.'

Vera nodded. 'Well, we all do what we can.'

'I can do a lot more,' he boasted, walking out of the room to join Vera for the short walk next door.

'The Lintels are lovely, but their son's an odd duck,' Sarah thought aloud.

'Quack,' said Ella.

Sarah laughed, ‘Did Ella Grange just make a joke? Stop everything; halt the press, Ella told a joke! The world’s come to an end. Next it’ll be locust swarms.’

Ella reddened and smiled at once.

‘Silly goose, I don’t know what that woman’s doing for your courses, but she’s performing honest-to-God wonders for your social graces. If she makes you brighten, she deserves a damn medal,’ Sarah said as she moved to the kitchen, separated from the variously adaptable main room by a wall with a permanently opened hatchway and a doorway missing its door. ‘Have you done the dishes already sweetie?’

‘Yes. We have no bread,’ Ella informed.

Sarah pursed, ‘Wasn’t there half a loaf left?’

‘I threw it, green mouldy. I could get some in the morning?’

‘You’re good to go?’

‘Hmm.’

‘Thanks love, a weight off. I’ve a salon appointment... Lay four places at table? Seán’s definitely for tea, don’t know if my brother is back from work, but we’ll make him a place.’

Sarah said the same most evenings, just as Phil’s plate always went untouched until late—when he cobbled together leftovers. It was as if her words were a mandated ancient ritual.

‘Sponge the table down first, will ya love?’

Ella took the soggy towel to the plastic surface and wiped. Then applied a dry towel before setting out four sets of utensils. And Sarah boiled water on the hob for pasta, taking out a metal pan and quickly getting it to a simmer while she put on the electric oven and opened a can of tomato sauce into tupperware for the microwave.

‘Sorry darling, floor’s looking messy; do a quick sweep?’

Sarah picked up the yellow enamel teapot, took off its top and peered; she tsked, put her foot on the stainless steel bin’s foot pedal and tipped two soggy bags of PG. Ella brushed loose dirt

into a line, which she deposited from floor to dustpan and dustpan to trash, getting in before Sarah let the lid slam.

‘Thanks a lot dear,’ Sarah said as she angled first the boiling water and then a bag of white pasta into the pot, adding a dash of olive oil. ‘Lessee if there’s music on the radio.’ She switched it on and beneath static they heard, ‘Mayor Hendrickson claimed his...’ before Sarah adjusted the nob; some girl-pop eliding into an orchestral piece Ella didn’t recognise, one with flutes.

‘Y’know, I’m good. A’right if you wanna go to your room while I finish up.’

‘Thanks Mum.’ Ella had been guiltily awaiting her leave; she wanted to solve her last maths assignment.

Sarah wrung the flannel, watching the saturation squeeze in gushes, a steady trickle and finally an irregular drip-drip. She tied a white-and-salmon-striped apron round her waist, feeling her hip’s girth with a pride-pricking sense of loss in gain, which Seán insisted was ‘nothing.’ Forlorn about ‘getting lardy’, she blamed men’s portions.

‘Hello darling,’ Seán said to Sarah, untucking his shirttails, loosening his black work tie.

‘Hi love.’ She put out the first plate. ‘Would you call Ella?’

‘Sure.’ He flung the tie onto the nearby couch, where it dangled precipitously and dropped to the carpet. Increasingly he had taken to living in this cramp, sharing Sarah’s bed, arriving each evening from work. He clasped the newel and shouted up, ‘Hey Ella, food.’

‘Coming,’ came a holler, ‘just a sec.’

‘Getting cold,’ he provoked.

‘I’ll be right down.’

‘D’you all have to be shouting?’ Sarah shouted from the kitchen.

‘Hi Seán,’ Ella chirped as she passed him, hand skirting the balustered rail. At the foldout table Sarah was laying the last of the meal.

‘Hello Ella,’ Seán greeted, taking his seat with manifest weariness, but also relief at the company.

He hated solitude, feared silence. Being sent to his room so frequently by a bullying father had implanted the firm belief that privacy was a vindictive punishment rather than an inviolable right.

‘Thanks for the grub.’

‘Thanks Mum.’

‘You’re both welcome,’ answered Sarah as she rested a carafe of water and then three tumblers at the table centre, one in proximity to each of the already placed napkins.

‘You seem in a good mood Ella,’ Seán observed.

Ella nodded.

‘Is there a reason or didja just get up and decide today’s gonna be chipper? What’s your secret?’

‘I’d make out it’s that tutor,’ replied Sarah for her daughter.

‘The old lady next door? Vera something?’

Ella nodded.

‘We like her,’ Sarah said.

‘That’s nice.’

‘She said she’d help find him.’

Seán and Sarah communicated worry in a glance that would normally irritate Ella, but didn’t. They concentrated on their meals for a while.

‘Well, it’s good to see you in such cheer. It’s been a tough day. I don’t think I’d have made it through without all this at the end.’ And as if to demonstrate his content, Seán munched a large helping.

‘What happened love?’

‘Usual crapola, pardon.’

‘That’s okay, I’m not soft,’ Ella said, knowing her mother’s protective prohibition on swearing must have been conveyed to Seán.

‘No, you’re not,’ mysteriously consented her mother.

‘It’s taxing,’ continued Seán. ‘We released this girl, gave her money and let her out cos she’s some arbitrary age. But she’s not grown, and if anyone looked at the case, they’d know. She’s a child, babe in the woods. We’ve changed her category: our problem, police problem. What kinda joke is that?’

‘It’s terrible,’ agreed Sarah, genuinely horrified, imagining Ella at various ages in the situations Seán described. This empathy had bonded them, and now it kept them strongly aligned—love born and sustained from moral indignation.

‘And that was the lighter stuff.’ Seán looked at Ella.

Ella looked at her mum, who nodded. She stood up. ‘I need to get some more work done, could I be excused please?’

‘A’right, dear. Keep it up,’ Sarah said.

When Ella was gone, Sarah smiled at Seán. ‘What’s happened?’

‘Ha. You don’t wanna know.’

‘Then I wouldn’t ave asked, moron. If you can’t share wiv me...’

‘A woman, a girl I knew from a while ago, she’s okay. Doing better’an many. I thought. She took a hot iron to her one and a half year old because he wouldn’t zip it.’ Seán’s voice was flat. ‘Like something you mighta nightmared.’

Sarah let her cutlery rest onto her plate. ‘Oh Seán, I’m sorry.’

‘It’s not sane, is it? You know I said something today that didn’t make me popular. These guys don’t like Jesus Saves, we’ve a few who’ve gone with’em and it’s agreed, especially from those right out of some social science degree; this is the worst that can happen. Really, the worst? Like worse than drugs? Worse than another messed up tyke lost in our system? Worse than scarring your baby because you’re mad alone?’

‘And I said if I had the run of things, but couldn’t do too much, like the things that need changing in a big way, well what I’d do is set up a direct line between us and those fundies and have ’em take as many kids as they want. Because those kids don’t take drugs, don’t abuse *their* kids and they get jobs if they can. They don’t even bloody drink and they do community, but no, that’s the worst thing.’

Seán looked at Sarah, becoming self-conscious at having talked so much. Sarah had her chin held on her palms, her elbows unusually on the table and stared at Ella’s still piled plate—a slow eater.

~

Andy and I are collapsed together. ‘That was nice Mary,’ he says.

“‘Nice’? Like a gander in the park?’ I poke between his ribs and he recoils more than I expect. Gently, I lift his shirt to reveal a web of scars.

‘Where’d you get these?’

‘After my wife left. Another undercover.’

‘Why?’

‘Why what?’

‘I thought... why’d you go undercover again?’

‘Because I wanted to forget myself in work.’

‘But you got hurt?’

He pulls out a cushion lodged uncomfortably. In his post-coital daze his answer’s a near non sequitur, ‘Not sure I give a damn anymore, but if I did I’ll tell you what’d wake me up. People say extremes are the same. Well I’ve spied on left and right and they’re not. Maybe they... end up like that? Maybe. Don’t know, but I do know if it’s between the two, my money’s on the right.’

As he talks my eyes remain on his old wounds.

‘People think the far right is just ignorant racists needing a lesson. Well those ignorant racists know it. Everything you gotta say. They know. And even when they don’t, it wouldn’t change fuck all. They don’t have a problem with facts. They can modify opinions, or just laugh you off, but they’ll still be the same, want the same things. And what they want, it’s fun.’

‘Fun?’ I ask, trying to keep up. During our article interviews he has been clear-cut, but now I can tell he wants to confess something inarticulate; our casual relationship is a puzzlement of roles.

‘Yes, that’s what the right is all about. They only look all disciplined. Actually Maurice had more rules. And with Maurice you obeyed whether or not you liked it. But with them? You liked it whether or not you obeyed. How they found me out—not cause I didn’t conform, but cause I wasn’t enthusiastic. Why Maurice was clueless.’

‘So you did another job before you quit?’

‘I quit because I did the other job. I felt bad about what happened with Maurice, but I still thought it was worthwhile, keeping a lid on things, just in the wrong way. Even after I lost her I thought that.’

‘Lost *her*?’

‘My wife.’

I remember how dad referred to mum as ‘her’, never invoking the taboo name.

‘They’d this garage where they met. You’d never know em. They’d normal stitched across their lives. Chemist, deliveryman, this old geezer type who ran a cluster of pubs, optician’s assistant. Different jobs. If you wanna know what fascist Britain might look like imagine CBeebies’ shows with working heroes and three letter names, only even whiter; *Bob the Builder*, *Postman Pat*, *Fireman Sam* wearing swastika armbands.

‘They met in this place. The guy who owned the garage had wolfsangels nailed. Used to buy flea market junk. World War gas masks, German medals, Nazi memorabilia plates. Owned a



mahogany cabinet where it was on show. Some liked taking photos dressed up. And called it the fourteen eighty-eight club. But plenty despised that stuff. Said they were, “nationalists, not Nazis.” Everyone on the left thinks the right is one thing, and the same is true for the right. They think the left is one thing. Only true when they close ranks on the other.’

‘I don’t know,’ I put in, inasmuch to interrupt as to make a point, ‘the divide is plain. Atavists want their tribes. And the left fails when they become atavist and get parochial. Or stop criticising the in-group or something. They become a tribe. Maybe the left fails when it closes rank and becomes the right, when it forgets what it’s for. That it’s a flock, not predators.’

‘We... the police, thought the eighty-eights were relative moderates, before we even knew what they called emselves. They’d mainstream links. Coordination was sophisticated. They had a network like something from a cheap thriller. They weren’t in control of anything, but they were shrewd infiltrators. Left talks about entryism, but the right are better at it.’

‘You stopped them?’

‘From what? Unlike Maurice they didn’t break the law much. I wouldn’t say we did. Just got a few, obviously,’ he looked at his traumatised flesh, ‘Here’s what I thought, though, people like Maurice don’t stand a chance, but what if they’re what we have? The block and the eighty-eights; couldn’t stop comparing. Should I of be snooping on hipster-cum-commies like I was white supremacists? It was in hospital I lost that sense it was worthwhile. Maybe it was the leftist theory I read to infiltrate Helots. I quit. It was easy to claim stress, a lie they wanted.’

‘So it wasn’t betraying Clare?’

‘I don’t know. I’m not good, Mary; why I said we shouldn’t start this thing we’ve got.’

‘It’s just distraction,’ I assure. I knew our tryst was fleeting. It’d been pleasurable.

‘I don’t wanna hurt anyone.’

I ease my left leg between his thighs. ‘Women aren’t doleful victims, Andy.’ I kiss him. ‘Worry about yourself?’

Under the warmth of TV set lamps Sebastian felt damp accumulate in his crevices and along his upper lip. The honey balm he applied to prevent fissures had caked disagreeably. Outside the Almighty was breaking covenant to unleash a second deluge; balmy rain slushed through streets to be gorged by drain-holes that gurgled like rural brooks, making the emotional appeal of music. For so long the city had burned with a potent, dead brightness. The meteorological prophets declared a calmer, cooler future, but the present was Sebastian's concern.

He was with two men. A tall, thin presenter with short-cropped hair, knee-over-knee, flicked his elevated Doc Martened foot with a poorly knotted shoelace. The other, a second interviewee, was older, solid, in Savile Row garbs, sporting a modest moustache and taper cut, reading from a pad. They were both in contrast to the eccentric purple Sebastian chose for sartorial impact.

Maurice had glibly urged him to use the televisual début to deliver some message, coaching sound bites so Sebastian found his head full of the politics he disdained, and an itch to unleash on his peer, the self-assured ex-boarding-school boy host. He felt indignant being made nervous, a sensation that never normally touched his performances.

'Hello,' the presenter gave a redoubtable shake. 'Don't fret. You're new? To this stuff I mean?' the man looked about as if to confirm his location and breathily exclaimed, 'Nothing to fret. No-thing at all. Not. At. All. Quick interview, not adversarial. Not on something segued into a breakfast show. You're in danger of boredom. Specially when *we* get talking.' He indicated to the other, unresponsive man.

'Okay guys, ready?' asked someone behind the shocking illumination and pointed camera eyes.

The interviewer gave a thumb up to the disembodied voice and delivered his introduction. Then he faced Sebastian and they chitchatted. Sebastian said nothing stored from Maurice's tutelage, but smiled, nodded along to prosaicisms about the importance of creativity, made

politically risqué jokes earning chuckles from Mr. Savile Row. He settled into the inert expectations until focus switched to Business Leader Robert Fetcher and a more sombre tedium swamped the next quarter hour. Lastly Julian directed attention to newspapers strewn on a table and invited them to comment on headlines. Sebastian was urged to quip on gossip while Fetcher gave drab, downbeat interpretations of footsie trends and MP scandals.

Sebastian was now only enduring. He was flustered, his left nostril bunged up, he felt a squint in his right eye and he was listening to Fetcher prattle about the skills gap, remembering something Maurice had been ranting a few days previous.

‘Don’t you have self-respect?’ Sebastian asked, only half-conscious of speaking.

‘What?’

‘There’s plenty of younger people with skills. You’re publically admitting you can’t attract them as employees. That’s a message you’re giving potential employees and customers.’

On Fetcher’s face a dim moment of confusions and outrage expressed serially. ‘This is not just *my* complaint.’ His volume rose. ‘From some concept artist cum novelist hack! Just to fill you in, this complaint is from the National Association of Business.’ Now started, Fetcher dragged, listing co-complainers with a new élan. Sebastian listened as he slid out his iPhone and typed Robert Fetcher onto an online search engine. Julian looked on smiling at Fetcher’s rant.

‘Excuse me, but aren’t you people the problem and not young people or the education system,’ Sebastian interrupted.

‘What do you mean?’ Julian came in, doubtless worried he was conceding too much of the show to his guests non-sequiturs.

‘I mean,’ Sebastian struggled, ‘really, Mr Fetcher, you’re here for the seedier side of politics; you’re the people who won’t pay a living wage. And I mean you, specifically, as well. Cause I’m reading how you’re in a crisis with your own employees,’ he held up the phone, ‘for refusing a living wage, which means your employees rely on the state to prop up their wage, which means, really, corporate subsidy. And you’re in a tax scandal to boot. Right?’

‘I’m sorry, this is ridiculous. I thought your book is what, mocking lefty nonsense where we pretend those who create wealth are villains. The public knows it’s people like me, who innovate...’

‘...who parasite, you’re like air parasites. Like mosquitos. And the criminals are ground parasites, like ticks. And...’

‘I’m sorry, what?’

‘...and both types offer the same excuses. They say hey, we’re okay cause if it weren’t us parasiting, it’d be someone worse. And... and you basically say...’

‘I’m sorry, I can’t even follow, what is this? From some public school boy, “parasites?” You know I started in a council estate in Newcastle, where did you start?’

‘Given the content of your book, Sebastian, what is your point?’ Julian intervened in an attempt to salvage the slot, ‘I mean you attack left posturing, you attack business, are you just an all-round cynic?’

‘I guess that’s what I’m doing Julian. Can I call you Julian?’

Julian nodded uncomfortably

‘It’s a fair criticism. And it’s all garbage. The book, the whole thing.’

Fechner snorted.

‘So you’ve fallen out with your book already?’ asked Julian. ‘You don’t think people should read *Stories from the Block*?’

‘No, indeed.’

‘And when did you decide to rubbish your recent publication?’

‘While listening to Fetcher. It gave me a chance to think.’

‘I see.’ Julian leaned in his chair and released a puff of air. ‘You’re not the first detractor though?’

‘I wouldn’t have imagined.’

‘I was thinking of the accusation that some details are more fictional than presented.’

‘I’ve always allowed I filled in blanks with invention. It’s both non-fiction and creative.’

‘Were you “creative” about your relationship with the leader of a prominent Christian organisation?’

‘Yes, a fecundity of libels. You’re correct, there are a lot of criticisms. Got me to rights, given me a grilling.’ His eye darted to the nearest lamp. ‘But Julian, I’m unimportant, my book’s unimportant, you’re unimportant. What’s important is ridding ourselves of what produced these unimportant, ugly things.’

‘...which is?’

‘Our current society. A diseased way of living.’ Sebastian made flailing gestures, ‘the group of people I embarrassed, that’s what they’re trying to do. They did a job of it before the police, playing soldiers against decent, normal people. Not like us—like those watching, probably,’ he leaned in, ‘wondering why they should listen to a c... to a fool in a debonair suit.’

‘That’s something they might be wondering.’

‘You’re droll. What school did you go to?’ He gave Julian no chance to reply. ‘Doesn’t matter—never mind. Look, we’re the flotsam that floats to the top of a stagnant pool. That’s what the three of us are. And we think cause we rise above all the fish it makes us better.’

‘So what would you like to see change?’ Fetcher came in, angrily.

‘I don’t know. Toppling government. Just more shi... stuff like what happened, but like it happened, not like I wrote. Honest people making something better.’

‘You want society to be like that tower block?’

‘Why not?’

‘What you’re talking about sounds like communism. “Revolution” and communes. Would you like to see what happened in Russia? Stalinism? Authoritarianism? Mock trials? We’ve seen these ideas before.’

‘You’re the one talking about, what, Stalinism? I never said that, did I?’ he turned to the silent studio and the live camera caught his wink.

‘Then you’re not clear what you want.’

‘I want people to decide what they want.’

‘We already have that, don’t we? It’s called democracy?’

‘Oh, do we? Do we? I don’t see much. What? Choosing identical parties every few years.’

‘So you have more legitimacy than the elected?’

Remembering some more of Maurice’s words, Sebastian pushed on, ‘You want to talk about legitimacy?’ He asked rhetorically, ‘I’ve heard pragmatic arguments for our *representative* system, that Churchillian “worst except all the others” right? But legit?’

‘Some who vote, informed by the party theatre of “electoral campaigning”, influence who composes government on the basis of lesser evils and broad concessions. Then the result is hemmed by undemocratic workings—influences, inheritances, even where its power extends. You might argue we’ve it better than outright dictatorship or total anarchy, you might, but by its own standards your legitimacy falls flat.

‘That’s why people can’t stand it. Cause your politicians talk about mandates and democracy and giving people power and nobody sees it. No one. Instead, when people want something they’re told government can’t do this or that or intervene. Then they ask what government *can* do, and they’re told not to meddle and leave it to experts. And next thing is all this “legitimacy.”’ he made the word sound like an expletive.

‘This is really very puerile.’

‘Well I’m glad you think so, Julian, that makes me think I’m on the right track.’

‘Who are you to be saying this?’ Prichard came back in. ‘You rattle me about my position, what about yours?’

‘Glad you asked. The difference... the difference is...’

‘Yes?’

‘The difference...’

‘What?’

‘The difference is you want to keep things the same. Obscure how things are. Truth is truth no matter who says it, and lies are lies.’

Taking himself from the studio’s confines Sebastian flicked open his mobile to find an unread text from his publisher, ‘WTF do U think UR doing? You killed SfB!!! Need 2 talk. Pronto!!’

He deleted it.

~

Graham took the Jesus Saves leaflet without thought. He was walking out of a department store when a young man handed it to him; the bearer of good news had a gormless grin and sunken eyes and Graham wondered if he had ever represented him in court.

Hours later, he was slouched on his couch, petting Rag’s bony head; the house was quieter since first Maurice and then, once again, Sandra disappeared. She would be back, his nephew probably wouldn’t.

‘You won’t leave me,’ he baby-talked to the dog.

Then he found the leaflet screwed up in his pocket. Graham read Clare’s words for lack of anything more captivating:

‘If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.’ 1 John 4:20

Politicians of both parties like to talk about how this is a Christian country, rooted in Christian values. We at Jesus Saves believe that Christian values are universal. We do not believe they are manifested either in this country’s present or past institutions. Your leaders have abused the Gospel. Their values are of a degenerate ideology used to bludgeon the

oppressed, exile the homeless and murder the poor; they have nothing to do with the Truth of our Lord Jesus Christ. Since perversions that go back to the ignoble secular career of Constantine the Great, people who imagine themselves Christian have poisoned salvation. This is an inevitable consequence of the fallen nature of mankind, which seeks redemption in false promises.

How can we distinguish the genuine from the fraud? We have been instructed how. Misanthropy is the mark of the adversary of mankind. You cannot hate your brother or sister, your human family, and preach Christian values. Hate is the true value of this country, rooted in Pagan concerns. These are concerns for military and material dominance. We have a culture that holds antipathy towards the world, which is a part of God's sacred revelation to us. They use a public rhetoric of bombast and bravado that shows their narcissism, their self-hate. They have committed the only unpardonable sin: despair.

Do not be taken in by their lies. We are dismissed as a cult; the Janus face of the media will decry us through one mouth as impotent, and as dangerous through another. You may be rolling your eyes at my message, which I understand. Every one of us has been ill with cynicism too. And we recovered, but this modern plague is onerous, a virus that makes you feel impregnable, safe, but all the while rots the most important part of you. We extend our open hand, the hand of a friend, a neighbour and, if God works through us, a healer.

‘To steal many from the herd—for that purpose I have come.’ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

Of all the anti-Christians Nietzsche understood our faith the best. We pay heed to his inversions, as our mission *is* to steal many *for* the herd. To take you back.



He scrunched the leaflet and threw the ball at the wastepaper basket. It hit the edge and tilted in. Graham felt pleased about his aim.

~

‘Did you see it?’ I shouted as I walked into my apartment, a Roman general retiring from a state triumph. I couldn’t hold my words, ‘World’s gone ballistic. It’s amazing. It’s popular on YouTube, ‘Sebastian Lyme’s rant’; it’s viral. Comments and comments. Twitter, Facebook, the blogosphere. You must have seen? Everyone thinks I’m mad or the fucking Messiah. Hey Maurice?’

I wandered through the large living room into a corridor, noticing without alarm my flat had been totalled, stuff scattered into detritus. ‘Maurice?’

At the foot of the stairs, ‘Maurice? You up there?’

Resigned to disappointment I searched more methodically for my flatmate, realising how I had taken having someone there—on call when needed, otherwise invisible. It reminded me of early puberty, the weeks after mother disappeared and father stopped jet setting to mourn her desertion. He took me on a consolatory holiday to a coastal town where houses were icecream pastels, gulls cried, brackish rivers crisscrossed forest paths, the air was saline, fresh crab was served in suave cafés and we rambled empty tracts of tide-lapped sands. I had been a stranger to my parents, but after one vanished I got to know the other by sharing cream teas from deckchairs unfolded along esplanades. And as strangers we became odd friends, as I had with Maurice.

When I gave up my hunt I closed an open window, which had refrigerated the place, startling a plump perching pigeon. The bird soared into the distance and I watched until a rightward dart took her from my sightline. I caught the view below, people milling the street, navigating pedestrian walkways and stoplights.

Flopping onto one of my leather chairs, I stretched—without anywhere to channel, my pent elation became a painful lethargy. I bristled with reminiscence. My arms dangling, I picked up an old copy of *The Watcher* from the floor; I'd saw it lying around since one of Maurice's rare excursions.

I never read papers, preferring to tab their online substitutes (*Watcher*, *Solar*) on my browser and jump across to get a mixup of vanilla news. Sometimes discovering or imagining a tidbit in the cracks between takes on the same event. That was during brief periods when I found I needed to concern myself with the world, which from childhood had been only one of a myriad realities, and one about which I lacked the depth of knowledge to sustain curiosity.

I flicked through as my mind wandered, but a line stuck in my head with a suggestion of *déjà vu*, 'The loving, hating, moving, eating, sleeping, shitting, farting, dying, fighting, laughing, talking, sulking stuff of our world—human beings.' I read the header, 'Fear and Loathing in Utopia', and saw that Mary Pritchard, a name it took a second to place, had written the opinion column and that it covered the same subject as my book. With renewed attention I read the whole article.

And I paced, then did some work in the studio, compelled by restlessness. I had seen something important, but I didn't know what. I paced again, allowing the gush of useless ideation in the hope of sifting a nugget.

I stopped. I bounded to my computer. I fiddled with the mouse while it sparked to life, got on the web and tracked down the number, writing it on a note to take to my black plastic wall-phone. My private drama was about to recruit new actors.

'Hello, Sebastian Lyme. Am I talking to Ms Pritchard... Good, hoped I'd get you right away. This can't wait... No, no... I want to help. About the article with the police. I want in on what you're doing. And I wondered if you'd care to talk...'

Hours earlier, Maurice had been in Sebastian's still orderly apartment. During another online altercation he had been considerate, but still got the flippant abbreviation 'tl;dr,' 'too long; didn't read.' Like all simulacrum the web narcotised; it enticed like an aquarium, to prove as superficial as school trip displays of exotic piscine. Maurice was done. Becoming the marginal voice of critique made him the voice of defeat. For that reason he had never gone public with his *pièce de résistance*, a lengthy essay critique of Helots and its handiwork. Although he equally feared nobody would bother with it at all.

He opened a window and felt a squall tug his hair. From a high vantage the city was an ugly palimpsest, slapdash growths of metals and bricks no longer displaying their best angles—a spread of dirty roofs in monochromatic greys, whites, blacks and stippled variegations. As though its repertoire was diminished to the sombre colours of granite.

With a desire to symbolise his passions, he looked down to check nobody was below, precariously leaned, stretched into the gale and released the laptop. The frivolous gesture of destruction was insufficient. He took hold of an 'art object', a revolting platformed and taxidermied squirrel with a medallion aloft in its claws and hurled it at the widescreen, from which it ricocheted with an unsatisfying clap, leaving a small gouge. He knocked its white stand at a contemporary chaise longue and continued his assault on the inanimate until he felt shamed.

He needed out. So he plunged flights, clambered doors to the flat's open-air atrium and, at last, sauntered from Sebastian's. Continuing all the way to a bench in the plaza opposite the city's focal fountain, outside his favourite building, the decaying public library.

A moated statue threw its sundial shadow to ripple out on the pool: 'THE SHED HAS OPENED' graffitied on its chest in uppercase green aerosol. At the other side of the statue a giant plastic black bowtie advertised a decrepit haberdashery. Next to him was a bottle of whisky tucked in a brownbag. His stomach burned febrile, cramps ran his legs, stiff with fierce aches.

Yet he felt comfortable, the place ameliorated; somewhere he'd spent weekends in earlier years, reading the strangest books he could order.

As a precocious, ostracised child with long limbs and thick unibrow he gloried in the shock of asking aged librarians for biographies of Alistair Crowley, with disturbing occultist titles. Or elaborate works of theory he half-understood and half-pretended to grasp, lying to impress until it was no longer a lie. He credited most of the unfolding of his life to these vain voyages into literature where he imagined the forbidden treasures of an elaborately concealed order. If he could map out the combined message of this text, he knew he would uncover more profound depths.

A pregnant pigeon came up to him with its primordial head-thrusting waddle, scavenging crumbs. Maurice kicked the bird away as he continued his reverie.

Volume after volume had been gripped in his kiddish hands, often in a struggle against wind that wanted to turn back a few pages or skip forward to the next chapter. He was gloved and wrapped during winter months, in shorts with knobbly knees during the summer. His rapacious eyes darted paragraphs. He imagined he was the only denizen of the plaza, the last child in the city, the final human. To do nothing, to be powerless, was part and parcel of his aloneness. And then he sussed it, sitting on his bench.

The revelation *was* the incoherency.

All the world's great structures were not human, but impersonal; not the systems of authors mummified by books, but haphazard accretions, shared across lives and inherited in an endless, pointless regression. Everything that preceded him was a senseless, a dystopic pick'n'mix. He travelled like More's hero, but found only an archipelago of terrors, on every island a new society of horror. Rather than convince him of the vanity of autodidacticism, the realisation of history's failure liberated him from some force hidden in words that *knew* what the fuck was going on or what to do. He gained the confidence and entitlement of nihilism.

The mistake of indecisive powerlessness was the either/or mentality that marinated doubts and regrets. Become the bohemian and risk a brief life of pleasure topped by a pathetic and lonely demise; choose to embody the honest man and die slowly in the ennui of routine. What if all lives were cul-de-sacs? Then arbitrariness validates any life. Action was not frightening set against meaninglessness.

The pigeon had flown back and was approaching cautiously, but it flew off into the distant skies when he kicked at it a second time. A dull ache rippled its ways across his stomach.

Radical politics would never have appealed without his conviction that society is universal ignorance obfuscated by the myth of a right way to live. As a teenager uncomprehended secrets cowed him into a humility that taunted action, but then he felt the thinness of thought and the weight of choices no longer constrained. He played politics and only sometimes felt the insecurity and suspicion that somewhere the one who knows judged his life and found it wanting. By reading more, dissecting the claims of wise men winking with fraudulent superiority, he reminded himself there were only people like him, dancing marionettes choreographed by the songs of the past. Like him, but not even real; they still coasted on consistency and believed in one who knows—whether the tune belonged to God or Leader or the conspiratorial notes of a nefarious Mabuse, they pirouetted off the same precipice. He was the last man. He alone could sustain his subjectivity against history.

David had put Maurice forward for leadership of Helots. Maurice was to lead others in the world, as someone who felt he was the last person of the world. ‘I don’t want to be a leader,’ Maurice had affirmed. ‘I’d be the Pied Piper of Hamelin.’ He had been right.

With a shock Maurice noticed a white robed arm dumbly holding out a leaflet.

‘No thanks.’ As she slowly spun away, he looked up and caught a better sight of her face. ‘Have we met?’

‘No,’ she shook, ‘Don’t think so...’

‘You’ve a familiar...’

She blinked, but did not speak.

'I could swear...' He drowsed and then recouped. 'You're fetching.'

She flushed.

'Sorry, I'm embarrassing. Here, let me,' she placed the dry thin piece of paper between his outheld fingers. No sooner had it come into contact than a cough wrenched him, permitting only a mangled 'sorry' as he thoughtlessly deployed the leaflet to cover his mouth.

'Are you okay?'

'Fine... fine...' he said as he improvised composure. 'Thank you. Sorry, I've ruined your pamphlet.'

He took a second one more warily.

'I don't think you're fine,' the young woman spoke boldly.

'No, suppose not.'

'Will you come to one of our places?' she asked, pressing the advantage of his admission.

'What?'

'I mean, if you want, return with me and we will give you somewhere to get better. And we can tell you about salvation.'

'You can?'

'Yes.'

Maurice studied her, reaching for a recognisable quality. And she was with Clare's group? Sebastian's Clare? He had read Mary's *Watcher* interview and affectionately remembered the outlandish woman who had stood for long periods in his block apartment.

He did not want to return to Sebastian to ego massage the newborn rebel. To tell him how impressive it was he'd conjured grand dreams on daytime telly, like bad reruns of good sitcoms. When the masses disappointed Sebastian, Maurice knew he'd return to middlebrow sardonicisms for comfort.

'Okay then.'

‘Really?’

‘Yes, okay.’

Rubbing his right shoulder with his left hand, Peter eyed the giant with the thick unibrow at the barracks door.

‘Beth, y’know we don’t have room for more homeless. Sorry mate.’

‘I offered a place and we don’t turn people away,’ she argued.

‘But...’

Maurice wondered at the designation ‘homeless’, but felt it held a variety of truth.

‘I offered.’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ Peter relented, not wanting to suppress Beth’s relish, but waspish about finding another bed.

The three walked through rooms to a large space with foldout floor mattresses in rows, like an emergency set-up for disaster refugees.

‘Maurice?’

Maurice looked to where Clare’s voice had come; she was happy, playing a board game with a kid in blue dungarees.

She stood and approached. ‘How long?’

He coughed out, ‘Years.’

‘You don’t look well.’

‘I feel worse.’

‘It’s cruel out.’

‘Sometimes.’

‘Too often.’ She nodded.

A new pain was scrambling up Maurice’s back, his insides felt serrated. Talking about his health sharpened these sensations. ‘Can I have a seat?’ he asked.

‘Yes, of course,’ and she gestured to one.

They all joined him. Beth looked on Maurice as she normally looked at Junior.

‘Why don’t you stay permanently?’ Beth asked, surprising them all—even herself.

‘Wouldn’t I need to believe in God?’

‘What do you believe, Maurice?’ Clare deflected.

‘I believed in people. I even believed in Helots.’

Pete scoffed, but was quieted by glares from Beth and Clare.

‘That’s not too different from believing in God, it’s just not enough,’ Clare said.

‘It wasn’t.’

‘Think about staying? Will you?’

‘This,’ he waved his hand, ‘it isn’t for me anymore. The whole “group” thing, making a better world. I can’t do it.’

‘I don’t accept that.’

His head dropped. ‘I can’t.’

‘You just need to find belief again.’

‘That’s the problem. I *do* believe... Believe too much. All those beliefs, convincing, all the mess wrapped into nice bundles. Each charming, but as those parcels are tossed they pile up. And if you take time to revisit that macabre museum we call history, you see every one for so much tat assigned to a garbage heap. Mercutio’s curse is my motto.’

‘Think on it,’ Beth said, undercutting his odd speech, her voice trembling.

‘Sure, you’re kind.’ He smiled.

‘You’ll stay here tonight, then?’ Beth persisted. ‘With us?’

‘Yes he will,’ Clare commanded. ‘You’re always welcome, Maurice.’

‘Thank you, it’ll just be tonight.’

‘We’ll see,’ retorted Clare.

‘Don’t make your mind up now,’ added Beth.



‘Like the Spanish say, *mi casa es tu casa*,’ finished Clare.

Bewildered, curious how he had been so ambushed, Maurice tried to look pleased.

~

Beneath a chandelier of transparent cerise cylinders, at the back of the second floor of a spacious ‘Jamie’s’, Toby pondered the group Sebastian had invited. Mary, Andy and himself looked to Sebastian like fish in a bowl: quizzical, tolerant and cantankerous. The assemblage had a kind of fake grandiosity.

‘I wanted this group to be bigger—at least wanted to have Maurice.’

‘Know his whereabouts?’ Toby asked, perking up. A woman took a neighbouring table. She had a baby strapped to her front and a toddler on a lead.

‘I did.’

‘Where?’

‘Living with me, for a while... but he’s gone. And I can’t find him. It’s strange.’

‘Sounds like you misplaced your keys,’ Andy said.

‘Why was he living with you?’ Toby interrogated.

Sebastian opened his palms in confession of ignorance.

‘Hello,’ said a waiter, ‘I’m Martin. I’ll be serving this evening. How’s your day been?’

‘Just excellent,’ said Sebastian.

‘Would you guys like to order drinks while you decide what you want?’

‘Yes, yes.’ Sebastian pulled out a wine menu and jauntily ran his finger down its contents.

Toby watched the woman with the children speak to a waitress. She’d put the infant in one of those high chairs with its own attached table and taken the other off his lead. The little boy looked browbeaten.

‘A bottle of the Vintage Tunina,’ Sebastian’s utterance broke Toby’s focus, ‘and two bottles of water, sparkling and still.’

The tall, thin man wrote rapidly on a pad and slipped away.

‘You can all order anything, my treat.’

‘Good,’ said Andy, ‘I’ll make the most of it.’

‘What’s all this about?’ asked Mary.

‘Good question, to the point, like a journalist,’ Sebastian smiled thinly. ‘But first decide your antipasti and main and then we’ll mix fun with business.’

When the waiter returned Sebastian tasted the wine, thought for a moment as if turning it down were a prospect and proclaimed, ‘Just joking with you all.’ He looked at the waiter. ‘Stellar wine, please give gushing quantities to everyone and then bring a follow-up bottle.’

They all ordered and the waiter egressed.

‘Will you tell us now?’ persisted Mary.

‘Not until we have food on the table. Let’s be urbane.’

‘Tell us what this is about, Sebastian,’ interjected Toby.

‘Allow him his fun, he’s paying,’ said Andy.

‘Indeed, enlightened, a gourmand after my own heart. Eat, drink and be merry, tomorrow we die!’

Toby excused himself, more to leave the table than any pressing need. The lights flickered to life as he walked into a bathroom. He tried to drag time, sitting in the lavatory cubicle, unable to defecate, painstakingly washing his hands and cupping water to splash his face. Examining his likeness he was self-conscious of enduring acne scars, unseen by others, and a stain on his lower lateral incisor.

When he returned he was crestfallen to see food hadn’t arrived, but a glance at his watch justified this—hardly any time had elapsed.

He saw an informally dressed burly man approach the woman on the nearby table. The nails on one of her spidery hands had been clicking on the tabletop, one after the other in an even tempo. She did not sense the man at first. When she did, she shot up. The man looked upset and clumsy as he dropped a backpack on the floor and removed a box of Lego. The boy stared at the man with huge eyes.

Toby only realised he was hungry when his Italian spiced chicken wings were placed in front of him.

‘Food’s here,’ Mary unnecessarily observed, ‘burst the suspense, shall we?’

‘Fine, fine, you guys must’ve been shit on Christmas Eve. Can I open now, Mummy? What’s in this one, Daddy?’

‘So, what’s it about?’ asked Andy brusquely, becoming interested too.

‘You all worked on that article; that one you wrote, Mary? About the block and the police and what happened?’

‘Right. So?’

‘What’s it like working for *The Watcher*?’

‘Tedious. Think they might ditch me... again.’

‘Good.’

‘Good?’

‘Sure, I want to hire you.’

The three looked uncomprehendingly at him. Toby was annoyed.

‘But you don’t own a newspaper, Sebastian.’ Mary spoke slowly, earning a snigger from Toby.

‘No,’ Sebastian dragged the syllable, ‘but, I am going to own a bimonthly.’

‘A magazine?’

‘Yes.’

‘Oh yeah?’ Toby suppressed any overtones of inquisitiveness, a caustic approach.

‘It will run online and off. And focus on lefty issues: dissent, underground politics. I want all of you. A legacy for Helots, for what happened. Something to mark it. I want to slowly include the old guys. And branch out, get involved in other projects. Networking. What we’ll be is a centre ground for radicals. As I see it, their problem is infighting, that’s what I got from Maurice. We’ll be a space where that doesn’t happen. Maurice will be in. So, howabout you three?’ As he explained crimson light shifted chiaroscuro on Sebastian’s naked head and face, articulating his chin’s cleft, the ridge of his nose and cheekbones.

‘I’m sure it’s a wholly original idea,’ said Toby, ‘but none of us are currently involved in the left.’

‘All the better; start with a clean slate, *tabula rasa*.’

‘Blank,’ said Mary absently.

‘What?’

She blinked. ‘Blank slate, *tabula rasa*.’

‘I’m not even a journalist, nor Toby, or most of the people you’re on about,’ Andy demurred, ignoring the Latin lesson, removing his gaze from Mary’s close fitted olive cardigan.

‘Become one then. How hard can it be?’

‘Thank you kindly,’ said Mary.

‘Err? I didn’t mean it that way. Come, this is something we can do. And I’ll manage the investment. Besides my inherited money, I’m actually getting royalties from that damn book after my interview. This meal is nothing against my pecuniary gains of last week.

‘I’ll be editor at first, then we’ll diversify, so it’s never bogged down by infighting. Listen, I’ve had words with my old man and he says it’s about time I did something. He didn’t even care if I attacked his profession. Said I just needed something. And right now the chatterati knows of me so...’

‘For now...’ said Mary, between bites of crispy squid. ‘Media lacks a long-term memory.’

‘...and we can use that. What I’m saying is one splash of an issue. And if it doesn’t take off then it’s an expensive joke, which I can afford, and we’ll get on with our lives. When I find where he’s got himself, I’ll bring Maurice in on this too.’ He looked at Toby. ‘I guarantee that.’

‘I’m game, whatever that’s worth,’ said Andy as he pegged another piece of the cured meats with his fork.

While they conversed, Toby’s attention wandered to the couple and kids. The man was talking to the boy, carefully listening in the kid’s replies. He still looked dolorous. The woman sedately stared at the middle distance, her yellow hair lank, unruly bangs sagging over her face, her dress a turgid beige, and yet beautiful in the feminine way that held a merely aesthetic appeal to Toby.

‘Maybe,’ Mary relented.

‘I want to talk to Maurice first,’ said Toby, half following now.

‘That’s fine,’ Sebastian topped Toby’s glass, who hadn’t realised he was dry. ‘I want to talk to him myself.’

Andy put down his knife and fork to indicate he was finished. ‘If I get it right, you’re paying for this lavish meal cause you wan’us to write tripe for you?’

‘Right.’

‘The rich *are* different.’

‘Have you got a timetable?’ asked Mary.

‘Two months?’

‘Hired a printer? Website? Staff?’

‘All of us can staff to start. Looking for a printer. And I’ll need a name before a website.’

‘So right now you’ve...’

‘Money.’

‘Important, granted.’

‘You want me to be your dogsbody?’ asked Toby blandly.

‘At first we’ll all chip in. I’ll do menial stuff too. And we’ll all write. So yes and no.’

‘Are you enjoying your evening?’ the waiter asked as he dextrously gathered and cleaned, stacking and balancing with a plate spinner’s aplomb; Andy detected the thinnest Eastern European accent in the willowy man’s voice.

‘Yes, thank you.’

Mary was leaning back, looking up at the chandelier hanging over them like Damocles’ threat. She chomped the left side of her tongue like chewing gum. ‘I think you’ll appreciate I can’t just quit at *The Watcher* for anything indefinite. But... I see you’re serious, or profligate...’

‘Between insane or serious, you reckon he’s the latter?’ quipped Toby.

‘Toby,’ returned Sebastian, ‘your best safeguard from madness maybe to seal it with seriousness, but the only way to endure insanity is to have tasted it sane.’

Mary sighed before taking up again, ‘...you clearly mean this. And I’m willing to work with you if you get the logistics sorted. However, you need credibility. So before you give room to less known voices, the people to elevate to the stadium can only enjoy that luxury, unfortunately, if you’ve more like me. In that way Toby, Andy, even Maurice, won’t help.’

‘Cheers,’ said Toby, sipping his red.

‘I think involving you is great, but what we require... what you really need, Sebastian, and I don’t want to sound arrogant, but it’s me. I know people I could convince to write. If you get the right slant on the first issue, it’d amount to something. Go for professionalism, credibility. Radical, but without tipping the boat. Then, when you’ve hooked your audience, see what you can do.’

‘Sell out from the get go?’ Sebastian asked.

‘Yes, then shock people. Another angry magazine with off-the-wall politics is meaningless, but if you get a wider readership...’

‘God, do I feel like a third wheel,’ Andy admitted.

‘Okay, agreed. I also think we’d be joint editors of issue one, and you can be editor of issue two,’ Sebastian said, ignoring Andy, made giddy by the sombreness with which Mary addressed his fantasy. ‘Does this planning make you lot hungry too? I can’t wait for mains.’

‘I’ll drink to that,’ said Andy. He had fixed himself to life by treating it as an extra allowance, something with which to go along. His planned existence had run its course. It didn’t matter. And so way he could survive.

Toby saw the stocky man leave. The woman looked after him a while. Her boy didn’t eat. *Could those people live in utopia?* he wondered.

~

At job interview eighteen Philip sat with two young men in a thin corridor. If it weren’t for Seán, the Granges would be screwed, and Philip felt indignant that he was unable to support his sister and niece. Philip tried not to *want* anything; expectation is suffering delayed. He considered *carpe diem* more basic than the golden rule. And so he was in cognitive dissonance over wanting a job at all. It was not because he secretly liked work, but he had an overriding concern: family.

Weeks ago he had stared at the red blemish to the left of the nose of the man at the jobcentre. The man looked like he had escaped secondary education with a nasal whine of a voice. His nametag read ‘Tye Cobbles’, which did not sound like a name to Philip.

Tye had affected sympathy when he had sanctioned Philip. ‘Out of my hands, Mr Grange. Don’t want to, but you must admit, you *were* late again.’

The man-boy’s hands clasped as if offering supplications to God on behalf of his ‘client’.

‘Twelve minutes?’

‘We’ve to be strict, keep up appearances; I don’t write the rules.’

Philip grinned, irked by Tye’s chain of platitudes.

‘I’ll get outta your hair; don’t suppose it’d make a difference if buses were late? No? Dog ate my homework? Anyway, think Kafka’s ‘K’ is waiting.’ As he passed the next man on the way out he gave him a ‘g’luck.’

Seán raged. ‘It’s a fucking farce, what it is. Free market gone mad. Starting to see why you got involved with the radicals way back when.’

‘Did I?’

‘They had their fingers on the pulse more’an we guessed. What were you saying about that last job? You queued two hours or something? Stand as much chance with the blooming lotto.’

‘I don’t trust Willy Wonka’s golden tickets. Don’t let it bother you, you’re meant to laugh at farce.’

‘I don’t know how you keep it together, mate.’

‘How’d I come apart?’

‘Ah?’

‘It’s life. Nobody owes me. I come like Oliver wiv his beggar’s bowl and I’m happy for gruel when I gets me some. More please, sir? There’re no promises; every one of em’s a lie. Life *has* to be wonderful enough.’

Later Seán promised he would find a job to get Phil off the dole. And he did. ‘A cinch. I’ve it on authority, it’s low-hanging fruit. High turnaround and they like lickety-split replacements. Not even on the listings.’

That was how Philip came to be knocking his shoe on the seamless vinyl flooring in a steady beat.

One of his fellow applicants was apparelled for war in an oversized cheap grey suit that looked too old for him. The guy stared fixedly at his feet like a man condemned to the firing squad. The other was in a woolly jumper and casually clasped his hands behind the back of his head. He kept wetting his lips.

‘Mr Ransey? Mr Ash Ransey?’



The more confident jumped up and followed the young women into an office.

‘G’luck,’ Philip said. His head rested against the whitewashed wall. He stared at an analogue clock over one of the doors.

Thirty three minutes later the tall man reappeared, the woman behind him, ‘Mr Cade Howarth?’

The leaving man patted the other on the shoulder, who winced in nervous astonishment. ‘Don’t worry, definitely didn’t get it.’

The next man took only twenty-six minutes, avoiding eye contact when he came out with either the woman or the standing Philip.

‘Philip Grange is it?’ the woman asked in Received Pronunciation.

‘That’s the old moniker.’

‘Good, come in.’

Philip was conducted to a chair in front of a serious looking man only a few pounds away from matching his weight.

‘Ah great, saving the best till last, right Delilah?’

The woman nodded after taking her seat at the back of the suffocating office, next to a potted ficus, her face bisected by the room’s slatted shade. An oak bureau separated Philip from the prospective employer. It was covered in neatly bundled papers.

‘Any experience?’

‘None,’ Philip admitted, having confessed as much on his CV.

The man grinned big. ‘I’m yanking you. I can see a man when he walks into my office. Getta looka the others? Crickey... Mr “W... w... well I’d like a j... j... job t... talking to strangers.”’ Delilah gave an ecstatic laugh, ‘And his double. Grant me mercy; he fucking slobbered. Whatta lark.’

‘Seemed alright.’

‘Morons. You’ve the job. As we’re concerned, you’re the only one bothered applying.’

When Philip came back Vera was sitting with Ella on the couch, workbooks on the coffee table.

‘Hello ladies.’

‘Hi Phil.’

‘Hello Philip.’

‘How are you getting on?’

‘Your niece is a genius, Mr Grange.’

‘That’s what I tell her, but does she believe me?’

Ella grinned, her head bent to conceal her expression.

‘I think we’re done for today, Ella,’ Vera said, folding sheets into a book. Philip saw how they were covered in equations and streams of notes written in blue biro. ‘Can I steal a word?’ Vera asked Philip, coming up to him on her way to the door.

‘What word you like? I enjoy “perspicacity” and “elision”.’ Phil followed her into a breezy, sunny afternoon. The bright flattened the scene, robbing sight of depth as though the world were struggling into three dimensions.

‘I found him.’

‘Oz?’

‘What?’

‘The wonderful wizard?’

‘You oaf, I found Joshua.’

‘As far as Ella sees it, that’s not too different.’

‘Quite.’

‘How’d you manage it?’

‘I looked. It wasn’t hard. You and Seán, haven’t been, have you?’

Philip embellished an exhalation. ‘Not very hard.’

‘Why?’

‘Her mum asked us not to and I was conflicted. She’s afraid Ella will get messed up in something again. She feels guilty about what happened afore.’

‘Ella’s a young woman.’

‘I’m afraid Sarah won’t ever see it that way.’

‘Maybe, but you shouldn’t *enable* her. I’ve got to know you all, and I know you want what’s best. I’m putting my nose in again, like always, but I think she ought to see her friend.’

‘Yeah, ditto.’

‘Will you bring Sarah around then?’

‘I’ll try.’

Vera took Philip’s hand. ‘You’re a good man.’ They stayed like that a moment before she let his arm drop. ‘I know you’re unemployed. I worked that out too. You Grange’s keep a lot of secrets.’

‘We manage our own problems.’

‘That’s not true, you’re here helping your family. You manage each other’s problems all the time. You’re just hidebound.’

‘Ha, you’ve got me worked out.’

‘Philip, for those who aren’t taken in, you’re as open a book as they come.’

Phil stifled a yawn. ‘Thank you Vera; you’re a treasure.’

‘Thank me when Ella’s gone to university.’

‘Eh?’

‘You heard. It’s my next magic trick.’

‘Grange’s don’t do that.’

‘You did.’

‘Who told you?’

‘It’s obvious.’

‘Pleased you think so, but you got me wrong. School didn’t sit wiv me; last thing I wanted were more classrooms, being told what to read by the clueless. I learnt from things like this smart cat Rick Roderick I saw on the library Internet. Universities are throwbacks.’

‘She needs qualifications.’

‘Does it make a difference?’

‘...and culture.’

‘What’s that? I’ve heard people talking about it, but I don’t know what it is. Will it help her?’

‘It must.’

‘How come?’

‘It does.’

A boy came running down the street. ‘Hi Anthony,’ Vera greeted.

He stopped and looked at her, ‘Hi Granny.’ Then he legged it again.

‘Maybe if you’d been my teacher,’ Phil flattered.

‘What?’

‘I might’ve, if you’d been my teacher.’

‘I’d like to think so too.’

‘Guess I’m not an entirely open book?’

‘Guess not.’

~

The dilapidated, empty room’s acoustics carried an echo. ‘Is that Sebastian or the strangest mirage,’ Clare peered at him aimlessly rambling the Jesus Saves barracks, spotting his pink cranium among the short back and sides of the faithful. ‘I didn’t think I’d ever see you in one of these places.’

‘Me neither,’ answered Sebastian. They took a moment, then fell into familiar talk.

‘Following current trends everyone will visit eventually.’

Sebastian’s eyes probed Jesus Saves’ latest barracks. ‘This isn’t exactly Xanadu, it’s like you’re still living in the old block.’

‘No, it’s really not, Sebastian.’

‘But even this, how’d you guys afford it?’

‘Abandoned shop fronts in back alleys are cheap nowadays. And we hold money collectively—get work as we can. Live frugally. There are dribbles of charity too. We use these places to do good, after all.’

‘So I keep hearing. You’re a philanthropist now, Clare?’

‘I’m a Christian.’

‘No offense, but I wouldn’t have pegged you for either. White robes suit you though; it’s all very Sibylline. Remember when we talked about everything? Dadaism and Dostoyevsky? The great pessimists?’

‘Yes, fondly.’ She smiled. ‘Except when we played Eeyore and Marvin the Paranoid Android, channelling Socrates. You were my escape. And you did all those paintings, sadly lost to fire. I’d love to see them again. I once thought you talked in exchange for my modelling, now I wonder if it was the other way. If I came to be painted, and paid you in conversation.’

‘I do miss your voice.’

Clare leaned against a wall. ‘So our chats meant something to you too, Sebastian?’

‘Jeez, know how hard it is to find genuine grey matter?’

‘Easy Sebastian. You always hated people more than they deserved.’

‘Not anymore.’

‘That’s not why you’re here though? I mean,’ she scratched the back of her neck, ‘I can guess why you’re not. If I surprised you by joining, you’d knock me flat if you wanted to be a member of Jesus Saves.’

‘Well I did read the interview where you said I’d be as welcome as a rapist. But no, I’m more likely to become an astronaut. God stuff? We used to agree, right? Even atheists grant too much, when you’ve got to arrive at a coherent definition in the first place.’

‘You came to debate theology and semantics?’ Her voice was flat.

‘Neither, but I’m always ...’

‘Why are you here? Is it...’ she paused ‘you’re here for Maurice? Right?’

‘Exactly right.’ He frowned, the panned eyebrows exaggerating the expression. ‘Clued in, aren’t you?’

‘Said you might come.’

‘Bet he did. Dropped me a text mentioning here. Where’s he hiding?’

She stopped leaning against the wall. ‘The city morgue.’ Her hands folded behind her back.

‘What?’ Sebastian took the nearest chair.

‘Sorry Sebastian, he said you’d become friends.’

‘How?’

‘His liver.’

‘Christ... sorry.’

‘No, *I’m* sorry. It’s awful.’

‘I can’t believe. I... I feel as if we were just talking; fucks sake—sent me a text. How’d this happen? How can Maurice be dead? That man was perpetual.’

Clare stood still.

Sebastian remembered where he was. ‘Is this the work of God?’

She took a second. ‘No, God doesn’t want suffering. You don’t want to talk about Him, do you?’

Sebastian shook. ‘Not really. No. I ... it just won’t fit, not this. Isn’t that what you guys do, make things intelligible?’

‘No Seb, none of us are in any position to make sense of these things.’

‘So you accept it?’

‘We try making it better, that’s all we can do.’

‘That’s what Maurice thought too,’ Sebastian said, addressing more himself than Clare.

‘There’s a women called Beth. Before he was taken to the hospital she spent time with Maurice, she would appreciate talking. Remembering. Shall I fetch her?’

For a while Sebastian stared at Clare. ‘I came to talk to you about something else too.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Never mind, get this Beth. I’ll talk with her.’

‘Good. Be gentle, Seb.’

Beth’s nose was too prominent, but her face would have been ravishing were Sebastian not miserable and her eyes not rimmed a darker shade, her mien made sallow. He enjoyed her towhead pixie-cut and boyish innocence.

‘Hello.’ She brandished a thin hand, which he shook.

‘I hear you were with Maurice. Clare thought you might, you know, might want to talk. I could do with talking about Maurice too... I’m... still flabbergasted.’

‘Yes.’

‘He made an indelible mark?’

She nodded once, vigorously.

‘He had that effect, didn’t he?’

They didn’t speak for a time, ~heads bowed. Then Sebastian broke the reverence. ‘I still can’t...’

And Beth cried, holding her face in her hands, rasping to halt snivels. Unaccustomed to tears, Sebastian looked at her with worry.

‘Sorry, did I...’

She shook her head as she composed herself. 'No. It's not you. I can't accept it either. He was alive. He was so alive. He talked. About the things he'd done. When he was president of his university union and nearly got expelled for a pro-communist demo. And when he started Helots and the things he did with that. The protests, the occupation and how it went wrong. I feel I lived it with him. He was so intense. And now all those things, they're gone, aren't they?'

'You have them.'

After she grasped his meaning she protested, 'But not like him. He lived that life, and it's...'

'...gone.' Sebastian finished her sentence after she left it hanging. He could not tolerate a half formed thought, like an appetiser without a meal. 'But what about God?' he added.

Beth nodded. 'Do you believe?' She was pleading for verification.

'You believe, that's important.'

The smile was gone as soon as it appeared. 'I know you don't. He didn't, but you're right, I do. And He exists whether or not we believe. And God remembers everything, experiences everything as though it were happening at once. That's what Clare says.'

'If Clare believes that then maybe I will. One day. I used to think this stuff was for idiots.'

'I'm glad we changed your mind.'

Sebastian and Beth talked for hours more before Clare came back, followed by Peter. The two were chortling.

'Happy to see you getting along,' Clare observed, feeling uncomfortably matriarchal.

'And I'm glad you're back, Clare. I was just telling Beth about the other reason I came.'

'Oh yes?'

'You know Mary Pritchard?'

'Yeah, she did that okay interview with me. And I remember her from before. I liked her piece on the block, she wanted me involved and I was sad to turn her down, but I've moved on.'

'Really? She and I are doing a magazine for radical viewpoints.'



‘A what, sorry?’

‘It’s going to come out soon. We’re going to fill it with lotsa points of view.’

‘I wouldn’t have expected that from you.’

‘Me neither, but hear me. Your brother’s on board.’

‘I’m sure he would be, I’m starting to see where this is going.’

‘I’m not,’ said Peter. ‘Ya want something from us?’

‘As a matter of fact. I want Jesus Saves to do a regular column. With a political spin.’

‘No.’

So unequivocally refused, Sebastian took a moment to rally. ‘Think about it?’ he negotiated

‘No, Seb. We don’t do “spin” and I don’t want us involved. It’s not what we’re about. We intervene in politics; we’re not a part of that world. Inasmuch as we can, we must rise above, while remaining relevant to the needy.’

‘But Clare,’ said Beth, ‘how’s it different from leaflets? It sounds great. Really great.’

‘We control the content of our leaflets. We won’t have editorial oversight.’

‘You think I’d misrepresent you?’ Sebastian sniped.

‘Not intentionally.’

‘I could show you copy before printing.’

‘Sorry, Seb. I don’t want to turn you down after everything...’

‘Then don’t,’ said Beth.

‘...but my answer is not debatable.’ She smiled at Beth. ‘It isn’t what we’re about.’

Tugging up his neckline to stop wet seeping down his back, Sebastian blinked a sticky sensation from his eyes.

‘I’m sorry,’ Beth said. She had followed him, sheltering in the doorway.

He shrugged. ‘Not your fault. I had a good time talking.’

‘Me too. I forgot to say; I saw your interview. On that morning show. I like what you said about change and needing something new.’

‘Thanks.’

‘I’ll try and...’

‘Naa, it was a long shot. Her and me aren’t likely to see things the same way. I’ve already done her wrong, she’s not to blame.’

‘Still, I’ll try.’

‘Cheers.’ He waved one arm and was absorbed into a slow moving horde.

## Part Three: Utopia

In which a new utopia is born  
from the vestiges of the last.

*They are the we of me.*

—Carson McCullers, *The Member of the Wedding*

Phil rested on the edge of Sarah's padded chair. He spilled a condiment sachet of sandy-brown powder on his curry. 'It went well,' he replied to Seán as he tried to take a bite of his meal, fiery from the microwave and balanced on his lap. He quickly retracted with an 'Ah.'

'Spicy?' Sarah asked.

'No-no, not spicy-hot, hot-hot,' he said, blowing on the forkful.

His gut made noises more often and he anticipated disappointment after too small a course.

'It's bleedin obvious she's happy,' remarked Sarah, 'I've not seen her so giddy over the moon since before her brother scarpered.'

Seán nodded. 'This is really best. She needs a friend outside the house.'

'Let's not go too far,' said Sarah.

'Look at us, gathered like some secret society discussing her fate,' Phil joked, taking a morsel to pace his appetite.

~

When Ella and Joshua parted from their hug she stood back to get another look. What remained of the protean boy, what was becoming the man, was appealingly new while also familiar. His frizzy black hair was close cropped and a moustache, prematurely thick, lined his upper lip. He wore spectacles; thin framed and listing, fractionally lopsided.

Her scrutiny made Joshua timorous.

She knew she had changed too. During his and his granny's time at the block she had been ghostly—the diffident girl who never left the piano teacher's apartment. And then, on a whim, she transformed into something mythical, given a key role in his and Ollie's fantasies. Still, she had never felt herself real until the raid, when she held a reassuring hand in an accord against horror. His presence incited a confusing amalgam of passions: homesickness that stretched back

and an attraction that stretched towards possible futures. All the pain she refused to relinquish was expunged, the guilt she jealously secured from well-intentioned strangers.

Caught in so many connotations and meanings, they sensed their significance to one another, happy to mean something to someone. They forgot the onlookers at their reunion until Alice spoke with her old brusqueness, pithily summarising, 'It's nice to see old faces.'

'Yeah,' David agreed, who wheeled to Alice, flicking a fringe from his face. Ella only half-remembered this couple. Helots, but he once walked. He flanked Maurice; Alice was to the other side.

Ella looked from the two back to Joshua. She remembered Vera and Philip were still stood behind. All six outside the mammoth disused warehouse, The Shed, with its scrub of dandelions sprouting clumps of hoary blowballs along where architecture abutted ground. The wind had already taken some of the florets leaving tawdry peduncles dangling useless. Before coming she had seen a satellite image of the building, its roof of steel sheets painted dull green, prominently visible next to specks which, after blowing up the monitor image, pixelled into cars.

'Want di tour then?' Joshua asked.

Ella nodded.

'What's that?' Phil asked, pointing to a sign over the entrance. 'Anonymity, Synergy, Sorority'.

'Our values,' explained Alice, 'what society forgot. Or has yet to discover.'

'Indeed?'

'Yuh comin too?' Joshua asked Philip.

'We're fine, aren't we?' said Vera.

'Yeah, I fancy grub though,' Philip added.

'Know who Kee'hotey be, mun,' Joshua quickly put to Phil.

'You read Cervantes?'

'Naa, mi know though.'

Philip smiled. 'All children are Quixotes.'

‘Wah bout di grown ups?’

‘Only difference between children and grown-ups is adults don’t believe in grown-ups.’

‘Come on,’ said Alice, and Ella followed inside, leaving the safety of Phil and Vera.

The imposing exoskeleton did not hold floors or walls. One jagged metal staircase clung steeply to the far side, leading to an elevated tin compartment that spied out. Otherwise a concrete floor stretched every which way. Even the exterior had not prepared Ella for The Shed’s inner vastness.

‘Ain’t it something?’ said David as his thick arms spun the large wheels of his chair.

An array of tents, marquees, kiosks and other fabric partitions gave the suggestion of an indoor marketplace. Along one side was a row of caravans. Twentysomethings thronged the makeshift metropolis of drapery, made festive by bright bunting. With clusters of older and younger people in-amongst the multitude.

‘You two go on, show her round our model utopia,’ said Alice.

‘Incredible,’ said Ella, too invigorated to remember her timidity. She was so taken to Joshua, and Alice as well. The red-haired woman looked at her kindly, but not in the way of family—as at an overgrown child, belittlingly benign.

Resting his hand on the small of her back, Joshua coaxed her through one of the avenues, distracting her from a posterboard with tacked paper depicting symbolic and cartoonish clenched fists, a guillotine, lines of people and shackled men. They had oblique messages punctuated by exclamation marks: ‘Keynes is dead! Long live the Ersatz Left!’, ‘No more cuts!’, ‘Austerity for the Rich!’ ‘Party like it’s 1848!’ In one, grotesques stood before a boggle eyed priest; a wedding ceremony tableau with the man speaking in a speech bubble, ‘I Nimby, take thee Tina, for worse, for poorer, in sickness, till death.’

‘Ever miss the old block?’ she asked.

She felt his hand tremble. ‘Nah not di place, but Ollie? I miss him like any’ting... and Gran.’

‘Sorry.’

He shook his head. 'Wish they could'a been Shedders.'

'Shedders?' asked Ella

'That's what weh called!' He stopped outside a large white tent. 'Di canteen.'

She peeked through the flap.

'Go.' He nudged.

The white pavilion had stood out since her first glance inside the warehouse, occupying the most space of any of the internal structures. She saw rows of people eating, all at wooden tables with joined up benches, which she remembered from parks visited long ago with Peter, when he would take her out of the city.

'Di food is awful, but mi love it ere.'

'How long...'

'Mi weren't ere when Alice started, but it go seven months. David and her made it out no'tin. Aftah wah happen at di block, she want ti do bettah, and she. We are all ere cause of her.'

The circuit continued by women and men's showers, sleeping tents, a chalked out sports field where kids dribbled and passed a basketball and a meetinghouse for lectures.

'Women and men have dem own, it give women a place fi dem'selves. Tis open lecturin for both though.' Joshua explained their anonymous lectures, 'Orators read any'ting, but dem incognito so dem free to speak, "sans ego," as Alice put it.'

"Sans ego"?"

'No showin off. No pressure to conform. No ego.'

There were separate schools for boys and girls, 'Alice think di girls learn bettah that way. And di crèche provided day-care.' Coming to the end was a doctor's tent. Joshua told her how an old Welsh GP worked with three nurses, Shedders who volunteered when they were not doing shifts at the city hospital.

They avoided the line of portaloos, but Ella caught a faecal whiff dulled by chemical antiseptic. Along the way people talked; one woman, Karen, recognised Ella and eulogised about resurrecting Maurice's dream.

An old man with a tangled shamanic grey beard and deep furrows stopped them as they went by the library, which was marked by a hefty wooden board, like the one on the outside door: 'Paradise Regained'.

'You're new,' he said, and held out a gloved hand to Ella.

His shake nearly tilted her.

'Scrawny lass, ain't ya?'

'Don't mind him, he's doolally man,' Joshua said.

'Ay? It'd be mad not to be crazy in this zoo,' rebuked the old man. He spoke as if his words had ironic parentheses.

'Ella,' she said, trying to sound laidback.

'Manners. A rarity. And I am the zoologist, bookkeeper, master strategist... the great amongst the small...'

'Ainsley Alex Arwood, weh call im Triple-A. He p'tend ti be barmy.'

'Pshaw, we all of us make a mask of our face and a face of our masks.'

'He always like that.'

'You see what common courtesy I receive for my diligent duties?'

Ella laughed.

'What? Am I to be mocked by you too? Doth suffering know no bounds? Have I not reaped my full share of effrontery?'

'He keep books and teaches anybody who gets wah he says. He's our jester.'

'Am I standing right here to be so talked about. Like a pet? Like an imbecile?'

'Do you like it in The Shed?' Ella asked.



‘More than most places, less than a few. These folks believe they’ve rediscovered Eden with their one part leprosy colony, one part scriptorium. Hence my little wink to the Almighty.’ With his thumb he jabbed over his shoulder to the sign. ‘Better than their hokum at the door, right? Equality! Pfui! Like Saint Stirner said, they like Mankind more than persons. But they got *something* going. Clever animals, always ahead of themselves.’

Having hit on this question, Ella decided to apply it universally. ‘Do you like it in The Shed?’ over and over, so Joshua started to chortle before she’d opened her mouth.

A man overseeing toddlers playing some game with blocks: ‘It’s home. I mean like, it takes your breath, don’t it? I couldn’t believe when I found this place and they agreed to have me.’

‘Agreed?’

‘Yeah, people apply. Alice wants an open door policy, whatever, but that was what destroyed the last group she was with. Helots. So she says people are vetted. And there needs to be consensus.’ The man guffawed. ‘She says “consensus” an awful lot.’

A young man fixing a generator, wearing shorts and covered in black oil smears: ‘Like it? You been out there? This place... how would you say, Josh?’

‘Paradise.’

‘Yeah, right. I mean I wasn’t keen at first. When they ask for all you own.’

‘All you own?’

‘Sure. You can’t own anything. Everything held in common. Except maybe some sentimental things. Course some us didn’t own much, but for me it *was* a stumbler. Alice says that’s important too, that people with too much make a big sacrifice and learn to trust a group. Way she put it to me when we met, if I care so much about people not having enough, why do I keep more than enough for myself?’

A woman in coveralls working with him on the sinopia rusted machine: ‘Beats the proverbial out of shelter, I’ll say that. Took time getting used to the regime. It’s freeing, but relies on self-discipline. I get on well with this, but Alice keeps people on their toes. Says to work our minds

*and* bodies. Lots prefer only the mind part and a few, like me, get on better with the physical stuff, but Alice is a good prodder. She's got me learning history from this guy,' she indicated the man in shorts, 'and him doing this. Good switcheroo.' She spoke to the man, 'when you came weren't you a scrawny thing with a crooked back from leaning over computers?'

The man rubbed the back of his head and grinned. 'I was that. Not like we're forced to do anything. We hate work here. Hating work is what it's all about. We want to contribute, but we're also learning to diversify our activities. That's how David puts it.'

A girl play-scuffling a boy with a wooden sword versus a plastic lightsaber: 'We likes it better'an anywhere. We don't ave to go to class when we don't want and there's lots and lots of people. But we often want to go to class because it's good. And I like everyone.'

Her playmate: 'Don't know.'

'Sum'ady vexing yuh Roland?' Joshua crouched to the boy's level.

Roland looked to Ella with feigned defiance. 'I like it here. I do!'

Ella watched them get back to play. The girl had the advantage, parrying Roland, invigorated. He showed the toll, startled by her speed, and shouted 'stop.' So she reprieved and moments later they invented a new game.

The other replies were variations. Except when Ella reencountered Alice and David talking in a meeting, sneaked up and whisperingly put it to them while Joshua took off his glasses and wiped them on his t-shirt, pulled from beneath his sweater.

'It's on its way,' answered Alice. 'I'm not satisfied.'

David nodded.

The meeting was full of people shouting, standing in turn and trying to convey a point.

'We need a bullying policy for the children,' said one, holding a white rubber sphere about the size of a basketball.

Someone else raised a hand and the ball was passed. 'There's no bullying, why do we need a policy? Kids are happy. Leave'em be.'

The first person raised a hand, along with three others. The ball was given to one who hadn't spoken. 'I agree we need a policy. There've been tiffs here and there. And we need to be robust, foresee problems. Kids here have very different backgrounds, see. And everyone is doing their part, to parent and what have you. We're like a family now, but we can forget how many of us there are. If something were to go awry, it'd cause conflict and break us up.'

Ella saw a young woman with hair tied into a bun quick typing on a laptop. She walked up and peered over her shoulder.

'We'll reconvene tomorrow to discuss an anti-bullying policy and whether we need one,' said Alice, 'but I want to see most of the kids here too. I want them to have a hand in any decision.'

The typist looked over her shoulder at Ella as she folded her computer, 'Hi, I don't recognise you.'

'Ella.'

'India,' the woman said. 'Nice to meet you Ella.'

'You didn't add names. You just used dots for the speakers,' Ella noted.

'Yeah, anonymity. We don't think it's important who says what, just what's said.'

'Ella, lemme show yuh somthin I done,' said Joshua, tugging Ella's hand to guide her to one of the pathways and back to the sleeping tents. He crawled into one and came out with a cardboard box, which he opened to reveal a bundle of papers. Setting them on one of the small tables spotted about, he daintily lifted a semi-transparent top sheet to reveal a black and white sketch of a tower block. He lifted this first page and the second had comicbook panels with two boys running through a corridor, the one in front a rendering of Joshua as a child, hunched in that odd way he had of sprinting, inspired by a pop culture Japanese ninja. The second figure ran more normally; Ella felt her chest tighten as she recognised Ollie.

'It's our story,' Joshua said proudly. 'Yeah bettah believe Triple-A know how to draw? We ah do di whole ting. What happened. Not like that other book.'

*'Stories from the Block?'*

‘It be a pack of lies. It says tings bout Ollie. Lies bout Maurice. Alice, David...’

‘I’m glad you’re writing. Can I read?’

‘Wait,’ he said and crawled back in, coming out with a second box. ‘Heard yuh en route, made a copy.’ Her name was written on the box in felt-tip.

‘Thank you.’

‘Give a lotta gifts ere. Alice says she want a gift economy.’

Ella smiled. ‘Thank you.’

~

Ella and Sarah had bowls of mushy Weetabix. Ella kept half a biscuit poking from her milk, as she liked the contrast in textures between the soggy-cold and dry-crunch. Sarah sprinkled granulated sugar on hers.

‘Where’re Phil and Seán?’

‘Morons changed the times at Phil’s work wivout warning. He’s still ere for tea, but says he’ll getta bite on the way for breakfast. Not healthy.’

‘And Seán?’

‘That’s something I’d like to talk about darling.’

‘Everything okay mum? Seán’s not going?’

‘Course not, silly moppet. The opposite. Look, I know its cramped, but would you be okay if Seán lived wiv us?’

‘Seán already lives here though, right mum?’

Sarah grinned. ‘He does at that, dear.’

‘And I know how we can get more space.’

‘Oh? How?’

‘I want to live at The Shed.’

Sarah frowned. 'No.'

'But...'

'Absolutely not' Sarah stood, collecting the bowls. 'Remember what happened, don'tcha?

Discussion ended, a'right? You want to visit your friend...'

'I love Joshua.' Ella was staring at the table.

This unalloyed profession surprised Ella almost as much as her mother.

'That's...' Sarah sat back and both women listened to the other's breaths for protracted seconds. 'That's good. I'm glad.' Sarah said at last. 'C'mere, love.'

Ella went as bidden and they embraced. 'He was a little rascalion, but a good boy.'

'He's not a boy,' Ella protested.

'No? Course not. Time catches up wiv us oldies.'

'You're not old, Mum.'

'I feel it, but that might be the chill of this miserable house.'

'Mum?'

'Yeah love.'

'Can I live in the commune?'

Sarah looked at her daughter eye to eye. 'Can we talk about this wiv the guys? Think it out, a'right love?'

Ella nodded.

'You're growin, ain't you?' Sarah asked, and hugged her daughter tightly again. They stayed like that until they both felt bashful and when they separated Sarah took off her glasses, polishing her flower print blouse over the lens.

The rest of that day Ella was distracted from her maths coursework, pestered by hiccups and the pull of the photocopies of Joshua and Triple-A's comic. The reproductions were haphazard, some pages harder to discern than others, but she found what she was looking for. The image of

herself, coming out of her old bedroom door to stand in a relaxed contrapposto before Ollie and Joshua—skinny and elfin in Joshua’s drawing, in his eyes.

She had stood before the scratched mirror Sarah once recklessly power drilled onto the rented building’s thin wall. A trailing pattern of dust motes rode an air current through a shaft of white projected into her bedroom, as it did every time the sun set on a clear vista. She held the image by the mirror and collocated her twin reflections as she heard traffic and children’s cries carried from outside.

~

We sit in a large circle. Sister Clare stands, ‘Dear Lord, we ask for your blessing on this meeting. Guide us in our thinking and in our speech. Open our ears and our hearts, that we may perform your works in the world, to the glory of Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end.’

We say ‘Amen’ in choir.

From amongst us I stand. ‘Some of us know about The Shed already. Some of you’ve been. For those that haven’t, it’s a magnificent place where people are trying to do something decent, something that’ll glorify our Lord.’

‘Amen.’

‘They’re not all Christians, but I have been there and witnessed their ways. I believe the Holy Spirit moves through them. We are God’s messengers on earth, and I believe we must find all who need our aid and offer ourselves in harmony.’ I sit.

Brother Jacob rises. ‘I’ve been myself; they’re a great bunch. I agree with Sister Beth.’ He sits.

Brother Tope speaks, ‘We need to be cautious, the devil always comes in sheep’s clothing, but we must not let fear of the enemy obstruct us from God’s works.’

‘Amen.’

Brother Tope gives way to Brother Peter. 'I say it's clear what we wanna do. And He moves us to do good, and would not deceive us or allow us to be deceived by the adversary.'

Sister Clare speaks again. 'We are united under God and in our fellowship. Let us give praise to Him.'

'Amen.'

'And let us expand out community and multiply our number to His eternal glory.'

'Amen.'

'It is agreed that we will offer our fellowship and His glorious words to our brothers and sisters of The Shed.'

'Amen.'

On the way out Beth touched Clare's shoulder, 'Can we talk for a moment?'

'Of course, Beth.'

'It's about Sebastian.'

A transitory, repressed discontent sketched on Clare's face. 'Yes Beth?'

'The first issue of *Anarchy's Masque* is nearly ready to print.'

'Tell him I'm glad for him and his people and that we all hope it goes as he intends.'

'He told me not to ask you again.'

'You can ask any number of times Beth. Listen, I know why you want this, and you might be right. Sebastian's a charismatic man. And he can be a good man, too. And I know you think I'm doing this because I haven't forgiven.'

'Have you?'

'He didn't even do me much wrong. That book he wrote was meaner to Maurice. And if Maurice forgave him and if I forgave Andy, how can I hold a grudge against Sebastian?'

'I just want you to see the copy.'

'I'm sure it's good. I'll read it when it's published.'

‘If you would talk to him...’

‘You’re talking to Sebastian plenty.’

‘I can talk to whoever I want, can’t I?’

‘Certainly Beth; I didn’t mean... only... be careful?’

‘He’s not dangerous,’ Beth protested, gesticulating ‘and anyway, you introduced us. If you’re so worried about Sebastian why get us talking?’

They turned into a new, empty and unadorned room, and took seats on a sofa. ‘I thought you both needed someone, to talk about Maurice. You were in shock, Beth. I thought you’d help each other.’

Beth smiled. ‘We did, you were right. So why stop us talking now?’

‘I don’t. I didn’t... just, be scrupulous. I care about you, Beth. You, Peter and Junior have become so close. I’ve never been as happy. I try to love everyone, but I especially love you three.’ Beth felt diffident. ‘And I’ve known Sebastian a long while, I know what he can be like. He’s not bad, but I don’t think he knows how to love.’

‘I love you too, but you’re wrong.’

‘What is it you get from him?’

Beth thought. ‘He has strength and fragility.’

Clare shook. ‘No Beth, Sebastian has no strength, he’s perennially thin-skinned. You’re projecting.’

‘You don’t know.’

‘I hope so. I mean, I hope I’m wrong.’

Beth stood. ‘I’m going to The Shed. Shall I tell them our decision or do you want to do it with a group?’

‘Tell Alice a group of us will come to offer fidelity to their cause. No need for surprises, is there?’



After hunting through 'The Shed' for twenty minutes Beth found Alice in 'Paradise Regained' reading Triple-A's collection—a paperback *Critique of the Gotha Programme* with a spine so bent a chiropractor would cringe.

'Question?' asked Triple-A's voice from somewhere concealed.

'Shoot,' said Alice, thumb rubbing her temples.

'Why does every court have a fool?'

'Dunno?'

'Fie. Cause power doesn't suffer being taken seriously! Chill a bit. Here.' A book was tossed at her, *The Blithedale Romance*. 'A better critique.'

She narrowly dodged the hurtled object. 'For the life of me...'

'You're tough to find,' Beth greeted, interrupting, standing nervously, hands fidgeting, a downcast gaze.

After numerous past visits Alice was still unable to read Beth. 'Meetinghouse or here—usually one or the other. If I'm in 'The Shed' at all.'

'Jesus Saves has agreed to work with you. They're coming with a delegation.'

'Like old times.'

'I wasn't with them during the Block thing.'

Alice slid a red marker into her page and folded it, looking up at Beth from her imperious beanbag lounger. 'Didn't miss much.'

Triple-A appeared from behind a large carpet hung from the rickety roof. His lions hair always allowed him to seem to occupy more space than he did. 'How'd T.S. describe the end of the world again?'

'I'm sure we don't know.'

'Hi,' said Beth, nervously looking up at the man.

‘Hello miss,’ he ran his eyes over her, ‘I see.’ He stepped closer. ‘One of them.’

‘Ignore him, we all do. Resident loony.’

‘Pshaw, see how our glorious leader exercises pastoral duties? Slighting the mentally ill.’

‘Are you ill?’ Beth asked.

‘Oh no. I’m the sanest, but they’re such nutters they wouldn’t recognise a rational man if he ran up to them with an uncombed beard screaming quotations from Milton. “The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heav’n of hell, a hell of heav’n”.’

‘Beth.’ she held out her hand.

‘They call me Triple-A,’ he said as he pumped her outheld hand. ‘A spiteful name I’ve made mine. Wear your scars proudly, what my ne’er-do-well of a daddy advised.’

‘Must you hassle every blighter you meet?’ Alice asked.

‘I must examine as many people as I can with Diogenes’ lantern, to find one good man.’ He looked from Beth to Alice to Beth again. ‘Although a good woman suffices. Even better, depending on motives.’

‘Urgh,’ complained Alice.

‘And wasn’t Crate’s wife, Hipparchia of Maroneia, the greatest of all the Ancients? That unsung heroine of philosophy.’

‘Please shut up.’

Triple-A shrugged. ‘Know when I’m unwelcome. I’ll depart from you ladies.’ He winked at Beth, ‘Careful faith-peddling lass; heathens, apostates and atheists round every corner. They look like us.’

He exited with the same flair with which he spoke, marching.

‘I’m sorry Beth.’

‘He’s a darling,’ Beth answered, her shoulders fell. ‘He doesn’t bother me.’

‘He gives *me* a headache.’

‘Do you know Sebastian?’

‘Who, Sebastian Lyme?’

‘Yeah.’ Beth nodded.

‘Unfortunately, thankfully not well. I wouldn’t have thought he’d associate with you lot.’

‘He’s a different person.’

‘Oh? Did Sebastian Lyme find God?’

Beth laughed. ‘Not yet.’

‘Phew, on that day the world stops making a lick of sense.’

‘He’s publishing a magazine called *Anarchy’s Masque*.’

‘Sounds more like him.’

‘He’d love to involve The Shed. He would love to publicise this.’

Alice tucked an errant piece of coppery hair behind an ear. ‘Maybe. Could work. Want to take a seat?’

‘No. I’m okay. Shall I tell him to speak with you?’

‘Is he doing this with Jesus Saves?’

Beth shook her head. ‘No, Clare doesn’t trust him.’

‘Clever woman. Neither do I, but I don’t trust easily and if I let that stop me working with people I wouldn’t get far, would I?’

‘That’s what I tell her.’

‘Those two have history, don’t they? My advice, avoid the past. There’re sharp, pointy things that can cut you in archaeology. Plenty of booby-trapped pyramids and berried ghouls.’

‘But you’ll talk to Sebastian?’

‘Sure, you’re the hard to turn down type.’

~

Pendulous, curling, silver filigree earrings hung from the woman at the counter, flashing in a glow emitted somewhere behind the bar. Her braided hair had green and pink highlights. Vera was envying beauty, which she had not done since she fell in love with Jacquie during middle age. She repressed a laugh about this trite jealousy for ephemeral youth.

‘They’re pretty,’ complimented Vera as she watched the woman get her a draught beer, effortlessly pulling the lever and tipping the mug at that apposite angle.

‘What love?’

‘Your jewellery, dear.’ Vera indicated to her own unadorned ears in illustration.

‘Thanks, hubby got ‘em for me. Here y’go love,’ she put the glass on the counter. Vera passed her cash and got change with the drink.

‘No offense,’ said Seán as Vera came to the table, ‘but I wouldn’t have pictured you as a pub lady.’

In the background a radio played an indie track, high octave vocals competed with gentle acoustic melodies.

‘People are never what they seem.’ Vera winked. ‘I grew up in a pub.’ She took a chair between Seán and Phil. ‘Not like this. My parent’s was a lot more, how to say? Out in the country. Local regulars, real ale on tap, and my pop was ahead of the bell curve. He wouldn’t let customers get so smashed they’d need crutches to find home.’

‘Be careful,’ warned Phil, ‘insulting *The Queen*, even by comparison, it’d be a capital offense if Seán were King.’

‘I’ll bite my tongue.’

‘Advisable,’ said Phil.

‘Even though it’s not the same, it does still have a vibe of coming home. The aroma. And that atmosphere, unmistakable. Somewhere between Eden and a mausoleum.’

‘I like that,’ said Phil, ‘I may do you the honour of imitation by way of theft.’

‘But I appreciate it, even in its mausoleumy way,’ she qualified.

The three remained unspeaking. Each was exhausted: Vera from a marathon session with Ella, who had been more interested in talking Sheddies than maths. She rarely noticed Joshua's name, despite the girl's uncannily chatty extolling. And from the questionable absence Vera deduced Ella's infatuation. Happily, the maths did not suffer, as Ella was ahead.

Seán and Phil were work fatigued too. Phil from the trite effort of reading a script over the phone to crotchety strangers until repeated words became so painfully known that *jamais vu* set-in—words losing their reality, alien from overuse. And Seán because a girl had come to them with black eyes, missing front teeth, an improbable child who looked sixty at eleven. And he couldn't stop imagining her.

A second radio song ended and all three absentmindedly listened to a newscast that substituted for the charts programme. The broadcast droned about drones bombing unthinkable villages in that other world; murmured about a murder spree two weeks ago in Surrey and whined about a winning contract for hydraulic fracking in the North, the jobs to be created, the unhinged locals opposed to progress. There was a bit about a controversial proposed young person curfew to check street crime, water canons to curtail riots like last years and police powers to enable patrols.

Next was an informal item on George Hendrickson's mayoralty. 'After his period in office many see great things in Hendrickson's future, but others cast doubt on his capacity to survive controversies if elevated to a national role. The real question is will he stand again or resign for a Pragmatist safe seat, assured ministerial position and elevation to the top. It would be a bold move when polls suggest Pragmatists maybe disadvantaged by a generational shift in favour of the incumbents. This is said to be inevitable after the lowering of voting age. Yet audacity has been a staple of his career. Our own Samuel Haradt met the Mayor earlier.'

'Mr Hendrickson, you have come under fire from civil rights' groups for your close association with the policing of protest groups and occupations. How do you respond to criticisms?'

‘I try not to listen to people who argue for the rights of criminals over the law abiding. If someone wants to change government, to get involved in politics, they’ve my admiration. Even if it’s not my politics they’re advocating. Join the Realists, blog your political opinions, vote, but I draw the line when it comes to breaking laws. These occupations infringe innocent peoples’ right to their property, which is the basis of civilization. And the tactics used by protesters have jeopardised the safety of the public.

‘Look, I’m sick of handwringing. There’ve been more and more rabble-rousers and your average Joe credits my zero-tolerance measures with keeping us from pandemonium. That’s why I was re-elected.’

‘Could you turn that swill off Trisha?’ Seán called over.

‘Sure,’ she called back and switched to a station playing R&B.

Phil and Vera finished their drinks at the same time. Seán took the last of his pint like a shot and offered to get refills. ‘It’s on me today.’

He carried them back to the table on a little grey tray. ‘Christ we look a miserable bunch,’ he observed.

Phil yawned. ‘How’s Ella?’ he asked Vera.

‘Well.’

Seán sipped his ale. ‘Ella smitten then?’

‘So it seems,’ Vera answered dreamily.

‘Is that good?’

Phil grinned, ‘Nuttin we can do, up to her.’ He clutched at his shirt and trembled. Then cleared his throat and settled.

Vera took note. ‘You okay?’

‘Fine,’ he coughed. ‘Fine. Heartburn. Nuttin... to fret.’

She mmed. ‘Have that checked, okay?’

‘I’ll be fine.’ He dismissed her anxieties with a symbolic wave.

‘Humour me?’

‘Okay, okay. If it’s not enough to have Seán babying my health, you’re gonna start? How’d I always end up surrounding myself wiv nannies?’

The three settled again, returning to their typologies of pubs.

~

A constellation of dried terracotta leaves blew by Graham on the street outside his office, rustling a ballet on the pavement as he maladroitly clipped the top buttons of his wax coat with one hand, the other taken by a briefcase, and then pushed his hood down more securely.

A young man came out of his office building, huffing, winded, probably from scampering back down the stairs. Graham had passed the boy, who must have looked out of place in the sterile environ of puffed out suits—wearing his white hoody with earphones dangling behind lobes like science-fiction ornaments.

‘Mister Finningham?’

Graham looked at his accoster, who adjusted specs to sit farther up his nose and grinned manically as if at a long lost relative or friend. ‘I found yuh.’

‘I’m not difficult to find. If this is about legal services, it’s also not difficult to get an appointment either. I can give you a card and you can phone my secretary from eight till three every weekday but a Thursday.’

‘Nah, mi nuh want yuh card, Mistah Finningham. I am ere to talk.’

‘About?’

‘It about di block and Maurice, but more about ah job too.’

‘You knew Maurice?’

‘When I were young, yah. Now mi with Alice, di Shed’s leader. Mi ah Shedder too; it’s what me come to talk yuh about.’

‘Woah-woah, reverse. One moment. You were *that* kid? The one with the friend...’

‘Yah man.’

‘Coffee?’

‘Mi drink tea.’

Juveniles crammed the Costa: blue blazers, white shirt collars and shiny nylon trousers, constituting a local school uniform. About half the girls wore a variation of black skirts and leggings. They huddled loudly round the larger café tables as far inside as possible, slurping iced fruit drinks and hot chocolates.

Graham secured a place at the front, by a window on street amblers who eyed indoors, thinking of sipping something hot.

‘I’ll get drinks. What kind of tea?’ He unfolded a menu, ‘Long Jing Green Tea? Gingersnap Peach?’ Graham asked.

‘Only one kinda tea, sir, builder’s brew, thanks.’

‘An Everyday coming up.’

Graham eyed a gateau at the counter, put-off by the exorbitant calories plaque sat pertly beside it, the only price he bothered to read. Joshua stared out. A geriatric man pottered over a zebra crossing while a yuppie in an open topped sports car looked on in contained rage for his precious seconds. A kid watched her blue balloon lollop up, sped by helium.

‘Here you go,’ Graham put down the tray. ‘It’s been so long since the block,’ he delved into discussion, ‘can’t believe how much has happened. It’s still hard to grasp Maurice died.’

‘Mi heard about that.’ Joshua shook his head.

‘Never forgave himself for what became of it.’

‘It were nevah his fault.’

Graham blew on his latte and took a sip. ‘My little cousin, always self-destructive; he used his cleverness to do it. In the end he killed himself in the lengthiest way... Know what eats me?’



‘No?’

‘Feel awful saying it, but I hate him, sometimes. I know I oughtn’t, that maybe it went the way it did because he never found what he needed. That I’m, in part, blameable? I wouldn’t deny it, but what happened was selfish. His parents won’t recover; they may not’ve been close, but he was their only... I can’t imagine...’ He looked across to the children at the back, some preparing to vacate. ‘Sorry, you didn’t come to talk about Maurice.’

‘Mi happy fi talk about Maurice.’

‘It’s nice, now and then, with somebody who knew him, even in a small way. I accept blame for what happened. I didn’t pull him back.’

‘Nah, be easy pon yourself man. No’tin coulda stop him if him want ah drink. Mi know, mi friend Ollie fadda ah drunk, him a bad man.’

A group of guys in smart black ensembles and red ties went by. One knocked on the glass and made monkey impressions at Joshua, arms curled under themselves so his hands reached up to his pits.

‘Fucking twits,’ said Graham as the group walked off laughing.

Joshua was stirring sugar.

‘That doesn’t bother you?’

‘Yuh, it bother mi; mi want to pop dem eyes outta dem skulls, but what mi do but debase mi’self that way? And if mi could hurt dem, what gud would it do?’

‘Don’t think I’d be so philosophical.’ Graham decided to change the subject, unsure about how to relate to what the boy had said. ‘You wanted to talk about a shed?’

‘Nah man, not “ah” shed, *di* Shed. Another occupation, like di block but bettah.’ Joshua took out the bag with his teaspoon and drank the dark liquid, thick from overbrewing. He faintly scolded the cave of his mouth. ‘Mi goin against di law. Thought we could use lawyer and then fi remember yuh from a’fore.’

‘Ha, I did help before. So you might need my help again, right? Who’s included in this Shed? You’re not running things?’

‘Nah man, Alice. She brought us together.’

‘I remember. With the fine Celtic hair. One of the bright young things that followed Maurice.’

Joshua shrugged.

‘Okay, in... I’m in’

‘Really man?’

‘Yes. I’ll consider it paying a debt to Maurice.’

‘Yuh good.’

‘I’m okay.’ Graham finished his latte. ‘After what happened in the block, you guys might want better.’

‘Yuh av to start somewhere, don yuh?’

‘True.’

Joshua worked on finishing his drink.

‘You can’t be as grown up as you look?’

‘Sixteen,’ he replied, nonplussed.

‘You could pass for early twenties.’

‘What is it, mi stache and specs then?’

‘Came out to find me on your own nous?’

‘Yah man, ah guess.’

‘I don’t think it’s just your moustache. You have gumption.’

Josh finished his drink. ‘Thanks for di cuppa mistah.’

A nectarine and apricot sky met Joshua as he took his time on the walk back, the early autumn stripping overhanging branches from the unkempt gardens of boarded houses. Joshua knew which had squatters. Before Alice he had resided in one where mildew percolated walls. He

enjoyed the sight of a tree confettied with Tesco bags in lieu of foliage, which now orange littered the pavement.

An old lady impeded him on his way. She yanked a shawl close to cosset herself from cold.

‘Where you going Josh?’

‘Mi goin nowhere.’

The bus stop was positioned ten minutes from the old warehouse, at the edge of the city in a neglected district. He took a full fifteen.

‘Alice wants to talk,’ David told him when Joshua arrived at the Shed, wheeling by.

Joshua followed David to the meetinghouse where Alice was already speaking to a group, holding the white ball that signalled her turn. ‘As I’ve said, and after we decided to accept Clare’s offer, I’ve been in further discussions and Jesus Saves would like to join our January protests and welcome help synchronizing with other groups. We’ve had problems before, so at the next meeting I’ll raise the issue of organizational capabilities. I wanted to tell a few of you just to keep people informed, as work restraints will stave off our next meeting a day or so.’

One Shedder silenced the group’s mumble when he took the speech ball and asked a question before handing it back. ‘Is it true they said they’d help if we’re raided?’

‘Yes.’

As the group dissolved Alice turned to Joshua. ‘Hey Josh, could you help Myles and Cindy in the canteen. They did the cleaning yesterday too.’

‘Yah.’

‘Cheers. I need to look at setting up a rota.’

‘Good idea.’

‘Why you staring at me Josh?’ she asked, self-conscious of his fixed gaze.

‘Sorry. Yuh hair remind mi ah Ollie.’

She smiled.

Relieved to be in his tent, Joshua let his back unravel from hunching and scrubbing over a sink. His muscles settled on the thick bedding, but no matter how long he shut his lids, thoughts assailed, preventing sleep. He sat up and took out his box of comic sheets from a shelf unit he used to protect the work from the floor. He opened it and warily leafed the dossier, afraid of nicking a single corner, creating one negligible crease.

Then he found what he sought. The image he had drawn of Ella, slipping out of the doorway to where Ollie and Joshua waited for their *Hokage*; a sylphlike entity with short hair, chosen as an addition to their play. There were four of them in that private universe he had invented. Ella and her uncle were honorary inclusions; Joshua had always liked Phil, if only for noticing he and Ollie existed.

He wanted to draw Ella as she had become. He put the box away again.

As his mind lost its lucidity a cough sounded outside the tent. ‘Can I have a word?’ It was David’s voice.

Joshua poked his head out.

‘The shop called. They have six hours tomorrow; you’ll need to be there at seven, do you want me to rustle up a lift?’

‘Yah, thanks man.’

‘Sure, no probs Josh.’

‘David?’

‘Eh?’

‘Remember Mistah Graham, di lawyer?’

‘Err... Maurice’s?’

‘Yah.’

‘Sure.’

‘Mi find him. Say he’ll work for us.’

‘I’ll tell Alice... Good going.’

‘Thanks.’

‘Goodnight.’

Back in bed Joshua worried about getting enough sleep before a day at work. He listened to the squeak of David’s chair diminish.

~

Minutes of the meeting of The Shed

On — Tue. October

- Announcement that the police have been in touch.
- General groans follow.
- A Shedder refers back to Helots occupation as an example of dangers we should heed and goes on to claim there may be undercover officers among us, but we should not be paranoid. And further caution that The Shed ought to do everything to avoid the ire of authorities without some pressing moral justification. We are better as an example to society than as martyrs.
- This is applauded.
- On the basis of the aforesaid, a follow up request that we stop acquiring food from supermarket dumps.
- Another Shedder questions wisdom of such a prohibition. Argued that food is hardly out of its sell by and cellophane wrapped, so it is edible and free. The supermarket is going to chuck it anyway. We are reminded that everyone enjoyed the Saturday feast, especially younger children.
- Rebuttal that it’s illegal and has already sparked two incidents with the police.
- More moans.
- Admittance that it’s frustrating, but that we have to accept realities. Asks if food is worth jeopardising all we’ve done. Call for a consensus.

- Anonymous vote: unanimous against continuing to get food from supermarket dumps.
- Recap: Shedder reports a stash of hallucinogen chuinjuatin, found last week, has been disposed with investigations active.
- New agenda proposed: coordinating communication with associated organisations. Ventures that a recent mix up of dates for a meeting with the National Union of Retail and Service Workers (NURSW) could have been avoided if The Shed had a more centralised administration. Suggests new admin body for the coordinated strike and protest in three months, as it will involve not only The Shed, but: NURSW, the Allied Industrial and Trade Union (AITU), the National Association of Office Workers (NAOW), Association of Students in Higher Education (ASHE), Movement for Revolutionary Labour, the Anarchist Left Unity League and the International Socialist Cause Solidarity party. And will be important to demonstrate discipline and numbers.
- Anonymous vote: two dissenting voices. Move for continued discussion.
- Two questions: How much power would such a body exert? Would they be allowed to make undemocratic decisions on matters internal and/or external?
- Assurances are made that such a body would have no power to make decisions separate from The Shed meetings. And there would be a secondary oversight body that would remain distinct. Agenda is re-proposed with caveats.
- Anonymous vote: one abstention from those present, otherwise unanimous.
- General discussion: proposes that we still need new ways The Shed can make money internally, proposing one central goal should be to minimise dependence on jobs from outside. Asks for suggestions.
- Arts and crafts as something that could be followed up. Journal making has been popular and with successes in the city market, especially under the 'pay what you want' model; textiles might do well too.
- Mentions there are a few people who know how to cook at professional level, raises potential for catering cooperative.
- Asks if we could apply for charitable status based on our work with the homeless.

- Denies that we might be able to do so given political status.
- Electrical repair is mentioned and discussed.
- Dog walking.
- Someone speaks out against recent attempts to link rations to labour. Argues input of time and need ought to remain prioritised and we should avoid slipping into a wage system. General murmurs of agreement.
- Third agenda proposed: Questions whether we ought to work with Mary Pritchard and Sebastian Lyme's magazine *Anarchy's Masque*.
- Holds up copy of the first issue and praises it.
- Another criticises Mr Lyme's piece as self-indulgent, but praises an article on dramatic rise of homelessness.
- Argues that both Ms Pritchard and Mr Lyme have the right credentials to be trusted.
- Third speaker argues that this probably true of Ms Pritchard, but not at all true of Mr Lyme, but also admits no serious danger in using *Anarchy's Masque* as an alternative platform. And that were there to be some difficulty later it would be easy to extricate The Shed from any association.
- Anonymous vote: large majority in favour. Proposal for further discussions at a later meeting, unanimous assent.
- The meeting is closed.

~

The woman retracted the box of matches to her breast pocket as she sucked on the fag.

'Think I'm hot? Pervin on me? That why you here?' she asked Phil, who joined her on the porch flagstone each lunch break, surveying a side road of cracked asphalt and double-yellow lines, the stripes of colour waning. Over the road, on a boarded up theatre, an imitation Banksy had been stencilled of Ronald McDonald leering over a little girl in a red parka, like the Big Bad Wolf of legend.

‘Course I think you’re hot, Molly, but I don’t need to follow you out for that.’

‘What’s it then? You don’t smoke so...’

‘I getta bit vicariously.’

‘Ah, old lecher, you’re getting some of my cancer stick huh, stealing baccy? Come, that’s not even proper quitting. Like when my dad goes on a diet and eats double portions of no-fat.’

‘Have I sunk so low?’

‘Work here, don’tcha? Doesn’t get lower.’

‘No?’

‘My dad says a job’s a job. What the fuck does that mean? I was just in there and fucking Noel was bitching about how he couldn’t get this other job cause he doesn’t have an ethnic pussy. This is why people come to work with semiautomatics, right?’

Phil chuckled, ‘You could take the offices while I pick off stragglers at the exits?’

‘You’re on, man. Anything but another bloody game of twenty-one with that bellend Richie taking house.’

‘Does he...’

‘Cheat like a whore? Uh-huh, at fucking no bets blackjack.’ She finished her cigarette. Quenching it beneath her left boot, ‘Fair play though, teach me for getting a geography degree.’

Phil lingered a while, savouring the freedom from work.

~

## Editorial

Somewhere in this country a woman decides  
between central heating and a second meal.

Elsewhere another has no choice in whether  
she will have dinner or feed her child. She



looks jealously at her kid's plate. A single man who didn't get a job after university chooses dignity or charity. A young boy becomes play yard pariah; his mum has too many jobs to delouse or make sure he bathes, and it's the same for his three siblings who share their stink in one bedroom. Such conditions appal me, and attract me to movements likewise appalled. This was how I found myself in the midst of barbarism; a group of dreamers orchestrating their stereotyped demands stamped out with unexpected forcefulness.

So I worked hard to find a small redress, but I come to the conclusion these efforts were vain. Not because we failed, but because we did not recognise the extent of the problem; that the police, for example, are no great nemesis, but fools tipping at windmills. There was an old word for useless work with roots in the American New Deal, 'boondoggle'. An older one traces back to the Church of the middle ages, 'sinecure'. Perhaps we need a phrase for our time, 'undercover agent'? It is important not to

sentimentalise organisations like the one I joined, Helots. Do we imagine a group like this constitutes a threat to power? But if not, why bother to kill it?

Our governments imagine they oppose state solutions. In truth, when it comes to politicised policing for a criminal class broadened daily by the feverish imaginations of legislators, government is welcome. And when it comes to paying for military escapades, we see this again. Yet let's not delude ourselves into believing rough-and-ready retaliation against organised dissent gives us our measure. This is the proverbial sledgehammer and nut. So why the sledgehammer?

As the victory of the right's *status quo* over our national consciousness becomes more absolute, so does their hysteria and delusion. They tell us we have won; worst, we went too far. The poor are now greedy parasites; women, the privileged sex... And they smugly affix 'post-' to emancipatory goals like tourists checking off their itinerary. A

week ago listeners to *Radio Network* were fascinated as the programme *Dissection* was given over to Priam Leatherby, famed for producing a leftist schism in the Realist party. Clichéd complaints ensued about blatant bias, oblivious that the last four guest directors were conspicuously at the opposite end of the spectrum. As my views became more hostile to received ideas, my employers at *The Watcher* told me how fortunate I was to have a column. That flaunted and cherished ‘right to expression’ is a boon rarely granted, for which private and state owners of the means to speak expect immense gratitude on the occasions they rent the megaphone. Before they proudly congratulate themselves on their liberality.

And yet can anyone plead ignorance despite the prevalence of media casuistry and conservative bombast? We have only recently seen a show of integrity from Christians who understand the import of their Scriptures: the United Reform Church, Quakers and ever that ubiquitous Jesus

Saves; the English Catholic Church and even this country’s established institution of faith, with a significant minority of Anglican Bishops adding their voice to petition government against escalating poverty. It is a broad brush too, with the more left-leaning wings of the Evangelicals and Liberals joining the legacy of the High Church Oxford movement.

In Jack London’s dystopic *The Iron Heel* there’s a character study of a bishop. At first a stooge for power, when faced by the conditions of his society the principled man cannot reconcile sermon and reality. Nevertheless, his new sermons acquire no converts from the wealthy and as he becomes an embarrassment he is removed from ‘influence’. What influence do such organisations and people wield in the first place? Are they relevant so long as they remain apolitically irrelevant? That remains to be seen, but irrespective, in the pages of *Anarchy’s Masque* we aim to represent these points of view too.

You will find an article written by a former policeman about the ways in which our ‘protectors’ recruit students, union members and young adherents of small political parties, and have them spy on friends and colleagues. Andy Perkins aims to dissolve the corny error that envisions the copper as an innocent. We also have an account of experience on the other side; the protester unaware his best friend was a plant. Leatherby contributes three short essays from his book *Through a Revolution Darkly* to be published by Radical Volt early next year: ‘Ludic Strategies: Rehabilitating Activist Larpers’; ‘Bespoke Capitalism: Things 2.0’ and ‘Vanguard as Seismograph’. More down to earth we take a long look at the explosion in demand for food banks and shelters, charities unable to match need. There is an exposé of child poverty and a collection of vignettes that describe, first hand, the harrowing reception of asylum seekers, some fleeing the devastation of our geopolitics.

We have an unpublished essay by the late Maurice Rathbone. He asks why Helots, which he led, disappointed. He argues organisations like it do not ethically innovate or fulfil economic needs; they are ‘of a Nineteenth-century drama seeded as far as the Sixteenth.’ Background noise. Instead of offering alternatives, they co-opt marginal dissatisfaction in a ‘declining capitalism’s surfeit population.’ Those recruited from the more economically secure runoff are filtered to the top, ‘making internal structures microcosms of the status quo.’ And he predicts they ‘will continue to inconsequentially rise and fall, membership anxious about being unable to reproduce their lives, but not better equipped for radical change, nor cohering in a social vision.’ Critically, denuded of any shared purpose or social rootedness, magic thinking manifests, like what Robert Jay Lifton called ‘thought-terminating clichés.’

What is the purpose of this publication? ‘To find a form that accommodates the mess; that is the task of the artist now.’ Something

Beckett said. When journalism threw its lot in with art, the loosely described New Journalists of Thompson, Capote, et al., this task became ours. Equal part confession and witness. This will be our magazine's mantra, against banal broadsheets with nuggets of sensation wrapped for easy digestion. I would rather number with London's tragic bishop than remain impassive, pretending the world makes sense by shoring up biases. Despite its failures, I am proud to have worked alongside Helots and Rathbone. With my co-editor, Sebastian Lyme, and the rest of the team, we dedicate our first issue to his memory and the memory of Helots, however futile, its last occupation of a tower block and the child who was killed there during a police raid.

Without excuses,

Mary Pritchard.

~

A speck of rain licked the black reflective surface and trickled down its convex to fall from the helmet's brim. It was joined by a further smattering that throbbed on the faceless masks and translucent shields; anyone close to the police wall would see, mirrored on an opacity where human expression belonged, only the image of the building and the reflected huddle of Sheddies moving around the forecourt before the corrugated green door. An expanse of rutted concrete separated the police from The Shed, which had once been a lorry park for cumbersome vehicles to pick and drop sheets of packed plywood.

Alice put down her phone. 'Nearly here,' she shouted to the assembled, trying to lift her voice over the weather.

'When? If they don't come soon, *we're* not gonna be here.'

'Then we won't be here. What cannot be changed must be abided,' said Triple-A.

Mary tapped furiously on her touch phone and pressed the device to her face. 'Caleb... remember you said you how you owed me for how I was fired before and you wanted to get some footage of police action for *The Watcher*...' She held out the phone to the police wall, then drew it back. 'I've sent the location on Google maps. An image is on its way. Think this will look good on the website... Be a good boy and get here with a camera... Sure, bye.'

'I'm terrified Alice,' said a young woman.

'We all are, but we'll be alright.'

'You don't know that though, do you?'

'No, I believe it. And I've been here before. Triple-A is right.'

‘Did I experience an auditory hallucination, am I to lose my only true possession, my faculties, or did I rightly hear our glorious leader proclaim me “right”?’

‘Probably the first thing,’ said David with a well-meaning scoff.

‘I...’ but the Shedder who was about to speak halted as, in eerie unison, the police began to bang batons against their shields.

‘Fucking bastards,’ said David, glaring like his namesake faced by Goliath.

The young woman stifled a sob. ‘Shall we just go? They’ll let us leave.’

Ella stepped forward. ‘They didn’t before, Cindy.’ She took the woman’s hand. ‘We have to trust, okay?’

‘Should we have everyone go indoors or bring all of them out?’ David asked Alice.

‘Unless they come it won’t matter, look, they’ve circled the exit to the car park. As things are, we can agree to get arrested, wait to be arrested or have them rampage through our Shed to arrest us. And even if we play nice, they’ll probably still have a rampage.’

Cindy started to cry.

David slurred, ‘Hey-hey-hey-hey,’ holding up his hands, ‘coolly does it. We won’t do any good bawling.’

‘But that won’t happen,’ assured Alice, worried at the impact of her assessment, ‘They’ll be here in time. I believe.’

The machine-projected tinny police commands deadened the tormenting beat. ‘Everyone must vacate the building. You will be quickly processed and dispersed. Anyone who fails to comply will be held for questioning and charges.’

The voice ceased. The relentless rhythm resumed.

The Sheddens remained in a despondent, apprehensive hush. They were locked like this for an age.

Then, after another interlude in the monotonous melody of shields, ‘We will give you two more minutes.’

‘This is it,’ said Alice, ‘the litmus test.’

David held out his watch.

Ella counted in her head as Sebastian had those years ago, standing outside the block. Replaying in her mind the short sequence of missteps that lead to Ollie’s fall. She felt choked as a terrible past and future collided, like a Greek legend—Sisyphus or Prometheus—sentenced by the gods not only to torture, but its endless repetition. This is what Sarah had feared for her. And now her mum and Seán and Phil were hastening to get her back, perhaps angry she had put herself there.

*And if only, if only that drumming would stop* and as she thought this it faltered, replaced only by the splash of rain in puddles as the torrent filled microponds in nearby potholes.

They heard shouts from the police line.

‘They’re here,’ said Alice.

Without instruction the Shedders filed out. They divvied in two like a hydra’s head and each beelined laterally along the Shed. Joining the centre to form a disciplined rabble opposing the police. Alice walked like a gladiatorial champion to the centre, so the four tips of the two lines were equidistant, boldly parading her jurisdiction to the would-be invaders.

And in a surge of energy the Shedders cheered as they caught the sound of a familiar song. Triple-A performed an improbable jubilant hop.

Caleb shouted ‘The fuck ya mean I’ve to leave?’ at a young officer, holding up a clipboard to barricade himself from the recently arrived and angry journalist. The balding short man leaned over his younger, taller rival. ‘I’m the fucking press. This is a free country. What are you gonna do?’

‘Hey Caleb?’ said a boom operator holding up a microphone on a fishpole, standing behind another in a cashmere sweater with a massive camera that stretched from its wheeled base like a hunching android. The equipment people had disembarked from *The Watcher’s* blue press van, replete with brand logo.

‘Yes?’

‘You think we should be pointing the camera thataway?’ He indicated with outstretched finger to an oncoming onslaught, a host marching in consummate order down the street like a conquering army in white robes.

‘Christ on a fucking stick,’ said Caleb, ‘must be hundreds. Must be every one of the Jesus fuckers in this city.’

From a different road converging with the legion two cars braked on the curb. Three men got out of one: a tall bald man with cobalt eyes; a chubby younger guy and a well built man in a heavy leather coat. From the second vehicle came someone in a wax coat and thick grey hair. Sebastian, Toby, Andy and Graham looked at the exposed rear of the police formation. They noted the confusion on the officers’ faces. And saw Jesus Saves, walking forward in perfect step.

‘Oy,’ said Caleb, looking straight at Sebastian, ‘I know who you are. You’re Sebastian Lyme. Where the fuck is Mary then?’

‘She’s on the other side,’ answered Andy before Sebastian got a chance.

‘Woman’s a danger-whore,’ replied Caleb. ‘Is’o, turn the camera thisaways for cunt sake. And you, Carl. That’s right.’

Isao tittered at hearing his name mangled by the anglophone, thinking out the phonetics of his name ‘E-sah-o’.

Caleb positioned himself in front, besides Sebastian. ‘I’m outside a commune colloquially known as ‘The Shed’. Moments ago we received news police were preparing to launch an unprovoked raid, perhaps at the behest of the mayor? I’m on the scene with



none other than Sebastian Lyme, author of *Stories from the Block* and editor of a new political commentary magazine *Anarchy's Masque*. Please share with our viewers your reaction to these developments.'

'Nothing's changed. The people in there have taken over a building I understand hasn't been used in a decade.' Sebastian wondered if the pretended knowledge was wise. 'And here come the police like government shock troops. This isn't a nation I recognise, where my father built two businesses. This kind of thing ought never to happen in a civilised democracy.'

'Thank you, Mr Lyme. We turn now to the officer in charge.' The camera pivoted as it followed Caleb's movements to the young officer with his clipboard. 'Mr?'

'No comment,' came the guttural dismissal.

'Surely you'd like to tell *your* story?'

'No comment.' The man quickly paced off camera.

Graham took the opportunity to sidle up to the flustered policeman. 'Excuse me, I'm the acting lawyer of the... err... of The Shed. Can we have a word?' Meanwhile the ranks of Jesus Saves stopped not far away and begun to sing. Sebastian felt a jolt as he recognised the lyrics and tune.

'There you have it, unjustifiable political policing or a legitimate action against hardened criminals? You decide. Cut... Now turn the camera and get some of that lot.'

The double team of Isao and Carl obeyed.

'We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord...

'And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love,

'And they'll know we are Christians by our love.'

On the other side a few had joined Alice. 'Have you gathered the little ones into the canteen?' she asked a woman, who nodded.

Not much was said as they waited, hearts rebelling against ribcages.

Then Ella asked, 'Can you hear what they're saying?'

They listened to the hum.

'We will walk with each other, we will walk hand in hand...

'And together we'll spread the news that God is in our land,

'And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love.

'And they'll know we are Christians by our love.'

The singing persisted, louder, until the police line crumpled. And slowly the intruders turned, defeated, to retreat.

~

The canteen was packed. Further areas cleared and tables set up outside. Clare told her group to mingle, but not preach. The euphonious strings of a flamenco guitar strummed out and orange circles described the path of a fire dancer's poi.

Andy sat opposite Alice, but his eyes were trained further down the table.

'I never thought I'd sit with you again,' Alice said, eyeing the man she still hated, but too flushed with victory to care.

'You'll be glad you have,' he replied.

'Oh, why's that?'

He answered her question with his own, 'Who's that? Brunette in the pink tunic thing over there?'

Alice peered. 'Lana, I think.'

'You've sedition in the ranks. She's one.'

'One what?'

'I know her, from former days.'

Alice stood. 'You sure?'

'You betcha. Her name ain't "Lana", its Beryl.'

'Right.' Alice marched along the seated until she stood behind the accused.

'Beryl,' she shouted at the woman, who was laughing at something.

'What?' the woman managed, taken aback.

'Are you a fucking cop?' Alice asked. Lana/Beryl held her body rigid, poleaxed but not cowed.

'I'm allowed to leave?'

'Allowed? Are you fucking kidding?' Alice raged. 'You better fucking leave. And now.'

At another table, David hit back his third shot of clear liquid. 'What do ya make of our little get up?'

'I've been spying for rot, as you expect with pristine apples, and I don't know if it's cause the maggots are borrowed deep, but I can't see a hide nor hair.' Phil took his third glass.

David managed his next too.

'You're doing better'an I'd have thought, for a scruffy hippy,' said Phil, who picked up his fourth and downed it in a fluid motion.

'Never underestimate a cripple,' said David as he prepared a fifth.

'If I wanted to save my brother's life,' said Sarah, 'I ought to have told him to quit drinking, not smoking.'

'That'd be neat,' said Seán. 'You've your work cut out.'

Ella sat further down, contented to be next to Joshua, leaning into him and holding his hand. Both ignored the mush that steamed on their reusable plastic plates.

'Sorry I ahn I weren't deych.'

‘You were at work, not your fault,’ protested Ella.

‘Still sorry. Must ah been scared.’

‘I was okay. We all were. We’ve so many friends.’

‘Do you think they’ll return?’ Sebastian asked Mary, cross-legged on a blanket some distance from the canteen.

‘The police? Yes, maybe.’ Mary answered. ‘We won’t be here all the time though. If I hadn’t been visiting Alice for the magazine. The way everything... everybody came together; can’t rely on that.’

‘This rescue could be meaningless.’

Mary stood. ‘You can say that about anything.’

‘Where are you going?’

‘There’s a woman over there, flirting.’

He grinned.

‘So,’ concluded Triple-A in mock storytelling fashion, ‘in the end was it brave Christian soldiers or the vile press who saved this fair day? No one here knows. Perhaps both? Either way the moral is different, and so I cannot convey a parabolic finale, but must disappoint with a mere dunno, dun care and adieu.’

~

Space became scarce at The Shed even after half of Jesus Saves were sent back into the city to reside at their barracks. There had been no official decision to unite the robed Christians and Shedders. Exhilaration over their joint triumph meant any idea of separation was eclipsed by gratitude from the Shedders and a suspicion something was

about to happen that would change the situation for all of them. Another raid or a natural catastrophe, the precise 'what' was immaterial; it was the quintessential 'it', an unknown quantity.

'Can I come in?' asked Peter's voice from outside the large tent Clare and Beth shared with a group of other women from Jesus Saves.

'Just a mo,' shouted back one, pulling robes over her head. Once she was done she surveyed the others to check their state of dress. 'Okay, we're decent.'

'Morning,' he greeted, messing Junior's hair, his son correcting the rumpled disorder. The boy was playing with a little Shedder girl in a rhinestone festooned dress, both of them wielding action toys, following her proprietary lead as she directed the drama with a child's officiousness.

'How're you lad?'

'He's great. Met his favourite uncle,' said Clare

'Not intruding am I?' Peter asked. 'You won't believe this, Clare.'

She raised her eyes from a hardback, with which she was pacing and reading. 'Won't believe what?'

'Guess who's back?'

She looked at him, solving the rhetorical question, her expression opening. 'No... Azariah? Really?'

'How...'

'Who else?'

'Turned up at The Shed last night. Had a dozen Americans in tow. It was like half past four.'

Junior's figure held a gun. He pointed its adjustable arm and bellowed, 'pow-pow-pow.'

The girl looked at him quizzically, 'What's that?'

‘Gun noise.’

She slowly shook her head. Then with her tongue latched against the roof of her mouth she made a sound between staccato clicks and an undertone hiss to evoke machinegun fire.

‘Have you seen him?’ Clare asked.

‘Not yet, only heard from Phil a little ago. I wanted to tell you. Thought we should go together.’

‘Where is he?’

‘Meetinghouse, that lawyer fellow came round again and they’re hashing out something important, to do with police.’

She set down her book. Junior made a spitting sound in a failed bid to parody the girl.

Moving through the winding passages of The Shed was no longer simple, obliging patience to permit the pace of a crowd. Congestion was caused by anyone entering and exiting the kerfuffle, jostling and jonesing for places. Despite the building’s size the pressure of bodies was as palpable as for rush-hour train journeys. Only camaraderie prevented mayhem.

When Clare saw the impish face and trimmed goatee of the diminutive man, she ran up and they hugged. Then she exclaimed in a single breath, ‘where’ve yabeen?’

‘Over the pond, dear Clare. Spreading our message.’

‘Do you think you could have said anything?’

‘Yeah,’ joined Peter, ‘like goodbye, good knowing you.’

‘I wanted to see how the group got on. I wanted to make sure I wasn’t deluding myself.’

‘About what?’ Clare asked.

‘That I’d helped make something special.’

‘You weren’t. You did.’

Clare looked over to where a group of overdressed men in this mayhem of hippies were talking to Graham with passion.

‘What’s that?’ she asked Azariah.

‘Oh, lawyers. Turns out they’re quite useful. And I’ve picked up a bunch in the States. They wanna help us out. They’re consulting with that beleaguered man who’s done such great works. With luck this place won’t be touchable. It’s tricky, turns out The Shed is still property of some landowner antsy about squatters. This is why I taught you to acquire places cheaply.’

‘Yes, we own eight barracks, spread across the city like you said. We shelter more homeless than before.’

‘I need to know everything at some point. I couldn’t be prouder, Clare. And you, Peter. Some weak part of me doubted, thought that anything I touched must amount to so much crap. And maybe it woulda if I hadn’t met Clare on that bridge.’

Clare smiled. ‘I’m glad you’re back, brother Azariah.’

‘I’m glad to be home free too, if I could throw this jetlag. Wish I’d got back before the good you did with The Shed. I’d loved to of been part of that. It’s what I should of done for Maurice and his Helots, if I’d’ve been proactive. Something groups like ours in the States taught me. There are so many lessons learned, lessons you’ve learned too. I met this fella passing through Cincinnati. Can’t wait to tell you. Jesus Saves will be a testament to the power of our Lord.’

‘Amen,’ chorused Peter and Clare.

~

As Joshua and Toby came through the door of 'Paradise Regained' Triple-A jumped out of a rocking chair screaming, 'Get out, get out, personal residence, no bible bashers or happy Shedders, only cave dwellers and malcontents permitted.'

'Ease up pon yuh'self man,' said Joshua, palms raised. 'Just us.'

'And who,' barely whispered Triple-A, peering at Toby, 'is this new specimen of the animal kingdom?'

'Him an old friend ah Maurice.'

'Aha, one of the infamous disciples. To know Maurice, a great claim in these parts.' Triple-A bowed improbably low. 'Then you're welcome, providing you touch nothing, say nothing and invite no one. Those are my rules.'

'Will you ever shut up?' said Alice from behind him. 'What do you want, Josh? Were you looking for me?'

'Yah, assume you'd be ere.'

'Good presumption. Just wanted peace. Haven't unwound since it happened.'

'Mi wanna talk about sum'ting.'

'Hello Toby,' said Alice.

'Hello Alice, it's good to see you.'

'You too. Are you with us properly?'

'I don't know. Like to be. Right now I'm taking shelter, y'know. Its bucketing cats and dogs.'

'There'd be no problem making you a Shedder,' Alice assured. 'Its the faithful I worry about.'

'What mi want to talk bout too.'

'Yeah,' came in Toby, 'this isn't going to sound loyal, with my sister leading Jesus Saves, but this group, The Shed, it's great. And what they did, incredible. Saving it, but



you know you stand to be subsumed? I heard their old boss is back and has his lawyer is working with Graham.'

'Yeah, I know.'

'You could become another of their what-do-they-call-it? Barracks? A wing of their whole operation, whatever it's about.'

'It occurred. Even after so many packed off they seem to match us man to man. They're popular too, and rightly, but I worry what they'll do to our ethos.'

'I not seen David about, what him think about it?'

'Got sloshed in a drinking competition. My fool lover needed to chill, I guess. He doesn't complain often, but with the police coming? Old wounds, literal and otherwise. Can't blame him for wanting to get hammered.'

'Yah man, mi wish mi ah been ere, but not fi myself.'

'And they could still be back, even with our crack legal team.'

'It ah risk we chose when we join up.'

'Doesn't make it easier. I wake up and question the point, but I've done this so fucking long now, maybe I keep doing it because it's what I know.'

'It's the grand narrative,' shouted Triple-A, 'we are mere lives in the fulcrum of mightier forces sweeping us up to the absolute.'

'You sound like one of Jesus Saves,' said Alice.

'Phooey. Those philistines? Girls with daddy issues have no comprehension of the absolute.'

'You are bonkers. Sometimes I agonise about your influence on the littler Shedders.'

'Will you have me drink Hemlock, glorious leader? For I will proudly lay down my life for the Shed and its decrees against the love of wisdom.'

‘Another reason we need to worry about all these people,’ said Alice to Joshua and Toby, ‘he’s getting more manic by the hour. But anyway, whatever Jesus Saves and the lawyers are cooking, I have plans of my own carrying-on and I’m gonna need you Josh.’

‘Sure.’ Josh half smiled.

~

Standing next to his tent, Ella leans and whispers to Joshua, he does not catch it, but picks up a libidinous tone. She puckers and their noses contact as they smooch. They hold their lusting kiss so long Joshua waits for an end; he notices a faint taste of coffee he dislikes. He feels weak when they part, and caresses her again, lascivious as they crawl headlong into the tent. In the interstice he leans over and as they enter she slithers under, his legs positioning either side. He feels her breasts against his chest as lips lock a third time. Lavender mixes with the canvas odour.

She looks up euphoric, and they come apart to undress, hurriedly, trying not to get confuddled in the tangle of pullover, socks, slacks... As she sheds hosiery he grabs a condom tucked under the mattress, feeling for the prophylactic. They are quick to get under covers, sneaking glances. His body lean, hers mole speckled. Instead of sight he explores the contours of her with hands: arms, nipples, the soft curve of her tummy. Her bellybutton protrudes. She reciprocates; her hands are cold and ticklish, but she is warm. Joshua enjoys how she sinuously presses to him and she relishes his warm smell.

~

The cell is long and thin, a desk shoved against one wall, a bunk with teal bedding against the other. The man on the bottom pushes his head into his pillow as the man above tries

to wank unobtrusively. While attempting to distract his thoughts from the carnality, the man beneath recalls a video on *The Watcher* website in the study room—a newspaper he regards affectionately since they published his pre-prison interview. He remembers the journalist, Mary, in his interrogation room. She was sweetish, bony and sharp. He wants to visualise her, but cannot.

The man on top finishes with a judder.

‘Ay?’

‘What?’ the man on the bottom bunk hisses.

‘Sorry, y’tired?’

‘No.’

‘What’s it like to kill?’

‘You get bored asking?’

‘What though?’

‘Ask Preston.’

‘Did.’

‘Then shut up.’

‘Don’t y’tink the new chaplain is fit though?’ The man above changes subject.

The man on the bottom says nothing.

‘C’mon, what ya think?’

‘She’s gotta be pushing sixty.’

‘So... oldies can still be fit.’

‘Lemme sleep.’

‘Said you weren’t tired.’

‘I am now.’

The man in the bottom was relieved by silence. In his head he fondly spoke the words of his last letter: 'Dear Mr Borger, When you're released, however long, we'll take you in. Sincerely, New Helots.'

~

Alice inclines into a folded quilt on their rollout futon, while David needles an irascible sciatica from the muscle clusters around his vertebral column. Agony suffered since the baton at the block. He half listens, still tipsy.

'Everything I do feels worthless. Even when I know it has merit, it's nothing. It's by no means humility. I'm not humble. You've always known that.' She looks at him, lends her attentions to his back. Comforted by her touch, he pays more heed. 'Whenever I act I think, that all? How'd someone so great only manage *that* much. This isn't something Alice did, just a polished turd. But you're not like that. Not about yourself or me.'

'Don't overthink.'

'You don't even care if what I do is good or bad, don't give a toss. You don't stare all the time. That's what other boyfriends did. Looking, judging like I judge myself, thinking there's something so special in here.' She points to her heart. 'That there's some secret.' They rest into each other. 'How'd you think it went?'

'The raid?'

'Um.'

'If law tolerates us, we're tolerable—invisible like fireworks in daylight. Worthwhile finding that out.'

'Yeah. Are we playacting? That what we do?'

'Maybe, but I'm cool with that. Just so long as I'm in on the best game in town.'

‘Guess we just have to go the whole hog. We know a better world is coming. We’re making way for it, showing how. I still find it hard to think about the whole and not the parts.’

‘Ah,’ he exclaims at a spasm, quickly recovering. ‘Do you miss Maurice?’ he asks, he knows she does. He does too.

‘I thought he was the smartest man I met,’ she confesses. ‘He was phlegmatic; people trust that, respond to it. If you’re excitable, like me, it’s not confidence inspiring, but perhaps honest... I’ll always unfavourably compare myself.’

She realises David is wheezing, his head creasing the pillow in folds, his lids struggling and his face slackening. She is soothed by his lackadaisic sleepiness.

She spoons him and says quieter, ‘I need you. We need you.’

~

Unfolding impromptu furniture, Joshua looked over to where Ella was with India, sorting out a laptop in a small umbrella tent, wide enough for the two to sit snugly with a computer on a tray spread over their laps. He conjured the feel of her held to him the night before. He waved and the two waved back.

Since the raid the rain was unabated, the barrelled taps on the metallic surface of the roof ratcheting—accompanying every thought and action until the blare shifted from despotic to a pervasive sensation more felt than heard. The only moment they collectively gave note was when it cathartically petered, subsided, the day of the meeting. When Shed and Jesus Saves would shore up their relations.

As the meetinghouse was no longer sufficient, it was convened outdoors, where the drama that brought them together had unfolded.

Clare looked at Azariah in exasperation. They were talking in the canteen, her voice hoarse from arguing. For days Peter looked on, watching his wife struggle against Azariah; the early pleasure of their leader's return now a wellspring of troubles.

'The way the group was it won't outlive you,' she leaned forward as she spoke, desperate that he should comprehend.

'It *did*.' His responses were laconic. He smiled and took in nothing, treating objections as delightful inexperience. To see his wife reduced made Peter angry for the first time since he'd joined Jesus Saves.

'I know you don't mean to, but you're going to make it a personality cult,' said Clare.

'Things were fine the way they were, Clare,' explained Azariah. 'I left and everything was fine. You did a good job.'

'You got lucky.'

'Yes, I had you. God gave me you. You made some bold decisions and you were right, don't back down. Remember your courage when you worked with that General Oquendo? I read about that.'

'That was wrong. I was wrong.'

'No you weren't. You spread and strengthened the faith.'

'At a cost to credibility.'

'I want your help to lead.'

'I can't. I never wanted to. I wanted to get Jesus Saves to a point where it needed administration, not dictatorship.'

'You're being dramatic.'

'No, I'm being faithful. You can't reverse everything and concentrate the power in yourself again. When I want to do something I compromise with the deputies; you'll tell them they have no role? You're going to lose good people.'

'Nonsense, they will accept Jesus Saves needs someone at the helm.'

‘You’ve been gone a long time.’

‘About that magazine,’ Azariah diverted the topic to what he imagined would be safer territory.

Beth, who had rested her head on her arms, sat up.

‘*Anarchy’s Masque*? What about it?’ asked Clare.

‘I do think you were wrong there.’

‘No, Azariah. I wasn’t.’

‘But...’ Beth started. She was cut short by Clare.

‘I made the right decision, and it’s still the right decision. Read it?’

‘Not yet,’ admitted Azariah.

‘Read Sebastian’s piece first. It’s self-serving, self-justifying garbage.’

‘No it isn’t,’ shouted Beth.

‘I’m sorry Beth, but he...’

‘You don’t get what he’s doing.’

‘...he whines for two paragraphs about people not liking him.’ She looked at Azariah.

‘Is that what you associated with Jesus Saves?’

‘It’s got a good circulation.’

‘So do pornography magazines.’

Beth stood up, grating her chair’s legs on the floor, and left.

‘It’s not the same,’ Azariah said. ‘It’s not important though. There was something else I wanted to talk about.’

Clare leaned back; a throbbing deep in her deltoids exacerbated one in her head. Peter reflected that he had never seen her deflated in that way, and felt his fists tighten and jaw clench. ‘What?’ Clare asked.

‘This is good, what we’re doing.’

‘Yes.’

‘I want to make it permanent. Let’s bring us together with The Shed, have a contingent with these folks.’

‘I disagree.’

Now Azariah was exasperated. ‘You’re being pernickety. Why?’

‘Because we’ve no right. We came to help, not instigate a takeover.’

‘Is *that* why you told everyone not to preach?’

‘It’s not right to take advantage of hospitality.’

‘We’re saving souls, Clare; we need to get our priorities straight.’

‘You mean *I* need to get *my* priorities straight?’

‘They’re already Christian. The universal value of people, sharing God’s world and all that? Theology. Only they don’t know they’re Christian. Let’s help em, Clare.’

‘I will, but on better terms.’

‘Listen, I know all this must be a whammy, but if we ...’

‘Can you leave her alone,’ interrupted Peter. ‘You come back high and mighty and lay down the law. And ignore everything that’s happened since you buggered off. I hate that. And then I’ve to listen to you berate my wife wiv this tirade. Wivout er, you’d’ve come back to zilch.’

Azariah was silent, and then he smiled again. ‘Look, everyone’s flustered. A lot’s happened. I don’t wanna press this on you at once, but I had to say something before the meeting. I wanna propose the merger. It’s a necessary evil.’

‘Necessary evil? It must be fun to be innocently callous.’

‘Clare!’

‘No, Azariah, this is pointless. If you’ve the slightest suspicion you’re asked to betray your conscience, you *have* been asked to betray your conscience. Even looking for a moral line takes you too far to the wrong side of it. Anyway, Alice will reject your merger.’



‘But Alice is a through and through democrat. If the Sheddens don’t oppose...’

‘That’s not Christian.’

‘Sorry Clare, but you know as well as I, bringing new souls into Christ’s loving embrace *is* Christian. Look, I don’t wanna upset, I admire you and I know you’re not as strong as you pretend...’

‘I’m sorry Azariah, I’m leaving.’

He shook his head. ‘Don’t be impulsive Clare.’

‘I’ve made up my mind.’

‘Me too,’ said Peter, putting his arm round his wife.

~

Azariah stood up to the audience, lined on seats in a huge circle. He was holding the speech ball in his calloused hands, raised. As he talked, Ella furiously typed, getting the gist of his sermon. India looked over her, pleased, offering no correction, surprised at the volume of information Ella condensed.

‘I would like to start by thanking our hosts at The Shed, and extending our goodwill to you all. Not everyone here has entered God’s joyous light, but even the most unbelieving Sheddens have displayed Christian qualities and values. More so than many professed Christian soldiers dropping bombs on families; more so than professed Christians who steal the innocence of children entrusted to their protection; more so than professed Christians who secret their wealth in tax heavens, mingling a dragon’s hoard with those of drug barons, traffickers and terrorists. And yet still, nonetheless, outside of the Christ’s community.

‘I realise nobody here is in ignorance of our open door policy. We abhor the logic that more people amount only to more problems. Every person’s a bungle of solutions and

capacities. We believe God's world is good, that we've been blessed by abundance. And only man's failings hinder us in the face of God's measureless love. We believe the company of their fellows meets the real spiritual hunger in man and woman.

'What I propose is not mass conversion. We are no imperial missionaries forcing a love of God on the intractable in a spirit of arrogance. Voluntary submission to His will is the kernel of our proselytising. Nevertheless, with our groups severed, we are made weaker to onslaughts.

'What I propose is only this: Jesus Saves operates a small barracks, our ninth, inside The Shed. We meet and stand united, but only when it comes to how we present ourselves to the world. Internally retaining different organisational forms, but externally The Shed will become a sorta secular outreach of Jesus Saves. I submit this plan before the Sheddens for their electoral decision, and will respect the result, whatever it is.'

He handed the ball to a little girl, who was standing to attention, awaiting this duty she regarded with grave seriousness. 'Here,' Azariah whispered.

The girl scarpered to the other side of the circle where Alice stood. 'Thank you, Farah.'

Alice paused before beginning. Ella used the break to crack her knuckles and ease out her joints.

'A commitment to each other can always be jettisoned by a proxy—a nation or community. Lacking specificity, a repurposed generality. If I say community I mean people with whom I live and work. There are no fairweather friends here. As Azariah begun by thanking The Shed I'll thank Jesus Saves, without whom many may have ended in cells. They came as reinforcements to a nearly defeated fortress. I know it runs counter to our ideal of anonymity, but I want to single people out. First an old comrade who made sure this happened, Clare Grange.'

Claps exploded from all angles and Clare fought to repress a smile.

‘Jesus Saves are not the only ones to whom we owe gratitude. The press isn’t always our ally, nor will they always come to our aid, but in this instance we profited by their initiative, and for that we are thankful. And especially to one arm of the press, who perhaps *will* always assist, and prove a permanent ally. I speak of the team behind *Anarchy’s Masque*.’

A second round of cheers was accompanied by whistles and hooting.

‘My dad was an old commy and said hell didn’t exist, but if it did it’d surely be full of lawyers. He’d joke about the utopias where one finds the description, “and there were no lawyers”. To put it in terms friendlier to our Christian friends, barristers were unheard of in the Garden of Eden. And yet, and yet, we owe a debt to lawyers. And to one in particular who has worked with us now, and worked with Helots before, which some of you may know about, and I mean, of course, Mr Graham Finningham.’

The third applause was just as voluble; Graham gracelessly stood and bowed.

‘I want to be forthright. Truth doesn’t entreat, it gives an ultimatum: accept or don’t. Lies blarney you with choice. Moral fibs are blandishments that offer balm, but an opium dream is worthless. It’s the difference between a hospital and a hospice. In the former they make you suffer, in the latter they won’t. They focus on palliatives when there’s nothing else. We offer assuaging lies to the hopeless, and we acquiesce to bromides when we consign ourselves to a fool’s utopia, a necropolis. I ask, are we sturdier united? Definitely. Do we share values? Not entirely. Can we cooperate? I believe so.

‘When I was a member of Helots speechifying was par for the course, but monologues are not how we do things. Dialogue is paramount, as a single voice fails to grasp a situation. There are many voices speaking now, but silently.

‘So what do I say, just me? Are we in some sense united? Yes. Do we have the same values? Okay, candour, no—not wholly. Do we cooperate? Yes. Should we amalgamate? No. Both Jesus Saves and The Shed are unique and contribute to something greater.

That's a limited synergy. That uniqueness, that difference in perspective, the cacophony of voices, cannot be risked. Especially out of a fear of consequences. Were we almost crushed? Will we be crushed? A sane observer would say so, in probability, but as the renowned Triple-A says, we already wagered with insanity.

'Our three principles are temporary correctives rather than ahistorical dogmas, but they're significant. They're our contingent justification. Anonymity to abolish the egotisms of identity, sorority to supplement fraternity, but synergy is the *most* vital—our protection against becoming a club for petty concerns. To benefit from one another fully, as a group who perceive each other in their material and historical sense, we work and live for each other. This is opposed to the pitfall of insular autarky, a politics that bickers over tokens enshrining who you are and not what you contribute through tangible links. This isn't served by dilution. And that's my voice. I move against.'

Clare could not reconcile so many talking and debating with the desolate concrete left over once the meeting had been cleared away. Working together, Shedd's and Jesus Saves had been efficient, collapsing and removing all residuums of what had happened, leaving stragglers in little pockets of conversation, people trying to work their way through the variety of opinion.

Peter stood by her side. 'What're you thinking?'

'That for the first time in so long I don't have anything to do. I can stop being a caryatid.'

'A what? You okay?'

She looked at him and they kissed. 'Better. I'm pregnant.'

'Hey,' came David's voice, his chair whined up to them, 'Alice would like to talk.'

They followed him inside and all the way to 'Paradise Regained'.

As soon as they walked in Triple-A was at them. 'More guests? Perhaps you could tell me what I missed in my lazy intransigence? I hear it was quite the show.'

'Yeah mate,' said Peter, standing between Clare and this strange man.

'I would guess you for one of the more eloquent speakers,' said Triple-A, considering Peter.

'You what?'

'I really should put up a sign,' said Alice, 'with something like "ignore the village fool".'

'Such tact,' said Triple-A, retreating back to his rocking chair.

'I heard you've left Jesus Saves?' asked Alice.

'Yes,' said Clare.

'You alright about that?'

'It's for the best.'

'I'd kick myself if I didn't offer,' said Alice, 'although I feel like a young boy asking the most tantalising girl for a date.'

'Ask what?'

'Admittedly we didn't always get on before, with Helots. Anyway, will you become a Shedder?'

Peter and Clare looked at each other.

'Your brother's with us, if you don't know.'

'I do. And yes, Alice, I'd be honoured.'

'I know you'll...' Alice begun before hearing what she had wanted, but not expected.

'Fantastic.'

'You know this place is a beautiful trap though? A *dionaea muscipula*.'

'A what?'

'A flytrap. You need to get out, soon.'

‘Yes. I’ve this young man with ties to local squatters. We’ll be gone before the next raid.’

‘Good.’

‘So our peregrinations are not to be softly squandered?’ quietly précised Triple-A.

‘Are you collecting Granges?’ asked Peter.

‘It’d seem so.’ Alice admitted.

‘You might be letting yourself in for trouble.’

~

Joshua yawned as he put away the last dish Toby had passed over. He heard another plate smash on the floor; it was the second Toby had dropped. Josh knew this man distantly from the block, and everyone knew him by his association to his sister Clare, an emerging hero. Sharing that past Toby and Josh had gravitated, despite Toby’s older age, and he had become a more common fixture around Toby and Ella. Comfortably filling a long vacated gap in their lives.

‘Yah good?’ Josh asked

‘Sure, sorry. Just slipped again.’

‘What’s bothering yuh man? Yuh be as jittery as ah politician.’

Toby laughed, scratching behind his neck. ‘Hey Josh, you in this whole New Helots thing?’

‘What’s that? “New Helots”?’

‘Nothing, I suppose. Something some folk here seem to be doing.’

‘Any’ting we all ain’t in on be soundin like bad news man.’

‘Maybe... sure it’s nothing, maybe if you were interested though. You were young back in the days of Helots, but it was amazing, right? If some of the old timers want to bring that back... I mean, if that’s what it is, I only heard a bit.’

‘And Alice?’

Toby shrugged and passed Josh another plate.

~

Ella nibbled on an onion ring.

‘Whatja think?’ Phil asked. They were under a scalloped awning fluttering without gusto, patrons of a fast food joint attached to the multiplex. Too close to exhaust fumes. It was a cold day, but Phil had felt stuffy indoors.

Ella laughed. ‘You always pick rom-coms. Or stupid actions. You’ve got the taste of a tween, Uncle.’

Phil stopped slurping through his straw. ‘It was supposed to be “stupid.” It was about attractive people in spandex saving the world with teammanship, a jet and strangely acquired powers.’ He held his double-layered burger with two hands to manage a bite, which he chewed fast. ‘And I like stupid people, the world’d never get saved wivout em.’

‘Thanks for taking me.’

‘Perfectly welcome. Can you think of a better way to spend the day?’

Ella smiled and returned her attention to consuming lunch in the smallest servings. Philip observed that she had ordered only a side, which she would take twice as long to consume. *Perhaps*, he wondered, *she’s just a more sophisticated hedonist.*

‘What’s next?’ he asked Ella.

‘I don’t know. Everyone says university.’

‘Do they?’

‘It’s all Vera, really. She convinced Mum and she’s got Josh on her side. And then India said I ought. And Seán goes along wiv whatever Mum thinks.’

‘You’re outnumbered.’

‘Not really. I think Vera’s convinced me too. It’s just frightening.’

‘It’s not you who should be afraid. Another Grange in the world? The planet should tremble. We’re a force to be reckoned wiv.’

‘I miss living wiv you.’

‘I miss living wiv you too, but shall I tell you what I don’t miss? That couch. Also, I’ve reacquainted wiv an old friend.’

‘Who?’

‘Mr Tobacco.’

‘Mum won’t be happy.’

‘Naa, she knows me too well. She just didn’t want me smoking around you.’

‘That’s why you quit?’

‘Maybe, or maybe I just wanted to show everyone I’ve free-will.’

‘Who doubted?’

‘I did, a while.’ They returned to their food, Phil finishing. ‘I shan’t make that error again. I’m bloody perfect, and there’s so much of me *to be* perfect.’

When she finished, they hugged and parted.

‘Toodeloo.’

He held up a large arm, index and middle fingers raised and flicked his hand in farewell.

From the bus it was not far to *The Queen*. His eye caught an enormous mosaic of grasped hands against a grey backdrop, with a sign ‘Sebastian Lyme, commissioned by the



mayor's office'. Graffitied over the image, like an advertisement for a new chain store or gadget, was, 'THE SHEDS ARE COMING.'

A man tried to give him a Jesus Saves leaflet, but he waved it away, smiling. Phil was almost where he had chased Peter. He felt dizzy despite a wintery chill and tears of sweat seeped from his hairline. His hands shoved tightly in his pockets, his movements suggesting a man peculiarly at ease in the encasing of such unlikely flesh. His mind skimmed faces: that young luckless Ollie, his sister, niece, nephew, grandnephew, niece-in-law, future nephew-in-law—the Granges, a dynasty.

The shot of pain up his arm did not come as a shock, merely unwelcome. His legs buckled and his breath stuck. From kneeling he sunk to his left. He heard the approach of urban fauna. A dusky cat with frosty-pale paws purred up to Phil and lay down, ears cocked. His eyes were closing, his wrist in front. He saw the watch, irate he'd not get to *The Queen*. And happy, his last thoughts in the conditional tense, his body against the floor, grounded on a larger mass, he listened:

'Tick-tick-tick-tick-tick-tick-

tock-tick-tock-tick-tock-tick-tock-

-tock-

-tock-

-tock—'

## Abstract

Utopia has a pedigree going back to early modernity and Thomas More; it has been reshaped by contemporaneous concerns from the emergence of technologies to changing geopolitical realities. For this reason, utopia has been invested with different ideological content over centuries. There are three interrelated theses in this essay. First, that Utopia is a genre of literature that is marked by a conversation between authors; utopias broadly engage one another in a textual dialogue. Second, this genre finds its origins in the early modern period, although it has been eclipsed by dystopia since the early twentieth-century—despite a brief recovery in the seventies. Third, utopia can be renewed in novelistic form today, as I demonstrate with my novel *We Are Seven*, but only by engaging in a literary conversation with dystopia as well as utopia, and by learning from literary innovations such as the ustopia.

To develop these claims I will provide an analysis of theoreticians to establish delimiting definitions of the genre and examine its broader history. This involves arguing that utopias are more than idealistic depictions of fictional societies, but properly categorised as attempts to depict, in narrative form, superior, counterfactual institutional solutions to the socio-political and economic problems of creating and sustaining a good society. Next I present examples of utopias throughout history, expanding on the thesis, before looking more in more depth at the writing process for *We Are Seven*. In doing

so I aim to make an engaging and original contribution to the narrative tradition of utopia and participate in the historical conversation in a way that is relevant to our times and politics.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Novel Synopsis**

A modern utopia, by turns tragic, satirical and hopeful, *We Are Seven* follows the lives of the residents of a fictionalised British city. It is the story of communities as well as a family saga, depicting the Granges, Dees and Urquharts as they encounter competing utopian movements. While Sarah overcomes despair by preaching the promises of a new world and the cynical Philip struggles to hold his family together, Joshua and Ella reach maturity living in community-occupied buildings, besieged by police. Combining romance, farce and observation about social and political realities, *We Are Seven* is a debut that questions how best to live.

## **We Are Seven in its Critical Context**

This critical section is divided into two parts: part one will look at two theses: first, how the utopian genre is characterised by a conversation between authors; and second, that this genre begins in the early modern period and has been subsequently overshadowed by dystopia in the twentieth-century, despite limited successes. Part two will offer justification for the third thesis, that utopia can be renewed in novelistic form, as *We Are Seven* attempts to do. Moreover, I stress that utopia can only be recovered by engaging in a conversation with dystopia and utopia, and by learning from literary innovations such as the ustopia.

## **Utopia: Genre and History**

### **The Meaning of Utopia**

Utopia is a double entendre: the Greek etymology (no place) and the homophone eu-topia (good place) play into its contested quality as a floating signifier.<sup>1</sup> Utopia can also suggest certain movements and fictions as well as anti-utopian rhetoric; this is evident in Marx's comment that 'Communism is

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<sup>1</sup> Lyman Tower Sargent, *Utopianism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: OUP, 2010), Ebook.

for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust[...].<sup>2</sup> The dialectical antonym of utopia, dystopia, is even more indefinite: a place, a bad place? Both utopia and dystopia open up psychogeographical counterfactuals, alternative worlds—providing commentaries and experimental spaces. Both blur into one another; is Thomas More's *Utopia*<sup>3</sup> (1516) satirical, an anti-utopia prefiguring dystopia, or a blueprint? Is dystopia analogous to tragedy and utopia to comedy, or does this separation fail to recognise a more indistinct boundary—a Heraclitean unity of opposites? This ambiguity reaches through the practice of utopic and dystopic fictions.

The opacity of genres such as utopia and dystopia goes further. Fátima Vieira notes that utopia has spawned 'words such as eutopia, dystopia, anti-utopia, alotopia, euchronia, heterotopia, ecotopia and hyperutopia'.<sup>4</sup> There is a need to give specificity to the concept by providing tighter definitions. My aim is to produce an original contribution to the enigmatic genre with a new novel-length fiction that reaches back to utopia's Renaissance origins while incorporating lessons from its twentieth-century replacement, the ascendancy of dystopia.

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<sup>2</sup> Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1998), p.57.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas More, *Utopia* (London: Folio Society, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Fátima Vieira, 'The concept of utopia' in Gregory Claeys (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature* (New York: CUP, 2010), p.3.

Anis S. Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff define 'genre', within the context of a literary tradition, as 'a typified way of recognizing, responding to, acting meaningfully and consequentially within, and thus participating in the reproduction of, recurring situations'. While it is not in the scope of this discussion to give an analysis of genre, it will become evident that my approach assumes a less traditional perspective, understanding with Reiff and Bawarshi that genre properly encompasses:

[...] knowledge of what and whose purposes genres serve; how to negotiate one's intentions in relation to genres' social expectations and motives; when and why and where to use genres; what reader/writer relationships genre maintain; and how genres relate to other genres in the coordination of social life.<sup>5</sup>

Using examples from cross-genres, Margaret Atwood argues that 'when it comes to genres, the borders are increasingly undefended, and things slip back and forth across them with insouciance.'<sup>6</sup> Yet, for the purposes of this analysis it is possible to be more methodologically precise with a definition that limits the scope of what can be called a utopia.

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<sup>5</sup> Anis S. Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff, *Genre* (West Lafayette: Parlor Press, 2010), pp.212, 4.

<sup>6</sup> Margaret Atwood, *In Other Worlds* (London: Virago, 2011) Ebook, p.7.

Similarly, while intertextuality (a concept that informs looser conceptions of genre) is acknowledged in the background of any critical reading of the utopian tradition, it is not inapplicable to advancing a precise reading. Roland Barthes defines intertextuality not as an attempt 'to find the "sources", [and] the "influences" of a work', but as the 'anonymous, untraceable, and yet *already read*'<sup>7</sup> network that encompasses all text. For Barthes intertextuality is the fact of every text existing in a continuum of other texts, a totality that cannot be demarcated or fully mapped out.

Since my novel works within the tradition and genre of 'utopia', it is vital to understand utopia and to explore its history. Making allowances for Michel Foucault's *episteme*, 'the totality of relations that can be discovered',<sup>8</sup> relevant, intertextual material is inexhaustible for this (or any) genre. As Nicole Pohl describes utopia, it is 'indebted to classical utopianism, early-modern travel writing, the pastoral/Arcadian tradition and finally Christian Chiliasm.'<sup>9</sup> Beginning with More's *Utopia* allows us to narrow the survey to something manageable, but I will also show that my choice of texts is not arbitrary. Because of the breadth of excluded texts, niche genres with more ambiguous relevance can be omitted in favour of examples that are more relevant to my novel. *We Are Seven* is consciously written within a sphere, and it is in

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<sup>7</sup> Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1997), p.160.

<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Oxford: Routledge, 2002), p.211.

<sup>9</sup> Nicole Pohl, 'Utopianism after More' in Gregory Claeys (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature* (New York: CUP, 2010), p.56.

dialogue with the body of literature that will be explored. It will nonetheless be worth outlining notable novels on the boundaries of this arena—in ambiguous and adjacent genres.

According to J. C. Davis, as summarised by Susan Bruce, a useful typology of utopias may be divided into five categories that negotiate the:

[...] gap between supply and demand. *The Land of Cockayne*, he argues, assumes unlimited abundance in order to fulfil unlimited desire. The Arcadia fuses a less excessive natural abundance with a representation of a humanity less acquisitive and more easily satisfied than ‘real’ human beings would be. The Perfect Moral Commonwealth realizes its ideal through an idealization of the nature of humanity. In Millennial literature parity between desire and available material wealth is effected by a *deus ex machina*, whose intervention transforms both man and nature.<sup>10</sup>

Bruce summarises Davis’s fifth type as utopianism, in which organisation is privileged:

the utopianist devises bureaucratic and institutional systems in order to contain desire and transgression, and thus to apportion a limited supply of material satisfactions. (xiii)

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<sup>10</sup> Susan Bruce (ed), *Three Early Modern Utopias* (Oxford: OUP, 2010), p.xiii.



One benefit of Davis's approach to the genre and to pursuing his fifth type of what I will coin 'institutional utopia' is to correct what Vieira identifies as a misconception, that utopia be equated with perfection.<sup>11</sup> This is not without contention. Krishan Kumar, for example, argues that perfectibility is central to utopia, although he softens that view with a caveat on human nature; the type of perfection must be 'qualified—but not too much—by something like the belief in original sin'.<sup>12</sup> Whether 'sin' is conceived as the total depravity of Augustinian Protestantism or moderated by freewill in Catholic theology, it remains a substantive stipulation. Here again, institutional checks to human evil are considered paramount. Karl Mannheim thus offers an alternative to perfection and provides a more adaptable definition in which utopia eliminates 'the order of things prevailing at the time.'<sup>13</sup> As we will see, this is true of the utopian content in *We Are Seven*. Nonetheless, what Kumar's thesis does usefully show is how ideal societies overlap:

Paradise is fused with the Golden Age; Cockayne is a reproach to Arcadia while it borrows heavily from the Golden Age and Paradise; the

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<sup>11</sup> Vieira, p.7.

<sup>12</sup> Krishan Kumar, *Utopianism* (Bristol: Open University Press, 1991), p.29.

<sup>13</sup> Karl Mannheim, quoted in Paul Ricœur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p.173.

Millennium is paradise restored; the ideal city draws upon the myths of ancient Golden Age civilizations.

All of these types have political dimensions, yet as Kumar's thinking indicates, only the fifth category of utopia (institutional utopia) definitively addresses its audience through narrative: 'Fictive elements no doubt have a role to play in these modes but in none of them is narrative fiction, as in the utopia, the defining form.'<sup>14</sup> Atwood agrees with the importance of fiction when she distinguishes between the genre proper and later novels that merely entertain utopian thought: 'Ideas about—for instance—untried forms of social organization are introduced, if at all, through conversations among characters or in the form of diary or reverie, rather than being dramatized, as they are in the utopia and the dystopia.'<sup>15</sup> We will see how *We Are Seven* features facets both of dramatisation and non-dramatisation within its utopian scope.

Both Kumar and I locate the beginning of the genre as a meaningful tradition with More, but Kumar goes further. He denies any prior examples to More and adds the claim that the form is uniquely Western: 'Utopia is a secular variety of social thought. It is a creation of Renaissance humanism.'<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, earlier non-European works, for instance Tao Yuanming's poem

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<sup>14</sup> Kumar, pp.17, 27.

<sup>15</sup> Atwood, *Worlds*, p.59.

<sup>16</sup> Kumar, p.35.

'Peach Blossom Springs', written between the third and fourth centuries EC, complicate the Eurocentric picture. Yuanming's ideal society has narrative, which means it meets Kumar's criteria for belonging to utopia:

And the path they trod was covered with grass and deserted.

And the living they gain is by tilling the soil and reaping;

When the sun goes down they go to rest together.

Bamboo and mulberry blend to give them shade,

Beans and rice follow at seasons due.

From the spring silkworm they gather long thread,

At the autumn harvest there is no imperial tax.<sup>17</sup>

Although 'Peach Blossom Springs' is a fiction about a perfect society, its narrative is sketchy and it arguably fails to meet Davis's criteria as it includes elements of Cockayne, such as the eternally good harvests and convenient foliage. Moreover, since this essay (as well as the influences of *We Are Seven* more generally) begins with More, the predominant focus will be Western.

The working definition of utopia for the purposes of our critical discussion, then, is a fictional account of a society with limited resources that strives towards a social ideal. Without these stipulations many arguments could be

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<sup>17</sup> Tao Yuanming, Gladys Yang (Trans.), *Selected Poems* (Beijing: Panda Books, 1993), p.91.

made for including earlier texts: Plato's *Republic* (c. BCE 380),<sup>18</sup> Tacitus *Germanica* (c. 98)<sup>19</sup> and Plutarch's *Life of Lycurgus* (c. 100).<sup>20</sup> St. Augustine's *City of God* (c. 400)<sup>21</sup> and Aquinas's commentaries on Aristotle (1272)<sup>22</sup> could be added too, with Lyman Tower Sargent arguing that 'Christianity was the fount of Western utopianism'.<sup>23</sup> Quentin Skinner contends that More merely contributed, rather than initiated, the broad Renaissance debate over the best possible commonwealth.<sup>24</sup> In his biography of More, Peter Berglar looks at the writer's formation and lends credence to this kind of contextualisation: 'While still a student [...More] lectured on St. Augustine's *City of God* at St. Lawrence's'.<sup>25</sup>

Introducing a caveat that would still include a range of utopias within the working definition, without making 'utopia' a ubiquitous and unwieldy category, Kumar similarly narrows the focus of utopian studies by beginning with More. Earlier texts constitute, in his view, 'at most a portrayal of the principles of the ideal state, not an exemplification of those principles in

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<sup>18</sup> Plato, *Republic*, in Cooper, John M., *Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997).

<sup>19</sup> Tacitus 'Germanica' in John Carey, *The Faber Book of Utopias* (London: Faber & Faber, 1999).

<sup>20</sup> John Carey, *The Faber Book of Utopias* (London: Faber & Faber, 1999) p.v.

<sup>21</sup> Augustine, Saint of Hippo, *City of God* (London: Folio, 2012).

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Politics* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2007).

<sup>23</sup> Sargent, *Utopianism*, Ebook.

<sup>24</sup> Quentin Skinner 'Sir Thomas More's Utopia' in Anthony Pagden (ed), *The Languages of Political Theory in Early-Modern Europe* (Cambridge: CUP, 1987), p.125.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Berglar, *Thomas More: A Lonely Voice Against the Power of the State*, (Cologne, Scepter, 2010), Ebook.

action, in concrete institutions and ways of life.’<sup>26</sup> Kumar demonstrates that the earlier texts foreshadow, but do not fully exemplify, the genre.

In continuing to delimit utopia for the purposes of my essay, Davis’s contribution is particularly pertinent to later science fiction. For example, the society of Iain M. Banks’s Culture series is not utopian as ‘the capacity for means of production [...] exceeded every [...] demand its not unimaginative citizens could make.’<sup>27</sup> Post-scarcity novels, which picture societies removed from material constraints by magic or technology, comprise a genre with roots in Cockayne myths and folk songs, for example ‘The Big Rock Candy Mountain’: ‘Where the handouts grow on bushes, / And you sleep out every night.’<sup>28</sup> Utopia could be said to be a subgenre of post-scarcity myths, because it depicts ideal societies but with great limitations on the content of that depiction. Going further, the Cockayne stories could be described as archetypal, a universal, basic idea about a land of plenty from which later, more specific utopia derives. Moreover, the post-scarcity genre can be used to explore interesting ideas in contemporary literature, such as the pitfalls of overabundance. In Samuel R. Delany’s Foucaultian *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia* (1976) ‘they made it so easy for you—all you have to know is what you want’.<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, difficulties arise precisely from the

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<sup>26</sup> Kumar, p.39.

<sup>27</sup> Iain M. Banks, *Consider Phlebas* (London: Hachette Digital, 2008) Ebook, p.498.

<sup>28</sup> Haywire Mac, *The Big Rock Candy Mountains* in Ross Bradshaw (ed), *Utopia* (Nottingham: Five Leaves, 2012), p.197.

<sup>29</sup> Samuel R. Delany, *Triton* (London: Gollancz, 2013) Ebook.

easiness such abundance affords. Still, as in the following dialogue from *Star Trek*, we see the Cockayne genre of abundance circumnavigating problems that utopia constitutively confronts:

Keeve: We live in different universes, you and I. Yours is about diplomacy, politics, strategy. Mine is about blankets! If we were to exchange places for one night, you might better understand.

Picard: Mr. Data, see that the replicators provide a blanket for every man, woman, and child before nightfall.<sup>30</sup>

The character Keeve creates a distinction here between the concerns of institutional organisation, which are relevant to utopias, and the limitless technological possibilities provided to Picard. The response given by Picard exemplifies that particular distinction between utopias and this other genre. That is, that the post-scarcity society can ignore social problems that utopias attempt to solve.

We frequently find that the creatures of science fiction have more to do with archetypes than science. The archetype of the Golem becomes Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*; werewolves become Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886); ghosts become people's digitally

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<sup>30</sup> Michael Piller, 'Ensign Ro' (*Star Trek: The Next Generation*) (1991, <http://www.chakoteya.net/nextgen/203.htm> [22/11/15]).

uploaded consciousness; monsters that filled medieval bestiaries<sup>31</sup> become Kaijū; Blemmyes and Monopods become humanoid mutants, while demons become malevolent AIs as in William Gibson's dystopian *Neuromancer* (1984): 'For thousands of years men have dreamed of pacts with demons. Only now are such things possible.'<sup>32</sup> While the Renaissance utopian genre dwindles, the older, archetypal Cockayne narratives flourish under a new guise. This suggests that utopia is a bounded historical (and therefore contingent) phenomenon within the scope of a more universal form of human imagining. There will always be imagined worlds without scarcity, but utopias are given no guarantee of existing. In *We Are Seven*, navigating scarcity and concrete problems is the focus, placing it within that non-archetypal, historically specific genre and away from the current trend of science-fiction ideal societies:

You have an ideal about distribution, but you need to sort out the practical and do it better. Do you have concrete suggestions? Growth? Environment? Crime? (p.33)

In the quoted extract the same concern raised in *Star Trek* is rephrased in *We are Seven*; that it is one thing to envision a perfect world, but another to

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<sup>31</sup> Anonymous, *Bestiary* (London: Folio Society, 1992); Robert Lewis Stevenson, *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* in John Wain (ed), *The Oxford Library of Short Novels* (London: Guild Publishing, 1990); Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (London: Folio Society, 2004).

<sup>32</sup> William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (London: Voyager, 2010) Ebook, p.193.

achieve that goal practically. Again, this coheres with Davis's distinction between the post-scarcity novel and the utopia.

Despite generally not being considered utopia, science fiction overlaps stylistically with utopia in ways that are important to, and inform, *We Are Seven*. The theorist of science fiction, Darko Suvin, identifies significant common ground between science fiction and a range of other genres in their reliance on cognitive estrangement. This is true of

[...] the classical and medieval "fortunate island" story, the "fabulous voyage" story from antiquity on, the Renaissance and Baroque "Utopia" and "planetary novel," the Enlightenment "state [political] novel," the modern "anticipation" and "anti-utopia."<sup>33</sup>

Suvin derives the idea of cognitive estrangement from Bertolt Brecht's *verfremdungseffekt* and the Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky's idea of *priem otstranenie*. This technique 'consists in turning the object of which one is to be made aware, to which one's attention is to be drawn, from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible, into something peculiar, sticking and unexpected'.<sup>34</sup> This makes the reader critically re-evaluate the narrative's content, which is necessary in novels of ideas, especially utopias. Although

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<sup>33</sup>Darko Suvin, 'Cognition and Estrangement' in Suman Gupta and David Johnson, *A Twentieth-century Literature Reader* (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2005), p.188.

<sup>34</sup>Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1964), p.143.



*We Are Seven* cannot use the same conceits as science fiction to accomplish similar effects (such as basing the action on a spaceship or using alien characters), there are subtler examples of this literary innovation, which contribute to my third thesis that utopias can be written today as novels.

Such subtler examples are deployed through fictionalising the city and having constantly shifting points of view. For example, when the block is raided, the reader is never allowed to settle into one comfortable viewpoint, but instead starts with a meeting between would-be utopians:

‘Sorry, I don’t follow,’ declared David.

‘I saw Mike communicating to the police. I think...’ she looked down.

Azariah sighed, ‘we had this too. A while back. Undercover officers infiltrating; something to do with a founder member working in Latin America.’

‘It can’t be true,’ Toby spoke to Maurice, willing him to offer an alternative.

(p.131)

The narrative then roams across other perspectives before taking up the angle of a child’s limited third person point of view:

Joshua and Ollie were close, backs pressed against a radiator so there was seating enough for Philip, Sarah and Joshua’s gran in the sparsely

furnished living room. Ella paced behind the settee where her mum and uncle hunched. Everyone was quiet. Philip's hands tapped. And Joshua's foot imitated the rhythm. They all tried to hear if anyone was coming.

When Ollie spoke he broke such a prolonged hush he caused a start in the adults. 'I have to get my dad.' (p.139)

Here we see an adult situation, a police raid, interpreted by the child Ollie, which allows the reader to perceive it outside predictable formulas, estranged from their usual perspective.

Techniques like these also allow broader utopian themes to be addressed in speculative literature that breaks the mould by situating new societies in different times or distant places. Slavoj Žižek singles out Theodore Sturgeon's *More Than Human* (1953),<sup>35</sup> about misfits with superpowers forming a gestalt entity, as an example of an allegorical and utopic 'community of freaks'.<sup>36</sup> This, however, falls outside Davis's criteria for 'utopian' writing since members of the parabolic community are inhuman in ways that liberate them from human social needs. Whilst I borrow conceits and styles, I remain within the definition.

Science fiction 'utopias' are therefore of limited reference as, similarly, are non-western currents in utopian fiction. Whilst Jacqueline Dutton's

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<sup>35</sup> Theodore Sturgeon, *More Than Human* (Guernsey: Gollancz, 2000).

<sup>36</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2011), p.376.

overview includes: 'the spirit of utopia (Ernest Bloch), the desire for utopia (Ruth Levitas), critical utopias and critical dystopias (Tom Moylan) and utopianism (Krishan Kumar).'<sup>37</sup> These approaches lose the discriminatory advantages of the tighter definition I am outlining.

The idea of the utopia as a post-apocalyptic genre furnishes other borderline cases: E. M. Forster's *The Machine Stops* (1909)<sup>38</sup> is a prescient look at environmental catastrophe and technological enslavement; John Wyndham's *The Chrysalids* (1955)<sup>39</sup> combines utopian and dystopian motifs; both Walter M. Miller, Jr.'s *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1960)<sup>40</sup> and Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* (1980)<sup>41</sup> look at how societies reconstitute histories after nuclear devastation, while Atwood's three twenty-first century novels *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and *MaddAddam* (2013)<sup>42</sup> explore similar arenas. Dmitry Glukhovsky's *Metro 2033* (2005),<sup>43</sup> Sheri S. Tepper's *The Gate to Women's Country* (1988)<sup>44</sup> and Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826)<sup>45</sup> are radically varied liminal examples of post-apocalypse fiction, but all are concerned with disaster and, pertinently, the inadequacies and dangers of ideal world projects.

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<sup>37</sup> Jacqueline Dutton "'Non-western" utopian traditions' in Gregory Claeys (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature* (New York: CUP, 2010), p.223.

<sup>38</sup> E. M. Forster, *The Eternal Moment and Other Short Stories* (New York: Harvest Book, 1970).

<sup>39</sup> John Wyndham, *The Chrysalids* (London: Folio Society, 2010).

<sup>40</sup> Walter M. Miller, Jr., *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (London: Orbit, 1993).

<sup>41</sup> Russell Hoban, *Riddley Walker* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002).

<sup>42</sup> Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003), *The Year of the Flood*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), *MaddAddam* (London: Virago, 2014).

<sup>43</sup> Dmitry Glukhovsky, *Metro 2033* (London: Orion, 2009).

<sup>44</sup> Sheri S. Tepper, *The Gate to Women's Country* (London: Gollancz, 2011) Ebook.

<sup>45</sup> Mary Shelley, *The Last Man* (London: Folio Society, 2012).

Whilst recognising that these broader themes of technology and conceptualising history (found in such works as *Neuromancer* and the Culture series) are not strictly utopian, nonetheless they are referenced in *We Are Seven*:

I also miss the good old days when the future was the good new days. I'm nostalgic for a time when I weren't nostalgic! Retro-futurism, the desire the present be how the past dreamed the future. That most splendid sublation; golden age rendered speculatively. (p.92)

However, these techno-futurist references do not play directly into the utopian projects depicted by the novel and are mentioned mostly in passing. For this reason, novels that are merely about these subjects fall outside the scope both of the utopia genre and this critical discussion as it relates to *We Are Seven* and my three theses.

There is not enough space, either, to reflect in depth on utopian movements or theories, both as texts and as political action, which constitute various related genres conveyed in different forms for conflicting ideologies: be that Republican, early Liberalism, Anarchism or those Engels dubbed utopian socialism.<sup>46</sup> Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651),<sup>47</sup> Gerrard Winstanley's *The Law*

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<sup>46</sup> Friedrich Engels, *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific (Classic Reprint)* (London: Forgotten Books, 2012).

of *Freedom in a Platform Or True Magistracie Restored* (1652)<sup>48</sup> and John Locke's *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689)<sup>49</sup> are political documents written in the aftermath of the English Civil War, which also produced literary utopias engaging in the same debates about legitimate governance such as James Harrington's *The Commonwealth of Oceana* (1656).<sup>50</sup>

Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790)<sup>51</sup> espouses anti-utopian ideas against the change wrought by the Enlightenment. He responded to revolutionary terror by emphasising the need to conserve elements of the status quo to ward off social dissolution and violence. While Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Social Contract* (1762)<sup>52</sup> and William Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793)<sup>53</sup> take more progressive positions, Thomas Malthus objected to political idealism on the basis of overpopulation in his *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798),<sup>54</sup> which helped to shape future utopian debate. For example, in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Moving the*

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<sup>47</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Cambridge: CUP, 2006).

<sup>48</sup> Gerrard Winstanley, *'The True Levellers' Standard Advanced', 'The Law of Freedom' and Other Writings* (Luxemburg: CreateSpace, 2014).

<sup>49</sup> John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration* (Luxemburg: CreateSpace, 2011).

<sup>50</sup> James Harrington, *The Commonwealth of Oceana* (2013, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2801/2801-h/2801-h.htm> [25/11/14]).

<sup>51</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Oxford World's Classics) (Oxford: OUP, 2009).

<sup>52</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (London: Penguin, 1971).

<sup>53</sup> William Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (Oxford: OUP, 2013).

<sup>54</sup> Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (Oxford World's Classics) (New York: OUP, 1993).

*Mountain* (1911) we learn how that society ‘improved the population and lowered the birth-rate at one stroke!’<sup>55</sup>

Political and social movements, such as the Arts and Crafts movement, can also be shown to influence literary utopias. The utopia expanded further in the nineteenth-century as many egalitarian movements appeared; Ricœur lists key leaders and thinkers as ‘Saint-Simon, Fourier, Owen, Proudhon’<sup>56</sup>—to which one could add Marx’s anarchist rival in the First International, Mikhail Bakunin. They advanced ideas to radically restructure society, imbued with a sense that their dreams were realisable, emboldened by economic and technological changes. J. B. S. Haldane’s lectures *Daedalus; or, Science and the Future* (1924) exemplify how such techno-optimism reached its partial terminus. Haldane tackles the ways in which we can adapt to technologies and broaches prospects that would inflect later dystopias: ‘Moral progress is so difficult I think any developments are to be welcomed which present it as the naked alternative to destruction, no matter how horrible may be the stimulus which is necessary before man will take the moral step in question.’<sup>57</sup> These texts show that at no point does the debate around utopias settle, it evolved and adapted in a way that ignores genre distinctions. And even within, for example the nineteenth-century, the terms of the conversation

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<sup>55</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, ‘Moving the Mountain’ in *The Herland Trilogy* (New York: Start Publishing, 2012) Ebook.

<sup>56</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p.6.

<sup>57</sup> J. B. S. Haldane, *Daedalus; or, Science and the Future* (1993, <http://vserver1.cscs.lsa.umich.edu/~crshalizi/Daedalus.html> [27/11/14]).

changed radically. Referring to the British period after 1830, Walter Houghton observed:

The Utopian dreams of human perfectibility which had grown up in the eighteenth-century seemed on the point of fulfilment when the French Revolution broke out[,] had been undermined by the Reign of Terror, the dictatorship of Napoleon, the long years of war with the succeeding period of depression and social unrest, and by the speculations of Malthus.<sup>58</sup>

Étienne Cabet's *Voyage to Icaria* (1840)<sup>59</sup> and Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (1887)<sup>60</sup> reveal how utopian literature inspires political movements, exemplifying the complex boundary between fiction and theory. Moreover, not only do literary utopias influence real ones, but also other examples show how real utopias influenced literary ones; as Deirdre O'Byrne notes about Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976),<sup>61</sup> 'Piercy's Jewish background surfaces in the many similarities between the ideals of Mattapoissett and the original kibbutzim'.<sup>62</sup> In a sense this is arguably present even as far back as More's *Utopia*, as D. B. Fenlon contends: '*Utopia* arises from an imaginary fusion of More's family arrangements and his monastic

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<sup>58</sup> Walter Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870* (London: Yale University Press, 1985), p.27.

<sup>59</sup> Étienne Cabet, *Voyage to Icaria* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003).

<sup>60</sup> Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (New York: Penguin, 2002) Ebook.

<sup>61</sup> Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time* (London: The Woman's Press, 1979).

<sup>62</sup> Deirdre O'Byrne 'Woman on the Edge of Time' in Bradshaw, p.78.

experience: the two combine to yield the perfect state—a commonwealth of cities.’<sup>63</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) shows a similar process occurring in an anti-utopian novel, where he mocks the pretences of the real Brook Farm Institute of Agriculture and Education with his fictional Blithedale:

“What a pity,” I remarked, “that the kitchen, and the house-work generally, cannot be left out of our system altogether!”<sup>64</sup>

This satirises the idealism of utopian projects, which are depicted as neglecting the logistics of real world problems. Nonetheless, despite being open to parody, it can be argued that utopianism and utopian literature have a more complementary relationship. Kumar observes of *Utopia* that ‘it is never simple dreaming. It always has one foot in reality.’<sup>65</sup>

This is true of *We are Seven*, which besides commenting on its context, has various real inspirations—even if the intra-genre conversation between fictions is my novel’s primary formative impulse. Examples include the Occupy movement’s protests against economic inequality (2011-12), which Noam Chomsky described as an attempt to ‘set society on a more humane

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<sup>63</sup> D. B. Fenlon, ‘England and Europe: *Utopia* and its aftermath’ in ‘Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, 25’ (1975), <http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=3465840&fulltextType=RA&fileId=S0080440100018065>, [19/5/15]), p.122.

<sup>64</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance* (New York: OUP, 2009), p.16.

<sup>65</sup> Kumar, p.2.



course.’<sup>66</sup> The tactics deployed by Occupy, such as taking over buildings and implementing targeted protests, mirror those of groups in my novel. Similarly, Awra Amba, an Ethiopian experiment begun in the 1980s and still extant in 2016, has been summarised as ‘a unique community [that] has evolved based on egalitarian principles.’<sup>67</sup> This group’s feminism finds parallels in *We Are Seven*. In Marinaleda (Andalusia, Spain), Juan Manuel Sánchez Gordillo (who has been town mayor since 1979) formed an intentional community under the ideological melt ‘of Christ, Ghandi, Marx, Lenin and Che.’<sup>68</sup> This is similar to the melting pots of ideas found in my novel. Showing a shift in rhetoric, even the British Conservative Party has switched from its anti-utopian ‘There Is No Alternative’ (TINA) rhetoric to adopt more prefigurative ideas such as the Big Society.<sup>69</sup> Additionally there are more utilitarian and technological utopian movements with a less nineteenth-century flavour that, while detached from the concerns of *We Are Seven*, provide contemporary examples of utopian imagination, even if it is not expressed through utopian literature. For instance, the philosopher David Pearce has formed a community around the idea of the technological

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<sup>66</sup> Noam Chomsky, *Occupy* (London: Penguin, 2012), Ebook.

<sup>67</sup> ‘Awra Amba: an Ethiopian utopia? – video’ ([http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/video/2014/apr/15/awra-amba-ethiopian-utopia-video?CMP=fb\\_gu](http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/video/2014/apr/15/awra-amba-ethiopian-utopia-video?CMP=fb_gu), [25/3/15]).

<sup>68</sup> Dan Hancox, *The Village Against the World* (London: Verso, 2013), p.13.

<sup>69</sup> David Cameron has been linked to philosopher Philip Blond Red Toryism and Catholic Radical Orthodoxy. G.K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc shaped Blond’s neo-Distributism; in the term of an unsympathetic commentary from the Marxist Richard Seymour, for ‘an artisanal Arcadia’. This ideology is revolutionary and, ‘explicitly utopian in its foundation.’ Richard Seymour, *The Meaning of David Cameron* (Winchester: O-Books, 2010), p.77.

abolition of all suffering: 'The Hedonistic Imperative outlines how genetic engineering and nanotechnology will abolish suffering in all sentient life.'<sup>70</sup>

Marxism does heavily inform *We Are Seven*, with my novel drawing from this tradition, even if sometimes humorously:

'Please. All of you, please,' Maurice said. They quietened and looked at him expectantly. He wanted their silence; the only noise a pitter-patter on glass. He sighed and began, as though reciting. 'Mike, you're right, these people aren't the industrial proletariat and this is not the Nineteenth-century. I don't think Marx is irrelevant for all that, and neither do you.'

(p.112)

Nonetheless, a form of Marxism could be written within the literary genre of utopia. Peter Hudis's *Marx's Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism* admits that Marx curtailed the kind of prognostication that is utopia's mainstay, 'reticent about going into too many details about this new society. This is because of his emphasis on the freely-associated character of such a society.'<sup>71</sup> Nonetheless, Hudis rejects the mischaracterisation that there is no normative ideal within Marx's theory and analyses Marx's extant literature to locate a futural vision. His conclusion is that for Marx, reification (*Verdinglichung*),

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<sup>70</sup> David Pearce, 'The Hedonistic Imperative' (<http://www.hedweb.com>, [25/3/15]).

<sup>71</sup> Peter Hudis, *Marx's Concept of the Alternative to Capitalism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013), p. 157

assigning lived existence or qualities like benevolence to an object or abstraction like the nation-state, has real ethical-political dimensions. That is: 'Capitalism is an abstract form of domination that has one over-riding goal: to accumulate value for its own sake. A new society would need to radically reverse this.' There are limitations as 'the future cannot simply be spelled out on the basis of the individual's imagination: it must be traced out through an analysis of existing social formations.' Marx's work is not utopian in Kumar's sense, but neither are Plato or Godwin's. Even so, all that would be required to add to Hudis's account is fictionalisation, and one would arrive at a utopia according to our working definition:

According to Marx, the amount of time engaged in material production would be drastically reduced in the new society, thanks to technological innovation and the development of the forces of production. At the same time, labour, like all forms of human activity, would become freely associated and not subject to the autonomous power of capital that operates behind the backs of individuals.<sup>72</sup>

Additionally, elements of Marx's ideals can be seen in literary utopias, the fictional, dramatic component of which sets them against reification. This is evidently true in those with direct Marxist inspirations, such as William

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<sup>72</sup> Peter Hudis, pp. 176, 123, 182.

Morris's *News from Nowhere*. However, objections to reification can be seen more subtly in, for example, Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974): 'Members of a community, not elements of a collectivity, they were not moved by mass feeling; there were as many emotions there as there were people.'<sup>73</sup> In *We Are Seven*, too, this is made explicit: 'A commitment to each other can always be jettisoned by a proxy—a nation or community. Lacking specificity, a repurposed generality. If I say community I mean people with whom I live and work.' (p.305). Conversely Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962) defines the dystopian Nazi ideology by its excessive capacity for reification:

Their view; it is cosmic. Not of a man here, a child there, but an abstraction: race, land. *Volk. Land. Blut. Ehre*. Not of honourable men, but of *Ehre* itself, honour; the abstract is real, the actual is invisible to them.<sup>74</sup>

Reification is stated bluntly in terms of the abstract being made real.

This wide-ranging discussion of genre and subgenre reveals the need for a taxonomy of utopian fictions as it relates to dystopia and anti-utopia. Just as utopia (idealistic and serious) is not identical to medieval Cockayne myths, due to the different solutions proposed for scarcity, as outlined by Davis, anti-

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<sup>73</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* (London: Orion, 2002), p.7.

<sup>74</sup> Philip K. Dick, *The Man in the High Castle* (London: Folio Society, 2015), p.39.

utopia (comic and cynical) and dystopia (serious and cynical) must be bifurcated too. These subgenres have different narrative strategies, that is, resolutions. Whereas the anti-utopias conclude in farce, dystopias end in tragedy. All three genres (utopia, anti-utopia, dystopia) thus can be contrasted. Each sometimes falls under Davis' catchall definition of utopias as rooted in institutional solutions to supply and demand problems, but relate differently to wider debates in terms of tone, style and agendas. The distinction is subtler than between utopias and post-scarcity novels or post-apocalypse fiction, but nonetheless important. Anti-utopias primarily make fun of utopias, while dystopias primarily make horrors of utopias.

Motive is also an important source of distinction within the utopian genre. Two *motives* for writing utopian fiction stand out as dominant and worthy of exploration. David Hume's *Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth* (1754) means to 'inquire what is the most perfect of all' governments, but hopes to avoid a whimsical 'great reformation in the manners of mankind'.<sup>75</sup> Here we see Davis's concern for how societies navigate limits to food, clothing, shelter, morality, human nature. Alternatively, William Morris emphasises subjectivity and self-expression for his utopia *News from Nowhere* (1890): 'The only safe way of reading a Utopia is to consider it the expression of the

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<sup>75</sup> David Hume 'Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth' in Gregory Claeys (ed), *Utopias of the British Enlightenment* (New York: CUP, 1994), p.58.

temperament of its author.’<sup>76</sup> Both novels address conceptions of society and share features: how are resources allocated, power distributed and corruptions averted? Yet for Hume the goal is analytical, embedded in the Enlightenment, whereas with William Morris we see the personal or emotional prioritised over the philosophical. Morris is wedded to a Romantic breakdown of the genre, going back to how ‘Schlegel insisted on the singularity of literary texts’.<sup>77</sup> Human intuition and vision become more constitutive of the utopia than generic features such as predictive or formally normative aims. *We Are Seven* eschews romanticism and the internal, subjective states of its characters (and author) by rejecting individualistic assumptions, preferring a more communal understanding of personal identity and political aspirations. By which I mean that characters are rooted in their immediate (non-reified) group belongings within familial, neighbourly and friendship circles rather than treated as wholly autonomous, self-creating, individualities within a social vacuum.

For many writers of utopias, the motivation is purely aesthetic or unspecific, but Hume and William Morris represent key philosophical and political positions by which we can understand other utopias. *We Are Seven* is situated between the two. It is not an exercise in political philosophy that is only incidentally fictionalised, but nor is it a purely imaginative statement of

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<sup>76</sup> William Morris, *News from Nowhere and Other Writings* (London: Penguin 1993) Ebook.

<sup>77</sup> Bawarshi and Reiff, p.20.

preference such as William Morris's. Instead, *We Are Seven* engages with a moral tradition seriously and critically, yet deploys humour and collective imagination to arrive at political conclusions.

Irrespective of the motive for writing utopias, they are a single genre bound by subjects from economy and reproduction to education and religion. This is demonstrable by juxtaposing two utopias written one hundred and sixty seven years apart. In Huxley's *Island* (1962) the residents of Pala are 'Mahayanists, and our Buddhism is shot through and through with Tantra.' They 'start at sixteen and go on with our education till we're twenty-four—half-time study and half-time work.' Their governance 'is a constitutional monarchy' and 'primitive village communism', while 'Deep Freeze and Artificial Insemination' aids positive eugenics. Such details anticipate criticisms in an attempt to assuage them: 'Pala isn't Eden or the Land of Cockayne. It's a nice place all right. But it will remain nice only if everybody works and behaves decently.'<sup>78</sup> Alternatively, in William Hodgson's *The Commonwealth of Reason* (1795), established faith is eliminated as 'the greatest scourge that has ever afflicted mankind'. Hodgson prioritises freethinking and learning, 'the most interesting and important of all human objects'. Governance is 'Revolutionary or Rotative' and prevents 'the accumulation of

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<sup>78</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Island* (London: Flamingo, 1994), pp.80, 67, 42, 97, 213, 218.

immense wealth' while marriage 'shall be merely a civil contract'.<sup>79</sup> What emerges is that there are a variety of responses to repeated dilemmas. Therefore, when I examine the instrumental and aesthetic components of *We Are Seven*, I will also show how the novel navigates these issues, which are fundamental to the genre.

Pertinently, More's *Utopia* has been deemed anti-utopian too. Skinner argues that 'almost everything about More's *Utopia* is debatable', but 'his main aim was to challenge his readers at least to consider seriously whether *Utopia* may not represent the best state of a commonwealth.'<sup>80</sup> Conversely, Peter Ackroyd insists that, whereas '*Utopia* has been considered to be a sympathetic narrative that does indeed reflect More's ideal of a commonwealth', in reality, 'nothing could be further from the truth.'<sup>81</sup> They can be contrasted with William Morris who, according to Clive Wilmer, took *Utopia* 'very much at face value'.<sup>82</sup> D. B. Fenlon cuts through this debate, agreeing that *Utopia* is satirical, but arguing that its target is not Christian communism but the realpolitik emerging from religious and political tensions: 'More was exploring the possibility that Christianity and public life might have become mutually exclusive.' And, moreover, *Utopia* must be seen in the context of More's wider body of writings: '*Utopia* argued the

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<sup>79</sup> William Hodgson, 'The Commonwealth of Reason' in Claeys, *Utopias*, p.206, 218, 238, 201, 203, 234.

<sup>80</sup> Skinner, pp.123, 124.

<sup>81</sup> Peter Ackroyd in Thomas More, *Utopia* (London: Folio Society, 2011), p.xiii-xiv.

<sup>82</sup> Clive Wilmer in William Morris, *News from Nowhere and Other Writings* (London: Penguin 1993) Ebook.



impossibility of politics; it was a statement of the case against.’<sup>83</sup> In this reading, More is radically anti-political, rather than defending either the *status quo* or urging a new *status quo*. For Fenlon, More takes a longer-term, patient Christian perspective.

Utopia, then, is a rich and varied genre that is difficult, but not impossible, to contain in useful delimiting definitions. By combining different definitions and understanding what is excluded, it is possible to have a working definition of utopia as a fictionalised account of an ideal society that solves problems of supply and demand through hypothetical social institutions.

### **Chronology of Utopia**

Having examined the genre of utopian writing, it is also important to consider its historicity, that is, the wider textual context from which the genre emerged and which shaped it. Doing this will demonstrate the thesis that Utopia is a genre of literature marked by a conversation between authors’ and further show how this genre developed from the early modern period to its current state. My condensed chronology will centre on key transitional texts that reshaped the conversation, such as Harrington’s *Oceana*. It will also be complemented by an in-depth comparison between Edward Bellamy’s

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<sup>83</sup> D. B. Fenlon, ‘England and Europe: *Utopia* and its aftermath’ in ‘Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, 25’ (1975, <http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=3465840&fulltextType=RA&fileId=S0080440100018065>, [19/5/15]), pp.124, 126.

*Looking Backward* and William Morris' *News from Nowhere*. First, however, it is helpful to start with More's *Utopia*.

Navigating between ahistorical heuristics and radical historicisation, both of which risk losing continuity by bracketing utopia completely or relinquishing the capacity to make generalisations about it, I will establish a perspective on my novel that places it in context while also outlining its departures from that context in order to make an original contribution to the genre. Fredric Jameson offers a systematic approach that does not allow for generalising from examples to support a coherent thesis: 'For Jameson everything must be historicised; even historicism itself.'<sup>84</sup> When reading utopias, this leads Jameson to see More's *Utopia* outside its historical situatedness, concluding that 'More's own prejudices seem to speak through the text'.<sup>85</sup> For Kumar this kind of reference to prejudice, psychology, etc. can lose sight of the very historical totality that Jameson, a Hegelian, studies. That is because everything is reduced to an irreducible instance of history, which cannot be compared without losing its historicity. Along with Kumar, I prefer a 'preoccupation with certain characteristic problems and the continuous argument about the best possible solutions to them. All this suggests a

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<sup>84</sup> Adam Roberts, *Fredric Jameson (Routledge Critical Thinkers)* (London: Routledge, 2001) Ebook.

<sup>85</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future* (London: Verso, 2007), p.50.

tradition.’<sup>86</sup> Historically embedded, tradition and genre can imply both change and meaningful continuity.

The Renaissance humanist and martyred saint, More, offers a good point of departure for the utopia within its chronological conversation. As Kumar stresses, More influenced the entire genre, beginning with books such as Tommaso Campanella’s *The City of the Sun* (1602)<sup>87</sup> and proceeding to:

[...] Robert Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621-1638),<sup>88</sup> which has been called ‘the first proper utopia written in English’. The seventeenth-century classic not merely critically reviewed the utopias of More, Andrea, Campanella and Bacon; it also presented its own utopia: ‘a New Atlantis, a poetical commonwealth of mine own’.<sup>89</sup>

The briefest survey of titles establishes More’s impact: William Morris’s *News from Nowhere*, ‘nowhere’ constituting the meaning of ‘utopia’; Samuel Butler’s anti-utopia *Erewhon* (1872),<sup>90</sup> an anagram of ‘nowhere’, and H. G. Wells’s *A Modern Utopia* (1905).<sup>91</sup> *We Are Seven* does not acknowledge More in the title, but ‘utopia’ is used in the subtitles for the first and third parts. Eric

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<sup>86</sup> Kumar, p.45.

<sup>87</sup> Tommaso Campanella ‘The City of the Sun’ in *Famous Utopias* (New York: Hendricks House, 1955).

<sup>88</sup> Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (Oxford: Benediction Classics, 2016)

<sup>89</sup> Kumar quoting J. Max Patrick’s view on Robert Burton and Kumar’s own summary, p.46.

<sup>90</sup> Samuel Butler, *Erewhon* (London: Penguin, 1985).

<sup>91</sup> H. G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia* (London: Penguin, 2005).

Hobsbawm traces More's far-reaching sway so that, by the nineteenth-century, utopia 'became the term used to describe any attempt to sketch the ideal society of the future'.<sup>92</sup> This constitutes a tendency to dilute the meaning of the genre that this analysis resists, as can be seen in the previous section.

However, outside the more constrictive scope of literary criticism, the word 'utopia' becomes a refrain in *We Are Seven* and is used in various contexts with different implications:

Somewhere to elsewhere, nowhere. *No place, utopia.* (p.20)

There is no 'good' in utopia, no 'utopia' in utopia, the only state in which 'utopia' is neither conceivable nor prescribes its own conception against repression. That is why 'utopia' is always an ideal in dystopia and why the worst dystopia is one in which 'utopia' is actively unthought. (p.47)

We offer assuaging lies to the hopeless, and we acquiesce to bromides when we consign ourselves to a fool's utopia, a necropolis. (p.306)

In these extracts from my novel, utopia is invoked respectively for a word game, to make a philosophical point and as part of a piece of political rhetoric.

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<sup>92</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World: Tales of Marx and Marxism* (London: Little, Brown Book Group, 2011) Ebook, p.17.

In addition to giving the genre its name, More provided its generic content, the aforementioned subjects of economy, reproduction, education and religion. Some of his approaches were problematised as the then embryonic conversation between texts grew. L. T. Sargent, for example, has uncovered a colonialist attitude, one that represents a repressed continuity within the genre beginning with More and continuing to:

[...] Theodor Hertzka's *Freiland: Ein sociales Zukunftsbild* (1890) that envisioned the displacement of the indigenous population to create the utopia[...] And James Burgh's 1764 *An Account of the First Settlement, Laws, Form of Government, and Police, of the Cessares, A People of South America* concerns the establishment of a Protestant colony in an 'uninhabited' area of South America. Also, Robert Pemberton's 1854 *The Happy Colony* specifies the creation of a community in an area of New Zealand that was heavily populated by Maori as if there was no one there at all[...] None of these works considered the people living on the land or their displacement as relevant.<sup>93</sup>

Colonialism is an important subject to be addressed in the utopia—it represents the dystopian side of the original utopian dream. Although it is not

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<sup>93</sup> Lymon Tower Sargent 'Colonial and postcolonial utopias' in Gregory Claeys (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature* (New York: CUP, 2010), p.205.

a theme of *We Are Seven*, for which 'elsewhere' is more a figurative than literal motif and the utopian focus is different.

Religion, another fraught subject for modernity, is at stake during the formation of utopia too: 'More's Utopia was closely followed by Johann Eberlin von Günzburg's pamphlet series *Die fünfzehn Bundesgenossen* (1521). Embedded in the series is Eberlin's ideal city state, *Wolfaria*, today acknowledged as the first Protestant utopia.'<sup>94</sup> Leaving the sixteenth-century, the Lutheran *Christianopolis* (1619)<sup>95</sup> by Johann Valentin Andraea and Giovanni Botero's similar *Reason of State* (1589) were influenced by Eberlin's explicitly religious utopias.<sup>96</sup> Utopianism began at the very moment when religion in Europe was destabilised and contested by the emerging Reformation and Counter-Reformation, so More's subject, admittedly secularised by depicting the utopians as pagan, inevitably played into these tensions. Revealing the links between religious and political themes and utopianism, Mark Goldie elucidates how Catholic Machiavellianism:

[...] was not above using Machiavelli's vaunting of Rome's pagan patriotic religion as a model for a portrayal of Christianity as the patriotic religion of the Bishop of Rome's *imperium*. The genre began with Botero's *Reason of State* (1589), and was most influential in the writings of Tomasso

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<sup>94</sup> Pohl, p.58.

<sup>95</sup> Johannes Valentinus Andraea, *Christianopolis* (New York: Cosimo, 2007).

<sup>96</sup> Giovanni Botero, *The Reason of State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956).

Campanella. Protestant philosophers turned these claims on their head, or, rather, turned them right side up. The Lutheran Platonist utopias of north Germany, such as J. V. Andraea's *Christianopolis* (1619), are, in this task of inversion, at one with Harrington's *Oceana*.<sup>97</sup>

Goldie makes clear that the religious wars and the rise of a new, secular politics simultaneously shaped a genre that depicted idealised societies.

Religious contestations remain within *We Are Seven*'s historicised context, albeit in new configurations. The Christian organisation 'Jesus Saves' plays a role in the story and brings such themes to the fore: 'Clare told me; how we do what we can in good faith, and shouldn't think like people in the secular world about how much we do, or reduce people to problems needing our solutions.' (p.206) So long as religion is a constitutive part of society, it is a constitutive part of utopia even if only in its exclusion.

It is wrong to posit More as fully circumscribing the genre; new and subordinated contestations fed into this imaginative territory, even if More serves as the progenitor. In contrast to many utopias, François Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1534) reconceives the monastic ideal in hedonistic and liberated terms, foreshadowing anarchist and libertarian ideal societies

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<sup>97</sup> Mark Goldie, 'The civil religion of James Harrington' in Anthony Pagden (ed), *The Languages of Political Theory in Early-Modern Europe* (Cambridge: CUP, 1987), p.206.

that More did not suggest: 'In their rule was only this clause:/ DO WHAT YOU WILL'.<sup>98</sup>

For Pohl, utopianism during the disruptions of the English Civil War 'provided a space for women writers.'<sup>99</sup> She cites Mary Cary's, *A New and More Exact Mappe; or, Description of New Jerusalems Glory* (1651)',<sup>100</sup> which also anticipates Cavendish's *Blazing World* (1666). The role of feminism in utopianism is examined later as the concerns of women remain largely suppressed through the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries with these honourable exceptions.

The outlandishness of Cavendish's travel to another world, via the North Pole, also anticipates soft science fiction and occurs in a context in which fantastical adventures represented another distinct current, a spin-off genre, from More's earthly *Utopia*. This was especially represented in the prolific lunar novels that often have more in common with mythic ideal world stories than utopias, as Pohl suggests:

Godwin's work influenced John Wilkins to revise his *The Discovery of a World in the Moone: or, A Discourse Tending to Prove, That, 'Tis Probable There May Be Another Habitable World in That Planet* (1638) and *A Discourse*

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<sup>98</sup> François Rabelais 'Gargantua and Pantagruel' in François Rabelais, *The Collected Works of François Rabelais* (London: University of California Press, 1999), p.126.

<sup>99</sup> Margaret Cavendish, *The Blazing World and Other Writings* (London: Penguin, 1994) Ebook.

<sup>100</sup> Pohl, p.62.



*Concerning a New World & Another Planet* (1640). Both Godwin's and Wilkins's works were imitated in several important ways in Cyrano de Bergerac's *Histoire comique contenant les États et Empires de la Lune* (1657).<sup>101</sup>

Other unusual utopias written during the seventeenth-century give a sense of the diversity of the period. Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1627) is an example of a scientific utopia involving mastery of the natural world: 'The End of our Foundation is the knowledge of Causes, and secret motions of things; and the enlarging of the bounds of Human Empire, to the effecting of all things possible.'<sup>102</sup> Bacon begins to anticipate the return of the Cockayne myth in the more contemporary post-scarcity, technological ideal-societies.

While the naturalism of *We Are Seven* prevents it from having moon voyages or other fantastical conceits, it does reflect a plurality of styles and ideas. It switches between first and third person perspectives. Already mentioned are Christian and Marxist threads, but there are also other points of view in the novel. Here we see an example of an anarcho-primitivist counterpoint:

They're privileged Generation 'Y' larpers. They're not intelligent enough to even role-play Bolshevik travesties, so they play at protest, confused

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<sup>101</sup> Pohl, p.55.

<sup>102</sup> Francis Bacon 'New Atlantis' in Susan Bruce (ed), *Three Early Modern Utopias* (Oxford: OUP, 2010), p.177.

nobody takes them seriously. If they'd ambition it'd be offensive, as it stands it's pathetic. It's a mockery to call'em the left. (pp.108-9)

Whilst this is an example of someone more cynical of political projects *per se*:

Nevertheless, you guys: you Marxists; or what Engels' derogatorily called the utopian socialists; Zionists too; all the hippy communes; Leninists; Maoists, Trotskyists; maybe not Stalinists; well, you go wrong deluding yourselves that the religions and philosophers just didn't try hard enough to make this awful lot *better*. And that's, sorry, but that's funny. Real happiness is in liberating oneself from the cares, as the ancients knew. (p.80)

With the eighteenth-century rise of the *uchronias* or chronological utopias, we can see how utopia has spanned not just a variety of viewpoints, but also literary forms. In this type, the ideal society occurs in the future, sometimes visited by time travellers from the author's present. However, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*<sup>103</sup> (1719), through its exploration of an alternative society via pseudo-autobiographical confessional fiction and travel narrative, inspired what Sargent dubs the 'Robinsonade', which is closer to the earlier form of

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<sup>103</sup> Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (London: Folio Society, 1972).

utopia.<sup>104</sup> This underscores that this process of change from More's discovered island utopias to *uchronias* was gradual and partial.

The anonymous texts, *The Island of Content* (1709)<sup>105</sup> and *A Description of New Athens* (1720);<sup>106</sup> as well as Robert Paltock's *The Life and Adventures of Peter Wilkins* (1751);<sup>107</sup> and Samuel Johnson's allegorical *Rasselas* (1759)<sup>108</sup> reveal how well-established travel writing and autobiographical conventions became entrenched. Nonetheless, the Enlightenment also developed the Renaissance's emphasis on reason's potential. Vieira therefore traces the literary beginning of chronological utopia to that period, which looked to the future, especially in the context of the (predominantly French) eighteenth-century Enlightenment: 'In 1771, Louis-Sébastien Mercier published the first echronia [...] *Memoirs of the Year Two Thousand Five Hundred*'.<sup>109</sup> In situating itself in a present day, recognisable, if fictional, city, *We Are Seven* bypasses both the travel utopias and *uchronias*. Yet, with its concern for history and discovery, my novel gives a nod to both conventions.

In the Enlightenment context, utopias such as Hodgson's *The Commonwealth of Reason* (1795) imagined human institutions resolving a

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<sup>104</sup> Sargent, *Utopianism*, Ebook.

<sup>105</sup> Anonymous, 'The Island of Content: or, A New Paradise Discovered' in Claeys, *Utopias*.

<sup>106</sup> Anonymous, 'A Description of New Athens in Terra Australis Incognita' in Claeys, *Utopias*.

<sup>107</sup> Robert Paltock, 'The Life and Adventures of Peter Wilkins' in John Carey, *The Faber Book of Utopias* (London: Faber & Faber, 1999).

<sup>108</sup> Samuel Johnson, 'Rasselas' in John Carey, *The Faber Book of Utopias* (London: Faber & Faber, 1999).

<sup>109</sup> Vieira, p.10.

corrupt clerical past by means of education. Meanwhile, satirists drew on the work of the seventeenth-century English Bishop and humourist Joseph Hall; Pohl observes that *Mundus Alter et Idem*<sup>110</sup> (The Other and the Same World, c.1605) is the first anti-utopia.<sup>111</sup> Kenneth M. Roemer argues that this process of response and counter-response makes utopianism a particularly 'dialogic literature.'<sup>112</sup> Here Roemer invokes Mikhail Bakhtin's term for literature that deploys 'a dialogue between points of view, each with its own concrete language that cannot be translated into the other.'<sup>113</sup> In Voltaire's *Candide, ou l'Optimisme* (1759),<sup>114</sup> for example, the political eschatology of Hodgson et al. is mocked. Sargent claims anti-utopia give rise to two subgenres: first, the 'Gulliveriana',<sup>115</sup> which is a word taken from Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726)<sup>116</sup> to refer to Aesopian allegories with non-human symbolic parallels, for instance Orwell's *Animal Farm*.<sup>117</sup> Secondly, the 'Erewhonian',<sup>118</sup> derived, as its name also suggests, from *Erewhon*; a genre that relies on reversals, such as a society in which people are blamed for their misfortune and pitied for their immoral choices.

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<sup>110</sup> H. J. Anderson, *Mundus Alter et Idem* (London: George Bell & Sons, 1908)

<sup>111</sup> Pohl, pp.62-3.

<sup>112</sup> Kenneth M. Roemer, 'Paradise transformed' in Gregory Claeys (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature* (New York: CUP, 2010), p.80.

<sup>113</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (University of Texas Press Slavic Series) (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981) Ebook.

<sup>114</sup> Voltaire, *Candide and Other Stories*, (Oxford: OUP, 2006) Ebook.

<sup>115</sup> Sargent, *Utopianism*, Ebook.

<sup>116</sup> Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (Berwick-upon-Tweed: Folio Society, 2011).

<sup>117</sup> George Orwell, *Animal Farm*, (London: Folio Society, 1984).

<sup>118</sup> Sargent, *Utopianism*, Ebook.

This conversation between texts was not limited to satirists and their anti-utopias, however, but was ongoing between utopias too. The primitive ideal society was a counterpoint to progressive perfectibility, as Pohl notes: 'Utopias such as Denis Vairasse's *History of the Sevarites* (1675) or Gabriel de Foigny's *La Terre Australe connue* (The Southern Land Known) (1676) document simple, virtuous and self-sufficient communities and thus offer their own contribution to the contemporary debate on luxury.'<sup>119</sup> These, in turn, were problematised by the comic tradition. Henry Neville's *The Isle of the Pines* (1668) subverts the later Robinsonade story into obscenity: 'in the year of our being there, all my women were with child by me'.<sup>120</sup> There are, in addition, some more direct examples of nuanced debates between utopians. In 1754 Hume admitted that James Harrington's *The Commonwealth of Oceana* is 'the most valuable model of a commonwealth that has yet been offered to the public', but also outlined its 'chief defects'.<sup>121</sup> As Kumar argues:

Harrington's ideal republic was astonishingly influential [...] the shape of the constitution of the United States itself, with its two-chamber Congress and powerful Supreme Court, has been attributed to the influence of

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<sup>119</sup> Pohl, p.63.

<sup>120</sup> Henry Neville 'The Isle of the Pines' in Susan Bruce (ed), *Three Early Modern Utopias* (Oxford: OUP, 2010), p.198.

<sup>121</sup> David Hume 'Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth' in Claeys, *Utopias*, p.58.

*Oceana* though the person of John Adams, a fervent disciple of Harrington's.<sup>122</sup>

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in the same spirit as Margaret Cavendish's seventeenth-century *The Blazing World*, some utopias remained fantastical, such as the inner-earth and anonymously published *Bruce's Voyage to Naples* (1802),<sup>123</sup> which anticipate Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race* (1871)<sup>124</sup> with its underground, ideal society. Others found unique means to convey their intentions that sometimes invited controversy. In the Marquis de Sade's *Philosophy in the Bedroom* (1795)<sup>125</sup> there is a utopian pamphlet 'Frenchmen, Some More Effort If You Wish To Become Republicans', which for Pierre Klossowski functions as a *reductio ad absurdum* of Republicanism: 'The revolutionary community will then be at bottom secretly but inwardly bound up with the moral dissolution of monarchical society, since it is through this dissolution that the members acquired the force and energy necessary for bloody decisions.'<sup>126</sup> Here we see Sade's ambiguously utopian text operating as a satire cloaked in his political ideals. The work is both a utopia and anti-utopia, as *We Are Seven* is both—although my novel is

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<sup>122</sup> Kumar, pp.68-9.

<sup>123</sup> Anonymous, 'Bruce's Voyage to Naples' in Claeys, *Utopias*.

<sup>124</sup> Edward Bulwer-Lytton 'The Coming Race' in John Carey, *The Faber Book of Utopias* (London: Faber & Faber, 1999).

<sup>125</sup> Marquis de Sade, *Justine, Philosophy in the Bedroom, & Other Writings* (New York: Grove Press, 1990).

<sup>126</sup> Pierre Klossowski, *Sade my Neighbour* (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1991), p.52.

ultimately more the former than the latter. Atwood invented the neologism 'ustopia' to characterise the tendency for both genres to be enveloped in one another:

*Ustopia* is a word I made up by combining utopia and dystopia—the imagined perfect society and its opposite—because, in my view, each contains a latent version of the other.<sup>127</sup>

Meanwhile, some eighteenth-century texts, such as Thomas Northmore's *Memoirs of Planetes, or a Sketch of the Laws and Manners of Makar* (1795), adhere more closely to the utopian convention in their form, albeit in the service of new, radical politics. Taking inspiration from Aristotle's claim that 'a city is a community of free men', as well as from Newton, Godwin, Christianity and the Stoics, Northmore acknowledges that before creating a new world we must correct 'The great mass of vice and misery which pervade the lower classes'.<sup>128</sup> The utopia itself, which is in a place called Makar, in the city of Macaria, alludes to More by using the name of one of the neighbourly isles from *Utopia*.

By the nineteenth-century utopias in the English language are common. Atwood notes: 'The nineteenth-century, especially the second half of it, was

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<sup>127</sup> Atwood, *Worlds*, p.66.

<sup>128</sup> Thomas Northmore 'Memoirs of Planetes, or a Sketch of the Laws and Manners of Makar' in Claeys, *Utopias*, pp.137, 139.

so cluttered with [...utopias] that Gilbert and Sullivan wrote a parody operetta called *Utopia Limited*.<sup>129</sup> Within this context, Cabet's *Voyage to Icaria* (1842) was inspired by Marx's political philosophy, and served as the inspiration for the author's largely unsuccessful utopian movement. Like William Morris, W. H. Hudson in his *A Crystal Age* (1887)<sup>130</sup> and Ignatius Donnelly in *Caesar's Column* (1890)<sup>131</sup> are examples of writers with an early focus on ecology, whereas William Dean Howells's *A Traveller from Altruria* (1894)<sup>132</sup> is a more conventional celebration of egalitarianism. However, a case study can show that it is Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (1888), with its sequel *Equality* (1897),<sup>133</sup> and William Morris's Marxist and medievalist *News from Nowhere* (1890), that characterise utopianism in the late nineteenth-century. The tendency is away from Hume's reformism and towards big, ideological projects, the decline of capitalism and liberation of mankind.

Nonetheless, conflict remained in the dialogue. Bellamy's vision was for a technological society where 'the nation [...was] organised as the one great business corporation in which all other corporations were absorbed [...] of which all citizens shared.'<sup>134</sup> This appalled William Morris, who regarded

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<sup>129</sup> Atwood, *Worlds*, p.81.

<sup>130</sup> W. H. Hudson, *A Crystal Age* (Whitefish: Kessinger, 2011).

<sup>131</sup> Ignatius Donnelly, *Caesar's Column: a Story of the Twentieth-century* (Lenox: HardPress, 2014) Ebook.

<sup>132</sup> William Dean Howells, *A Traveller from Altruria* (Whitefish: Kessinger, 2010).

<sup>133</sup> Edward Bellamy, *Equality: The Stunning Sequel to Looking Backward* (Rockville: Wildside Press, 2010).

<sup>134</sup> Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (New York: Penguin, 2002) Ebook, p.24.



such a plan as prescribing a 'machine-life'<sup>135</sup> and wrote *News from Nowhere* as an alternative, pastoral and libertarian vision. *We Are Seven*, like William Morris's utopia, also envisages bottom-up organisation, as against Bellamy's large scale, technological reformism. Yet my novel casts doubt on both technological hopes (as we saw in an earlier extract) and pastoral dreams:

[...] your pastoral Arcadia has, as its prerequisite, the deaths of the majority of the human species (p.110)

Of Morris's and Bellamy's books, Bellamy's was both prior and more influential, giving rise to the 'Nationalist' (that is, in favour of nationalisation of the economy) Bellamy Clubs. Yet Morris was also involved in attempts to reshape society, as a Marxist and one of the founders of the Arts and Crafts movement. Both texts are firmly rooted in the ideas of the contemporaneous Left; for Bellamy this means that 'there is no such thing in a civilized society as self-support.'<sup>136</sup> Likewise for Morris, 'it is impossible to see how destruction of privilege can stop short of absolute equality of condition: pure Communism is the logical deduction from the imperfect form of the new society, which is generally differentiated from it as Socialism.' Morris and Bellamy wanted some form of collectivised economics and therefore opposed

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<sup>135</sup> William Morris, *News from Nowhere and Other Writings* (London: Penguin 1993) Ebook, p.357.

<sup>136</sup> Bellamy, *Backwards*, p.59

the prevailing political economics of their day. Both novels are also uchronias, in which a hero—Bellamy's Julian West and Morris's William Guest—travels to the future to visit a changed and improved world. Yet for all these superficial commonalities, the difference between them is not slight and was best articulated by Morris's central complaint against Bellamy:

[...] the impression which he [Bellamy] produces is that of a huge standing army, tightly drilled, compelled by some mysterious fate to unceasing anxiety for the production of wares to satisfy every caprice, however wasteful and absurd, that may cast up amongst them.<sup>137</sup>

Scale, efficiency and luxury are the virtues of Bellamy's ideal civilization, 'The principle that makes all operations on a large scale proportionally cheaper than on a small scale'. His is an orderly society in which 'everybody is a part of a system with a distinct place and function.' Moreover, even when permitting private discretion in sexual selection, Bellamy appeals to liberal eugenics as a justification: 'its tendency to preserve and transmit the better types of the race, and let the inferior types drop out, has unhindered operation.' Work is carefully planned; when swapping jobs or moving to another area a worker may do so 'under certain regulations'. All facets of the economy are centrally controlled and managed 'distribution and production

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<sup>137</sup> Morris, *News*, p.324, p.356

supply is geared to demand like an engine to the governor which regulates its speed.'

For the citizens, the benefit of all this efficiency includes material abundance, health, education, early-retirement and a birth-to-death social security system. Moreover, Bellamy stresses the fairness of his model, so that in contrast to the easier work, 'arduous trade, such as mining, has very short hours.' Bellamy also seeks technological innovation, from 'pneumatic transmitters' to the contemporaneously inventive 'credit cards'. For Bellamy the highest of these accomplishments is aesthetic, as his protagonist West notes:

[...] if we could have devised an arrangement for providing everybody with music in their homes, perfect in quality, unlimited in quantity, suited to every mood, and beginning and ceasing at will, we should have considered the limit of human felicity already attained, and ceased to strive for further improvements.<sup>138</sup>

In contrast to *Looking Backwards*, Morris's *News from Nowhere* eschews regulation and technological flourishes, preferring freedom and a more austere pastoral setting. Bringing together something of the Pre-Raphaelites' medievalism with the Libertarian Marxism of the Communist Left, Morris

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<sup>138</sup>Bellamy, *Backwards*, p.100, p.81, p.123, p.31, p.109, p.30, p.48, p.39, p.51

decried the state socialists. Whereas Bellamy's is a hyper-industrialised world, Morris (contrary to Marx as well) eschews even mechanisation: 'no ingenuity in the invention of machines will be of any real use to us.' Morris's ideas can be traced back through John Ruskin and the early nineteenth-century English textile workers who formed the Luddite movement, protesting against their replacement by machines. Instead, great wealth is created merely by the absence of a parasitical class, meaning that there is 'no compulsion on us to labour for nothing'. Rather, there is a requirement that 'all work is now pleasurable'. In place of industrialisation, Morris's rich and idiosyncratic aesthetic vision for the landscape and architecture of Britain is given attention:

I need to say a little about the lovely reaches of the river here. I duly noted that absence of cockney villas which the old man had lamented; and I was with please that my old enemies the 'Gothic' cast-iron bridges had been replaced by handsome oak and stone ones. Also the banks of the forest that we passed through had lost their courtly gamekeeperish trimness, and were as wild and beautiful as need be, though the trees were clearly well seen to.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>139</sup>Morris, *News*, p.295, p.296, p.123, p.183

This textual comparison demonstrates the first of my three theses: that utopia is a genre defined by the conversation between utopian authors such as Bellamy and Morris and that these books are shaped as responses to one another as much as (or more than) they are responses to changes in the broader political world.

The transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth-century is registered in utopian writing by another set of concerns and, as mentioned previously, a move from utopian to dystopian writing as the dominant genre. While bearing in mind the evidence of an earlier dystopic turn, Gregory Claeys claims that 'in the twentieth-century dystopia becomes the predominant expression of the utopian ideal, mirroring the colossal failures of totalitarian collectivism.'<sup>140</sup> W.H. Auden's poem 'Vespers' (1954) sums up this rejection of utopia from a Christian perspective:

remember our victim (but for him I could forget the blood, but for me he  
could forget the innocence)  
on whose immolation (call him Abel, Remus, whom you will, it is one Sin  
Offering) arcadias, utopias, our dear old bag of a democracy, are alike  
founded:

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<sup>140</sup> Gregory Claeys, 'The origins of dystopia' in Gregory Claeys (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature* (New York: CUP, 2010), p.108.

For without a cement of blood (it must be human, it must be innocent) no secular wall will safely stand.<sup>141</sup>

Here we see the view that secular projects to improve the world are inevitably built on human suffering and death, and that utopia is unavoidably corrupted by such sins.

Claeys helps define dystopia as ‘portraying feasible negative visions of social and political development, cast principally in fictional form.’<sup>142</sup> Within the definition we find helpful echoes of the parameters for utopian writing set by both Davis (in terms of the feasibility of the political worlds depicted) and Kumar (with the stress on narrative fiction).

Dystopia is an accretion of anti-utopia. Emerging at the dawn of the twentieth-century with novels such as Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We* (1924)<sup>143</sup> and Jack London’s *The Iron Heel* (1908),<sup>144</sup> dystopia has largely (although not entirely) obscured the competing genres of utopia and anti-utopia—although it remains in conversation with both. Just as utopian fiction is anticipated as far back or further than Plato’s *Republic*, anti-utopianism is prefigured by Aristophanes *The Birds* (BCE 414)<sup>145</sup> and *The Clouds* (BCE 423).<sup>146</sup> Dystopia has

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<sup>141</sup> W.H. Auden, ‘Vespers’ in *Encounter* (1955, <http://www.unz.org/Pub/Encounter-1955feb-00010> [19/5/15]).

<sup>142</sup> Claeys, p.109.

<sup>143</sup> Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We* (New York: Penguin, 1993).

<sup>144</sup> Jack London: *The Iron Heel* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

<sup>145</sup> Aristophanes, *The Birds and Other Plays* (London: Penguin, 1978).

<sup>146</sup> Aristophanes, *Lysistrata and Other Plays* (London: Penguin, 1973).

its own conventions, but as we move on to examine the tradition across centuries, it must be noted that, as might be expected from an *intertextual* thesis, the demarcations around genre are rarely perfectly mapped onto the body of literature. Rather, the reality is that there are always liminal cases of texts at the margins that cannot be fully explored here, just as we noted previously with post-apocalyptic novels.

That dystopian and utopian authors continued a dialogue into the twentieth-century explains why utopia and dystopia cannot be simplistically separated. It is therefore important to discuss the phenomenon of dystopias .

Much as William Morris wrote his *News from Nowhere* with a critical eye to Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, so H. G. Wells' wrote his *A Modern Utopia* (1905) condemning William Morris, who Wells insists was in error when he decided to 'change the nature of man and things together', a judgement which is reminiscent of Hume's criticism of earlier utopias. Wells cites More, Plato, Howell, Bellamy, Comte, Hertzka, Cabet and Campanella as models for a third way 'between Communistic and Socialistic ideas on the one hand, and Individualism on the other'.<sup>147</sup> During the same period, Gabriel Tarde's *Underground Man* (1905)<sup>148</sup> envisions post-apocalyptic reconstruction shaped

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<sup>147</sup> H. G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia* (London: Penguin, 2005), pp. 12, 64.

<sup>148</sup> Gabriel Tarde, 'Underground Man' in John Carey, *The Faber Book of Utopias* (London: Faber & Faber, 1999).

by an appreciation of the arts—a very different kind of ideal world. Even as it was receding, utopia looked to a pluralistic literary tradition.

Contemporaneous with Wells and Tarde, Gilman wrote feminist utopias, *Moving the Mountain* (1911), the short story 'Bee Wise' (1913) and novel *Herland* (1915)<sup>149</sup> and finally *With Her in Our Land* (1916). *Herland* remains the most famous of these and, unlike *Moving the Mountain*, moves from the euechronia back to the geographic form that was popular since More. In her preface to *Moving the Mountain*, Gilman shows willingness to converse with other texts too—Plato, Wells, More and Bellamy—but criticises their 'extreme remoteness, or the introduction of some mysterious out-side force.'<sup>150</sup> Arbitrariness is a constant anxiety for utopian authors, and in engaging with the tradition and learning from its past innovations this problem is one I attempt to avoid in *We Are Seven* by grounding its events in a more recognisable reality, free from the accusation of imaginative whimsy.

Glimpses of utopia are evident after the twentieth-century dystopian ascendancy, often from unusual sources. Austin Tappan Wright contributed the egalitarian and Arcadian novel, *Islandia* (1942).<sup>151</sup> Despite a high-fantasy aesthetic its focus on institutional configurations and fictional realisation roots it firmly within the definitions of utopia offered by Davis and Kumar. B. F.

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<sup>149</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-Paper, Herland, and Selected Writings* (London Penguin, 1999).

<sup>150</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 'Moving the Mountain' in *The Herland Trilogy* (New York: Start Publishing, 2012) Ebook.

<sup>151</sup> Austin Tappan Wright, *Islandia* (New York: Overlook Press, 2007).



Skinner's *Walden Two* (1948) links to what Kumar has termed 'the modern "eupsychia", the psychological utopias of Wilhelm Reich, Erich Fromm and Herbert Marcuse.'<sup>152</sup> Skinner was intensely aware of the broader utopian tradition, referencing 'the Utopias, from Plato and More and Bacon's *New Atlantis* down to *Looking Backward* and even *Shangri-La*!' <sup>153</sup> Even horror writer H. P. Lovecraft's novella *At the Mountains of Madness* (1931) has the narrator glimpse the utopic civilisation of the menacing Old Ones in which 'Government was evidently complex and probably socialistic'.<sup>154</sup>

As I am arguing in my second main claim about utopian writing, the twentieth-century produced predominantly dystopian literature, especially after the first two decades. Yet Vieira qualifies this with the observation that 'there was a very brief moment of confidence, at the very end of the 1960s and in the 1970s, which was clearly linked to the student movement of May 1968.' <sup>155</sup> These years of utopian flourishing once again reinforce the conversation between literary and non-literary developments. They are also the most historically proximate outflow of utopias to *We Are Seven* and therefore offer the most important literary innovations. Sargent gives evidence of these same patterns outside a European context too: 'South Africa has a deeply divided utopian tradition in that most utopian literature well

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<sup>152</sup> Kumar, p.40.

<sup>153</sup> B. F. Skinner, *Walden Two* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2005) Ebook, p.9

<sup>154</sup> H. P. Lovecraft, 'At the Mountains of Madness' in H. P. Lovecraft, *Necronomicon*, (London: Gollancz, 2008), p.471.

<sup>155</sup> Vieira, pp.17-8.

into the twentieth-century depicted the system of racial division or apartheid in positive terms, and after that the same system was depicted almost universally in dystopian terms.<sup>156</sup> Here we see a general tendency to have utopianism temporarily re-emerge, making any simplistic claims about its disappearance invalid. Peter Fitting contributes to the analysis of utopianism during the twentieth-century by characterising the eighties decline of utopianism within a political-economic backdrop:

By the mid-1980s this utopian moment [...] had come to an end, however, as that earlier euphoria faded, a casualty of the rise of neo-liberalism (as marked by the elections of Reagan and Thatcher), and by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the socialist alternative a few years later.<sup>157</sup>

This decline is indirectly referenced in *We Are Seven*:

Resting his hand on the small of her back, Joshua coaxed her through one of the avenues, distracting her from a posterboard with tacked paper depicting symbolic and cartoonish clenched fists, a guillotine, lines of people and shackled men. They had oblique messages punctuated by exclamation marks: 'Keynes is dead! Long live the Ersatz Left!'; 'No more

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<sup>156</sup> Sargent, *Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*: p.209.

<sup>157</sup> Peter Fitting, 'Utopia, dystopia and science fiction' in Gregory Claeys (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature* (New York: CUP, 2010), p.150.

cuts!', 'Austerity for the Rich!' 'Party like it's 1848!' In one, grotesques stood before a boggle eyed priest; a wedding ceremony tableau with the man speaking in a speech bubble, 'I Nimby, take thee Tina, for worse, for poorer, in sickness, till death.' (p.253)

Although satirical of the Left's mantras and slogans, this extract also demonstrates a focus on the dystopian historical context in which the novel is situated, the impasse for utopian imagination.

The feminist dimension was especially prevalent during the 1970s, particularly in what have been called critical or process utopias; that is, utopias that are incomplete or assumed to be constantly in a state of improvement. It is worth recalling Kumar's definition of perfectibility and noting that some in the field of utopian studies might challenge whether these texts qualify as utopian in the same way as Renaissance examples. The process utopia is not wholly original, for example it is anticipated by Sarah Scott's polemical *Millennium Hall* (1762),<sup>158</sup> which depicts the process of an emerging utopian institution. The tradition flourished towards the end of the nineteenth-century, although Alessa Johns argues that a dynamic, evolving form of utopianism is 'not merely the product of first-, second- and third-wave feminism of the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries', but a consistent feature of feminist writing throughout history. Johns outlines and

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<sup>158</sup> Sarah Scott, *Millennium Hall* (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2001).

illustrates five features of process utopias that make them suited to feminist goals: education, human malleability, gradualism, appreciating nature's dynamism (ecology) and pragmatism.<sup>159</sup>

Feminist utopias should not, however, be pigeonholed. Elizabeth Burgoyne Corbett's *New Amazonia: A Foretaste of the Future* (1889)<sup>160</sup> is similar to Bellamy's technocratic vision, albeit supplanted to Ireland and with a feminist twist: in both we find state socialism and an oneiric visitation from the present, but in the latter an emphasis on suffragette victory as well as eugenics. Another mode of feminist utopias involves the removal of men, which applies to Mary Bradley Lane's inner earth, eugenicist Aryans of her *Mizora* (1880)<sup>161</sup> and the utopic component of Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975)<sup>162</sup>—taken from different ends of the tradition. Wyndham's short story 'Consider Her Ways' (1956)<sup>163</sup> could be read as a dystopic counterpoint to the all-female utopia, one that makes possible reference to Gilman's *Herland* and, perhaps even more, to her 'Bee Wise', predicated on the titular Proverbs 6:6: 'Go to the ant, thou sluggard, consider her ways and be wise.'<sup>164</sup> Wyndham's book illustrates how the conversation between utopias also extends to

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<sup>159</sup> Alessa Johns, 'Feminism and utopianism' in Gregory Claeys (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature* (New York: CUP, 2010), pp.174, 178.

<sup>160</sup> Elizabeth Burgoyne Corbett, *New Amazonia: A Foretaste of the Future* (Seattle: Aqueduct Press, 2014) Ebook.

<sup>161</sup> Mary Bradley Lane, *Mizora* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999).

<sup>162</sup> Joanna Russ, *The Female Man* (London: Gollancz, 2010) Ebook.

<sup>163</sup> John Wyndham, *Consider Her Ways and Others* (London: Penguin, 1983).

<sup>164</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wall-Paper, Herland, and Selected Writings* (London: Penguin, 1999), p.271.

dystopias too, which were in turn influenced by other literary traditions as much as political realities. While men exist in Roquia Sakhawat Hussain's *Sultana's Dream* (1905),<sup>165</sup> her novel performs an Erewhonian reversal of gender power to critique patriarchy.

Le Guin's 1966-7 trilogy *Rocannon's World*, *Planet of Exile* and *City of Illusions*<sup>166</sup> started the Hainish Cycle, which includes the genderless society of *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969),<sup>167</sup> a variation on the all-female approach to utopian society. The cycle also contains an 'Ambiguous Utopia' titled *The Dispossessed*, another book that stresses utopia does not need to be set in a post-scarcity world: 'It's the poverty of Anarres. This planet wasn't meant to support civilisation.'<sup>168</sup> Peter Fitting outlines how Le Guin uses fantastical preconceptions of gender and breakaway egalitarian societies to elucidate 'many of the failings of today's world while pointing to some of the difficulties of the utopian project itself.'<sup>169</sup> A similar claim might be made for many examples of the genre, even going back to More. Piercy's aforementioned *Woman on the Edge of Time* has the protagonist wrongly detained in a hospital, psychically visiting a potential utopian future under threat from another, possibly dystopian future.

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<sup>165</sup> Rokeya Sakhawat Hussain, *Sultana's Dream and Padramarag* (London: Penguin, 2005).

<sup>166</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, *Worlds of Exile and Illusion*, (New York: St Martin's Press, 2007).

<sup>167</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (London: Hachette Digital, 2012) Ebook.

<sup>168</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* (London: Orion, 2002), p.139.

<sup>169</sup> Fitting, p.145.

The feminist tradition, especially from the seventies, substantially influences *We Are Seven*. This can be seen indirectly through the prominent roles given to female characters such as Ella, Mary, Clare and Alice; the last two eventually lead the key utopian organisations of the book during its concluding section. Yet it is also apparent more directly through the explicit arrangements of one of these communities:

Women and men have dem own, it give women a place fi dem'selves.  
(p.254)

There were separate schools for boys and girls, 'Alice think di girls learn bettah that way.' (ibid)

Here we can see institutions explicitly catering to feminist demands for female spaces, within the context of female leadership.

Despite the 70s interlude of utopian writing, utopias' general diminishment needs an explanation. Although the horrors of World War and nuclear weapons could be posited as an explanation, this temptation ignores the horrors of previous centuries and fails to explain the seventy's revival. Rather, it is more probable that the accomplishment of many of the aspirations of nineteenth-century Whiggism (suffrage, rotation of power, a free press) as well as the Keynesian post-war Social Democratic consensus

made liberal and reformist socialist utopias redundant. In this context the ambitions of a Harrington (such as rotating public offices or broader and more effective institutions of accountability) are moderate. Nonetheless, the post-war consensus collapsed after the 1973 oil crisis, culminating in the monetarists' hegemony in the eighties and nineties; liberalism has remained strong and no alternative vision of political economy has captured authors' imaginations. This economic account also explains why the process utopias of the seventies represented interests that remained excluded from liberalism's accomplishments, such as the goals of radical feminists. Percolating through Piercy's novel, for example, are not only the iniquities heaped on gender, but the racial, age, disability, sexual and class injustices within a liberal society: 'Envy, sure, but the sense too of being cheated soured her, and the shame, the shame of being second-class goods.'<sup>170</sup> These various kinds of exclusion likewise and necessarily inform *We Are Seven*.

Le Guin and Piercy have ecological concerns too, but ecological utopias were also written outside the feminist tradition. Brian Stableford characterises Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia* (1975)<sup>171</sup> as making 'the case for an actual technological retreat as the only viable means of averting a dystopian Tragedy of the Commons'.<sup>172</sup> Callenbach's vision is also secessionist, with smaller and

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<sup>170</sup> Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time* (London: The Woman's Press, 1979), p.35.

<sup>171</sup> Ernest Callenbach, *Ecotopia* (New York: Bantam Books, 2009) Ebook.

<sup>172</sup> Brian Stableford, 'Ecology and dystopia' in Gregory Claeys (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature* (New York: CUP, 2010), p.274.

smaller states to empower democracy, to such an extent that within his already seceded cluster of some of California and all of Oregon and Washington: 'Jewish, American Indian, and other minorities all contain militants who desire greater autonomy for their peoples.'<sup>173</sup> *We Are Seven* also features ecological concerns: 'It is hardly in any person's self-interest to invite environmental destruction' (p.35). And, like *We Are Seven* and the feminist process utopias, Callenbach's prequel, *Ecotopia Emerging* (1981)<sup>174</sup> published after the seventies, is also a book about an emerging utopia rather than a finished utopian society.

Finding utopias after the seventies generally becomes harder. Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Mars Trilogy* (1992-6) is a rare egalitarian science fiction that stresses pluralism and does not use a post-scarcity conceit, although it posits 'the transformative power of technology over the blank materiality of nature'.<sup>175</sup> Demonstrating the continuing conversation between utopias, Brian Aldiss and Roger Penrose's *White Mars* (2000) can be read as a critical riposte to Robinson's colonialism: 'Mars must become a UN protectorate, and be treated as a "planet for science", much as the Antarctic has been preserved—at least to a great extent—as unspoilt white wilderness. We are for a WHITE

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<sup>173</sup> Ernest Callenbach, *Ecotopia* (New York: Bantam Books, 2009) Ebook, p.164.

<sup>174</sup> Ernest Callenbach, *Ecotopia Emerging* (Kent Town: Banyan Tree Book Distributor, 1981).

<sup>175</sup> Kim Stanley Robinson, *Red Mars* (London: Voyager Classics, 2013); *Green Mars* (London: Voyager Classics, 2013); *Blue Mars* (London: Voyager Classics, 2013) Ebook, p.699.



MARS!’<sup>176</sup> Ben Okri’s *The Age of Magic* (2014) goes back further, to the pre-utopian Arcadian tradition with its overlapping ideal world themes: ‘Arcadia is the place where life is renewed’.<sup>177</sup> It is also possible to perceive utopianism in the titular community of Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* (1996).<sup>178</sup> Commenting on David Fincher’s adaptation, Slavoj Žižek observes that ‘the message of *Fight Club* is not so much liberating violence but that liberation hurts.’<sup>179</sup> Nonetheless, only rarely or with interpretive gloss are there many discernable examples of utopia in recent fiction.

Some ambiguous late-twentieth-century utopias, however, provide more points of comparison with *We Are Seven*. Andrey Platonov’s posthumously published novella *Soul* (1999)<sup>180</sup> unites Sufi ideas with the socialist realism of the USSR, but the focus is more on spiritual growth than political organisation. Mario Vargas Llosa’s novelisation of The War of Canudos in *The War of the End of the World* (1981),<sup>181</sup> and Toni Morrison’s book about an all-black post-fifties town and its relation to an all-female settlement, *Paradise* (1997),<sup>182</sup> share with *Ecotopia Emerging* the notion of ideal communities-in-construction, utopias as non-realised project. In Llosa’s book, the millenarian

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<sup>176</sup> Brian Aldiss and Roger Penrose, *White Mars: A 21st Century Utopia* (London: Sphere, 2000), p.323.

<sup>177</sup> Ben Okri, *The Age of Magic* (London: Head of Zeus, 2014), p.29.

<sup>178</sup> Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club* (London: Vintage, 2005).

<sup>179</sup> Slavoj Žižek in Eric Dean Rasmussen, ‘Liberation Hurts: An Interview with Slavoj Žižek’ (2004, <http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/endconstruction/desublimation> [30/11/14]).

<sup>180</sup> Andrey Platonov, *Soul* (London: Vintage, 2013) Ebook.

<sup>181</sup> Mario Vargas Llosa, *The War of the End of the World* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012) Ebook.

<sup>182</sup> Toni Morrison, *Paradise* (London: Vintage, 2010) Ebook.

Sebastianist-Autonomist group proclaims that 'the time had come to put down roots and build a Temple, which, when the end of the world came, would be what Noah's Ark had been in the beginning.'<sup>183</sup> However, both Llosa and Morrison problematise the fictionalised communities and suggest that they are failures, at least as secular attempts to build a permanent better world on earth. All three books also share historically grounded settings with *We Are Seven*. Similarly, like *We Are Seven*, *The War of the End of the World* and Morrison's *Paradise* feature communities threatened by outside forces. Llosa writes at length on these challenges facing the Sebastianist-Autonomists:

What matters is what they do. They have done away with property, marriage, social hierarchies; they have refused to accept the authority of the Church and of the State, and wiped out an army company. They have fought against authority, money, uniforms, cassocks.<sup>184</sup>

In this extract from Llosa we see the necessary militarism of the utopians he depicts.

Morrison likewise situates her community in threatening circumstances:

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<sup>183</sup> Mario Vargas Llosa, *The War of the End of the World* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012) Ebook, p.36.

<sup>184</sup> Llosa, *The War of the End of the World*, p.91.

The whole house felt permeated with a blessed malelessness, like a protected domain, free of hunters but exciting too.<sup>185</sup>

Morrison here shows that the all-female group can only function by defending (protecting) itself from the external peril posed by masculinity.

Both of these extracts can be compared to *We Are Seven* in that they oppose some external threat (authority, maleness). This is seen most potently when police raid the block in the first part of the novel:

He ran past all the people in white, down a wide tunnel formed by the half circle around the door and the wall of riot shields (p.133)

In contrast with the relative decline of utopias, dystopias are a constant, especially in the later twentieth-century: Bradbury's philistine world of book burning in *Fahrenheit 451* (1953)<sup>186</sup> and more ambiguously William Golding's parabolic *The Lord of the Flies* (1954)<sup>187</sup> are two examples. William F. Nolan and George Clayton Johnson's depiction of involuntary euthanasia in *Logan's Run* (1967)<sup>188</sup> and Philip K. Dick's corporatocratic *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968)<sup>189</sup> show that dystopia is as keen to narrow its focus on a

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<sup>185</sup> Toni Morrison, *Paradise*, p.177.

<sup>186</sup> Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451* (London: Folio Society, 2011).

<sup>187</sup> William Golding, *Lord of the Flies* (London: Folio Society, 2009).

<sup>188</sup> William F. Nolan and George Clayton Johnson, *Logan's Run* (New York: Buccaneer, 1992).

<sup>189</sup> Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (London: Gollancz, 2004).

particular problem (overpopulation, corporate power, etc.) as utopia is to champion a particular cause, such as ecology or women's rights. Anthony Burgess supplies a vision of crime and social conditioning in *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) as well as an anti-union homage to Orwell in *1985* (1978).<sup>190</sup> To this we can add Ira Levin's technocratic collectivist future in *This Perfect Day* (1970),<sup>191</sup> Stephen King's mass-media nightmare in *The Running Man* (1982),<sup>192</sup> Atwood's patriarchal world in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986)<sup>193</sup> and P. D. James's end of history in *The Children of Men* (1992).<sup>194</sup>

Picking up from the anti-utopian satires, Zamyatin's *We*, which Claeys notes was 'influenced by Wells'<sup>195</sup> as well as Jack London's *The Iron Heel*, set the formula for a frightening society opposed by a hero, to be either crushed (*We*) or ultimately victorious (*The Iron Heel*). Katherine Burdekin's *Swastika Night* (1937)<sup>196</sup> deserves mention too, as it is an early instance of a feminist dystopia akin to Atwood's as well as providing a vision of Nazi victory like Dick and strongly anticipating Orwell's motifs of militarism and rewriting history. The most notable and influential dystopias from this period,

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<sup>190</sup> Anthony Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange* (London: Folio Society, 2014), Anthony Burgess, *1985*, (London: Serpent Tail, 2013) Ebook.

<sup>191</sup> Ira Levin, *This Perfect Day* (London: Corsair, 2014) Ebook.

<sup>192</sup> Stephen King, *The Running Man*, (London: New England Library, 2007) Ebook.

<sup>193</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (London: Folio Society, 2012).

<sup>194</sup> P. D. James, *The Children of Men* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008) Ebook.

<sup>195</sup> Claeys, p.114.

<sup>196</sup> Katherine Burdekin, *Swastika Night* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1985).

however, are Huxley's *Brave New World* (1931)<sup>197</sup> and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949).<sup>198</sup>

Whereas Orwell is focuses on draconianism and punishment, Huxley foresees soft power as the main mechanism of coercion in the future. Wells' *The Sleeper Awakes* offers an earlier middle ground dystopia more influential on *We Are Seven*, where people are controlled by poverty and police, but, showing the same concerns as Huxley, pleasure and hypnotism too: 'Little children of the labouring classes, so soon as they were of sufficient age to be hypnotized, were thus turned into beautiful and punctual machine-minders'.<sup>199</sup>

Huxley also wrote *Island* (1962), another rare example of utopia in the twentieth-century. Claeys insists that 'Huxley was not opposed to intelligent planning for the future.'<sup>200</sup> Nor was Orwell averse to utopian plans; he was a prominent socialist even if he often voiced (sometimes dystopian) criticisms of others on the left. Claeys reminds us that it is important not to caricature dystopians. The most that can be gleaned from their books is that they perceive undesirable potential futures, not that they reject more desirable paths. Still, Kumar makes the observation that anti-utopian sentiment came to characterise theoretical writing too, listing Karl Popper, Leszek Kołakowski

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<sup>197</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (London: Folio Society, 2013).

<sup>198</sup> George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London: Folio Society, 2001).

<sup>199</sup> H. G. Wells, *The Sleeper Awakes* (London: Penguin, 2005), p.102.

<sup>200</sup> Claeys, p.118.

and Jacob Talmon as illustrative that 'hostility to utopia has been well nigh unremitting.'<sup>201</sup> To this I could add subtler instances, such as Ricœur's ethical stipulation 'that the utopian imagination always be converted into specific expectations'.<sup>202</sup> However, utopianism simultaneously found many theoretical champions, some of whom will be explored below.

Coming into the twenty-first century, dystopia continues to go from strength to strength as utopia wanes, with the new phenomenon of the Young Adult dystopian series. Scott Westerfeld's 2005-7 *Uglies Quartet*<sup>203</sup>; Suzanne Collins's 2008-10 *The Hunger Games Trilogy*<sup>204</sup>; James Dashner's 2009-12 *The Maze Runner*<sup>205</sup> tetralogy and Veronica Roth's 2011-13 *Divergent Trilogy*<sup>206</sup> are all dystopias with post-apocalyptic, science fiction themes. Although Westerfeld moves beyond our definition by encompassing post-scarcity motifs too: 'you could use all the resources you wanted, as long as you captured the city's collective imagination.'<sup>207</sup> Other authors continue to write for older readers of dystopias: Brigid Rose's *The City of Lists* (2009),<sup>208</sup> Man Booker Prize winner Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005),<sup>209</sup> Haruki

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<sup>201</sup> Kumar, p.90.

<sup>202</sup> Ricœur, *Time*, vol. 3, p.258.

<sup>203</sup> Scott Westerfeld, *Uglies Quartet: Uglies; Pretties; Specials: Extras* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2013) Ebook.

<sup>204</sup> Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games Complete Trilogy (Hunger Games Trilogy)* (London: Scholastic Books, 2013) Ebook.

<sup>205</sup> James Dashner, *The Maze Runner Complete Collection* (Frome: Chicken House, 2013) Ebook.

<sup>206</sup> Veronica Roth, *Divergent Trilogy (books 1-3)* (London: HarperCollins, 2013) Ebook.

<sup>207</sup> Scott Westerfeld, *Uglies Quartet: Uglies; Pretties; Specials: Extras* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2013) Ebook.

<sup>208</sup> Brigid Rose, *The City of Lists* (London: Crocus, 2009).

<sup>209</sup> Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (London: Folio Society, 2012).

Murakami's set of three books *1Q84*<sup>210</sup> (2009-10), inspired by *Nineteen Eighty-four*, Howard Jacobson's Man Booker shortlisted *J* (2014)<sup>211</sup> and Jasper Fforde's *Shades of Grey: The Road to High Saffron* (2009).<sup>212</sup>

The relative popularity of the dystopia is relevant to this essay's third thesis: that utopia must engage in a conversation with dystopia to be germane again. Atwood's idea of ustopia (a blending of utopia and dystopia) is useful, but insofar as ustopia has so far been evident, it is more generally characterised by authors finding dystopia in utopia—and thereby problematising utopia. There are elements of an ustopian *uchronia* in David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004),<sup>213</sup> although this novel more prominently leans towards colonial, romance, noir and apocalypse genres. Based on this feature of his book, it is possible that Mitchell was influenced by the seventies feminist tradition. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, Russ's *The Female Man*, Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* and Doris Lessing's 1979-83 *Canopus in Argos: Archives* series<sup>214</sup> also counterpoise utopias and dystopias through juxtaposition, but Le Guin also problematises utopia itself by stressing her utopia's material poverty. Even the problem of defending utopia from the

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<sup>210</sup> Haruki Murakami, *1Q84* (London: Harvil Seeker, 2011).

<sup>211</sup> Howard Jacobson, *J: A Novel* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2014) Ebook.

<sup>212</sup> Jasper Fforde, *Shades of Grey: The Road to High Saffron* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2010) Ebook.

<sup>213</sup> David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* (St Ives: Sceptre, 2004).

<sup>214</sup> Doris Lessing, *Shikasta* (London: Fourth Estate, 2012); *The Marriages Between Zones 3, 4 and 5*, (London: Fourth Estate, 2012); *The Sirian Experiments* (London: Fourth Estate, 2012); *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8* (London: Fourth Estate, 2012); *The Sentimental Agents in the Volyen* (London: Fourth Estate, 2012).

outside world in Huxley's *Island* represents only a marginal example of ustopia. Moreover, Suzy McKee Charnas's thematically twinned novels *Walk to the End of the World* (1978) and *Motherlines* (1980)<sup>215</sup> which successively depict dystopia and utopia, does not go all the way to renewing the utopian genre by uniting both traditions at once into a mature ustopia.

Although the dystopia-in-utopia approach to ustopias understands the relevance of dystopia to any attempt to restore the novelistic utopia, it is not my approach in *We are Seven* because it fails to recover the early modern political aspirations of utopia. On the contrary, it strengthens a dystopian (conservative, anti-reform, anti-revolutionary) suspicion against utopia, i.e. that utopias are all, secretly, dystopias, or destined to be defeated by a stronger dystopian society. I have reversed this approach by couching the utopia of *We are Seven* within a dystopian context, a utopia-in-dystopia. Instead of finding dystopia in utopia, *We are Seven* finds utopia in dystopia and therefore engenders a utopian suspicion against dystopia. The subtitle of the second section, 'Dystopia' (p.148), highlights this approach—as does the focus on Phil, a character hostile to many of the utopian ambitions of the other characters and yet consistently drawn into their hopes and plans.

This survey of utopian (and dystopian) literature does not pretend to comprehensiveness even within its caveats of a tight definition of utopia and

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<sup>215</sup> Suzy McKee Charnas, *Walk to the End of the World and Motherlines* (London: The Women's Press, 1989).



a limited Western post-Reformation period. In addition to books, it is important to note that other narrative media have taken on a utopian aspect. These include films such as Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (1985),<sup>216</sup> games in the vein of Ken Levine's satire of capitalism *BioShock* (2007),<sup>217</sup> comics such as Alan Moore's pastiche of neoliberalism *V for Vendetta* (1982-89),<sup>218</sup> and television series (in addition to the previously mentioned *Star Trek*) such as Dennis Kelly's Malthusian *Utopia*,<sup>219</sup> debuting in 2013. Even campaign settings in pen-and-paper role-play games such as *Dungeons & Dragons* can have utopian overtones: 'Founded over a thousand years ago, the kingdom of Cormyr benefits from an enlightened monarchy, hard-working citizens, and an advantageous location.'<sup>220</sup> All of these examples from a variety of new media have utopian or anti-utopian components.

Meanwhile, imagining better worlds remains a beguiling preoccupation of modern philosophers. Richard Rorty's postmodern vision of 'liberal utopia' contains citizens who have 'a sense of the contingency of their language of moral deliberation, and thus of their consciences, and thus of their community.'<sup>221</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre's approach is more Aristotelian: 'What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within

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<sup>216</sup> *Brazil*, dir. by Terry Gilliam (Universal Studios, 1985) [DVD].

<sup>217</sup> *BioShock*, dir. by Ken Levine (2K Games, 2007) [PC Game].

<sup>218</sup> Alan Moore, *V for Vendetta* (New York: DC Comics, 2008).

<sup>219</sup> *Utopia*, dir. by Dennis Kelly (Kudos Film and Television, 2013) [DVD].

<sup>220</sup> Ed Greenwood, Sean K. Reynolds, Skip Williams and Rob Heinsoo, *Forgotten Realms: Campaign Option (Dungeons & Dragons Accessory): Campaign Setting* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast, 2001), p.111.

<sup>221</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York: CUP, 1995), p.61.

which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages'. Consequently he is 'not entirely without grounds for hope.'<sup>222</sup> In Raymond Tallis's defence of the Enlightenment, 'the hope of progress is implicitly Utopian, inasmuch as it is assumed that progress in specific areas will not be at the expense of progress in others'.<sup>223</sup> Suggestions of the genre thus remain in a variety of contexts and ideologies, though it is much diminished. *We Are Seven* is a conscious attempt to revive and reshape the genre for our time.

## Utopia: Genre in Practice

### Utopian Conceits

Writing a novel in conversation with a tradition requires an understanding of that tradition, but in fulfilling the third thesis of this essay to renew the utopia in novelistic form, as *We Are Seven* attempts, other aesthetic choices must be made too. These are the aesthetic choices unrelated to utopia, that make the story and its textual transmission satisfying and engaging to a readership.

Earlier, we saw how cognitive estrangement can transmit political and moral

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<sup>222</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), p.263.

<sup>223</sup> Raymond Tallis, *The Raymond Tallis Reader* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), p.188.

ideas aesthetically. Conveying instrumental content (e.g. a belief about the proper form of governance) aesthetically (i.e. in a way that appeals artistically to an audience) is one of the main concerns of any utopian novelist. While discussing the dystopic film adaptation of P. D. James's *The Children of Men*, Žižek outlines a device that is similar to cognitive estrangement in that it can disclose moral content within a narrative. He argues that the power of the film arises from an ambiguity that opens up a space for critical engagement:

The true focus of the film is there in the background and it's crucial to leave it as a background. It's the paradox of what I would call a morphosis—if you look at the thing too directly, in this case the oppressive social dimension, you don't see it. You can see it in an oblique way only if it remains in the background.<sup>224</sup>

Michael Sprinkler finds an example of this technique in the writings of Marcel Proust. He shows that Proust has a demonstrable concern for political economy, even though this is not found in any surface reading. Sprinkler's insight is to show how these aspects are perceptibly placed in the background: 'Class struggles thus appear in the novel in the guise of the major characters' anxiety about their changes in social status.' He thereby

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<sup>224</sup> Slavoj Žižek, 'Žižek on Children of Men' (2007, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pbgrwNP\\_gYE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pbgrwNP_gYE) [24/2/15]).

identifies 'how Proust's novel talks ceaselessly about social relations and political events while not appearing to do so.'<sup>225</sup> This helps to constitute a good definition of what Žižek calls *morphasis*: addressing a subject without making it explicit, so as to indirectly highlight that subject.

My earlier comparison between Hodgson and Huxley showed examples of the repetitive concerns that drive the utopian genre: economy, reproduction, education and religion. Some of these concerns became apparent in the in-depth comparison between William Morris's *News from Nowhere* and Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backwards* too. These subjects are often instances in which authors choose to be explicit about their moral message. To show how I use *morphasis* in *We Are Seven* and, simultaneously, how this fits within the broader utopian tradition, it will be beneficial to look at instances from my novel that are preoccupied (however implicitly) by those generic utopian motifs.

One method I use to accomplish *morphasis* is to add details surreptitiously, such as when a character in *We Are Seven* notices evidence of urban decay while on a car ride: '[...]the prostrate carcass of a trolley cast off by predators to lie pathetic in the thoroughfare bank, like the cleanly picked bones of carrion on the Serengeti.' (p.194). *Morphasis* can also be conveyed through casual dialogue in a larger context. In the third part, Joshua is guiding Ella around the Shed, the final utopian space of the novel. In the foreground I

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<sup>225</sup> Michael Sprinker, *History and Ideology in Proust* (London: Verso, 1998), pp.53, 66.

make their relationship central. 'His presence incited a confusing amalgam of passions: homesickness that stretched back and an attraction that stretched towards possible futures.' (pp.151-2) The details about the place, including its economic aspirations and arrangements, are kept in the background while the characters' reunion is foregrounded. Their intimate conversation turns to the composition of the utopian space, through which we learn about that society: 'Give a lotta gifts ere. Alice says she want a gift economy.' (p.259)

Sexual relations (and by extension the theme of reproduction) between characters are also important to the wider utopian tradition, as Atwood observed: 'Sex is often centre stage in utopias and dystopias'.<sup>226</sup> This has invoked suspicion from some commentators, such as Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks*, who identified the intrusive danger of planners: 'Notice how the sexual question plays a very large, often dominant role in "utopias"'.<sup>227</sup> Because the Block and Shed are not planned, autocratic societies that dominate reproductive or romantic life, *We Are Seven* handles sexuality through oblique utopian juxtapositions between the utopian and the dystopian. When Joshua and Ella make love, the scene is proximately contrasted with another in which a prisoner, outside the Shed, uncomfortably masturbates: 'The man on the bottom pushes his head into his pillow as the

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<sup>226</sup> Atwood, *Worlds*, p.189.

<sup>227</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), vol. 1, p.170.

man above tries to wank unobtrusively.' (pp.297-8) References to sex in the wider, more dystopian environment are impersonal, shallow or unfulfilled:

≠ expectation of sex; our meetings are pornographies without erotics. (p.38)

Sexy-girl3000 Go to my profile's homepage to find many sexy girls of all colors who get up to naughtiness, but accidentally leave their bedroom webcams switched on. See girl on girl action, barely legal, interracial and have fun with largest XXX gallery on web fo...See More (p.33)

In one scene Maurice (who leads the occupation of the tower block in part one) is visited by the spurned lover of his roommate, Sebastian; the meeting is framed by paranoia, callousness and suffering, without any of these dimensions becoming explicit:

Really he wanted rid of her, he had not felt well for days. Woken by night shakes, profusely perspiring, weak with hunger, but unable to eat. It occurred to him Sebastian arranged this girl to be here as a depraved gift, although he dismissed the unkind presumption. (p.193)

Nonetheless, sexuality is more problematised, and therefore examined more critically, within the context of 'Jesus Saves'. The organisation's religious

views cause its members to adopt less conventional stresses on marriage within the group and its importance, and this permitted me to write satirically about the kinds of logistical dilemmas they encounter:

The male to female ratio is tipped too much to the latter. And more of the women agreed to anonymous weddings than men. There aren't many who have actually decided on anyone. And some of the men who have put themselves forward aren't suitable. A few were already ruled out before I took over. It could end badly. There were a lot of problems last time too.  
(p.205)

In this section the kinds of problem that the idealistic group encounter are spelled out within the context of an interpersonal dispute.

My own interests in education percolate *We Are Seven*, with characters professing passions for learning and teaching, which we see with Clare ('Good, education is important.' [p.204]); Sarah ('Not everyun is happy to waste their noggins,' [p.27]) and Peter ('The kids learn wiv us.' [p.196]). Nonetheless, like all the proceeding subjects addressed in *We Are Seven*, this is not handled by my third person authorial voice, but as a part of the dynamics between characters in their dramatic contexts. Moreover, it becomes an area of contention between different characters and their respective values, such as when Vera clashes with Phil over Ella's future:

‘Pleased you think so, but you got me wrong. School didn’t sit wiv me; last thing I wanted were more classrooms, being told what to read by the clueless. I learnt from things like this smart cat Rick Roderick I saw on the library Internet. Universities are throwbacks.’

‘She needs qualifications.’

‘Does it make a difference?’

‘...and culture.’

‘What’s that? I’ve heard people talking about it, but I don’t know what it is.

Will it help her?’ (p.243)

In the utopian context, both the Block and the Shed establish prefiguring institutions and forms of education. Therefore, when I have a character nicknamed Triple-A describe what he likes about the Shed, he says: ‘These folks believe they’ve rediscovered Eden with their one part leprosy colony, one part scriptorium.’ (p.256) Another mode of adding indirect exposition that is not a reductive authorial endorsement is through the character Mary and her epistolary articles and blogs:

Some solutions arose more spontaneously, from people’s good nature: a class for illiteracy; another for innumeracy; a third doing art with younger residents; even an exercise course. (p.120)



The blog device imitates the descriptive tone of earlier utopias, in keeping with the tradition, but in a way that is dramatically in keeping with the novel.

As mentioned previously, religion is a key theme in *We Are Seven*, connecting the novel not only to a dominant preoccupation of the utopian genre, but also with the Christian, millenarian, reformation and counter-reformation roots of the genre in the work of More. This is achieved by having a prominent Christian group in the novel, Jesus Saves. It is one that variously allies itself to the utopians and in which key characters like Clare participate. Religious themes are also addressed by some of my references, such as how the Shed's library is:

[...] marked by a hefty wooden board, like the one on the outside door:

'Paradise Regained'. (p.255)

Some character choices also enabled me achieve my instrumental and aesthetic goals. Sebastian's ranting monologues and the pretentious displays of his intelligence can be used to make clear points of reference to the utopian and proto-utopian traditions, even in the context of a speech with anti-utopian sentiments:

Well the religions all do at least, world is suffering to the Buddhists and you should read what St Augustine has to say about our mortal lot, but for them there's always an escape hatch, a nirvana or something like that. Okay Augustine has a utopia, a *Kingdom*. But mostly there's *something else*; it's not necessarily that horrible notion of an afterlife, but something; even oblivion. And Western thought achieves its apex by understanding that kind of pessimism more directly, less alienated alienation; Schopenhauer, you know, Zapffe is better, more advanced. Cioran, of course, I'm sure Clare's mentioned...' (p.80)

As with *The Children of Men*, *morphasis* is applied to the dystopian aspects of my novel. Here I also chose to differentiate this section of *We Are Seven* from the rest of the dystopia genre, which has distinct heroic and action tropes. In *We Are Seven* I did not personify the dystopia in an ideologue who delivers sermonising apologies for tyranny. Examples of this kind of character abound with Mustapha Mond in *Brave New World* and O'Brien in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. As Clare puts it in describing her brother Toby's motivations: 'Thinks he'll find a villain, but there are none. Only weak, scared people.' (p.160) I made the mayor, George Hendrickson, appear apt for the role of antagonist, but he does little in terms of the plot and only appears in person once, in passing, through eavesdropping, and even then not as an operative adversary:

‘What we’ll do is... okay, the tests are hard and we could make them harder, so people just back out. We generate statistics about fraudsters,’ said the younger of two men.

‘I won’t deceive.’

‘Won’t have to. Your city can’t afford to pay the feckless; more crucially, people don’t want to. You’ll be making them feel easier if you approve this, that’s why they elected you. That is your job as their representative.’

‘I’m not a monster. We do things right.’

‘Yes, but this is right.’ (p.200)

Insofar as he is depicted at all, Hendrickson is not portrayed as operatically evil, but rather as flawed, insecure and unable to challenge the conditions of his power.

In addition to recurring subject matter, utopian and dystopian fiction has devices that are a part of the style and aesthetic repertoire of the genre. These conceits often tie moral concerns with approaches to writing intended to produce particular emotional or cognitive reactions. Some have already been explored in reference to *We Are Seven*, such as depicting an external threat to the utopia.

Kumar identifies how ‘a device used to especially telling effect in Bellamy and Wells is the nightmare return—in dream or reality—to the visitor’s own

society, now bathed in a ghastly and hellish light'.<sup>228</sup> Jonathan Swift parodies this when he has the hero of *Gulliver's Travels* return home bemoaning his 'unfortunate Exile from the Houyhnhnm Country' and the realisation that by reproducing he has increased the number of a lesser species: 'it struck me with the utmost Shame, Confusion and Horror.'<sup>229</sup> This is a device I found especially useful for my utopian choice to transition between utopia and dystopia. I inserted an early and direct allusion to this device, as deployed by Edward Bellamy in *We Are Seven*: 'Why do I feel like Julian West after his nightmare; when he wakes from utopia to find hell?' (p.30). More substantively, a nightmare return occurs in the second part of the novel, when the first utopian project has failed. Because of a non-satirical approach this is not as overt as in, for example, *Gulliver's Travels*, *Looking Backwards* or *A Modern Utopia*, but there is an expression of pathos and dissipation:

There were no Helots; they had used up their last savings paying bails and other court costs. And then everyone dispersed. Some joined Trot groups and Eco-protestors. And Jesus Saves, willing to soak up anyone; like his sister. Most settled back to old lives or made new ones. He and Maurice suspended theirs, the latter in regret, but Toby? He had taken his anger and fashioned a seed of white heat, pure and distilled. (p.158)

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<sup>228</sup> Kumar, p.26.

<sup>229</sup> Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (Berwick-upon-Tweed: Folio Society, 2011), p.277.

Another popular utopian device is to have a character (usually the Western everyman author-proxy protagonist) stand in for the reader as they are introduced to the new society. Although this is not the approach assumed by More, Bacon adopts this mode in his *New Atlantis* with interlocutors delivering lengthy digressions on the place's customs, and one can find Bacon's legacy in everything from *Icaria* to *News from Nowhere*, and from *Island* to *Ecotopia*. My own book is no exception, with Mary's lengthy blogs being one prominent example.

Feminist utopian literature from the twentieth-century played with Bacon's trope too. Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* exemplifies a possible subversion, making the explorer a Hispanic woman in her mid-thirties. More radically, in *With Her in Our Land*, Gilman inverts the formula, with a utopian woman visiting the non-utopian patriarchal world—a convention Ursula K. Le Guin also adopts and allegorically adapts for *The Dispossessed* with her male utopian-protagonist Shevek. Early in *We Are Seven* this type of archetypal traveller, whose name is a reference to More, recounts his journey during an online conversation: 'Ralph Hythloday back in the seventies, when i was just barely a teenager, i lived on a commune for a few months up at the scottish borders with radicals.' (p.31) Later on, *We Are Seven* twice exemplifies the feminist subversion of this formula, aware that subverting the trope (and expectation) is a mechanism that destabilises the relationship between the

character and the reader. Both instances involve female characters. In the first instance the female journalist Mary writes a descriptive blog of the occupied tower blocks, much as Hythloday fictively recounts his explorations to More:

Helots are self-governing in structure, but at the head is Maurice: a quiet, intense, giant. In appearance and temperament he's a hybrid of Neanderthal and Professor. He keeps the building running, addressing complaints and heads-off disaster. I was not here before his group, but from piecing together the testimony of residents I can discern their impact.  
(p.119)

The second instance is when Joshua guides Ella through the Shed; neither of these characters is typical of utopian protagonists in terms of race and gender respectively. Moreover, in reading *We Are Seven* the reader is not encouraged to fix on a character made to resemble the Eurocentric everyman. Instead, there is a diversity of non-generic characters who perform this generic role. Therefore, *We Are Seven* is able to situate itself within the utopian genre, but also subvert its conventions.

## Aporetic Utopianism

Beyond considerations of genre, I was aware that *We Are Seven* must function primarily as 'literary fiction' so as to make an original contribution. Definitions of 'literary' have propensities to be circular or vague, for example 'important writing with permanent and memorable artistic value.'<sup>230</sup> My own working definition of 'literary fiction' implies aesthetic functions, but allows for an instrumental approach. Furthermore, a novel of ideas such as *We Are Seven* must function as a narrative experience, rather than an essay, which means advancing a plot and characters using skills of engagement such as tension, revelations and obstacles. In order to accomplish these goals I made stylistic choices, which take inspiration from beyond the utopian tradition, from the broader inheritances of the novel and other narrative mediums. The most important of these stylistic choices is the use of *aporia*, or fruitful impasses. Plato scholar M. M. McCabe makes extensive use of this conceit in her hermeneutics:

If all the dialogues before the *Republic* lead us to the theories found there, any puzzlement they may display will be purely protreptic [persuasive and instructive], and not a part of the working philosophy going on there. If, on

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<sup>230</sup> William H. Coles, *Literary Story as an Art Form: A Text for Writers* (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2008), p.7.

the other hand, later dialogues serve to offer critical reflection on earlier, then the critique itself may assume no immediate solution: *aporiai* may be genuine, and none the worse for that. This Plato is a self-critical theorist, who uses intertextual reference not merely to allude to, but to provoke reflection in one text on another.<sup>231</sup>

As we saw earlier, intertextuality implies the network of all texts, although McCabe uses a narrower definition to look at the relationship between Platonic dialogues. *Aporia*, as defined by McCabe, as a literary provocation to reflect, highlights two aspects of *We Are Seven*: an unwillingness to arrive at monological conclusions that favour a simple, authorial moral and the way different impasses in my book critically inflect one another.

This self-reflective, self-interpretive structure is signposted by repetitions—not merely the section markers of ‘utopia, dystopia, utopia’, but also repetitions between passages. For example, the Prelude is an extract from an episode at the end of the novel, a proleptic idea inspired by my familiarity with *anime* and *manga* (the Japanese tradition of comicbooks and their cartoon adaptations) such as *Baccano!*<sup>232</sup> Later on in *We Are Seven*, there are also instances of people walking through the same area. Some of the descriptive

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<sup>231</sup> Mary Margaret McCabe, *Developing the Good itself by itself: Critical Strategies in Plato's Euthydemus* (2007, <http://www.nd.edu/~plato/plato2issue/mccabe.htm> [19/4/15]).

<sup>232</sup> *Baccano!*, dir. by Takahiro Omori (Manga Entertainment, 2010) [DVD].



wording is new, but there are also variations to evoke both change and continuity:

The two men walk silently through a suburban landscape. Past tower blocks, terraced houses, newsagents, a board promoting British Beef Burgers, off-licences, derelict shells and a lone tattoo parlour displaying skulls, roses, hearts, Oriental characters seared on pink sore flesh and flashing neon lights on puddles with electric greens, blues, reds. In the distance is a column-guided gasometer, its envelope engorged into a circular gas bell colossus. They pass a homeless man with a sunken face and upturned cap. The sky is a mild unfailing grey, backlit by a weak autumnal sun that radiantly tips from blue cracks. Toby reflects that the heavens match the pebbledash and concrete. (p.15)

This is mirrored in a later scene:

The rain was harder now and the lapis sky darkened. The two men walked in silence through the suburban landscape. Past tower blocks, terraced houses, newsagents, a board promoting Kangaroo burgers, off-licences, derelict shells and a lone tattoo parlour displaying skulls, roses, hearts, Oriental characters seared on pink sore flesh and flashing neon lights on puddles with electric greens, blues, reds. In the distance was a column-

guided gasometer, its gas bell envelope empty so only the outlining telescoping walls showed like the support assembly for a promised edifice.  
(pp.143-4)

These echoes reinforce the sense of impasse, as if the novel is struggling to overcome repetitions. What are the *aporias* of *We Are Seven*? Each section contains its own example. The first *aporias* are symbolic. The characters struggle to legitimise the seriousness of their plans and lives: the left activist leader Maurice needs the journalist Mary to participate because 'He felt more comfortable to be watched by a former rag employee—an adult if puerile world of media-politics, where his radical dreams failed to penetrate.'  
(pp.105-6) Clare, on the other hand, joins Helots to find a sense of meaning within the context of her loneliness and suicidal depression: '[...] if I am going to commit suicide I may as well do it as protest, self-immolation outside of parliament?' (p.40). None of these dilemmas are fully resolved by the end of this section. At the conclusion, Maurice is in a car with his lawyer and cousin Graham:

'Enough bullshit, alright?' Finningham diverted his eyes from the road to look at Maurice, straying a little towards the guardrails.  
Maurice nodded. 'Enough.' (p.147)

The second *aporia* builds on the despair with which my novel's first section concludes; it is an *aporia* of nihilism, which is a sceptical impasse that opens up new possibilities. This is evident in the trauma experienced by my new character, the retired teacher Vera, whose partner, Jacquie, dies: 'I found her there, lying next to the Hoover. Two parallel bodies: the live machine and the dead woman.' (p.164). Ella, separated from her friends Joshua and the deceased Ollie (who died in a raid on the Helot-occupied tower block), experiences a breakdown in a supermarket: 'Only at the cereal section had dread risen solidly from her abdomen and into her heart and head.' (p.169) With Maurice I had a vehicle with which to articulate this nihilism and explicitly refer back to the impasse of the previous section:

David had put Maurice forward for leadership of Helots. Maurice was to lead others in the world, as someone who felt he was the last person of the world. 'I don't want to be a leader,' Maurice had affirmed. 'I'd be the Pied Piper of Hamelin.' He had been right. (p.228)

The third section allowed me to tie these *aporias* together, through an allusion that first appears in section one, to Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote*.<sup>233</sup> This happens when Philip encounters the children Ollie and Joshua playing make-believe 'Phil smiles and lights another fag. "Little Kee'hotey

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<sup>233</sup> Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote* (London: Folio Society, 1995).

and faithful Sancho. Good to see you two.” (p.13) On Philip and Joshua’s reacquaintance in the third section, Joshua comments that he ‘know who Kee’hotey be, mun’. (p.252) Here, Philip summarises the moral of his Quixote reference: ‘Only difference between children and grown-ups is adults don’t believe in grown-ups.’ (p.253) This is also an allusion to Maurice, who died of his alcoholism during the second section; before his death Maurice remembers his adolescent revelation that ‘liberated him from some force hidden in words that *knew* what the fuck was going on or what to do. He gained the confidence and entitlement of nihilism.’ (p.227) Both these statements deny that there is a validating outside—adult—perspective that has more access to meaning.

The *aporia* of the third section is born out of the *aporia* of despair, while also answering the symbolic *aporia* of children pretending to be adults; there is no meaning superior to the games played by Ollie and Joshua, or played by Maurice’s Helots. Nor, by implication, is there a meaning superior to the fictive and often defensively self-justifying games played by More, Harrington, Bellamy, William Morris, Gilman and Le Guin in a genre keen to distinguish itself from the whimsy of Cockayne and, as we have seen, lay claim to the seriousness of political science and mass movements. *We Are Seven* attempts to contribute to the waning Utopian conversation by making the claim that it does not need to defend its aesthetic or instrumental playfulness to be serious.

Triple-A, the new character of the third section, presents Maurice's nihilism again. Triple-A tries to summarise the moral of the police raid on the new utopia, the Shed, which mirrors the first unsuccessful police intervention on the tower block and attempt to remove the children of resident families. His lack of a definitive answer functions as a satire of Maurice's deadlock: 'Either way the moral is different, and so I cannot convey a parabolic finale, but must disappoint with a mere dunno, dun care and adieu.' (p.291) However, as the satirical edge suggests, the third section overcomes Maurice's nihilism with a new *aporia* suggested by the leader of the Shed, Alice: 'Were we almost crushed? Will we be crushed? A sane observer would say so, in probability, but as the renowned Triple-A says, we already wagered with insanity.' (p.307) By suggesting a wager, this is an *aporia* of hope.

To preserve the aporetic quality of the wager, I did not include a second raid on the Shed to mirror the second successful police raid on the tower block. Moreover I give the reader no means of knowing what will happen once the book has ended. The plot resolves with an *aporia*, with uncertainty; nobody knows the eventual outcome and nothing exists to offer an external, authorial meaning to the account. It concludes, like each of the sections, with a death representative of the impasse. In the first Ollie dies in a state of confusion, attempting to find and help his abusive and neglectful father. He is accidentally knocked downstairs by a police shield in the commotion: 'He knew he must save his dad. He knew as much as he knew he hated his dad'.

(p.139) Here we find an ambivalent undertaking that ends in despair. In the second section Maurice dies 'offstage', metaphorically obscured; a death which is later reported to his roommate Sebastian by Clare: 'How can Maurice be dead? That man was perpetual.' (p.245) In the third section Phil dies with a sense of hope.

The links between *aporia* and death have been observed before; the poet and critic Omar Sabbagh, for example, observed: 'Death, of course, both in terms of empirical life and as a concept, is liminal, aporetic.'<sup>234</sup> Death is also a special, constitutive problem for utopia—it asks why one might work towards a better world that one cannot see realised, let alone experience? This question can be resolved aporetically, in hope.

While *aporias* such as this are open-ended by their nature, using them does not avoid the aesthetic requirements of a satisfying conclusion. Philip's death constitutes the ending of *We Are Seven* and my aim was to establish the general import of the whole book. For the poet Donne, the ending of a text was vital to the work's overall success: 'the force of the whole piece, is for the most part left to the shutting up; the whole frame of the Poem is a beating out of a piece of gold, but the last clause is as the impression of the stamp, and that is it that makes it current'.<sup>235</sup> All the *aporias* inform the last one, which then alters their meaning. Philip's death is foreshadowed in the first section:

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<sup>234</sup> Omar Sabbagh, *Disciplined Subjects and Better Selves*, p.62, (Hephzibah: Anaphora Literary Press, 2016)

<sup>235</sup> John Donne, *The Sermons of John Donne*, George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson (ed) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953-62), vol. 6, p.41.

'he sprinted down the street where he would one day die'. (p.93) In this death I make evident how the *aporia* of hope inflects the earlier *aporias*. Philip starts by reflecting on other characters, especially those who intersected with his family, including Ollie. He accepts his death, and by extension the other deaths, despite it precluding his personal future:

He saw the watch; irate he'd not get to *The Queen*. And happy, his last thoughts in the conditional tense, his body against the floor, grounded on a larger mass, he listened:

'Tick-tick-tick-tick-tick-tick-

tock-tick-tock-tick-tock-tick-tock-

-tock-

-tock-

-tock—' (p.312)

The reference to time is not incidental. It echoes Part One when Philip listens to his watch and gains a sense of time passing at different speeds depending on the interpretative choice he makes in how he hears the sound:

And as he watches dancing fumes he twists his watch so its face rests upside down on his wrist, pulling the device up to his ear by clasping his neck; he can demarcate the noise in his head with the onomatopoeias tick-

tick-tick-tick-tick-tick or tick-tock-tick-tock—the latter somehow slower.

(p.50)

This extract demonstrates one example in the novel of an interest in the split between the interior private world and the exterior shared world. In *We Are Seven* and the general communitarian tradition of utopian writings, the former, interior, is broadly subordinated to the latter, exterior, but the tension remains in how individuals might assert their own subjectivity within a political or communal ideal. Reconciling that gap is key to the characters' utopianism, especially those who experience the split between subjectivity and objectivity as a form of alienation and reification that cannot be overcome. One example of this split in fiction is found in Tarsem Singh's film *The Fall*.<sup>236</sup> An injured stuntman, Roy, invents a fantastical fable for fellow patient Alexandria, a child labourer, in order to trick her into supplying him with morphine. The narrative depends on the characters reconciling their perspectives to avert Roy's spiritual breakdown. The split in their interpersonal subjectivity, then, is constitutive of the plot, and this is explored in numerous ways. For example, Roy talks about an Indian warrior, referring to one of the indigenous peoples of the U.S., but Alexandria imagines her friend from India in the role. In *We Are Seven*, characters often inhabit worlds-within-the-world, oblivious of one another:

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<sup>236</sup> *The Fall*, dir. by Tarsem Singh (Roadside Attractions, 2006) [DVD].



Another voice cut in from behind Maurice, a woman's. 'Is it getting claustrophobic?' *Toby's sister? Clare?* Maurice had forgotten she was still in the room. (p.111)

Ollie and Joshua's game, inspired by the Japanese *manga Naruto*,<sup>237</sup> is one of these subjective worlds: 'Ollie squirms, wanting to be erased, or step into the game world, enveloped beyond discovery by Joshua's fantasy universe, elsewhere.' (p.23) This escapism is ultimately destroyed by the intrusion of the objective world when Ollie is killed, although it is notable for being a shared fictive space that forms a parallel to Helots' prefigurative utopian games. A more solipsistic instance is found much later in the book when Toby observes a divorced and unhappy couple in a restaurant while Sebastian vainly pontificates about publishing a left-wing magazine. Toby is sharing a meal with a large group, but is detached from their discussion as he watches this separate drama occurring in the same objective space:

She did not sense the man at first. When she did, she shot up. The man looked upset and clumsy as he dropped a backpack on the floor and removed a box of Lego. The boy stared at the man with huge eyes. (p.234)

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<sup>237</sup> *Naruto*, dir. by Hayato Date (Anchor Bay, 2013) [DVD].

Like *The Fall, We Are Seven* posits ways of reconciling to this *aporia* of different perceptions; the internal and external realities are traversed by intersubjectivities, as the ground for any resolution of the problematics of the plot. First the *aporia* of meaning, the impasse of characters' ability to make sense of their world, is constituted in validating their subjective worlds by appealing to the external world. Then the *aporia* of nihilism is constituted in validating those subjective worlds because nothing external is able to invalidate them, as the loss of external meaning allows them to constitute their own. Finally, the *aporia* of hope is found in reaching towards a shared project that reunites different subjectivities to a single end, without reifying them. As Mary states in her Blog on Helots occupation:

Neighbour and neighbour, formerly strangers, united to a single end. If this sounds dreamily utopian, that is an accurate summing up of the atmosphere. (p.119)

## Writing a Utopia

Paul Ricœur has said that Sagas and Ancient Epics are 'centered on groups, not just on isolated figures.'<sup>238</sup> Similarly, *We are Seven* avoids atomising its subjects by focussing on how the characters interrelate rather than how they relate to themselves, which precludes a certain amount of internality of character. With the exception of Clare's journals, little space is afforded to thoughts and feelings other than in action. This is to reinforce the sense that their existence is primarily public, and shared, rather than private and atomised.

As well as devices to convey the kind of person who inhabits the novel, there are metafictional and structural conceits that reflect on the kind of novel that is about such people. These include references and allusions to the literary utopian tradition, which are used more to establish credentials within the tradition than to undercut naturalism. In this way the novel references other literature directly, but without breaking the fourth wall by having characters talk directly to the reader. The style of the novel is elliptical and fragmentary, with short sections interweaving into a collage. The writing uses changes in tense and medium, with examples of epistolary, omniscient third person and unreliable first person points of view. This produces shifts in

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<sup>238</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1983-5), vol. 1, p.151.

register, but repetitions and prolepses supplement the narrative structure to foster coherence.

Besides *aporia*, various stylistic choices have informed *We Are Seven*; some I discovered while writing, while others derive from academic and personal influences. These have included using idiomatic phrases such as ‘much of a muchness’ (p.52), phonetic spellings in dialogue, different literary styles (epistolary, first person, third person) and changing points of view. Clare’s journal sections were initially written by hand to get a sense of how writing in that mode differs from using a keyboard, though I also edited them later for the sake of aesthetics and clarity. My own practice of keeping a journal inspired the abbreviations used in these sections:

out @ 1 of his political meetings (p.37)

Can’t remember ½ of it (p.39)

& look 4 people (p.117)

During the writing process, I took notes of distinctive words from numerous sources: television and film, graffiti, *manga* (with its idiomatically rich translations), daily conversation and other novels. These were compiled into a single document to be integrated into the novel. They were not randomly

incorporated, however, but carefully sifted and sometimes later rejected. The overall aim was not to use as many obscure or polysyllabic phrases as possible, but to keep the language diverse and fresh as well as, most significantly, veil my authorial role in selecting (consciously or unconsciously) the vocabulary. Undercutting the knowing, authorial perspective was one of my guiding aims in writing *We Are Seven*.

William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White's *Elements of Style*<sup>239</sup> and David Lodge's *The Art of Fiction*<sup>240</sup> were both useful. I have learnt to be more cautious about the overuse of adverbs and adjectives and the need for parsimonious prose, such as deleting the superfluous 'large' from 'large expanse.' Some sections have been re-edited with particular aims. For instance, the journalistic writing for Mary's character is based on examples from the media. To this end I read a sample of media texts, focusing especially on *The Observer*, which is the most direct real-world parallel to Mary's writing. This resulted in the removal and summarising of extraneous dialogue, taking it into the present tense, altering syntax and vocabulary to match the form and starting with a catchier opening. In newspaper articles there was a tendency to use shorter paragraphs, which I also mimicked. The first paragraph of the original was therefore more elaborate:

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<sup>239</sup> William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White, *The Elements of Style* (London: Longman, 1999).

<sup>240</sup> David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction* (London: Vintage, 2011).

It was only two months ago Bret Borger was arrested at his garage; the extent of his crime drip-fed to a sensation-eager media. How, two weeks earlier, he kidnapped the Minister for Work and Pensions, Gregory Simmons, and held him prisoner for four days. His helpless captive was beaten and tortured—death from trauma to the head. The more macabre details are infamous, but less known are Borger's motives for carrying out his intricately planned imprisonment and assassination of a supposedly well-protected and controversial politician. Was it madness, politics or a personal grudge? Without grounds for any conclusion, the copious speculation has been characterised by idle blather. Now, for the first time, the public is to be given access.

This became considerably shorter after revision, and took the form of two small paragraphs:

Two months ago a crime shocked our nation. Bret Borger was arrested at his garage. He kidnapped Gregory Simmons, Minister for Work and Pensions, then beat and tortured the man—inducing death from trauma to the head. Less known than these macabre details are Borger's motives.

Madness, politics or grudge? So far it has all been speculation. Now, for the first time, the public is given access. (p.48)

Another problem was how the frequent movement between characters and stress on dialogue might risk alienating the reader. This tendency in writing was usefully commented on by John Mullan in his *How Novels Work*: 'The more characters known, the more viewpoints represented, the more difficult it becomes to maintain narrative coherence.'<sup>241</sup> Through the aporetic, three-part structure of *We are Seven*, the parts of the novel are shown to relate to each other, but there is still a need to be comprehensible and engage the reader with that cohesive structure.

To overcome this problem I expanded characterisation and prolepsis. I also used framing devices such as chapter titles. These titles take inspiration from the long and proleptic chapter titles, themselves derived from an older tradition of novel writing, in Douglas Coupland's *Girlfriend in a Coma*,<sup>242</sup> Joan M Harris's *The Gospel of Loki*,<sup>243</sup> Douglas Lain's *Billy Moon*<sup>244</sup> and Matthew Francis's *The Book of the Needle*.<sup>245</sup> There are parallels here within the older utopian tradition itself; for example, with James Burgh's aforementioned Utopia's title, *An Account of the First Settlement, Laws, Form of Government, and Police, of the Cessaes, A People of South America*. These titles then have three functions: as comedic interludes, as links to the utopian tradition, and as

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<sup>241</sup> John Mullan, *How Novels Work* (Oxford: OUP, 2006), p.68.

<sup>242</sup> Douglas Coupland, *Girlfriend in a Coma* (London: Harper Perennial, 2004).

<sup>243</sup> Joan M Harris, *The Gospel of Loki* (London: Gollancz, 2014).

<sup>244</sup> Douglas Lain, *Billy Moon* (New York: Tor Books, 2013).

<sup>245</sup> Matthew Francis, *The Book of the Needle* (Tanygrisiau: Cinnamon Press, 2014).

anchors for the plot. In *We Are Seven* such titles gave me a comic, archaic overview of the respective plot:

In which Helots occupy the block and our cast gathers to build a new life in the midst of the old. (p.10)

In which the barbs of defeat & impasse claim victims & the remnant find new friendships in hitherto unfriendly territory. (p.148)

In which a new utopia is born from the vestiges of the last. (p.250)

Moreover, there is one of these subtitles at the beginning, encompassing the whole novel:

In which in an unknown city of known England, brave women & men assemble to fight iniquity and poverty. (p.4)

There were other proleptic devices. As well as the more obvious theatrical and operatic source, the decision to also include a 'Principal Dramatis Personæ' (p.8) is in part a further attempt to give a scaffold to the novel, an additional aid to readers, and an allusion to Marx's use of the term in *Capital*: 'the same economic dramatis personae, a buyer and a seller—confront one



another.’<sup>246</sup> Moreover, it is in keeping with the aesthetic of the proleptic titles. With the elliptical shifts in characters from different backgrounds and subjective worlds, this aesthetic coherency has served as a countermeasure to create a unity in the text.

Several other proleptic inclusions have already been mentioned, such as the repetitions, especially the preamble, and Philip’s death. However, as well as the more heavy-handed device of flashbacks, analepsis has been incorporated through subtler references to previous characters, helping the reader keep track of them and their relations; for instance: ‘He follows me like a lapdog—to the bus, everywhere.’ (p.81) And I have stressed the relations between characters in terms of their familial ties. This supplements one of my priorities for *We Are Seven*, to embed family, generational difference and childhood within the story. This is contrary to the common approach of novels of ideas and politics as exemplified by Ayn Rand’s *The Fountainhead*,<sup>247</sup> which bypass concerns for family for a more exclusive and cerebral focus on atomised adults. To illustrate, in one instance I added a sense of familial relationships by changing an episode featuring Philip so that ‘sleeping baby’ became ‘his sleeping grandnephew’. (p.88) In this way I was able to help the reader follow the narrative, anchoring them in the characters in terms of their relationships, and emphasise their communal identities.

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<sup>246</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (2010, [https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/\[22/4/15\]](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/[22/4/15])), vol. 1.

<sup>247</sup> Ayn Rand, *The Fountainhead* (New York: Signet Books, 1993).

From the outset, the peril of having so many characters was foremost in my mind. For this reason, one technique that was decided on early on in the writing process was to make character descriptions distinct; the emphasis on the character concept in comic books was an influence, as visual media place a premium on appearances that can be undermined by novels' more abstracted reliance on prose. Examples of this in *We Are Seven* are numerous, as the following demonstrate:

A waitress with a large Roman nose and ear length hair smiles, her nametag reads 'Beth'. (p.18)

He hasn't a strand of hair on his head, *alopecia totalis*. (p.38)

That night Ollie stared at his orange hair in the sink mirror and thought, as he often did, of cutting it off or dying it like Joshua's Gran's. It was his dad's hair sprouting from his head, a fungus, alien matter. (p.103)

An old man with a tangled shamanic grey beard and deep furrows (p.255)

More substantially, I struggled with the limitations of my choice to 'head-hop' within episodes. Without a single, dominant perspective, especially in a novel with a large number of characters, there is a risk that it becomes difficult for

the reader to keep track, even allowing for proleptic and analeptic conceits. However, frequent jumps in perspective are a vital feature of *We Are Seven* and its ambition not to represent the solitary arc of a lone individual, but the story of groups and group projects. The compromise was to adhere more consistently to one perspective in each episode, i.e. sections divided by a tilde within each part. An example of the difference can be found in two versions of the same paragraph from early in *We Are Seven*. In both instances the episode begins with Philip's point of view, but in the older version the third person voice readily head-hops to assume Ella's perspective:

Ella tracks their steady conversation with fretful movements. It goes on; long silences and empty chat, broken up references to her as though she was not there. Standing behind her mother, her head jerks her attention to arbitrary details of the safe, monotonous space—*Maneki-neko*, the good luck Japanese cat on the mantel, tiny TV screen with a crack in the black plastic frame, grey strained carpet; keyboard and chairs where her mother taught piano—her hands make regular movements—ticks.

His niece stands behind her mother, she jerks her head. The man watches her fretfully track their conversation. It goes on; silences and nattering. He stares at *Maneki-neko*, the good luck Japanese mantel cat, the tiny TV screen with a crack in the black plastic frame, grey stained carpet; a keyboard and

chairs where his sister teaches piano. Ella's hands are making regular movements—tics. (p.12)

Ali Smith's *Hotel World*<sup>248</sup> (2001) has been a major influence in shaping my choice to use a plurality of voices in response to the problems associated with depicting the narrative of a group over the narrative of individuals. Smith's novel contains another example of prolepsis, and exemplifies democratisation through the novel form in a way that is similar to, and potentially elucidating for, *We Are Seven*. Emma Smith's essay 'A Democracy of Voice', subtitled 'Narrating Community in Ali Smith's *Hotel World*', posits that the hotel backdrop of the story, despite constituting 'a culturally homogenized space', is also 'a site of anonymous and transitory encounters that allow for the transgression of social divides, for hegemonic centres to be shifted.'<sup>249</sup> This can be related to how I brought together Helots and the tower block in part one of *We Are Seven*, where the crucial relationships of the book are seeded. More fundamentally, Emma Smith perceives narrative 'strategies of *polyvocality*' in Ali Smith's novel that she traces to Woolf and William Faulkner. Here '*polyvocality*' is interesting because of 'its potency as a means of examining familial and communal structures'. To that end, Smith argues that texts such as *Hotel World* must not merely box individuals within one

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<sup>248</sup> Ali Smith, *Hotel World* (London: Penguin, 2002).

<sup>249</sup> Emma Smith, *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 'A Democracy of Voice' (2010, <http://cww.oxfordjournals.org/content/4/2/81.extract> [22/4/15]).

plural 'we' voice that speaks for the community, or subordinate that group to a single 'I' voice, but rather:

[...] replace the main protagonist and/or narrator, which remains a central assumption of much narrative theory, with several such figures, [...] in order to think through questions of social relations, of interconnectivity, of the complex workings of community.<sup>250</sup>

This is a strategy consistently adopted in Robinson's Mars trilogy too, with its strong emphasis on pluralism.

Similarly, for Jacques Rancière, certain styles are regarded as either democratic or non-democratic depending on whether they present 'characters without depth' or attempt to recover 'the powers of myth enveloped in language.'<sup>251</sup> For Rancière 'democratic' does not mean merely a political arrangement, such as parliamentary politics, but refers to a privileging of the demos over governance and an elevation of the marginalised. He cites a democratic levelling of characters in the paratactic prose of Cesare Pavese,<sup>252</sup> and this narrative effect is likewise attempted in *We Are Seven* through an emphasis on dialogue, character relations, *aporia* and *polyvocality*. Dialogue in various forms (including the communicative, epistolary mediums of articles,

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid

<sup>251</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p.55.

<sup>252</sup> Cesare Pavese, *The Selected Works of Cesare Pavese* (New York: NYRB, 2001).

blogs, letters, email, online chat) comprises most of the novel, with the two notable exceptions being explicitly solipsistic and despairing; that is, Clare's suicidal journals and Maurice's solitary breakdown. Here depth, hierarchy and the atomised self become synonymous with impasse, death and limits. For that reason, interiority is rarely stressed during interactions between characters, except in short italicised interludes, which once again are utilised to highlight the impasse of stress that alienates individuals: '*What do they expect from me?*' (p.125)

The problem of stasis in Utopian fiction is distinct from these other issues, because it arises from the genre itself (an idealised society inherently lacks the conflict necessary for drama) rather than my authorial choice, such as the choice to focus on a community rather than an individual. Once a group has achieved utopia, there are no longer narrative obstacles by which to progress plot, and therefore there is the risk that the plot stalls. The key here is not merely in inventing such obstacles, but disguising the artifice of such invention. This issue is largely circumnavigated in a process utopia and ustopia, since the creation and formation of the utopia as well as the struggle against the threat of dystopia constitutes the progression of events. Nonetheless, this alone does not necessarily provide sufficient tension, which is where the dialectic of utopia and dystopia, the structure of *We Are Seven* with its failure at the end of part one, is meant to reinvigorate my story and contribute the required tension reaching towards a satisfying conclusion.

The challenge of concluding the novel has been analysed above, so this critical discussion will conclude by examining the conceptual and practical choices that produce the *beginning* and ‘beginnings’ of *We Are Seven*. ‘Beginnings’ are those various recommencements that typify how a book is divided into sections. Sylvia Plath was the most substantial influence on how I incorporated beginnings and, more generally, related to the need to engage the reader. Her novel *The Bell Jar* (1963) has a famously disorientating, but equally rooted and poetic opening: ‘It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn’t know what I was doing in New York.’ More significantly, Plath uses techniques through the novel to renew her hook. This includes *in medias res*: ‘It was completely dark.’ And sensationalisation: ‘Of course his mother killed him.’<sup>253</sup> An example of this from *We Are Seven* is when we are introduced *in medias res* to an episode in which Joshua and Ollie are playing a console game without this being immediately apparent:

Fire balloons from Joshua’s mouth and engulfs Ollie. The charred body knocks against a sand-house, thumping an instant web of cracks onto the frail structure. Despite the blow, Ollie rebounds—his faster-than-sight thin-elastic frame emerges behind Joshua to launch an upper-kick for which he has saved on his chakra-bar. The target vanishes in a puff as he is about to

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<sup>253</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), pp.1, 164, 148.

take the knock, only to reappear behind Ollie and deliver the *coup de grâce*.

(p.22)

As well as the hook, the opening establishes atmosphere and context. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Mandarins* (1954) proved formative in developing my ideas about how this can be achieved. Like *We Are Seven*, this is a book with a large number of characters, group projects, personal crises and a political subtext. Nonetheless, de Beauvoir opts to introduce her fictional landscape and political moment of her novel, at the end of the Second World War, through one character's solitary experiences:

Henri found himself looking at the sky again—a clear, black crystal dome overhead. It was difficult for the mind to conceive of hundreds of planes shattering that black, crystallising silence! And suddenly, words beginning tumbling through his head with a joyous sound—the offensive was halted... the German collapse had begun... at last he would be able to leave. He turned the corner of the quay. The streets would smell again of oil and orange-blossoms, in the evening there would be light, people would sit and chat in outdoors cafés, and he would drink real coffee to the



sound of guitars. His eyes, his hands, his skin were hungry. It had been a long fast!<sup>254</sup>

The atmosphere in this particular scene becomes representative of a general historical moment. Similarly, my opening introduces us to a particular scene in which Philip is sitting in a café before walking out, which provides a description of the city, touching on themes of community and alienation that will become central to the novel. The city itself is as much introduced here as Philip. Its presence in the novel is of comparable importance as the central characters, as seems fitting for a genre rooted in geography, and a sense of its composition is provided early on. As well as the population of ‘over a million’ (p.11) we are told of the architecture of the city’s residential outskirts:

[...] a monolith in grey decorated by satellite dishes—like Christmas baubles affixed to pine. Inside is a monotony of dingy apartments—akin to all of the apartments in all of the apartment blocks on the city’s outskirts, which form a donut ring of brutalist high-rises like a new take on Neolithic standing stones. (ibid)

This is later reinforced in other passages:

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<sup>254</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Mandarins* (London: Folio Society, 2008), p.1.

I was eager to do well, I had been assigned such a good spot; the city square was the most central location, particularly important for an urban jungle that otherwise felt like clusters of smaller, identical cities contained in one large city, with the same brands repeating so that one area would have a café and bookshop and three or four clothes stores and then the next would have the same café and bookshop and three or four clothes stores. With its fountain and library the city centre was a landmark in which it was possible to find oneself. (p.206)

In the introductory scene Philip's distinctive appearance and relationships are also given consideration. As mentioned previously, the character concept (or visual uniqueness) is one way I differentiate between characters. As an instance of prolepsis, 'Jesus Saves' is mentioned and, a little later, when Philip walks into the tower block that will be the setting for most of the first part, the building is referred to as a 'castle destined for siege' (p.11). My aim was both to compel interest and provide a sense of the novel's *telos*:

He tongues his protruding lower lip. Takes another bite of his baguette, chews strips of mayonnaised bacon. Ruddy in beige three-piece, skinny black tie, he eats with determination, lumped uncannily on a café stool. And fumbling change onto the table, he waddles out, takes a fag to his mouth, deploys a liberty statue novelty lighter—sucking as he eases

through crowds. Only thwarted by a woman in white handing out bold font 'Jesus Saves' leaflets to passers-by. (ibid)

Chronologically, the prelude supersedes this opening and again uses the technique of *in medias res*. Nonetheless, it is this first episode of my book that initiates the logic of the narrative. When the episode repeats at the end, we see how that logic politically leads to the conclusion.

Both J. M. G. Le Clézio and Mervyn Peake influenced the form of the novel's beginning, which drifts from character to character and wanders around the city, with only hard breaks between each character transition. In *Titus Groan*, Peake introduces the reader to the fantasy and parabolic city-state Gormenghast with the same conceit. We encounter 'the curator, Rottcodd' who has a conversation with 'Flay, the taciturn servant of Sepulchrave, Earl of Gormenghast' whom we follow to Swelter, 'The chef of Gormenghast'<sup>255</sup> and so on. During this we are given a tour of the titular Gormenghast. Le Clézio's *The Flood* starts: 'At the beginning there were clouds, and more clouds, heavy black, blown by intermittent gusts of wind, contained within a ring of mountains on the horizon.'<sup>256</sup> It then continues for sixteen pages with a description of a provincial city's awakening, but no characters are mentioned.

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<sup>255</sup> Mervyn Peake, *Titus Groan* (London: Folio Society, 1992), pp.3, 5, 17.

<sup>256</sup> J. M. G. Le Clézio, *The Flood* (London: Penguin, 2008), p.1.

The intention behind this device is twofold. Firstly, to establish the unnamed city in *We Are Seven* as a semi-character in its own right, with its implied dispositions and expectations, a fact I already hinted at by its inclusion in the 'Principal Dramatis Personæ'. And, secondly, the opening establishes the elliptical, *polyvocal* and communal shape of the novel. This is a part of its utopian design. A utopian structure is necessarily geographic: although utopia is both a nowhere and an elsewhere, the where is always constitutive of utopian fiction. Utopia is also communal, as utopias address themselves to communal aspirations.

The last aspect of the beginning, also emphasises that communal facet, the titular William Wordsworth epigraph for *We Are Seven*:

"But they are dead; those two are dead!

Their spirits are in heaven!"

'Twas throwing words away; for still

The little Maid would have her will,

And said, "Nay, we are seven!" (p.5)

Wordsworth's ballad poem addresses motifs that are important to the utopian themes of the book: death, communal identity and the aporetic distinction between the subjective view of the 'little Maid' and the objective view of the narrator. Moreover, its invocation of the first person plural is allusive of

Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*, and the numerologically significant 'seven' (besides the reference to an afterlife) connect it to some of the religious themes both of the novel and of the wider utopian tradition. Finally, the poem is a dialogue, which prefigures the *polyvocality* of the novel. Thus the title and epigraph anticipate some of the novel's key features.

From this examination of the literary influences and conceits that influenced the narrative, it should be clear to see that *We are Seven* is indebted to a range of novelistic innovations as well as the literary conversations more unique to the utopia and dystopia, brought together in the ustopia. Earlier in the essay I demonstrated that utopia, as a genre, is particularly shaped by a conversation between utopian texts; that is, that different utopias such as Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* and William Morris's *News from Nowhere* have a significant relationship to one another. Moreover, I have traced this genre back to its origins in the early modern period, examined the relative rise of the dystopia since the early twentieth-century and the brief return to the utopia during the 1970s. Most importantly, I have illustrated both in *We Are Seven* and this accompanying essay, the contention that utopia can be renewed in novelistic form today.

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