

Incomplete Pictures

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INCOMPLETE PICTURES

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To Rose

My name is Cornelius Baker-Smith and I've been dead at least four times. Hazy recollections come to visit me of a life or lives before this one. I have worn more than one of the innumerable masks of humanity. The masks are fluid and constantly changing.

The summer of no relief is coming to an end. The summers are becoming hotter every year. Sometimes I think the world is ending, but I keep waking up, day after day. The feeling when I wake is a lingering weight. It's the realisation of a continued existence that is never quite as fresh as I desire. For now, I'm stuck with the face that stares back through the cracked morning mirror. The cold, broken glass is an isolated image of itself, but it's all I have to watch. That and the window. Memory burrows deep and tarnishes the sky. There are no words to be spoken out loud today. Tomorrow they will come out, doubled, all through a barrage of loneliness. But that's not today. The house I'm in is on an island surrounded not by water but rivers of traffic. Its roar is a distraction that cannot be blocked out and continues on despite its own need for cessation. The need for cessation also applies to my own situation. Enlightenment attained only through the cessation of its seeking. Indian meal moths fly around the room so often that I've thought about naming them. I wouldn't be able differentiate between them to do so. I don't know how long I'll be able to stay. In this house. On this Earth.

Suspended here in words, I hang without a whisper, like a spider cocooned in its own web. Without the words I'm

blind and, with them, I'm trapped in the concepts they denote. Trapped until I can rearrange them of my own accord, until I can harness their power as though they're units in a war game of consciousness. The arguments that prevail are those that are sound and are able to withstand the scrutiny of attack. In the mirror I see eyes that simultaneously perceive and create. I am more than a mere witness to the world; I envision and embody it. There is nothing behind my eyes. I exist only in a conventional sense. Here, in this infinite place. From here to the most distant point of observable light, there will occur cataclysmic change, most of which will be unwitnessed and unfelt. The awe and fear of the sublime takes its draw of inspiration. Chaos rains down where reason and order were once thought to exist. Embracing it, I strain my eyes to see clearly. Words no longer illuminate the way. They cannot see the future. My resolve to cease holding on to the past is thwarted by the words I choose, words that can only speak of what came before. But the narrative is not set. And there's more to be said, even through the silence. Nothing of consciousness left save words, always turning toward the past as I turn away from despair toward hope. Time to resume the cultivation of dreams. The road awakens, without a soul, and I have to create the scenes as I go. The road is devastatingly open.

In the shroud I wake again, unknowingly asleep. I wake up alone. Everything's blurred in the morning light and I rub my eyes. There's a deep sense of grief that's impossible to extract. If I dig deep enough, I'll pull out rotten pieces. Fragments of bone. Or, perhaps, nothing at all. Through the aftermath of many lives comes, all at once, an intrepid flow of stars. The stars look upon this moment – now lost forever – in the quiet, my adren-

aline reserves burnt out, as a new day spins into existence. Here I sit, at the muted desk, thoughts flowing with the tap of each key. Each letter is part of a combination that opens up the infinite. This is how I will remember these days. Memory so close that it appears before me as if it is happening now. A delay in its processing.

A dream state before waking.

The world opens up just as everything comes to a close. Another state of transition. The travels are done, the books read. There is no knowing now what to do, other than to begin again, without presuppositions. The air is all anticipation. It runs down the streets, floods the skies and inspires a change that is to come. Now in motion. It's late. Late in all manner of speaking. Of time especially. And I wait. Wait and rest and long to leave for someplace new. There is nowhere new. All paths have been traversed and the Earth has lost its awe. Rediscover it with every rising breath. On the surface. And my heart beats to a warning that nature cannot speak.

This lens is not clear. The morning is a pristine lagoon. In the corners of the room, there are dragons. I don't see them directly. I see only their shadows in my peripheral vision. The streets move continuously. Meandering streams of travel. All imaginative possibilities open up, unveiling an intolerable freedom. Knowing that they are all up to you, the victories and failings alike. Each moment, down to their core. All of the sufferings that happen for nothing. Pervasive suffering; universal suffering; the suffering of suffering. All the wasted days. Almost always enclosed within walls. I have retreated from life. It happened some time ago. I retreated to escape from reality and now, in the mire of delusion, search again for what is real.

I decide to face it all. I've been unhappy too long. I decide to focus on transforming what I deem possible. To go further. The sad light shines down again. As all optimism gathers. And forward momentum (the only remedy) is but an illusory sequence of moments. There are no answers to be found, only more questions. Stirrings against peace.

In the crooked hallway, at the encounter, I stand there like a scarecrow. Not knowing what to say. Not knowing what to do. Crows all around me, in their black funereal garbs. On the brink of falling into depression, through endless darkness. A dizzying mess of where I've been, of what I've known. Slipping, still trying to grasp on to world, sky, anything. Mind like a shaken-up snow globe. Images come back around from times I thought I'd forgotten. They do not fit together in any logical way; their purpose is unclear. I'm tense, unable to differentiate between temporal modes. I try to remain calm but really I'm angry, frustrated, writhing within myself. The nature of all things is change, except my situation doesn't. It remains stuck like a lone pebble in a river of time until, one day, it will inevitably dislodge and be lost forever. All but routine is broken. A sadness now set.

I creep up the darkened steps like a strange creature and, when I reach the landing, take the second door on the left. I put my bags down by the chair and hang my coat on the back of it. I then proceed to sit down. My life hangs here without a whisper. An unchanged film where the same action takes place. Asleep till the point of death and in suspense at the inevitability of life's ending, I take another breath. I try to sit still, and do not make a sound.

I wash my hands before the day begins. A future that's forgotten. To lock the world out is to have it close in. The way out is the way in. Relinquish control. Instead, I do something else: I live. And, through this living, which I have not yet figured out, I seek only to lend my hand to the creation of a positive world.

It feels good to be outside. I do not, however, go out there very often. Not anymore. On account of there being no place new. To find the new. That is my task. It's the task of all who set out to venture and to navigate the world that has become all too familiar. Its familiarity is an inoculation against wakefulness. I cannot resist my own gaze, crossed imperceptibly with the gaze of the world. Its gaze has become my adversary, along with the limits that it draws. And here to survive until no longer deemed necessary. Until survival inevitably gives way to absence.

This town is never silent, despite its people being locked away in their lives. The slow pour of sound cascades constantly through the air: laughter; trucks being unloaded; bins being emptied; the constant groaning of machinery. All mixed together, almost indistinguishable. To extract meaning from any single piece of sense data is to close all other possibilities.

When our eyes meet, we look into each other's worlds. In searching for her, I have found unity. My broken world glued back together with love.

For where is the dreamer if not in the dream? And, moreover, where is the dream?

At the temperature of the sun, everything melts away.

Blind to something that has been there all along, to the belief that life is worth living. Often obscured. Unnamed. Shrouded and unrevealed. But there. The knowledge of it. In

the restaurant again, along the path of purification. It's as if the waiter is cleaning up after ghosts. The customers have flickered by. The cafés across the street are also empty. I do not belong here, in this great place. I do not belong back there, either. In the old world so-called. Forever displaced. The path behind crumbles, lost, like a desolate bridge dissolving into water. To know what it means to be locked out of the world for so long, only to be invited back in.

The rains do not come. I go home.

I tidy my space and, before long, it's messy again. The same goes for washing, and sleeping, and waking, and dressing, and eating, and shitting, and pissing, pissing all day and then drinking up some more water, tea, coffee, juice. Sometimes I think the process is all there is. The stages of sustenance. I fear to lose those around me that I love. Those that, in many cases, I see rarely, if at all. Without love, I am no more than a biological machine. I'm sitting here, in my room, safe, but at the same time, I'm hanging off a cliff.

Of time. A recurring theme. Nothing there to control. Sometimes nothing to perceive. Let time slip away while life occurs. Circling images of days gone by. Everything that is relevant to being human. The expected things. The familiar things. The skies drain away through the sink of time. Until I'm walking on them, underground.

And dream. Dream a reality that is more real than anything before. The roaring knowledge that these words keep this world alive. In all my travels, the skies have never been so open as here, on these plains. Nor the trees and wildernesses so wild. Thoughts pop up like wildflowers. I used to try to push them

down, but their force is such that they must reach the sunlight. They must fly away and be free to inhabit lives of their own.

When I was a child, I was moved into a Catholic school. I would not have any *real* friends for a long time after. It was the first great challenge of my life and the first time I was ever singled out. Since I had not been baptised Catholic, I was never fully accepted by the other pupils or their parents. Mine became a life of sliding through doors and of keeping out the way. The word on the report that the other students questioned me about: Anglican. A word that made me different, somehow inferior. A life of imminent flight that transformed into a drive to escape. Here, wading through porcelain waters, there is a clarity that collects each moment of my life into a single droplet. Pure. The waves expand far from my waist toward a deep horizon that I can see but never know.

The days of doubt are upon me. Spent in solemn anticipation of whatever is to come. A change I knew had to come eventually. The world out there. The mystery of it grows further each day. The light hurts my eyes when I step out into the afternoon sun, but it feels good. As it would to a dead man who escaped from his crypt. Lazarus. Jesus, perhaps. Occasionally, I drive to distant places. Mostly, nothing much exciting happens. Nothing to match the excitement of my younger years. I do not wish for their return. Those days are gone. Lingering troubles remain in shadows, waiting.

The air in the car is putrid. I open the windows for the air to blow through. This is a life in transit. A life moving forward. Shifting constantly through the quicksand of self and time. To arrive... where? It is something I have often thought about. The lack of a destination and a surrender to the flow of an under-

standing of which there can be no finality. The picture is never complete. Especially here, in this country. Its modern culture still in its infancy. Its lines are blurred and nothing is set. Its borders keep out as much as they keep in. They will, however, never stop the flow of life by osmosis. In the meantime, culture comes from overseas. The country's traditional inhabitants are given a sentimental wave and then routinely forgotten.

Here. By the flowerbeds on the path back from the beach. Where I drowned and lived again. It's no use. My feet carry me up the hill. The wet footprints are becoming less and less defined as the others dry behind.

There's something going on behind the façade, beyond the farce that surrounds each day. There is an infinite cycle of death and rebirth, destruction and creation. In the end, it doesn't matter who is to blame: only the path exists; the process; the cycle. I hold on to another day, knowing it will end. I hold on to love as my lover falls gently back to sleep, safely returned to me. Everything seems to be happening in perfect time.

I will not be undone by the same mistakes as before, when my name was Thomas Dreer, that led to the regret and remorse that spelled my demise. I will have to forgive what could not be forgiven then: namely, myself. The consequence of failure is an eternity of cycling through tormented landscapes. In order to accomplish the goal of liberation, I will have to relinquish all attachments.

I remember a dream in which I knew a Buddhist traveller, a dream in which I was another. Dreer had known him for real and had scorned him and scoffed at his beliefs. And now here I am, conscious to know all of this. I know more now, strangely enough, than Dreer did at the time of his death. Something to

do with a manuscript left behind that the Buddhist had read. The Buddhist traveller's name was Nicholas Finch. Finch had read Dreer's lost works and, in doing so, a part of Dreer had lived in him. The part that looked out of Finch's eyes I can now recall: Swastikas on the gate of the Tibetan Buddhist university in Sarnath, India; the dawn rituals on the river Ganga; the friends that came into his life and left without so much as a murmur. At some point, the memories go dark, and so I have no clue what eventually became of Finch.

Wind rushes past the silence at the window. A river of air. I see my life from outside, as I'm sitting in here. I meditate to cultivate an inner resilience. Buddhism teaches that external phenomena are like an illusion. The same goes for any sense of self. There is, in this sense, nothing to grasp. Like fingers clutching at currents in a stream.

The radiant sun saps me of energy. Still summer. I hide from it. Keep cool. In all manner of speaking. Remain still, like the objects in the room. Peace at last. Momentarily. Where do I end and the world begin?

I do not know why I remember what I do. I have not experienced a smooth reincarnation. Let me say, for the record, that reincarnation is not, in this sense, some delusional Western comfort; I did not want to come back. However, my life is now different. I am not the same person entirely. The addictions that once plagued me are gone, and I can think with a precision not before attainable. When I look at people walking down the street, I see endless possibility. What does it mean to be a person? Are we but walking bags of skin, or something more? Before, I saw only death and destruction deep within the well of myself. There are over a thousand ways of being in the world.

Breaking free from this cell of limitation. I came back here not knowing what to expect. Well rested but not as recharged as I would've liked. Still low. The isolation had gotten to me, deep under my skin, until there was no other path to take. I had chosen my direction. I arrived home in Melbourne without knowing what was coming next. The world outside exists, even on the occasions I don't see it for days. There is a world outside this mind.

There's a violent jolt and I'm awake again. My eyes meet the air like a naked flame, igniting this vision of the world. There is nobody here who can speak for me; my voice carries with it its own assertions. It glides through the air with invisible wings that echo through the puzzle box of time, loosening the lock without a key, setting each moment free.

The future is blocked by my body. It stands as a barrier that, aside from rare transcendent moments, does not shift. Here, now, cycled back before the beginning, before I set myself alight with the knowledge of death, I wait for the past to commence. I am dead, but still speak. Reliving all that did not occur. Found here where I am lost. Lost where I am found. In the depths of myself, of the world I invented. A world that relies on the functioning of mind. My mind lingers, floating above, I see it all. All of the events that occurred without me. I dreamt them. My mind a globe. A life that unravelled that wasn't mine. Trapped between worlds. All that could have been. I see the betrayals and the subsequent ruin. The travels to India and Europe that I followed. The regret and the emptiness of retracing those steps. The familiar face of Nicholas Finch, trying to run away from Melissa Melloway. Those characters from another time, a different landscape. People I once knew.

Didn't know. I saw them and see them still. Their lives now only in my memories of another life. A life I will soon speak of. Am presently speaking of.

I peer deep into a mind of obsession. I recognise it as my own, one that I once tried to burn away. Now I burn in the formlessness of time.

Soon to be reborn into the world, pushed out into the screaming void of a hospital room.

The old formations have come to an end. Any sense of permanence or the infallibility of past and memory is to be disregarded. Sometimes, I see the old visions as pillars that need to be knocked down. From their collective rubble there may then arise something new. A flower to be mocked at first, then accepted.

A presence is watching from above. Hovering awareness. Suddenly, the watcher becomes the watched. The necessities of life come back around through an arduous cycle of their becoming the foundations upon which to exist.

The formlessness of the road becomes solid, until the road is all there is. The path beyond oblivion. Time has moved on without me. Having travelled the path before, there is the knowledge that it could all be lost in a moment. There is always the possibility of taking the wrong road. And then there's no knowing where I might end up.

Back here. Flowing not alone but along with all that exists. At such times, there is no 'I' to be separated from the stream. Such an experience is the definition of peace. A rare experience that really is profound, as opposed to a banal realisation mistaken for profundity. The workings of the mind are in everything. The traffic crawls through the rain. The courtyard is

empty of all those who once wandered there. There is nothing left but the memory of an idea whose form has passed, the carcass rotted. We are, each one of us, less than fossils. A life of constant anxiety. All in the name of nothing and no-one. Anxiety has a way of settling in the bones. I do not want any single act to define me. The storm thickens. Persistent dreams of an unfaithful chronotope.

The superfluity of the existence of the world is on my mind again. Necessary and sufficient conditions arise to support the existence of a life that is not necessary. It is a constant struggle and a fight for freedom. I lie on my back with my arms by my sides. The air is a mausoleum, the earth a tomb. Each rasping breath and fluctuation of the heart is a moment to be added to the pile. Its gaping monstrousness is impossible to sift through and can only be gawked at. Baffled eyes toward an immeasurable sky that grows with every stare. The stars recede with each passing moment, further from reach. I am perturbed by the prospect of its vastness, but persevere nonetheless.

No answers to be found, only voices that question.

They are older now, those characters whose traits I invented. Their demeanour has leapt beyond that which I created with words. They have broken free from any control I may have had over them. They were never mine. They followed only what I had to say through both obedience and resistance to my grasp. Thinking for themselves now, perhaps. Perhaps they always have. They have both, Melloway and Finch, escaped the range of my utterances.

It was a thirst for knowledge that called forth a mistaken belief in the blazing glory of death. No answers to be found there, either, only boundless sorrow. To die seemed, at the time,

to be the only way to know more. It was a blazing death, although I do not remember the pain. Nor do I remember the smell. I remember only the fire. And then I was reborn. Pushed through another channel and back into the world. It had not worked. The problem resumed, staring me in the face each time I encountered a mirror, further fragmented. Being, perhaps, was all there was, until one could let go of it completely.

The rooms here are different, the shadows longer. Here, in this strange country, far from the epicentre of the world. Once again. In this grief-wracked summer. Teetering steadily toward decline after having missed out on the peak of my existence. Thoughts blow in what little breeze there is. There are always things we might have done differently as the present wave crashes. The pursuit of an impossible dream.

Discord roars in my soul. There is a spiritual dearth in this internal landscape. The sky is the colour of oil in water.

As the graduates line up to be churned through the ceremony, I'm aware only of the fact that I'm doing this all over again. I'm in a hall of mirrors of repetition, awaiting my name to be called so that I may receive my testamur. There is no escape now from the thought that I dread formal proceedings. The more serious the air becomes, the less I can take it seriously. The procession is a kind of tragic comedy, reserved only for the intellectual at heart. When they call my name, 'Cornelius Baker-Smith,' my heart begins to pound in my ears. I step forward and doff my hat to the speaker and shake the chancellor's hand. The lights are so bright that I can barely see the people seated in the hall. And to think that this must be what success feels like to some. Joy juxtaposed with endless dread. I walk off the stage and go back to my seat to the sounds of applause.

My downfall had always been imminent, but now I rise again, my dreams more real than my waking life. Despite the resolution to discontinue seeking, it seems inevitable that the seeking will continue. Survival depends on it. Just as thought continues to flow, as within this piece of writing, the force of life and mind cannot cease willingly. It does not end through statements of a willingness to end, but through a cessation of the necessary and sufficient conditions that support the flowering of consciousness.

The Earth is now a heavy stone at my feet. As I wait in the swarming city, memories of India arise that are not mine. Memories of sitting cross-legged in a room with a Tibetan Buddhist monk. This is where my mind goes to centre itself. All else is a disturbing dream sprung from there. A disturbing conception, as Buddhist scriptures would have it. I am performing a role in a play and, outside of this play, nothing within the play that disturbs me matters. For outside of the drama and the suffering, another reality exists entirely. One that cannot be accessed through conceptual spheres. The world is like an illusion in that there are many realities that exist at any given time. The one that I comprehend consists of concepts and of signs that can only represent the experience. There exists, in my fleeting dreams, a world beyond this one. A world without words and conceptions thus denoted, in a place not physical, where peace resides, and where nothing exists as it appears to be. Nothing to report but silence and falling dust. Ready to dive into experience itself.

After months of the dark, brooding house, I'm now in a light-filled room. The world to me is nothing short of a philosophical puzzle. I push to understand it as I sit, cross-legged,

upon the couch as the birds outside sing the day away in the sunlight. Why do they sing and what do they sing of? I am here until I'm not, and then I'll be someone else entirely. Passed between lives and lives within lives, my constitution is always changing.

The world of familiar faces has forgotten me. It has, of itself, become a stranger – a cycle of orbits. Life and death the same, closing from all sides, in a crippling effect of fear. To rise out, fly out, to realise love, to breathe it. Otherwise lost in the dark with only the compass of mind for direction. I have seen much further beyond the tiny world I now inhabit. I remember again, involuntarily, walking the streets at dawn. With only the dimly lit fires – the afterglow of the night's festivities – to light the way, we sauntered onwards through the mist and the smog.

All that we see to exist is but a flicker and dance of light. My life is the sum of too many fragments to pick up and piece together. There's never enough time to process everything that happens in life. Locked out of language, despite it being my only tool, the insight I seek is that of immediacy. There are moments of peace that occur to me rarely and, when they do, consist of an absence, a freedom from mental disturbances such as anxiety and consuming worries of a worldly nature. When it happens, it's as though I can see clearly with an immediacy and a clarity that I could not access before. The result is a direct knowledge, or insight, into how things are as opposed to how they ought to be, as dictated by desire. In saying this, I am well aware of the building paranoia that once led to my death. Of the substances upon substances that led to images plastered upon images in a confusion of years that I longed to escape. I am lucky enough to remember and to now learn from those

lessons. It is, however, the only life lived previously that I can consciously recall with any vivid detail, and the reasons for my being able to do so are not entirely clear to me, just as purpose in life is rarely clear if not created by the one performing the investigation. My calendar suggests that it must have been the life directly prior to this one. I am aware that here I am departing from the realms of the physical and meandering into a metaphysical inquiry. To ground myself, I often try to remember, and at the same time do not know why. I remember the frightful loneliness that I invented and pursued, as I shunned all those around me to immerse myself in a solitude that I could not thereafter escape. There was no going back from the plateau upon which I had landed, and it was a despair that only death could set me free from. It was not, however, the answer to the problem. I know this because I am here again, roaming this earth. Only this time I can see that failure is not going to be an option much longer. Or perhaps it is the only option, and therefore manifest destiny. My voice is drowned out by the whirl of machines.

When I'm depressed, I recount the most terrible moments of my life. In my mind I build them a shrine and a deep fear descends to linger in my veins. My analytic mind recognises nothing but its own internal contradiction. People in the city walk around in their own solipsistic daydreams, swarming out of buildings like ants from a hole, with feelings and ethics and thoughts of their own. The city is a place of collective loneliness, where people walk endlessly, alienated in their own skins, capsuled off from the world outside. The fragility of the sky is juxtaposed with its dynamic and mathematical sublimity. De-

spite humanity's capacity for reason, some of the terrors remain: the uncertainty of the heavens.

The weeks move along, frittering themselves away. Shadows of dissatisfaction. Units in the turning machinery of time. My moods therein are cyclic. I am each day of the calendar, each passing moon. Beyond exhausted, tired of my story, my narrative, of everything I think I am. I lie in wait to forget. I once stripped it all away to find a pure being that possessed none of the afflictions that I suffer. Hanging by a thread above an all-consuming chasm. Aside from this, there is an angry judge inside my head that I work hard to vanquish. Some might call it God. A voice from within that nags and criticises. I'd feel better if it were gone. I sit down to meditate. There is a mismatch between inner and outer worlds, despite their being interconnected. As my awareness comes back to me, I take a look at my surroundings. The room is beginning to resemble a tomb, with the pileup of dust and lack of light. The blinds are constantly drawn and therefore the light cannot enter to blast away the hammock of darkness upon which my mind rests. It reminds me of Dreer's life, of seething the days away, shut away from the world.

The day arises of itself. I get dressed and step outside. There is the usual hum of traffic in the distance: An endless trail of destruction. *Nobody can tell you what life is.* My thoughts whirl in the hot summer breeze, no respite save the stink of sweat. To wake up is to pass through a nightmare tunnel and to be nakedly exposed in the light. Laid bare to panic, anxiety, terror, then the futility of depression. The fluidity of the day encompasses me. All of my previous concerns are for nothing now in the face

of crisis. Death is all around. Extinction is in the air. There is the need for a sudden awakening.

‘Wake up, Cornelius, you’ve been dreaming again.’ I am slumped in my chair. There is no-one else in the room. I raise my head to peer through the gloom, wishing that my field of awareness was much broader. The phone rings and I answer it, mutter a few words. A voice lost, somewhere in time. The words hang there a moment, in the dark, before vanishing completely. I put down the receiver: another junk call. This life is lonely territory.

Let me say outright that there is no hope for humanity. I strive now only for personal liberation. My compassion does not stretch far enough beyond that. I once met a Hinayana Buddhist, who told me that once you learn the truth of emptiness, the world will never appear the same again. She seemed to believe that this truth is too esoteric for most beings to ever know.

There is a man on the train whose dead eyes penetrate nothing.

My enduring sense of solitude gives rise to an increasingly solipsistic outlook, likely in error. For example, as I dress, I dress only in my mind. How can I know whether this is all a dying dream? Lost in my mind, I try to wake up, to resist. At the point of death, life is a lost, forgotten dream. Memory erased and yet, I remember.

On the train again, like cattle to the slaughter. Worse than slaughter – lifelong.

There is no right and wrong in the sense that in mathematics there’s a right and wrong. There are only differing views, upon which varying degrees of evidence are given weight.

My earthly concerns fall away as I reach toward the impossible mirage of transcendence.

I grow weary of all this. Of sitting, standing, speaking, thinking, lying down, eating, feeling, trying to sleep etc. etc.

The world changes again, with its fresh whispers of cold. There are cold fragments of dreams, none of which fit together. The light of memory is fading me now, its incandescence at a low. No matter there; time to be present. I write the horizon that comes and do not falter when I encounter its limits. There is boredom at the train station, and peace and beauty in the park. Fallen into silence. A deep winter, from which I'll never escape. A sudden awakening. The echo of a dream, after which a silence hangs in the air. Consciousness, emptiness, a shifting shadow on the wall – I have beaten myself down to this. The universe is a dance of light. It refuses to provide answers to the thousands of involuntary questions going around in my head. There is nothing to hold on to but the stories that came before. There is nothing to hold on to save this – this nothingness that spins words into void. Words into concepts, concepts into words. I don't know why I do what I do, nor where I came from. I just keep going, proceeding through ignorance and trying to transform it into some kind of wisdom.

To reiterate, there is no memory that stirs at this time. There is only the day ahead and the days that follow which have not yet sprung. It is a rare feeling for time to not exist; I am usually lost in psychic reconstructions of what has already occurred. The days ahead are not yet filled. They're as empty as those that have already passed. Perhaps they hold more possibility than the reconstructions of the past, I'm not sure. Expe-

rience is always deferred to be understood at some indefinite time. Spinning through the infinite.

The sun is out again, bringing a little warmth. It cannot, however, illuminate this self of which I am supposed to be. *Supposed* to be, as commanded by unknown forces working contingently with one another, imposing a view of many upon the individual – as if it were that easy – increasing the risk of a mistaken view tarnishing all those that it encounters – suggestibility at its finest. The sun, yes. The sun. It comes in, illuminating all that we think we know. And I'm sitting by the window, looking out, trying to escape from this enclosing sense of claustrophobia of both life and mind, when I happen to see that there's nothing out there of the world I once knew. Nothing. It has all been reborn into a shape and form that I do not recognise. Even if I think I remember how it all works, the serendipity of years way past lost traction long ago. Long ago, when life seemed simple. Childhood. All that. Nothing but a series of half-forgotten memories I'll take with me to the grave. Lost, then, rotting and eaten by worms of misunderstanding. All this will be illegible in a few hundred years, if not lost. But for now, nothing will stop its forceful tide. This tide. Of the words only. Spinning, as they do, through an endless landscape of interpretation. It won't matter to me then. I won't be there to see the fruition of its multiple interpretations. A voice to remember the ghosts of the days I'd rather forget. That's all I am. Others might think or say that I've been given a second chance. I know better. I was trying to exit this cycle but was pushed back into the world. Pushed. The involuntary nature of it is right there within the meaning of that word. The futilities of arguing against it are apparent. I took the wrong road after all. I'm

here now, again, and have had to go through it all, again, and have so far survived. And now I'm in an empty house, teetering on panic. Yes, panic. Again. Sweating again. Not knowing why or how or where and not caring anyway and then having no choice but to care since the questions keep on popping up along with thoughts and feelings that I have no control over. It is as if I can never take in enough air. But enough of all that pessimism. Hope springs eternal through a vacuum of nothingness.

The following day, the sun shone again, this time in the past tense. I suppose it always does shine in the past tense because of how long its light takes to reach the Earth. More often than not, when I wake, I have a craving for caffeine. I flick the switch on the kettle before going to the bathroom to excrete toxic piss. This part is a necessity. The daylight then, slowly, oppresses me into some kind of action, for which I can never know the reason. Sometimes I think I can remember why, but this usually occurs in dreams. The requirements for my economic upkeep often seem antithetical to my needs and ambitions, both intellectual and literary. To get back somehow, to the plot of this narrative, and to those antecedent narratives of which the characters I can still remember, there is nothing new here. I remember them with each breath, in different ways, sometimes forgetful ways. Sometimes I forget that I remember, and sometimes I remember that I forget, as it were and is, in this chair of mine, by the window that looks up to the empty sky. If I'm going to sit around here on this Earth, I may as well attempt to create a masterpiece. There is no other reason for staying alive.

I dream late into the day, looking for answers. The sky is already growing dark. Whereas once I had tried to feel, or at least feel differently, I now aspire to feel nothing at all. There is something beyond reach, in a place that language cannot touch. A perceived hollow obscurity that is the source of all torment and peace. And you cannot escape yourself. There is no self from which to escape. It is now that it creeps in – the confusion and the fear – as the day draws rapidly to a close and there's this sense that more could have been done. I have not pushed far enough ahead today, and I fear that I'll become afraid of everything, so as to only live half a life. And I only hope that somewhere at the end of facing all this empty horror, there will be peace. There is no guarantee of anything. No certainty. Not even of hanging on. I hang on for another moment. For the time being I have lots of them. Moments. All of them. Though they are not mine, not exactly. Feel better. There is no use in overanalysing a reality that I can never know. Without a maker. It is not without its jokes. The suffering has its upsides, too. It is not all a bleak, blank canvas. There are colours and shades of possibility to be applied. Endless scope for creation. Always incomplete so as to leave open space for change. Myriad voices. Endless echoes and perceptions of the real. A nightmare multiplicity of opinion, cascading through time. Masquerading as truth. The cries of which will never be fully understood.

All of this opening up, of space, time, and language, is but a precursor to the next illusory step. At some point, I know, I will have to reapply it to the real. The real of which, it could be said, extends to this story – my story – the process that is currently underway.

I am deep underwater, and no-one can reach me. Everything above the surface is distorted. Everything below is constrained of movement, a prison without bars. I have been down here a long time with no rope to pull me ashore. There is no escape. None that I can see. There is no choice but to go deeper, and to find out what lurks and hides in the darkness. Better to be down here than in the shallows of superficiality. That's what I tell myself, anyway. I am hypnotised by my own thoughts and words – by every little thing I tell myself. It is as though there is no essence within me and I'm hanging here, light as air. My thoughts encircle a vacuous point.

It has taken me a long time to get here and I have travelled a long way. It is as though I have already crossed over to the other side of something. As I sit, thinking hard, and processing all that has befallen me, I cannot help but feel that I have already arrived. Feelings change, I know, and in a number of unspecified moments of an unspecified length, I will probably feel differently again. So it goes on, not knowing what is going to happen. A negation of knowledge is all that I know. The problem of knowledge. Thinking I know. So it goes. On. Forward. Again. Keeping. On. Going. Forward. Again. Unable to rise at a respectable time. Exhaustion ensues. A necessary feat of getting beyond the ordinary and the familiar. Push through the pain. To an open plain. And the world opens up, unravels, so much so that it's no longer a lone sphere but part of a spiral dance around the sun. I am drawn to openness, even though I live in a closed-off world, barely able to see the point in stepping into the sunlight. I am a living, breathing juxtaposition.

The people on the main street, close to the train station, live ordinary lives. They commute and commit to providing

their respective services to society at large. They are not sitting in an empty room trying to mine the useless content of the deepest aspects of their minds. All our stories are interconnected, but that doesn't mean they're the same. Teetering on the edge between depression and awe, I could see the entire spectrum of my life. Every moment there shone with brilliant amazement, and continues to do so, like the emerging light at dawn, or the way the sunlight sparkles on the sea.

This house is but a shell. The wind blows these emotions around: No control. Somewhere on the far side of the world, there is a ghost who stayed. A life missed, happening without my awareness. Another life parted at the crossroads. My life, here and now, is on the outskirts looking back, looking in, outside of place and time. It took billions of years to get to this empty shimmer of truth. Unity in this realm is the illusion of all fragments coming together. To awaken is to notice all around something that is happening that can never be identified clearly or put simply, the complexities of which require infinite time and space, upon which an infinite number of possibilities arise. In the strange city I grow stranger still.

Outside the window of the tram, words fill the sky. The lady sitting next to me is looking at endless incarnations of being on her phone in the form of models modelling clothes for sale. Such is today's fashion not only of style but of mode of purchase. I really ought to be minding my own business. The business at hand. Of being trapped in a reality of unchanging nightmares. Watching the hours pass. They are nothing before my eyes. And out of all these possible lives, why do I currently inhabit this one? Unrecognisable faces swarm by every day as I sit here now, trying to go deep, attempting to let loose

the unconscious flood of symbols that dance across the page. The page is blank and white and it haunts me. I fill it in the only way I know I can. The tram comes to another stop. Some people get on and others get off. Balance is achieved. The sun lights up everything – the streets outside are blurred, as if part of a dream. I'm out here searching for a lost image, something buried deep or blown far away in the wind. I can't tell which. Nothing has been the same since this life began. *Since this life began.* I'm trying to do something new, but I'm trapped in a loop of my deepest fears. *Why go on?* I have not yet come up with an answer. I get off at an unknown stop, hoping to catch a glimpse of a new landscape. It's right by the beach. I step off the tram and gaze deeply into the vast and distant blue. Downwind from an elderly lady who smells like soiled nappies, the air around me is but the grouchy mood of morning. My mood hangs low on the sky, all the way to an unknown horizon. The wind chill reminds me that, to the south, aside from an island state and some other smaller and more scattered islands, there is a frozen continent I have never seen, and that is more alien a landscape as it would presently be possible to see, apart from the surface of the moon that sears its face into dream. There are a few cargo ships on the horizon and, closer in, a multitude of yachts. I get the impression that I could walk along the path by the beach forever. I begin, arms swinging, to walk in a southerly direction, the waves close to me lapping gently thanks to the groyne – constructed from loose rocks – that juts out some fifty metres into the vast blue. Further out and toward the south, the sea swells violently. Dark clouds gather, and it becomes apparent that a storm is coming. It tends to happen at least every few days as the world attempts to cleanse itself but,

for the moment, there is no imminent danger and I have plenty of time to continue on and seek shelter. Memories gather with the momentum of the waves that wash clean my mind, creating room for new thoughts to emerge. There is now only the endless path, winding through the elements. What begins as a gentle stroll soon becomes a relentless journey. There's no shade and I'm heating up, beginning to break into a sweat. The dark clouds roll ever closer, but the sun is on the opposite end of the sky, where it's still clear. I stop and turn around. In the distance I can see the unreal city, propped up like a 3D cardboard puzzle, a chaotic oasis from wilderness. When I look to the south again the dark clouds are rolling in fast. Time is passing quickly. There aren't many people around, a few stray joggers here and there, and I notice that a chill has returned to the air. From the south, a gust of wind slices my skin, and I know that it's time to turn around and head home. It won't be long until the heavens come down.

The house is dark when I return. Transparent shadows move along the walls. The rooms are empty; the only presence is my own. My clothes are so wet they're stuck to my skin, so I roll them off and find a towel to dry myself with. Looking out the window and into the dark, I resign myself to a night indoors, inhabiting this strange place, its shapes more dream than reality. There's a blackout halfway through cooking my dinner so the oven shuts off and there's nothing to eat. My tum-my grumbles through the impenetrable darkness and I close my eyes and focus only on my breathing, sucking in and exhaling air. Sometimes I feel that I'm merely an awareness atop a brain-stem. Empty of love and hope and passion and hate and fear and regret and anger and dread and happiness, I am a shadow

in the dark. There's commotion outside. Voices. Neighbours shining torches and seeing if they're alone in their absence of power. I remain still and silent, listening to their scurries and their whisperings through the black window. I can faintly see my reflection looking back at me, expectantly. *What are you going to do now?* it seems to say. To my surprise, I find it liberating to not have an answer to this question – my own question – and it seems that life is more open than ever. Suffering alone becomes the most beautiful thing in the world.

After another night of oppressive dreams, I wake up craving the sun. An uncertain wind blows by the window. My surroundings are still drenched in sleep. I walk over to open the blinds. It's very early in the morning. My eyes meet the air before the distant sun. This fragile peace I keep could implode at any moment, so I sit cross-legged on the floor, eyes closed, and stare deep into emptiness.

There's a woman on the train platform with a plastic bottle, hitting a man on the back with it like a baby with a rattle, bay-ing for attention. On the ground next to a wall there's a plastic bag, abandoned, its contents concealed. I approach it and there's a rising feeling of fear. Could it be a bomb? I back away. The air is freezing. Water drips from the ceiling of the grungy station steps. When I emerge out onto the street, I cop a face full of rain, and I know that it's going to be one of those days. On the street there are protesters on the road, blocking an intersection. The simplified slogans on the signs they're holding regarding serious political issues gives me an uneasy feeling of complexity. All around there is ignorance, error, and irrational belief. Sometimes I feel as though I'm single-handedly holding up the skies with reason. It's exhausting work. And through it

all, there is a constant storm of past events whirring inside my skull.

I have nothing. Nothing in the way of words or physical possessions. The wealth of all the earlier imagery is now lost to me. They are but forgotten paths traversed – dead ends. I have nothing, despite all my learning. I am oppressed by my own hand, my dreams a nightmare reflection. I slept a long time and woke, not knowing who I was, who I am. I am rediscovering with every look, smell, sound, sensory perception, what the world has become. I lack the necessary language to describe introspection, so I look only outward, even when I look within. Presently sheltered from the busy streets, I find nothing beyond the surrounding furniture. Beyond my beating heart. The reasons for being here are so elusive that I no longer attempt to rely on them in explaining my position. Sometimes, logic falls short. I seem to have given up much of what I once had. I no longer do things I once did. I no longer try. I rise only when necessary conditions must be met, such as the need to eat or defecate. I sleep a lot but, despite this, there is something within me that never sleeps. I am always exhausted. On the days that I do drag myself outside, there is always a desire to return. Return to a point without reference. The day outside busies itself, and I am a shadow abstracted from it, not recognising the flow that I, too, am a part of. The day marches on. Something must change.

In place of melancholia I fill the house with music and the smell of spices. I open the windows and allow fresh air to blow through. The outside air on my skin invites memory, and events from the past few days flash though my mind. I had been out a

few days before in an attempt to turn the tide of my seclusion. I attended a party on the outskirts of the city. No matter how hard I tried with that particular group of people, I could not penetrate their nucleus. I felt acutely as if I had been pushed to the fringes, like a stranger standing out in the rain, hooded, and without a face. I returned home. The hours that ensued were nothing short of a disturbed dream, but my eyes were wide open. I lay there on the bed without being able to move, locked in the prison of my perspiring skin, the secretion of nightmares. I simply could not decide on a course of action or find motivation enough to move my living corpse. Everything seemed to be without meaning. My mind annexed the external world; my imagination became my waking life.

The wind again stirs curiosity inside a dream, of which the interior can never be escaped. The outside can only be glimpsed from time to time in transient moments of a revelation that can never be proven to others. I once dreamt that I had discovered the meaning of life, but immediately forgot it upon waking. Nothing left but a disturbed silence.

Following on from a glimpse of the promise of spring, it is apparent to me that winter has not entirely lost its grip. As I walk away from another faceless party, I am blasted by freezing air and rain. It's late and dark. When I was preparing to leave and saying goodbyes, there was a dog that was already falling into slumber. I feel sad as I walk, and I crave warmth and comfort. I can't wait to get home. Water falls from the sky, flooding the streets. My paisley umbrella has become something of a friend. I have fallen out of step with the people I once knew and seem to know no longer. Their faces remain familiar, but this is nothing but a deceit. Something has changed and in

place of common ground, a rift has formed. A deep chasm into which everything we once shared has been lost. They have changed. I have changed. I am changing beyond form, into something that even I do not recognise, each day coming closer to who it is I wish to be, perhaps. I navigate my way through the dark streets that slide through my mind as I walk. When I try to cross the road at the crossing, cars don't stop for me. I curse at the drivers and continue on toward the train station. When I arrive, there's a hooded figure tagging the walls with graffiti. Another hooded man is standing watch, facing in my direction. I look him straight in his cold blue eyes before I turn away to walk up the station ramp. It's one of those nights where you feel as though you might get mugged or killed, but I carry on nonetheless, my legs carrying me until I can finally take a seat on the train, where it's warm. Motes of dust in the air of the carriage float past my eyes. Dead cells from the skins of strangers. The acceleration along the track creates a churning mechanical sound, like clockwork, before smoothing out as the train picks up speed.

I drift across the city through the night.

There is a spiral I recognise, dancing before my eyes. I will never, in this lifetime, leave the Earth. Not even in the flight of dream. I stand over my empire of nothingness: of washed clothes and clean dishes. In this house, we live like ghosts before the promise of an unknown future. None of this is ours by right. To awaken too late to life – this is the fear. To sleep through it all and, at the very last moment, to realise that time has passed without even being aware. I take a slow, deep breath in to steady myself. In doing so, I find myself at the surface of life, looking down into a deep philosophical labyrinth. I have

been lost down there too long, and know no more than before, nor am I any better for it. I understand very little, occasionally glimpsing the ordinarily unconscious processes that seem to govern my actions. I cannot know why I do what I do and, conversely, it is not possible to do nothing at all. It can certainly be said that I am ill at ease. The sun shines brightly, but the branches of the trees are still bare.

I wander in my mind as I mean to sit still. Through the park with the slide embedded in the hill. Through the darkness between the trees, looked down upon by winter moon. I feel the cold air as if the memories were present, can smell the damp ground. But whose memories are these, and of which life? The street is not far from the park. Terraced houses line the grey road. There's a path that I sometimes walk along, out of the town that leads toward farmland. Sometimes there are horses. The trees on the right of me obscure the cemetery I know so well. I rode my bike there during childhood. I light a cigarette and feel guilty about doing so, as if I were a truant child. I follow the path to see where it goes. There's a part where a stream passes across, with a stone bridge to allow travellers to bypass the water. The tunnel beneath is about the width of a rat. The way becomes lonelier the further I walk. Nature is moved by the wind. I especially like the way it breathes the tops of trees. I almost do not wish to return to my life, as if being far out in nature is to be nothing at all. I climb higher until, eventually, I reach the summit.

I am back in the light-filled room. The memories have ceased. The banality of the day bellows on, irrespective of the train of darkness that rolls on beneath. Rain is withheld by the clouds, but it's cold again.

A presence in the corner of the room. Not seen but peripherally sensed. *Bardo* state. Transmigration of souls. Where does consciousness go if not transferred someplace else? Its flashes of energy light up darkness. A lone figure wanders along the coastline, his greatcoat flapping darkly in the sea breeze. His features are wrinkled with time and grief. His eyes gaze, fixedly, through the gloom, trying to pinpoint lost years. The years are everywhere and nowhere, evaporated into the air and dragged down by the sea, warped and contorted by directional conflict. The sand crunches beneath his feet like a breaking sheet of glass. The waves roll in and out, pulling pieces of his life with them. The beach appears to stretch on forever but is obscured by sea spray in each direction. It is akin to being lost in a fog with no idea of how to get out. His life hangs before him, through him, within him. *At least I am safely on the shore, gradually decaying with each passing thought.* The man has no clue that he is dreamt by another, that he is a mere idea, an image, a fiction. Likewise, the dreamer does not know that the old man is him, and that this will be his fate. Therein lies the failed boundary between what is real and what is imagined. Time falls away. Dimensions open up. Outlines of ships can be made out in the distance. Sketches. Ants scurry about in the sand, carrying to the queen anything they can find: leaves; dead beetles; the crumbs of discarded iced-cream cones. Seaweed washes up like severed tentacles, all up the shoreline. The old man is alone and, despite himself being dreamed, he dreams. Memory is now the only reality he knows, with all experience soon to cease. The tide will continue to pull without his knowing, manipulating his body until it has disintegrated, until it is no more. The tide will endure for longer still, until the oceans boil

away. But not for some time. Life will continue. He will continue, perhaps residing in the skin of something or someone else. I wonder how he will fare. Was never very good at putting himself in other people's shoes. Selfish to the core, his mother said. And now another test. An experiment. His new-born eyes see the world anew, create it again, afresh. All the way up to this moment here, in the light-filled room. This is it. No do-overs. There is, however, always another blank page to fill. The words lift off the pages to inhabit my world. This world. A world built by language. Letters. Spaces. Punctuation. Grammar is the logic of this world. But what it reveals, like an open window, is its true illuminative purpose: The transcendence of suffering.

I'm empty. Nothing to dispel. Look deeper. Keep digging. And then. A world underwater. Through the murky depths comes clarity. Of what, a state of mind? I ought to be revealing objects, tangible things. I ought to ground myself in reality. Yes, there it is, swarming out the window, safely effaced. When to meet it? Never, it seems. It's inaccessible. To speak it, I feel I am close. To write it, even better. Not much sun today. The flowers are closed. I suppose they're resting, biding their time. Beauty concealed, closed, crouching. I am crouched by the window. The same room, different air. A gloom has descended, and through it, I see the old country. Dark streets. Walking through rain. And there, in the deepest darkness, the friendliest of voices. Voices of love. Voices that have transcended myriad hardships, the severity of monotony. Years. Years spent together, alone.

Here there is movement. Here, there is the sea. I did not have that before, not in the old country. I lived in the middle of a large island. Once. When, I cannot say. But I remember it.

There is no other evidence of it. None that I can see. Clues, perhaps. Hunches. But nothing solid. Perhaps I wish to forget, and that this fuels my lack of certainty, of fidelity to memory. My mind does dark somersaults whenever I think of the distance. Out here is to be on the precipice of nothing.

In the failing light I catch the presence of every moment in which I exist. Shadows of trees grow on the lawn as the green gently fades to grey and then black. As the night approaches and falls, it dawns on me there's nothing to do and no place else to go. Everything is closed until morning, when the world, like a wound-up doll, will continue to rigidly tick away. I wait here now, in the closing darkness, expecting to be entertained, hoping that something will come along and give life meaning, but I know that it will not. My mind tries to attach itself to anything it can and, recognising my own folly, I try and make it stop. But the more I try, the more I cling, until negative mental images flood in and surround me as if they were currents in a poisonous ocean. It is a paradox, a contradiction above which I can only hope to arise. The agency is there. It has got to be. The freedom to rise above and to choose not to drown. I strain to see. I switch on the light to discover again the once darkened corners of the room. I exist here, and not someplace between. The hours slowly empty themselves. They're all I have to work with. The passage of time.

At the end of the road, where the momentum gives way to peace, the trees grow to monumental heights. From where I stand, the sky can barely be seen – strips of blue amidst shaded green. The wind whirls the leaves and all is strange, as if it were in a void. The moon falls across the sky, its shadow cast over my life.

A long scripture that is beyond reach captures all experiences lived. It consists only of a flash of vision on the window of morning, documenting everything. There is something hol-
lowed out about lost experiences. They can be remembered in the present, but for how long? Time exists contingently with space, but still there is the feeling of its being illusory. I am bathed in memory that leads no closer to meaning, nor to the discovery of who I am in the present. Flashes of memory occur involuntarily and it is within these memories that stories can be constructed. The present is a muddle that will soon fall into memory. In the karmic residue of my dreams, I can remember further back than is humanly possible. Lives are linked as if they were occurring contingently, despite their being lived in differing temporal modes. His experiences have been coming through me more frequently, as if I were being constantly haunted, or perhaps my entire existence is merely his dying dream. No. I am not willing to entertain such a notion a moment longer. However, it can be said with some certainty that my existence is the consequence of Thomas Dreer's suicide. I exist to suffer in his place, suffer the desire of mother's milk then an unsatiated longing for transcendence. It is here that the contradictions begin; there can be no striving toward inevitability, toward that which desire will undo. There is a risk of attachment to the non-attachment of the desires of this world. This is the folly of asceticism.

The light through the window is already fading as an experience of the absurd comes over me in a wave. I am in a room, alone, recounting all of this. To whom, I do not know. Consumed as I am by illusory events, the fear is to have nothing to show for time spent. This fear is contradicted by the eventual-

ity of death. The day is darkening before its time. It is ending without me, without my having to be aware of it, for awareness itself is not the cause of its ending. The awareness of the vision of decay brings forth an awareness of its rebirth, igniting the possibility of tomorrow.

I awaken to face the terrors of all that I have done. As the ashes of all those I have once known fade, I alone remain aware of the events that transpired. There is, within me, a broken sense of continuity – a lost transcendence followed by the awakening of rebirth. I walk across an open field and towards an avenue of trees. The scent of summer grass and flowers, combined with the midday heat, reminds me of long-lost holidays. Deep in memory I recall the more carefree times of youth, a time before my heart saddened with time and grief. There was a time in Dreer's life when he was engaged to a woman whose name I cannot presently recall. There had been many loves and each one had taken a piece of him. Slowly he retreated from the world and finally from life, but there were many moments before that finality in which he felt as though he was on the precipice of something great. Dreer's error had been the steadfast belief that death would release him. Instead, it served merely to augment the karmic consequences that I now face. His wasted days echo forever through eternity. For Dreer, there had been nothing beyond death's horizon, as far as he knew, and his inherent atheism and nihilism had precluded any thoughts of an afterlife. As I walk along the avenue of trees my thoughts turn toward God. Could God be anything more than an anthropocentric imprint on the world – an archaic shadow that disappears with the movement of all things?

The house is dark and is again beginning to resemble Dreer's old apartment. Depression sinks in once more. How to fight it? It's as if I have no interest in the world anymore. Life has taken a sunken turn, as though I'm being crushed underfoot by an invisible force. I begin to think that it might be better if I no longer feel anything at all. Eclipsed by an encroaching poverty, I wish I could find my way out of these words. At times, thoughts of a morbid nature would not cease – thoughts such as *I know despair at the end of a rope*. My days rarely pierce the dark mist of morning, a mist created entirely by the mind that fogs the senses. No clarity of thought. Each word of enquiry is a window to the infinite. The pieces of the puzzle circulate the air around me and to nail them down in any particular order is to lose the possibility of a different configuration. The only thing that dictates this present combination is an absence of time. There's a dead fly on the windowsill. The garden outside overgrows without emotion. The mist rolls back.

In search of newness. To leave a world steeped in antiquity. I'm growing tired of all expectations, including those I place on myself. I grow tired of the memories that inhabit my waking life, those of my own as well as Dreer's and those that he influences with his mournful words. I prefer now to sleep and to lose myself in dreams. It is there that I can heal without a worldly care, oblivious to the illusions and disturbing conceptions that surround me when I wake. Not that they seem to matter, but I suffer them all the same. The way out of them is to go deeper in, and to root them out in dream. There is nothing upon which these words are composed.

This is the peak – the pinnacle of my years. What to do with it but mourn the loss of a world that still exists. The absurd

hero stands alone beneath a meaningless sky, the burden of belief lifted from him. His awareness no longer filtered through conceptual understanding. Everything about him is change, the constellations one day becoming unrecognisable. All maps will become lost. The landscape moves beneath his feet. Through the loss of the familiar, a new world is born.

Rebirth of the dawn.

Infinite cycles are currently in motion – the expansion and contraction of everything in existence.

The present city undulates. It becomes filthier by the day. I maintain a certain presence, a stillness, to prevent myself from being swept up in the chaos of passing machines. I cling desperately to my sense of self and to the illusions that inhabit this existent realm. There is a certain gravity that keeps my awareness swinging around the illusory core of my being. I stop at a café and order coffee. It could be any café, any coffee. Sheltered from the open sky, I sip, like a baby with a bottle of milk, caught in the spiral of my own depressive tendencies, searching for a bridge, a way out. The people at other tables float like islands fixed to nothing, so far apart. The sound of the milk frothing puts my senses on edge, my mind sucked into the machine. Its intricate workings are alien to me, yet the taste of its product is familiar.

The same thoughts have been following me around for years, the same fears, the same uneasiness in my gut. I long to be rid of them and wish only for their cessation. It was the same pervasive feeling that brought death to Dreer. But I am not going to commit suicide. Nor am I going to commit philosophical suicide. I will ride it out for as long as it takes, until I eventually come to a clearing.

My silence pervades the room. It fills the objects around me. There is dust on everything. The moths are coming back. I've killed three today already. Murdering them makes me feel uneasy. I wonder if I'm the object of their nightmares. No matter. I have to protect the food stores. Last year, I found larvae in the rice. I was about to cook it in a pan and noticed a few grains were wriggling. I won't allow that to happen again. It filled me with a feeling of disgust. I remember it clearly, didn't want to eat again. Had to drive to the shop to pick up more rice. A most irksome experience. But I had to find compassion for the larvae, even if I were to destroy them.

Time passes. I wish to return to silence, just as one wishes to return to the source of being. There is, however, an immeasurable discomfort. I can never attain the peace to which I perpetually aspire. Perhaps it is a mirage. To hope: An everlasting momentary delusion.



At the chai stall in India they had drank from cups made from clay. They were made for single use and, after finishing drinking, they would smash them on the ground by the road. The stall owner threw the cups at a cow's hooves as it ambled past, encouraging it to move along. The cow mooed with contempt and sauntered in the direction of Benares. Nicholas Finch sat on a white plastic chair and smoked a cigarette as he talked with friends. He was not permitted to smoke, since he was considered a representative of the university in Australia. Initially, he was happy to oblige, but without nicotine he could not think clearly, and a cloud had descended on his mind. At dusk swarms of mosquitos would hang overhead, and together

with a public health warning about malaria, it was a deterrent from spending time outdoors in the twilight hours, and the students would seek shelter in the university. Tonight was cold, and there was minimal mosquito activity. The students spoke of many things, from the serious to the comical, as the night gently descended and deepened. Finch liked to joke around with the other students and, in this respect, was a far cry from the serious and brooding Dreer. While Dreer had lurked in the shadows of depression, Finch had travelled the world. And although his academic achievements had gained him little in the way of material possessions, Finch, in his youth at least, had been the envy of his cohort. His abilities far exceeded many of those around him, and this was recognised by those professors that had the patience and dedication to encourage their students. Finch was not impervious to suffering, however, for there were many wounds that festered deep within him that would come to the surface at various times throughout his life.

Finch became close with a number of students throughout the trip to India – students that he refused to name in the notes that he made both during and shortly after the trip. It was these students that were the main culprits at the night time chai sessions. There was something good about being out beneath the night sky after a long day of lectures. It was freeing to them and allowed them to absorb the lessons they'd learnt during the day. Although the discussions around the brewing tea often encompassed their developing understanding of Buddhist philosophy, it was also a time to leave philosophy to one side and connect at an individual level.

'So, what are everyone's plans after graduation?' said Amy. Everyone there was specialising in different subjects, and only

a few were philosophy majors. This was a question that often stumped Finch, since he always considered it sufficient to ride whatever experience he was presently living, and his only goal at that time was to keep travelling. The whole idea of the trip was to broaden what was deemed possible. An expectation of having to articulate this position caused Finch great anxiety, since he imagined that it showed a lack of integrity and resolve. He did not wish to appear a free-riding hippie.

'I'd like to do social work, helping young people through problems in life,' said Hassan, a young Muslim man with a thick, black beard. Finch would later become friends with Hassan, but their passion for travel would lead them inexorably to different parts of the world.

Hannah wasn't sure what she wanted to do or be. She was the youngest of the group, and therefore it didn't seem to matter; she still had time to figure things out.

Throughout the serious conversation, Finch remained largely silent, sucking on his cigarette and hoping to God that he would not be asked a direct question, fearing that his wall of silence would crumble into a rubble of vulnerability.

The night bled on as the stars began to peer through the smog-laden skies. Before long, Finch retreated alone to a long night of disturbing dreams.



Again on this plane of existence. The significance of Finch's memories is not yet apparent to me. I have begun a new routine, an alteration of habit. Not too far away from the house I'm staying in, there is an open field. It's a good place to stretch, exercise, and take in some air. It is a markedly cool start to

the summer, despite heatwaves and bushfires in neighbouring states. The boughs of trees bend silently. I step outside into a world of sound. The winds feel as though they have stripped a glacier in the south. In my mind's eye I can see the shores of Antarctica, and this vision is the closest I'll ever get to the continent. Free to wander, I continue along, shuffling through the dirt. Birds are singing in the trees, adding their own dimension of colour to the landscape. The day is in full bloom.

Dead moths are smeared across the kitchen ceiling and walls. The kitchen is their tomb. The house is a ship headed for an unknown destination, to wherever the Earth is headed, on its dance with the moon, sun, planets and distant stars. A horizon of destruction, perhaps. My own world is infinitesimal by comparison. It is made up of tiny worries and concerns that seem huge from my perspective. So much so that sometimes I fear the details, leading me to overlook them. It takes effort to notice them and to gain a painfully clear perspective of one's own circumstances. And still, it's all grime and dirt and imperfections. The deficiencies become apparent, too – all that is lacking. They build up like bricks in a wall of absence that accumulates to an illusory prison: A limit drawn by oneself for oneself.

I don't know how I got here. It seems to me immaterial. Nevertheless, the question remains.

Memories play of their own accord in forgotten rooms; forgotten by the ghosts who once inhabited them. For even they have moved on, forward on the path, leaving nothing but photographs and obsolete tapes. But I remember, even now, far removed from the halls of my childhood, a world now lost. I try my best not to scour its surfaces (the futility is much too

painful), but it cannot be helped. Those memories in me refuse to be silenced. A deep excavation of the self is all that interests me now, as the end closes in to claim any light that is yet to be extinguished. As my life leaks away into the earth and the sky, I wish for all sentient beings to be free from suffering – none excluded. All I have ever wished is for everything and everyone to be happy.

Outside it is dark and silent. The usually burgeoning city is finally asleep. The night speaks of nothing, and the bedroom once again becomes a mausoleum of dreams.

The past deflates with every passing moment. I hide away in the darkened house some more, since to step outside is to be exposed. But when I do eventually go outside, I have a moment with the sky as the clouds drift effervescently through the transcendent blue, magnificently and beyond any description conveyed through words, for no arrangement of symbols can represent its ephemeral sublimity.

I no longer allow myself to be swept away by illusions, departed in bitterness to our separate dreams. The sides of the bed resemble vast cliffs and to climb down would take much courage in the face of uncertainty. And I wonder if it wouldn't be easier to live life alone, but then I'm reminded of that awful loneliness from which I thought I'd never escape. Either way there's a weight deep down in what I imagine to be my soul and no matter which decision I come to or what realisation I have, I'm merely a droplet of water rolling down the outside of a window, forever looking in and trickling down to be washed into an endless river of time. The light and heat of the day are unwelcome visitors, and I must sooner or later rise from this messy

funk. The emptiness all around me and within me allows for the possibility of fullness.

The naked sun hangs low in my eyes. Dark balconies tower over the trainline. If I never question my own fundamental assumptions about life, I'll never know life's potential. I watch my own habits circle like flies around my tiny world. The faces that pass by on the street look at me as if I were already dead. I have fallen into despondency. It is a necessary low point from which I shall rise. Sometimes it is as though life were not worthy of discussion. Silence and isolation become my twin pillars, and the world itself becomes a stranger. No matter which empty thoughts fill the emptiness of the day, the sun will still set, only to rise again. I may catch a glimpse of these events, from time to time, despite their ubiquity. I often miss them because I'm sleepwalking through life. Eyes open, body functioning, but with the higher functions necessarily switched off. Awake, but not fully awakened. Never fully awakened. Only flashes, from time to time, of awakening, reminding me that I've been living asleep.

The coastline stretches all the way to the dark city. At the train station I experience a moment of total presence as I approach a flock of dirty grey pigeons, pecking at the ground. They seem out of place in the seaside town, and the new summer breeze is cool off the water. I hear waves as I walk down the platform and toward the shops, the taste of salt in my mouth. I'm soon pouring sand out of my shoes as I sit on a bench facing the sea. The life-saving club are training new volunteers, and the instructors shout words of encouragement across the waves. A few scattered dog-walkers are littered on the sand. It is late morning and my eyes are already growing tired, weary from

the bright sun. But there is nevertheless an energy that burns within me that has for some time been absent.

I hang on to my scraps of freedom and refuse to admit defeat. What little I have is the sum of my life and comprises few belongings along with a plethora of confusion. There is nothing to be done about it, and little to be said. Time passes and more words come, the picture of a world put eloquently, created by language, the landscape of the dream of life. And I do not know why I wanted it to cease, and wish for it to cease still, when more effort is expended in wishing for it to cease as opposed to simply carrying on. There is the fear of toil, of toiling for nothing, but I admit that the majority of my fears are imaginary, and never come to pass. There are many weights I drag along within my shadow, heavy through the days. I tried to fix myself once with meditation and wisdom so-called, but it was no good, because there is nothing to be fixed.

Years have passed. Since when, I do not know. The sky is in a hurry and nothing is still or unchanging. Nothing lasts. Rest assured in the certainty of the uncertain. I walk by graves while shovelling cold beans into my mouth, straight from the can. I cannot find the grave I'm looking for – it is as if it has vanished and she never existed. My great love from another life. The trees hang down over crumbling headstones. The engraved names are weathered and faded, one day to be smoothed over and lost forever. To have lost someone close and to have an intimate knowledge of death is too much for one person, alone, a speck in the void. To say that there are others around is not sufficient, for they will never understand – a phenomenon that exacerbates loneliness. The cemetery is silent. There is no life anywhere.

Finally, I wake. It is late in the day, for I have become addicted to the magic of dreams. The ceiling prevents me from seeing the sky, but I know it is hot outside. I'm in an old house and the brickwork keeps the interior cool. I aim to keep it that way and, after I rise, I walk around the house to ensure the blinds are down on every window. There is nothing in the here and now, at this moment of concentration. Nothing that the self can be in any state of permanence. Nothing to speak of. But silence is not something that can be sustained throughout a lifetime.

I walk down dark streets in a daze. The streetlights provide no illumination for me, for my path is unknown.

From the bed I watch a black dot crawl across the ceiling. I punish myself for having thoughts I'd rather not have by denying myself things. I'll starve myself or stay hidden like a hermit for days. I'm lonely no matter who I'm with, so sometimes I feel it's better to be alone. It's the only way to be free. But sooner or later the silence that sets in becomes a prison and, if allowed to breed, can be difficult to combat. I tell myself it isn't my fault, and that the depression that follows me is an illusory shadow. But of course I am responsible, since my mind creates it every day and I allow it to manifest and destroy the otherwise good aspects of my life. Sometimes nothing helps, with talking and silence being equally hopeless. I nurse myself to health by forcing myself to do things as simple as getting up and going for a walk, until I cannot do those things anymore, and the cycle continues. The night flows through me like waves until the irksome light of morning, when I rise and the performance of the world continues.

It's difficult to see the stars from here, so close to the city lights. All it takes is a drive a few hours out into the country for an entire universe to open up. I could lose myself there in that state of peaceable terror and never come back to the tedium of social responsibility. I could fly free for all eternity and never return.

The things I take for granted are the strangest. For example, when I realise that I have calves or a liver, I immediately recognise my own mortality. But I am aware of my own awareness of phenomena. That is as close to the mind as I can get, for the mind is not an object but an awareness. When I look for the mind, there is nothing, for it negates itself in its own searching. The mind is liberated, but the puppets of its creation are not. A kind of paradox, I'm sure. No matter. It is taking a long time to change the negative patterns that occur in my mind. To correct my karma, so to speak. The intention is there nonetheless. And the more expansive my world becomes the less significant my transgressions seem to be. There are new thoughts to be had and new lives to be lived.

All phenomena are a positive wave, undoing the conflict of the past. Having vanquished the momentary terrors of death, there is a benevolent energy that flows through the room. Things have cooled as a breeze breaks up the heat that had been trapped over the city, stifling the days. Accordingly, I've opened up the windows and doors to invite the cool air in. However, other parts of the country are not so fortunate, with fires ravaging bushlands and devastating some rural townships. Nature has been set alight, and it burns with the fury of an indiscriminate enemy, showing no signs of a ceasefire. Out there in the wilderness, volunteer firefighters do battle with the blaze, nec-

essarily using their water hoses in an already drought-stricken landscape. It is only the very beginning of summer.

The town is unusually empty and silent. The day is open and I'm not sure what to do with it, for I have reached a crisis of meaning and purpose. I simply try to be kind and do as little harm as possible, although often I am the architect of my own unhappiness. I practise patience and focus only on my breath, but it is not sufficient. There are other needs that arise that breathing alone cannot fix. I am aware that the world is a kind of painting created by my mind, and its bounds and limits are those that I myself draw. I therefore cannot satiate myself with excuses regarding the negative filter through which I have come to view the world. The wind strips the surface of all that befalls my vision, giving old objects the appearance of being new: the sign outside the bakery; the post box; even the surfaces of roads and pavements. The small town is little more than a daydream. The sun rains down from a sky bereft of cloud, but the southerly wind once again keeps the air cool, mitigating the sun's relentless radiation, and I think to myself that it will be a good day.

My partner and I take the train toward the city (I have omitted much of her character because her freedom is not mine to lock away in these pages), and I'm glad to be in love and graced with her company. The scattered passengers have their usual look of detached anonymity. The landscape rolls by as it does – graffiti-adorned walls and the backs of houses and factories, roads lined with cars and the occasional pedestrian. I feel that I ought to know where I'm going and what I'm doing, but do not. Others give an impression or illusion that they have some place to be, some destiny to fulfil, and I'm sitting there

thinking I'm deficient in some way and that I'll never figure out this thing called life. And the longer I take to figure it out the shorter the time I have left to do so. Eventually, I simply surrender to the rolling rhythm of the train.

A daddy-long-legs spider crawls up the bedroom wall and reaches the ceiling. I'm not sure what it uses for sustenance, and I cannot help but feel that we are not so unlike each other – an impoverished spider with an empty web. It dangles down from the ceiling and I collect it in a glass before setting it free outside. Hopefully it will have better luck out there. The night is cool and dark and silent. There is a calmness now before another week begins.

My dreams have come to nothing. I thought by now I'd be a musician living a life of hedonism, creativity, and minor fame, but in reality I'm thirty years old and sober with no money and no job. I can't even face people at dinner tables because I've nothing to say. There is again a rising sense of dread and, after its emergence, I sink back down with it. And I know that somehow I'm going to have to transcend all of this. Again there is a burning longing to escape from all that I think is true. Perpetual exhaustion and a burning within are no substitute for peace. The fire in me now is something else entirely. The path before me flickers, distorted by my own view of reality. Then it disappears again and, without the light of reason, I am lost in the mad dark. But the fire is still there, ignited by any number of causes and conditions too innumerable to count. Perhaps they cannot be isolated and analysed so readily. However, the result is the same: the resolve of the present.

I have often found myself, in moments of transition, in different courtyards around the world. As a child I played in

church courtyards during school holidays. I remember the grey bricks and the cruel children. The light of my memory there consists of differing shades of grey. That period of my life is to me now a dark dream, for my days are now spent in the sun. I have a memory of sitting in the sun in India, reading Beckett in the courtyard outside the Tibetan university, playing solitary games of the intellect. The light there saturates all, as though there can never be any shadow. Two men from Tasmania practise sparring as I read. When asked, I tell them I have no interest in their physical games. At present, however, I have somewhat changed my position, believing that a healthy body is required to maintain a healthy mind. I am building myself up physically in order to soar intellectually.

The Tibetan Buddhist university is a great place of learning, where the principal teaching is belief in the liberation from the perpetual cycle of life and death. All that I look upon and love in the world will be gone from me, but so too will the sorrows and agonies of pervasive suffering. Unless I am born again. But I will not be born again, not this time. I am certain of it. Yes, there is fear. Fear in the face of the unstoppable tide. Time flows through me and away from me, like water that cannot be controlled or manipulated. And with it, I grow sleepy. These old bones must be put to rest. I will one day be forced to let go of this world. In the meantime, how to be a positive force?

The cafés are overflowing with indiscernible chatter. It is hot and dry, and it has not rained for some time. The day is contrasted by a night of silent stars, for the sky is clear. All that was invisible during the day becomes visible at night, despite its being dark. Time passes quickly. Moments of total presence

and awareness are becoming more frequent and can occur at any time, such as when simply walking down the street. As I walk, in my mind I am challenging all assumptions upon which my own understandings of reality are based. There is much that isn't right, and I see it all as I see myself: as both subject and object. There are problems running wild through my head that I'll never be able to solve, ruminations that refuse to cease. To be aware of and to accept my own history arises only in conflict. Rarely have I glimpsed moments of peace. They arise only when the mind is quiet. Mostly I am contented, save a faint din of anxiety that is pervasive enough to lead often to a bellow and finally to a runaway train. Caught in a tangle of time, the past becomes the source of all future fears. All of these processes occur as I go about my day. Vegetables spill out of grocery shops and out onto the street. There are boxes of carrots, potatoes, cauliflower, broccoli, as well as various summer fruits such as mangoes that are plump and in season. I feel the pores on my back begin to perspire as the summer sun beats down. Fortunately, the air is not without a breeze. I think what a lovely day it would be at the beach – the same day; the same moment – but settle instead for the park. It feels good to move through the open air after the bustle of the high street. I keep moving and do not stop for fear of what I might think if I do. The momentum of walking distracts my restless mind. The path is dusty and dry, but out on the field are sprinklers helping keep the grass green and alive. There are not many people around: a stooped old lady walking her dog; a child on a bicycle wearing a blue helmet. It is, all in all, an unremarkable day, however, I cannot shake the notion that every day is remarkable, and that

to exist is perhaps a rare opportunity to attain liberation from existence itself.

There is smoke in the air. It hits me as soon as I emerge from my hovel. Strong winds are bringing bushfire smoke down from the north, or at least that's what the guy at the post-office tells me. The entire city smells like a great big bonfire. None of the cities on the east coast have been spared, and the change in the air signals vast destruction. No matter. I push on. It's the only thing to do. Push on and stay positive even as everything burns and dies. It's either that or give up completely, but there is no giving up. Giving up is out of the question; I've tried before, only to circle back around, finding myself in a worse position. I fight against all of it while simultaneously accepting the hopelessness of all plights, for it is within hopelessness that all beauty arises.

After a previous life of self-destructive tendencies, it is not easy to know how to live. An alteration of one's disposition throws all old habits out. From my vantage point now, it is not difficult to see why I lived the way I did, chasing distraction at every turn, since the stark reality of the world can become too much. Everywhere I look there is pain and suffering, now that the veil of ignorance has been removed. And here I am surrounded by these incorrigible individuals who cling to beliefs despite evidence to the contrary. But I hold close to reason. The predictions and the forecasts are too grim even for me, but I try not to bury my head in delusional hopes, such as those that help is coming. Even through the blackest depression I have known that there is no help save that which you give to yourself. I sometimes wonder what I'm doing here in this land that seems harsh and unforgiving. Just yesterday I was

bitten by a white-tailed spider, only days after saving one of its arachnid comrades. At first, I did not know what the spider was and quickly convinced myself of my imminent demise. But no, it was not to be, and my panic subsided once I learned the truth of its identity. When I close my eyes, an English landscape rolls by, and it occurs to me that it's a different world entirely. My childhood there is fixed in the past, but I still take pleasure in recalling memories of my early life. I knew nothing else other than where I was, my tiny world as big as the sun. I rarely saw through the heavy grey clouds. It was the only time I'd ever know simplicity. I would often take the bus to the shops with my mother, who would bump into friends and have long conversations that bored me and made me irritable. I wanted only to be free from the gaze and constraining expectations of others. I would dread whenever a familiar face floated toward us; all I wanted was play. Although through the years I had a passing procession of friends, I always felt lonely to the core, and developed a habit of preferring to play alone. Other children would spoil the intricate games I'd learn to play, interrupting the sequential ritual of the placement of the action figures. I learned, ultimately, to amuse myself. But enough reminiscing. I digress. It is distress that takes me there, to the illusion of safety in memory, or to the incessant ruminations that prohibit me from living a life of presence. The streets are now filled with smoke, and the rains have come to ease the strain that extremely high temperatures bring. My adopted home is burning, and so I seek refuge in the memory of the country of my birth. Times change and friends disappear, memories fade and, as they do, I mourn their loss in silence. New memories appear, though I have to try harder to make them stick, defined

as I have become by the distant past, and by my mind's interpretation of events long forgotten by others. Perhaps unknown by others.

Many years ago, while living in a town in country Victoria, I decided to live life as though it were a work of art. The details of the forests there were enough to awaken me to the meaningful aesthetics that would become vital to the episodes of rampant creativity I would experience soon after, as well as what would become a philosophy of life, fuelled by the use of drugs – a practise I have since abandoned. In those forests, through the winter mists, I found every colour and, in the evenings, I would sit with my guitar in an attempt to paint the sky with music. To notice each and every infinitesimal detail, such as a droplet of water from a leaf, and to lose myself in the bliss of the drifting sky, became a kind of vocation, and for a time it seemed the joy would never run out. But nothing lasts, and my life would be transformed again, despite the feeling that I'd arrived at the end, at the final transition. That period is almost unrecognisable to me now, as if it were a different world and I were a different person – a different incarnation of the self, perhaps. It is a mistake to say that the sun is the same from day to day, eon to eon, or that we each see the same sun, for that matter. There are as many worlds as there are experiences of possibility.

I watch the shadows move long the wall. Absence feeds silence into the shape of a heart. Sealed in the house to ward off the heat, I have an opportunity to investigate deeply the contents of the mind within these walls; its hopes, dreams and fears clawing at the surface. The weight of time breaks everything into innumerable fragments. I can stretch my mind to

imagine what lies outside these walls but cannot imagine what lies outside of space and time, if anything. The Earth hangs in the void, far from distant stars, with little hope of calling on a neighbour. My own experience comprises smaller concerns that seem large from my perspective. Little things to eat etc. Abstaining from this and that. Of which there appears to be little point. But alas, the necessary and sufficient conditions of existence must be met in order to continue to exist. Just as art is (supposedly) for art's sake, the same applies to being. And although causes and conditions do not exist independently, they do not exist to satiate the apparent appreciation of other; they exist for themselves. When I tidy the cluttered room, I discover that my important possessions are few. I do not mean to own much in the way of chattels, for they serve merely to unbalance the mind. And although I have abandoned the severest aspects of asceticism in favour of aesthetics, there is a degree of minimalism required in order to create. The stark music of morning permeates the walls, along with the heat of the sun. Not too far away, the waves are lapping against the shore. A gentle scene of blue.

Cool change. I open the door to let the storm in. It electrifies the air and, the following day, the air has been refreshed. Balance has been forced in from afar. The cooler conditions allow for the arising of a clear state of mind, and for the first time in a delirium of days I can achieve some rest. The days are going from me at warp speed, such that it is as though I'm watching a reel of life passing through a tunnel of vision detached from my own internal sense of awareness. There's nothing to be done but to watch it pass. I extend my hands in an attempt to inter-

vene, but all this does is introduce the illusion of control. I see past such illusions and retract my hand at once.

In the empty house there's a rising fear. My days are once again without structure and a deep lethargy has set into my bones. To rise with the sun is the kind of synchronicity I crave. To work would be a start, to contribute to something. But my body refuses to move and my mind reels at the necessities of life that only seem to further fuel my pernicious exhaustion. However, I am lucky enough to have love in my life, which at the moment is enough to keep me truly alive. Lucky enough to both love and be loved. All else is slow to progress, despite the quickness of the days, as I hide from oppressive skies as well as the oppressive stares of strangers. The sheer anonymity of any crowd has for me become a source of endless intrigue. When I enter such a crowd, I could be anyone, and my sense of identity shifts toward the collectively stern faces that want nothing at all to do with one another. There is invisible armour all around. I tremble on the inside, waver, in the face of some unnameable fear. There is a coldness that's exhibited by strangers in busy business districts. I have a lot of time to spend alone, deep in thought. Sometimes it seems like thought is the only thing that's possible. Like the others, I'm guarded, too. Experience has taught me to be so and, as a consequence of this, I have lost all my former capacity for wonder, since wonder requires a certain degree of openness to the world. As an artist, too, this is vital and, for me, where drugs had once come into the equation. This current bout of lofty soberness has been necessary, and yet adds only to the exhaustion. However, such substances had, after all, instilled in me too much confusion as well as an escalating paranoia. And so, over time, I stopped. After

the long pangs of boredom and travels across the seas, I managed to clear my life of the people I had once associated with, among whom drug use was the norm. None of this was easy, but I did finally arrive at a place free from those distractions, and I did manage to recover love, but not meaning. I sometimes suspect that I'm merely a relic of past times, and to move across the shoreline of the present is a difficult journey toward an unknown horizon. But when I do catch a breeze, from time to time, I can see there's a whole new life that's worth pursuing, its image incomplete and slowly coming into focus, perpetually deferred, and seemingly forever unattainable.

My journey out for inspiration leads to little more than hipster alleyways that reek of urine. Strip away the words 'edgy' and 'cool' and the Chapel Street sprawl is little more than a dark circus of transient amusements.

My desk is by the window. To others it is only a desk, but to me it is a portal. The daylight is not enough for me; life is not enough. There is always a craving for something more, a craving to transcend, never actualised, and I'm forced to notice the details of the realm I currently inhabit. Staring out at the innumerable colours of the world, I am set free through a flight of imaginings. I am fortunate enough to have a view of the sky. Lemons have fallen from their tree and are rotting and growing mouldy on the patches of lawn that are left. The grass is a myriad of greens and browns, such that a painter would use many colours, illustrating detail with many brush strokes to represent it. I have tried shutting out the view on the advice of others, but it is much better to love and work with an open view. Smoke has descended on the city once again, which makes the air outside difficult to breathe. The doors and windows are once again

closed. It is another hot day. Exhaust fumes and heat ripples in the air create mirage effects on the nearby highway. The year is now advanced. Attempting to put symbols and images into any kind of chronological order is impossible, for the mind from which these words spring seems at times to be itself an impossible mess. Anyhow, what hope is there? Hoping for the best is not a course of action and achieves nothing. Sealed off from the smoke I am fishing for images in the dark. Going mad, quite possibly. Perhaps time runs backwards somehow; I seem to uncover the past as I go and as it reveals itself to me. Lost details from situations, rooms, and spaces emerge, and I cannot always distinguish between those that are real and those that are not. Always, I have been running and hiding from some long-buried truth that is too difficult to face. Repressed, perhaps. I long for absolution, and to let go of and simultaneously be released from all that torments me – to achieve a state of peace. Once again, this is something that appears to be perpetually out of reach, so I prop my corpse up at my desk and write. I write in an attempt to uncover, in some methodological sense, that which would otherwise remain hidden; the words on the page cannot avert my gaze. Whether these apparent treasures of the mind are worth anything is another matter. They come from necessity more than anything else. I don't have the resources for them not to.

I do not know exactly how many days have passed, nor do I know how many I have left. I have become somewhat hardened to them, the passing days, as though they are somehow separate from me. They are but a reflection of my own state of mind and, as such, I take note of my surroundings. A tree stump in the garden displays a drooping half-moon face. I have begun

to populate my desk with books and in-progress manuscripts. A bird with yellow eyes and a yellow beak pecks at the earth, looking for worms or seeds, I'm not sure which. The ravaged earth must provide. Everything depends on this simple fact.

The town is almost devoid of activity. There are some minor roadworks and one or two pedestrians. The carpark is strangely empty. A train rumbles over the crooked bridge to my right as I walk, for the hundredth time, to the post-office. It's an errand I'm running for myself and, once I'm done, I will have the entire day to ponder alone and in silence. Familiarity fades from view as my solitude grows deep, and those people I once knew join the ranks of strangers I will never know. I suppose that's the result of emigrating to a new country, not that I was close to many of the familiar faces of my youth. The path I wander is all there is, all there has ever been, not a soul in sight at this juncture. But alone is a word that connotes more than the mere absence of others.

There is much that is missed that language cannot express – much that is left unsaid. Much that cannot be said. The illusions of the everyday seem at first to be all there is, but there is more that exists outside the realm of ontological relativity. The breaking of habit becomes more difficult as time progresses; most light cannot be seen by the naked eye. Words capture what they can, but to find a way to open them up would be better. A beautiful summer of fear is as contemporary as I can get. The picture that emerges through the dark, smoky windows is that of a world in crisis. That's the big picture and, to become overwhelmed by the vastness of it is to miss the finer details that amount to a life. It represents the warning of a life of limited perspective. But still the passing days take the appearance

of a smooth and featureless curve, and it is not without effort that I bring myself back to noticing my surroundings, and away from discursive abstraction.

There is silence in this landscape. Sometimes it breathes and sometimes it suffocates. Countless hours spent staring out to sea, dreaming of a sunken world beneath the waves, the cool breeze on my skin. The surface of the water is all I see; all I have access to. It stretches out like an endless plain toward sky. The hanging bushfire smoke has once again dissipated and I can no longer smell the distant burning. Flies circle the dying seaweed washed up along the shore. Fortunately for me, they do not follow as I walk. I expel the images and voices of others from my mind, take a moment to be free of them. I cannot, however, sustain this practise for long; they ultimately come clambering back, as insoluble problems arise again, and I'm unable to erase what has passed or change it in any way. Transfixed in my lament I wander the shoreline, a shadowy figure lost to the past, encased in an inability to change. A relic on the beach before the moving tide.

It seems clear that the sea represents to me yearning and loss, as well as a searching of the endless well of my imaginary soul. In my childhood the beach had been a place of endless fun, as well as a rarity. I would spend all day during holidays playing in the surf and in the pools that form in the sand. Now I walk in an attempt to recover lost illusions, with each step on the path dissolving the categories of time. The way things are are quite possibly inaccessible, for I possess only one particular view of them – the absolute truth is out of reach.

If the nature of the mind and phenomena are empty, then meditation is not about attempting to empty the mind, but

rather attaining insight into its natural processes. Just now I had a rare memory, on the very fringes of remembrance, of walking by a river in the old country. I see myself walking, the countryside around me, but my gaze is fixed ahead, seeing nothing of my surroundings, thinking of nothing but how and when and where I'd next acquire some dope. There is a great lesson in the memory not to spend one's existence in the interiority of one's own problems, gazing up at the world through a cell-basement window at a world of possibilities.

There is no ceiling and I'm exposed to naked sky. All is silent save the sound of waves. The mirror bestows upon the viewer the reflection of a reflection, a gaze that cannot be shaken, foreign eyes that ought to be familiar, belonging to oneself. And despite its illusory nature there is no escape from the world the self creates for itself. There is, however, always the possibility of change.

Hail the size of golf balls falls from the midsummer sky. The processes of a world are happening all around me and within me. Sometimes it delights, and other times it terrifies, to be awake through such an unknown and yet familiar process. To attempt to capture these unknown processes is to paint a world that lies beyond the horizon of knowing. Sheer lack of sleep makes me feel as though I've taken some bad speed as I watch from the window the cycling days that are without doubt a part of a much larger undulating cycle, something to do with the birth and rebirth of the cosmos that rests on intuition more than any other form of reasoning. The purpose of this new landscape is to break free from the prisons of conception.

She bares her breast at the barred window, as the asylum skies crumble into darkness. The old stone building is filled

with the desperate cries of the insane. To the people there, physical boundaries mean nothing, since even if they were to escape the grounds, they would find no respite beyond them. As for me, the place represents a long-buried past with shallow, weak foundations (the memory of it all could resurface at any time). I would not be able to chart the distances travelled since then, for no person or device has been counting the mileage. However, distances are often measured in years, and many years have passed since my experiences at the limit edges of life that fuel this desire to recover my great loss. Through this lens of subjectivity, reflected in the only mind I'll ever know, I watch the decay of the world.

The bus rattles through city streets. I'm all anxious and slippery as the day beats on. The burden of familial responsibility keeps me chained and unchanging, as though the memory of how things were dictates the way things continue to be. There is always a perceived risk of straying too far, and a complex network of fear clips freedom's wings. Each day I wade out further, until familiar, doubting voices recede into the distance. I nevertheless wander the earth like a lost spirit, without perceived security and without a plan. Getting by, I have abandoned any notion of a surplus of resources, for such aspirations are phantoms that may never come to pass. How can tomorrow hold the possibility of being different to today?

Sirens in the distance further exacerbate this experience of anxiety. Waves of hopelessness fill the room as I sit slumped, head on desk. I try to keep myself propped up with positive affirmations, but without any action they serve only to drive me insane, flickering voices that instead take on a condescending, mocking quality. The question of what it is to be drives

me further from being. I have analysed the experience of this world. At night I journey through dangerous streets and beside the flowing black water of the river. Beneath dark bridges and along endless rows of dumpsters, countless faces drift, as one, through time's process, bound to their places in history.

The world that emerges after the night has dreamed itself away is vastly different: A river of flesh adorned in business suits; enzymes in search of caffeine. I swim upstream toward the train station, backward through the crowd. The bridge in the distance appears as a giant toy, suspended before a hazy morning sky. Plastic wrappers float atop the harbour, obscuring nature's clarity. The sanctuary I feel after seeking shelter quickly devolves into restless pacing. The rooms are growing hotter by the second. Somewhere outside someone shouts 'Fuck!' and my pacing becomes more erratic. And all the while I'm wondering what I'm doing here, continually going over the same questions, the same artificially concocted answers. It must only be a matter of time before I crumble into a pile of flesh and tears, can't keep this up forever. It becomes clear that the compassion I have toward myself and my own situation is lacking. In recognising my own humanity, this compassion could go deeper as well as extend further out, toward others.

The best I can hope for is to fail. Perhaps then I'll be free of doubt. The days open and close, open and close, in my absence. Just at the right distance from the sun for all of this to occur. No external voices.

Silence

Continuing throughout. The unspoken lurks in the corner of every shadow. I am hoping for work but receiving none. Idle days of putrid summer heat interrupted only by frighten-

ing storms. Loneliness stretches the days into unrecognisable shapes as I continue on through delirium, desperate to give this life meaning, to know who I am and where I belong. There is life in everything I see, shapes emerging from an otherwise backdrop of grey. The sun is shining and will continue to do so for a long time. It will outlast us all, burning for eons. We're merely in the way, creating shadows.

Nothing happening behind the eyes. Cracks and contours of dream. There is no pleasing this version of myself, so fragile now that any encounter with another being leaves me shaken, since I want nothing to penetrate this private world I've created, away from the madness of the masses. A poet I was once and continue to be, searching with these feeble tools for a light that can be sustained, unwavering in the face of adversarial darkness. And as my torch dims in anticipation of an unending night, new flowers spring from the choking earth. The new flowers have voices, too, that sing in a way that I never could, bringing an end to a world that I knew as a child. This new age is one of silence and alienation, where conformity is key to survival. Keep your head down and stay out of trouble. But the voices that rise from the vast silence do battle with the forces of old, demanding change. I myself watch from the sidelines, too cynical now to believe that real change can occur. I have taken no sides and remain an isolated individual, distrustful of the motives of others. There was once a time I would have done battle, but now place my wellbeing above all other causes, since I know the personal costs of rebellion. Conformity is a mask I now wear, but the flame inside has not yet been extinguished.

The problems of the world are too vast for one person to contemplate alone.

Privacy is all I crave. A place to live and work uninterrupted, where I can observe this process of life to its end. Some consider it a right, but not all respect it. My deferential attitude must cease, in place of an assertive power that commands. A positive mind, unperturbed by the disturbances and distractions that threaten to interpolate each moment.

Advertisements spill out of the television and into the room. There is something pervasive about their content, sinister even. Through the window I can see a neon billboard in the distance, obscured by a humid haze. The sky is overcast and the sun's heat is trapped beneath a thick blanket of cloud. I'm becoming irritable from the heat. My vision spins around empty rooms. I can't think in this heat, and I descend through layers of sweat and lethargy. The objects in the room appear to expand and become overly porous, the TV aerial propped up by sweating DVD cases. That's all they're good for now, building towers for things. Can't give them away. And on the hottest days I bide my time, as I have always done, conserving energy and trying to do my best to keep a cool head. Night approaches like a gift. At least I'll soon be cool and, with any luck, unconscious. All through these days of absence momentum builds. Once the year is in full swing there'll be less time to do nothing, and I'll miss these empty days. My calendar consists of empty boxes – compartmentalised days. All waiting on the open page of the mind. The days therein have yet to be written.

'Can you tell me where the RSL is?' says the old man with piercing blue eyes. His face is drawn and wrinkled, but the eyes are alert and demanding answers. I tell him and he drives on through the noon heat. The bitumen ripples, the air almost unbreathable. It burns hot in my nostrils as I continue on toward

lunch. The key is to try not to think about it, but that's hard to do. All I can think is that it's uncomfortable to be dressed in human skin.

I'm never sure what to do on the hottest days, once the boredom sets in. A lot of people go to the beach to cool off in the sea. But there's no shelter there, and the ultraviolet rays rain down heavy from the sky. I guess most people have jobs and are paid to sit in the comfort of air-conditioned offices. Not me, though, even though now I'm technically employed. Underemployed, they call it, when you work a lot less than you'd like to. But enough of the labels; they are not representative of identity. The many paths I've walked I see now only in dreams.

I've never been able to get used to the hot weather, myself hailing from cooler climes. The last time I visited my home country I had to be careful not to slip on black ice. It rained continually for a week and the water on the ground froze. I remember fondly the winter ferns rising toward a cold blue sky, patches of grey cloud swirling inland from the distant Atlantic. A strange perspective I have now of a land that was once all I'd known. It is as if the limits of mind have been lifted now that I know there exist other worlds beyond the vast horizon. The most distant land from my home country is New Zealand, and I managed to visit there twice around a decade ago. I did not find it so different from my adopted country, although it is smaller in scope and the landscape more varied.

As soon as my childhood ended, I wanted to travel as far away from my origins as possible. This, of course, I accomplished, at a young age. Physically I travelled as far as I could, but the destination never felt far enough. The only way I could travel further was through various imaginings, until I imagined

entire worlds that in no way resembled my life. In a sense, they became more real than the day to day.

There's a voice outside that floats in through the window. The sound is faint and I cannot make out the words spoken.

Sitting here. Waiting for life to begin again. This is the moment. Watch it pass. Fade to nothing. Where do they go? Where will I go? Once my eyes close forever, all moments lost. There are too many gaps in my knowledge to know. The ether runs dry. We look on past the sunset, each of us alone, chasing the contents of dream and subsequently forgetting their wisdom. Searching for lost shapes of unrecognisable form. On the precipice. Soon to fall.

Trust the process. Patient through the storm. Centred in its eye. Where all possibilities converge. A dark monolith towers above me, threatening eternal darkness. A new plane awaits, through a dissolution of the present. A building of small, expensive cages. The sky is a barren plain where no crops grow. My inner landscape has become desolate and grey, stretched over valleys where nothing grows.

Three

The pieces on the table are set at their original positions, for they dare not move. My clumsy hands try to accomplish such intricate work. Neurosis oozes from my skin as words composed of passion reflect more coldly than intended. Such limited little things, and yet the desire to communicate is immense. Here, in this cold cell of mind, my compassion incomplete. My mask is slipping, exposing empty truth to the self so-called. My scars laid bare and no longer hidden.

The excitement of the world builds and fades in waves, drifting across the cold vacuum of space. I am surrounded by cold, dead things, when all that really matters are living beings. The trees and various vegetation in the garden bring me more peace than my possessions ever could. To awaken to its beauty gives me a feeling of reprieve, as though I were a prisoner acquitted after decades of false condemnation.

The sea air propels me into dream. The wind blows away all residual energy as waves crash on the rocks, ocean spray ejecting high into the air.

Sounds and silences. The spaces in between.

The bare wall stares at me expectantly. It is older than me. White paint upon an imperfect surface. Its bricks will outlive us all. The window has become my movie of the world, much greater than any electronic window could provide. So many sunsets – I revel in them all. Watching the light fade day after day.

As a young man I worked mostly in bookshops across the city, writing whenever I could, eking away my existence with

a repressed passion for life. In awe of the world once more. And for that reason, sadness descends; the world will not last, nor my place in it. A low mood hangs as a mist, just above the floor, about ankle deep. It weaves indiscriminately through every room, refusing to dissipate.

With exhaustion comes words, involuntary and from nowhere, going nowhere. The movement of the tram lulls me to a sleepy daze. Drifting scents propel me to memories from various times in my life: a popcorn machine in Mallorca; a hospital room in Manchester. The rapidly changing smells send me across time and place, but only in the mind. My soul departs at the dark train station – at the changeover. A lid lifted from the sky. A hazy sun leaves its light on the window. There is nothing here. Nothing save time and feeling. And words to echo their meaning.

I met with a friend today at a park where young people go to lie about and read. What did we talk about? We laughed at something darkly humorous. Some conundrum of depression or anxiety, I can't remember. But that's how it is with days, their energies charging towards night. We sat on the ground, encircled by tall trees of immense beauty, leaves falling despite it not yet being autumn, the sun quickly falling in the sky, signalling an end to our meeting.

There's something moving outside in the dark. Some critter or another. A cat, probably, maybe a possum. I'm alone in the house, the window now black save the reflection of the room.

Afterwards watching pink, blue and yellow colours saturate the light coming through a doorway. Not sure who to be grateful to. The vision a celebration of life as the mourners dissipate.

There's grime running down the subway walls. Everything's vivid in the early morning light. I journey across the city and crawl out west, past empty office buildings, past the Southern Star. It's dawn. Grinding metal and fear. Endless plains shimmer in the new light. Everyone around me looks half asleep – drooping bodies in black coats, faces gaunt with unreality. Pale, dying skin. The colour faded from their lives.

Lone towers stand on the outskirts of the city, overseeing nothing, devoid of nature. Unfinished, they will soon be inhabited by countless lives, many of whom will no doubt soon wish to escape. Futuristic cages, in my opinion. The towers loom, contrasting the Buddhist temple that sits by the river only a few hundred metres away.

Cascading through endless cages of conception. Miraculously. Dead words written in a dead language.

The self. A concept assembled from swept up fragments. Which ones are mine exactly? I let myself go. Allow myself to feel it. In the dark with nothing but thoughts. May as well lie around in my own excrement. No-one would notice.

Lost at the bottom of a deep well of experience.

Up with the dogs. All hours. Try to get some rest. Some semblance of rest. None to be had. Got to get up. Go. Keep going. On. Toward the cusp of eve. Perhaps I'll get there. Cross over to morning. I exhaust myself and, at the same time, am inexhaustible. Sometimes I see glimpses of light. On a grey field. After walking through town, lost in darkness. They catch a whiff of grief and disappear. Locked in the past, no key to throw away. An entire world. Such beauty my heart might break at any time. The world comprises masks. I awaken in someone else's dream. Vapour in the air creates undefined

shapes. A ghost in the mirror. Dark rings around its eyes. Holding tightly to worldly concerns. Water pours through the window during the storm. Outside and inside becoming indivisible. She looks deep into my world and I into hers. All the way back to childhood. Repeating certain words as if they mean something. The woman on the train opposite me gives off an air of unfriendliness – hostility, perhaps. Saturated in sunlight, the traffic groans. Out all day, bringing home the proverbial bacon while I sit around all day touching myself and thinking of her and pretending to write. *Brings home the bacon*. I really want clam chowder.

Once you cross the threshold of fear, anything is possible.

The laughter dissipated with the grey clouds. I flew far away until I thought I was free.

Light intensifies and then dims on the walls at dawn, consciousness squeezed and then expanded. Shift work. So little sleep I have the sensation of slipping through time portals. Rain so heavy the automatic doors open to let it in. A shrouded figure stands only as a gap in the rain. In a large room. A dark room. The rain room. One more time toward the light...

Clarity the paradox of insanity.

Midnight chores.

News articles create an eclectically sickening dystopian nightmare, only to spell out a unified message: We are doomed.

There is hope in the flowerbeds.

If you believe nothing, you feel nothing. Pray to a dark sepulchre. They only make flour at the abandoned factory in dreams. I feel nothing. Perhaps. Or perhaps the nothing I feel is something. Drowsiness, dizziness. The tops of large buildings

obscured by cloud. CEO's with their heads in the clouds. The reality of it. Illuminated now by lightening in a passing storm.

Rekindling. Fresh sparks of ghosts. The old buildings still the same. Old faces, too. Transient places. Faces. Deep in corporate clunge. More glass prisons – transparent cells. One by one. Orderly. No room for error. Violent voices on public transport. Best thing to do if confronted by any rabid dog: avoid eye contact. Kill if necessary. A man with a Monster energy drink, gawking at his surroundings: that's evolution. Live, work, love life in a glass prison. Have to work in one to be able to afford the other.

It's so early the birds shout from the treetops at our passing steps. Must've woken them up. And through it all I'm longing to escape. Escape into what? Silence, yes. Waiting for the train in silence. Out there in the world so-called. Until the tracks have shrunk, the roads vanished. I had never seen my father so frail as when he was in the hospital, tears in his eyes. And all for love. When nightmares creep into the waking world, that's when sleep becomes the only escape. A finger hanging only by its tendons. We are now all hunkering down for the collapse of civilisation.

On the outskirts now, looking back toward the city – to the epicentre of possibility. To the place where all dreams have died, its senseless nature shifted toward silence and absence. I have collected all that I can in a bid to create something new. Radical changes are occurring all around me: the framework of society crumbles, giving way to what I hope will be a positive world.

A lot of time spent indoors. I have to keep the combination moving, unlocking with letters the doors of experience that

leave behind husks of the intellect – paths to traverse that transcend time.

I'm dreaming only of an ever-changing sky. The endless dread and boredom of the outer Melbourne suburbs are creeping into my life, and I can't shake the feeling that I'll be stuck out here forever. This place used to be a swamp, I'm certain. But you can't concrete over the experience of being bogged down. Extracted from all I have once known, like a rotten tooth soon to be discarded, I once again await life's beginning. Endless traffic crawls by the window, despite this road not leading anywhere. Who are they, the people driving? *They* – the faceless masses. And I'm merely exhausted by such abstract thinking. Trying not to think doesn't help much, either. I've lived in more houses than bodies. Free me from the cyclic patterns of my own thinking. Let me vanish and never return. Those bodies, yes, I remember consisting of different flesh. Further back in time than Dreer. I have been a son and a father and a mother and a daughter. I have both suckled and allowed to suckle. Inhabited the bodies of animals and gods and demigods and hungry ghosts in realms that language cannot touch. Sweeping across this banal landscape of suburbia, memories live in me still. Pure beings transmigrating through eons. The hollow doors of my present abode can never shut out truth. The ceiling can never conceal the existence of the heavens. I am a mole that lives underground and in darkness, in squalor once more and amid my own filth. There isn't a knife sharp enough that could cut through my own bullshit or, for that matter, the bullshit that surrounds me every day. And everything I know exists on the breath. If I were exposed to the vacuum of space, I'd be dead within two minutes. No air to breathe. A bus drives through

the rain. The gloomy interior lights reveal impassive faces. The sky is darkening. It promises nothing, means nothing. Still, there it is, encompassing all present phenomena that lies within the sphere of my gaze. Able as I am to achieve little more than presence of mind. I remain motionless, all the while wishing, yearning to move beyond. Beyond the horizon of blank pages that I spend my life filling, again and again, life after life, as if there were an answer to which these sentences reach. But there is only more void, more pages to fill. I lose my grip and fall. The harmonious dance of the cosmos turns sinister within me, and I'm afraid. It's a lonely place to fall to. A dreamscape of panic. Gravity becomes too strong to resist and pulls me into the earth. Entombed beneath I plan for my resurrection. Realising that I do not possess Buddha-nature, I plot my various revenges. Can anyone reach so high an aspiration? I'll leave any ambiguity hanging from the shores of Aporia. The bus stop outside the window is encased in a shroud of rain. The air is cold but it's warm inside as it is beneath the earth. My cadaver exists alongside this dream of life.

I sit on the steps outside the entrance to the university, staring intently at the ants on the ground. Every now and then I have to move my feet so that some of them don't crawl up my leg. There's so much space around me – so much empty sky. Throughout the years I've never seen a university campus this empty at the beginning of a semester. The world I once knew and loved and hated has emptied itself of its illusions, giving way to a desolate image of bare reality in its purest form. I'll soon be out of work once more, just as I was getting onto some kind of track. Perhaps my destiny is always to return to myself and to the work at hand – to the project that is currently un-

derway. Always when I'm close to reaching some idea of success that isn't mine, I'm pulled back, finding myself with nothing and at my desk once more. At my desk trying desperately to find the answer to the question: *what is reality?* before usually giving up and losing myself in takeaway food, television, endless web surfing, staring into empty space, letting out angry exclamations, endless vipassana meditation sessions, talking with my lover, driving without aim, planning for a future that will never occur, drinking ridiculous amounts of coffee, and generally peppering my experience with ingredients that are thought to be sufficient enough to make up a life. And then I'm back to the question because the truth is that none of these activities of themselves are sufficient in such a way as to *mean* something. The demands on my time continue: incessant emails; junk mail in the post; chores; and all without reward. Or else with a reward that can never be reward enough. I'm not a puppy to be trained. I couldn't care less about the majority of the things I'm subjected to on a daily basis. And even if I find some segment of quiet, I torment myself about things that simply don't matter. Not to me or anyone. And I'm right back at the questions that really matter, and that don't have answers, at least not in a general sense. I can only answer such a question as *what is the meaning of my life?* for myself, and then it is by no means static and unchanging. I walk back into the university building and order coffee, all the while thinking that I might not see any money flow into my bank account for some time. The barista obsequiously goes about the business of grinding the coffee and frothing the milk, almost in an automated fashion. I stand and stare, numbly, not gazing at anything in particular. It's as though I'm looking between the atoms in the air, be-

tween the atoms of things and toward a phantom presence I'll never know. Heavy rain begins to wash on the large windows – there is no wall – and I'm resigned to the fact that I'll have to trudge ankle deep through water on the one day that I accidentally left my umbrella on the train. I wait for the rain to ease off but I'm running out of time. The class is about to begin and the student I'm meant to be helping will be anticipating my arrival. I take a few deep breaths and step towards the door.

A long time ago I made a decision never to live in fear. When I arrive home (to a house that isn't mine) I do my best to examine my life. I light a candle and sit across from the flame. The future is once again uncertain as an invisible enemy sweeps across the globe. Everyone is told to stay home, lest they become ill with the new disease. But for most people the real task is to stay sane. The candle flame flickers violently, then becomes steady, and oscillates between these two modes awhile. Its sphere of illumination remains small, with more distant objects in the room barely perceptible to my eyes. I dwell in this dark space, unable to leave unless absolutely necessary, with nothing beneath me – no safety net and no ground to hit for that matter – falling through months that seem more like an endless abyss than the organised boxes on the calendar that hangs on the kitchen wall. My newfound purpose removed from me (in the form of my job), I seem to move in a downward direction, in spite of there not being any directions. Strictly speaking, I'm sitting cross-legged on a chair. And then I'm up on my feet, not knowing where to move. I could move left, right, forward, backward, but I'd still, in some sense, be in exactly the same place: right where I am. The blinds are drawn, and the only natural light comes in through a small sky-

light, giving weight to the overall feeling of being in a subterranean space. There's a mummified cricket trapped between the glass. The very notion of a functioning society falls away. I am an outpost of a human being and an emissary to the shadows that invade my life. I desire stillness and to exist at some point of origin, but such desires are absurd: around me, everything moves. Time with it. Time pervades everything. Un-fucking stoppable. But I won't dwell on the concepts I can't control. I fall asleep for an hour. I read a book for another hour. I attend a few meetings on my computer. Faces have become nothing more than images on screens, further complicating my own personal pursuit of what's real. I want to escape their interminable gazes and to envelop myself in bad habits that will only serve to waste all the time I have. There's something weird about never seeing people and scarcely venturing out into the world. It's an experience of being abstracted from life itself. The immersion that I have long pursued has become indefinitely unattainable, my possibilities cut from beneath my feet as I stand on a bald lawn, on a garden turned to dirt. And for the first time in a long time, I have to accept that I am where I am for good and that there's no escaping this time. There's no escaping from the self that is undernourished and underdeveloped. Misfortune turns to opportunity before me. I can now embark on the projects of my life without distraction. Finally, I come to recognise that I am truly free and that, in the liminal hours between various virtual social interactions, there's nobody watching. It's all consciousness and empty rooms.

I awake in a silent room. I awake in the middle of a barren field at sunset. I awake on a train on the way to work a few years ago. I awake in the middle of a thought. Time has come un-

done. I speak to my lover about organising our things, about what to have for dinner, about where to live in the future. I have thought out an entire life before I've even lived it. I sleep and wake and sleep again. The activities of the mind exhaust me to sleep. Not much gets done in reality. Moving matter from place to place. Doesn't matter anyway. To think is all that matters – to dream of a better world. A world that will likely never come to be. Don't ask me why. I'll tell you what's important. Believe me or don't. Something to help get through the anguish. A framework – a set of ideals. Yes. Ancient wisdom. There's something there. Words to live by. Ethical and moral frameworks are all there, constructed to help you to decide the person you wish to become. I look inside them, gaze at their architecture. Then to escape before they come crashing down on top of my head. The frameworks, they've come unstuck. Virtue ethics, deontology, utilitarianism, all of them. The more I look the more fragments fall away, until I awake in the middle of a barren field at sunrise. Life a dream created, elongated through the surrounding trees. No limit to its terrain.

I cannot cease thinking. Sometimes this condition is antithetical to sleep. The flickering image in the mirror is not a perfect reflection. Within it, I face my own mortality. Without love and compassion life is little more than an endlessly churning experience of terror. This world will continue on without me. Its indifference is not one of a human quality. The coldness of the waves on a paradise holiday. The sun, our nearest star, bringing a little warmth to the winter sky. I walk forever along the shores, gazing out to sea. The images that I take in do not paint a complete picture. There's an unseen landscape within that can only be revealed with words. Its turmoil can only be

detected on the surface. Ripples from the deep. From the dark. From the places that ordinarily escape exploration. The waves rise higher and higher, precluding the light from reaching the bottom. Its mysteries remain submerged, unresolved. An occasional shallowing of the water allows me to glimpse, for an instant, all that lies hidden, but then the clarity of its illumination is lost once more. I put one foot in front of the other, over and over again. The sand between my toes begins to tear skin from bone. The salt stings the wounds as the horizon dissolves into nothingness.

In a chasm now. No light to speak of. Enveloped in darkness – a comforting blanket. Another world draws near, illuminated in an instant. And there's light again, so suddenly. Thought the darkness might be endless. No such luck. Perhaps many eons have passed. I wouldn't know. I have an intuitive feeling that many lives have passed. And as I strain my eyes, I see that I have come back to the same world, much later on. The Earth has cycled many times around the sun, the sun around the galaxy. There's little to be said of the time that's passed; none to remember it. The 'I' that is recalled is one that suspects that perhaps it has been deceived. Maybe I have not left the very first stage of the *bardo* of my original death. Perhaps I have been in hell all this time. All this burning circus. I have a talent for despair. A picture comes into focus. A picture that consists of many fragments. It's the picture of a life – of many lives within one. A multiplicity of voices, too. Voices I cannot yet situate, cannot put in place. And they speak, the voices. But their words reach me as indecipherable shapes. Loud shapes that frighten and oppress, spinning through void, establishing form. Instilling a labyrinth of order.

Tiresome loads of boxes are scattered across the floor of every room. Move a life from point x to point y . And then on to point z at some indefinite moment. It never ceases, the movement. I've lived in as many as twelve different houses across my short life, and in two different countries. I never seem to be able to settle anywhere for long. And it isn't of my own choosing. Circumstance necessitates that I continue on. The end of many roads and onto new ones. Always with the roads, the paved highways. Highways that meander through the wild, giving the false promise of a civilised destination. The guiding lights are little more than a deception. But I follow them anyway, like a fool, out of necessity. Beneath the sad light of day and deep into night, I walk. Or do I trudge? It largely depends on my energy levels. Such magnificent skies I have seen. And waded through every conceivable emotion.

I cannot escape from sleep. I am the man who sleeps. *Un homme qui dort*. The universe seems largely indifferent, but indifference isn't the right word. It implies a separateness from being in addition to an ontology. *Unfeeling*. The relentless hours march ahead nonetheless. The light of day brings only sickness to my world. There is nothing. But no, that's a lie. There is much of nothing. I cannot move, chained to my distress. It would be better if I were to vanish. I would no longer be in the way. I cannot describe my unspeakable horror at the realisation that my days consist of waking up with a panicked heart, followed by a slow and arduous process of rumination on how my life came to be the way it is. Its hopelessness is a testament to these times. I open the window to let in the sounds of booming traffic. Will it ever cease while the world is still habitable? Take a moment to sit and look within. All of the destruc-

tion that surrounds and impregnates each day is beyond unnecessary. To what end do we drive our destructive fates? Perhaps I was right: Striving for personal liberation is all there is hope for. But it is also a problem in itself.

The pull of the past is like being drawn incessantly toward a deceptive light. Its jewels hold empty promises and crumble quickly into dust. And with such a thought, I'm merely stuck with the intolerable present. There's much I must pass over in silence. Little sense in these accumulated statements. Statements that do nothing, that cannot touch the infinite force that runs contingently alongside all events. But to see the world, without evaluation, without judgement, is perhaps devoid of the purposes of this excavation of meaning. The grey pigeons peck at the floor, circle round bins. Car engines blue shift and red shift all day and for much of the night. There's rarely the sound of car brakes. My present life rests on a bypass. None stop to enter my life, which is, apparently, little more than a landmark for the traffic to flow around. The ceaseless spill of sounds sends me into a daze, and finally to sleep. Back to sleep. Provided I was awake to begin with; I can never be certain. Drifting now, either way, through a life, once again, underground. So far underground that I'm also underwater. Underground and underwater. I can still hear the incessant squawking of birds. Yes. I wouldn't exactly call it song. Down here among the fossils. All that's dead and passed. I lie among them, ready, already sealed into my fate – into the fate of all creatures who roam. Below sky and then below the ground. It's the natural order, apparently. The way of things, evidently. Even the wisest eventually sink beneath the sediment. There to linger and to decompose. That's what we're up against: Time that occurs well

beyond consciousness. There's little doubt about it. No such thing as a talking skull. Nor a thinking one, for that matter.

Against the current. A long way to swim. As a child I would play out in the dark winter months, playing hide-and-seek in the conifers on the golf course close to my house. That would be the house that changed everything – one of the first times I learned about change. It was the era of the Catholic school. New friends that already inhabited their own lives. The dawn of complexity. As an only child I already knew the meaning of loneliness, which perhaps allowed me to adjust quite quickly to my new surroundings. I think about those days still, albeit rarely, in moments where I try to piece together the past in order to attempt to paint a complete picture of the present. Such an activity, however, can never be completed. There are too many fragments lost, found, then lost again. And, as the present moment swims forward and into the future, the past grows even larger, in spite of being nowhere at all. My own life has no fossil record as of yet, and I still have time to choose its meaning and to act accordingly. The child I once was exists now only in faded photographs.

Wading through the deep, trailing thick, black slime. An endlessly grey shore. But enough of those metaphors! I'm a young man in a doctor's office. He prescribes me, with some hesitation, antidepressants. I cannot take the grief I'm going through, have no idea it's completely natural – a painful process to be undergone, like giving birth to death. The streets are unforgiving. I only see them at night, when I trudge down the street to an ATM, withdrawing cash while furtively looking over my 3am shoulder. It's cold. I have lost all sense of time and cannot seem to be able to correct it. It isn't until I land

in Australia that the jetlag puts me back on track. Night becomes day again. But all this is getting ahead too quickly. It's night. My 3am shoulder. No birds to be heard – scarcely a soul. I've gotten into the habit of avoiding people, of wearing the same clothes, taking lots of drugs, drinking myself into stupors that lead to blackouts. And this, to me, is what it means to be an adult. It is the only adulthood I have known. Hours of agony in the dark. A long time ago now, perhaps. But still fresh enough to be recalled, like a dry underlayer of soil that, with some careful attention, can easily be revived. Another life, perhaps. Scamper back toward the safety of childhood. Nothing there. Nothing left. That stage has been abandoned; the toys scattered across the globe. The friendships drifted apart or severed. A shell. A shell of memory. An empty shell of memory. What else can be said about it? After all, words cannot bring it all back. Better to be forgotten, vanished, erased, cancelled in favour of the eternal, vacant present. Scarcely a soul. I don't take the pills for long.

To live with another is to become caught up in their rhythms – their habits. They appear as mere automations that repeatedly perform the same tasks and at similar times each day. I live as a rat underground, observing these habits. The habits of washing, eating, sleeping, cleaning, squeezing out excrement, drinking, staring blankly at devices, drifting to and from places of employment, doing the laundry, scraping out gutters, gardening, yes, gardening, that's another one, talking on the phone to the same people about the same things, the list goes on. *My happiness? What does my happiness matter?* To live in the corner on the floor and in perpetual distress is to experience an awakening of sorts. Not one that is in any way spiritu-

ally superior, but quite the inverse. It is to know the continual pumping of flesh and sinew. Oxygenated limbs that make mobility possible. The momentary functions of biology, basically – functions that sustain all knowledge of the world. But where, exactly, is this linguistic tide leading?

The pressures of adulthood. Find a job. Get a job. It doesn't matter whether you like it. Wear the mask of a profession and wear it well. Become seamless. Become someone else. Conform to expectation. Let your dreams die. They'll still be waiting for you after you die. And the dream? To be free of all conventional constraints. To walk around hungry and poor, shabbily, seeking inspiration. To live free is to starve, freeze to death or die of heatstroke out in the open. Starving artist or starving art: a false dichotomy? Unable to choose, to see clearly the dejection of my life, I remain hidden. Hidden so that I may choose instead tomorrow. But tomorrow never comes. It quickly turns into today, in a steady procession. Like a man with amnesia, always forgetting the value of each passing moment, I remain inert. Never progressing. The bed is comfy and warm so why move? Why do anything? Necessity, perhaps. I wouldn't go so far as to say passion. Time does not cease.

The clouds move again, darkly, toward evening. The air is growing cold and is once again filled with the sound of traffic and little else. A certain sense of peace has begun to flow. Perhaps I have merely resigned myself to the fate of this passing day, and that it's now almost too late to do more. Occasional groups of pedestrians as well as toddlers on little scooters meander past the driveway. I never go out to say hello. I've everything I need at present – all the necessities – and therefore feel no urge to go out. Out. The world outside has become an

alien world. The gasses that fill the sky threaten in an irrational way. I've become accustomed to staying indoors. Walls, ceilings, and doors are my defences. But I cannot defend myself against memories and dreams and, without much external stimulation to play on the senses, these are the things that come to the fore, and that cannot be avoided for long.

My secret star shines out there somewhere, over the bounds of reality. I will never again see the friends and acquaintances of my youth. Never again will we be reunited. Not that I'm sentimental about it. It merely baffles and amazes. To take a life and to move it far away, dump it in an unknown corner of the world like you would bones in a fleshy sack. But I wouldn't change any of it. No. My life has been filled with wondrous amazement. It has been a great adventure, and beyond anything I could have imagined. Just as well. Interminable motion. No turning back. I unpacked my bones here and I intend to stay.

I roll the bins down the driveway and leave them on the kerb. I catch a glimpse of the misty moon on my short walk back to the house. The air's so cold that my fingers and toes begin to ache, and all I want to do is crawl back inside and get beneath my blankets. There's little else to be done. I've cleaned the sheets, scoured the job ads, and sit now in the silent air, my cold face and eyes peering through the gloom. My belly rumbles through the silence, and I stir, but don't eat. Hunger can never be satisfied, only deferred, and I refuse to be a slave to hunger. It will win in the end, there's no doubt about that, and my defiance will prove to be another futile exercise. I'll add it to the list. But at least there's pleasure in eating, and in defecating, too. Hunger deferred and then, afterwards, empty and clean. If I focus on the process long enough, sometimes I even

feel a sliver of happiness, in awe of its simplicity. But this, of course, is folly. It's just part of the cycle of suffering that I intend to become liberated from. Absent from. The digestive system is, after all, not without its occasional pains and complications. No. It just isn't good enough! But I digress. I'm talking myself into a position yet again, only to have to talk myself out of it later. Perhaps I'll wake up the cat and torment him for a while. At least give object to my own torment. He's been asleep all day in his little house. Hasn't moved, as far as I can tell. Never has to think. Never is put into a position where he has to explain himself or justify his existence to others. *What is it you do? What is your profession?* Haven't figured it out yet. Running out of time. I can feel the sand draining from my eyes. The horror! Empty, silent room. Got to get out. Nowhere to go. Don't know anyone around here. Not like when I was a child. It isn't as if I can play out, knock on a friend's door. Perhaps there's a child in me after all. But enough of that. It's no use attempting to psychoanalyse myself. That'll only lead me deeper into strife – into neurotic landscapes. All of this an experience. Yes, a state of mind. I study my thoughts as they rise and fall away. They're closely connected to my energy levels. My thoughts. I feel them in my body, too. If I could only rest, I might stand a chance. If I could switch off my thoughts, perhaps, even for an hour. To be someone else awhile, with a different set of problems. Mine are too familiar! So familiar they're like an old, sad story. Bedtime story, but lifelong. The narrative runs throughout my entire body before spilling out into the world, like a madman on the run from the police, having escaped the asylum, beneath treacherous skies. What a vision to behold this life really is. Such beauty rooted in the depths of sorrow. But

there are no words that take flight at present – only a silent sky that is never still. Breathes itself. Each breath takes a century. Drifting, as it does, around the globe at high speed. Each and every moment. To think of it. The processes that occur, unceasing, relentless and elegant. The lamplight dreams. The door is closed. My eyes are open. My eyes are closed. I dare not move or speak for fear of waking the dead. I do not reach out. I am alone, and such, my words communicate nothing. They are superfluous and will not cease. I clamour at the walls, scratching off paint and plaster. It's buried under my fingernails. Probably will stay there for a week. I lost my scrubbing brush, dirty old thing. I think it belonged to my grandfather. No matter. I'll buy another when my payment comes through. I'm positive it will. It'll be my last payslip, perhaps. And then I'll have nothing but words left. Shivering on the street, perhaps. At the corner with nothing but the streetlight to illuminate the rain. Shivering in dark vestibules, I'll be, once I've been ushered on by police. I'll be hunted down for nothing, persecuted for having nothing. A life of no respite. A transient without a dwelling. Yes, the fear keeps me. The fear keeps me invested in a life that interests me no longer. There's so little that distinguishes my present life to a life on the street, begging for change. Thin walls. A few numbers in an account. I've no social standing, so I can readily cross out reputation. Tick that one off. Feed it to the dogs for all I care. There's nothing to support this image of thought. Its foundations forgotten. Flotsam floats downstream, out of sight. Out of my line of sight, anyway. Out of my line of sight and into another. After all, I'm not the centre. There are other gazes. Sometimes I flinch under their collective scrutiny. I've never really fit into society and therefore feel no desire to carry

its seed. It can burn for all I care. Wither or burn, whichever applies. The end would likely be the same. Illusions before my eyes, nothing more.

And then it hits me: I wouldn't want to be anybody else. I don't think you ever truly get over anything, even if you *become* someone else. You just add all the events and experiences to the incommensurable heap, until eventually you become dwarfed by it. Chained to its elusive location you sit, like a transient on a park bench, watching, with invisible eyes, the horizons of your misfortune grow. Until one day you can't take it anymore and you rise, only to find that no matter how hard you try, you can never walk away.

I've seen the different coloured lights that attempt to lure in wayward souls after death – the lights of different realms. I have so far been unable to resist their pull. I have visited many of the worlds, but none, at least according to the scriptures, allow for liberation. None except the human realm, that is. And here I am again, constructed, perhaps, through language, and able to have another crack. Human. Yes. Often disgusted by my condition, I must admit. But this is a part of it, perhaps. The body is no palace of pristine keeping. It secretes fluids and even fails over time. It's a ticking time bomb of decay. Just as well, really. One day I'll have to let it go, and that will be my chance. I will resist the call to exist again. But now I must cultivate a life that accumulates to wisdom. Perhaps it will all be in vain, that I am wrong and will waste my life in pursuit of an impossible virtue.

This condition. This condition of being human. Too quick to be disgusted. I'm not yet sure what it is, even after all this time and all these lives. To be human still defies any holistic de-

finition. I do what I can, but that's all anybody does. What to say. Never enough. To speak is never enough. Alone in a room, staring longingly out the window. At a world – a world of possibility. A world of possibilities that are never fulfilled. Fancies, really. Ideals. I'm sitting. That's where I am in reality. Sitting and imagining a life that's perpetually beyond reach. It's a life shown to me through the television and through various other media outlets. But it's never actualised. Not for me, anyway. I'm sitting with my thoughts. I used to walk a lot. I would walk until I wore out the soles in my shoes. Walk across continents, trying to get as far as I could. Away from who I was. Yes. But enough of that. I cannot walk away from myself. I choose now to inhabit it as fully as possible and to examine my life in the way any philosopher would. I consider myself a philosopher of sorts. I spend my life trying to measure reality, and to investigate truths. I cannot be certain whether I've found any, or anything at all for that matter. Most often I find absences – the gaps in between lives. But I exaggerate in my pursuit of nothingness. There's plenty around. The evidence of presence is everywhere. It's all around me. In my desperation I drive to a coastal town in which I used to live. Desperate because I haven't been able to go out much. I'm mesmerised, as I drive through the gentle rain, by the many shades of green in the pastures. I'm sensitive to it all after such a long period of depravation. Like a prisoner set free, I wish to experience it all. After all, my margins of late have been so thin. I have almost lost the taste of freedom. But I remember it. Somewhere down a dark tunnel of memory. It was once the prize of a life I once had, now a burden.

I have now developed an aversion to going outside. This growing sense of agoraphobia motivates me to get up and step out the front door. It's the need to overcome before my situation gets out of hand. I can only make it to the shops to acquire the ingredients that will sustain another day. Beyond this I am lost. I return to my new residence quickly. I wouldn't exactly call it home. I hide to the sound of birdsong. I am a shadow in the dark; a hand that reaches toward daylight. Toward a day that will never come. Toward a day that is here. But I let it drain away toward dusk. I spend my time watching colours fade, witnessing all life disappear. Perhaps this place is condemned. Perhaps I am condemned, limited in what I can know, always trying, in spite of myself, to reach out further. Perpetually seeking to get beyond these walls that surround, no matter where I go. But now I am afraid of open skies, and there is no going beyond. I have to be satisfied by what I have or eschew satisfaction completely. Walking into walls, locked doors. Strangers on the street won't let me into their homes, and the interiors of most buildings I see remain forever mysteries. This landscape a labyrinth of mostly locked doors and closed minds. There's no dialogue. Barely anybody speaks. There's no need to speak. It's considered old-fashioned. Another day wandering in the mind, looking for something, clues to the past. Clouds gather above as if I were dreaming. Dreaming, but very much awake. No, I am not dreaming. This is real. *This*. Experience. What more can be said about it? *This* reality. The chemical composition of a human being can be placed together in a container, but a human being will not emerge. There is something more. A divine spark, some might call it. But this isn't an explanation that's good enough for me. It's the end of the road, handing the reigns

over to a god, to a creator. The room grows darker and I switch on the light. *What am I to do?* I used to feel as if I had all the answers, but I am soon learning that I know nothing, that I don't have the answers. The memories I have of other lives I lived. Perhaps they are false. I need more proof of their occurrence, but why? I could simply let go of those images. Let go of those voices. No good stirring them up when I have to let go of everything eventually. I sit in the chair by the ticking clock, trying not to think of Dreer and Finch and Melloway and all of those cursed characters that no longer have a stake in my life. Ghosts, all of them. They no longer have hold over me, nor are they around except in my mind. They are, after all, imaginative inventions that I came up with, merely to pass the time, or to avoid the trials of my own life. They represent nothing of the person I've become. I imagined them all before I even existed, and now I imagine myself.

It's night and the streets are empty. There's nowhere to go. I don't go for a walk in the dark. I dream. This time for real. Yes, I am dreaming, and it is real, in a way. A different form of reality. Melissa Melloway sits in her car, scanning the horizon with her hazel eyes. Thomas Dreer lights the match that will set him alight and ultimately end his life. Nicholas Finch sits in the half-lotus position, searching the ether of his mind for at least a semblance of peace. There is, outside, a paranoid daze of streets unwitnessed by any of them. Landscapes that have yet to be created, ominously forming in the dark of the unknown. Pockets of unrest spring up throughout the world. The people need something to blame, something to rail against. They unite, divided, their stories never told. Time goes on. But in my mind, I dream. I dream of the Ghats in India, my body floating

on the Ganga. All it takes is for me to imagine the smells and I'm taken there. But I remember little of what came before. Little of the life I lived there. A dream or a life lived, is there any difference? I have relatives there. Relatives I will never know, and do not know the names of. My body floats, lifeless, soon to be washed to the stepped hills. No more will I aimlessly wander this earth.

I was not there when they burned the bodies on the riverbank. Those that witnessed it returned in a state of shock. One of them wrote a poem about it that I found moving, but I do not remember it in detail. There's something unnerving about seeing the remains of a life before your eyes. Here lies before you an object, whose past can never again be retold, and whose conscious existence will remain beyond reach. When it is your own body on the funeral pyre, you float above, light as air. All the limits of perspective fall away and, for the first time, you see beyond the world of conventions. You see the ultimate: the whole. It was, after all, an experience I'd been preparing for all my life. The doctrines outlining *karma* and *moksha* and *dharma* and *samsara* had been instilled into me from a young age. But nothing, no verbal teaching or indoctrination, could ever prepare me for the experience of dying.

The mourners gather by the funeral pyre, their faces obscured by shadow. The burning embers crackle in the morning air as smoke fills the sky. There is no sound save the crackle of the fire; all is otherwise silent. The humidity of the day has not yet set in, and so some of the figures clothed in black shiver in the morning breeze. What is left of my spirit passes through the *bardo*, once again mistaking the light of the human realm for salvation. I then search the world for two human beings mak-

ing love, so that the flowering of a new consciousness can once again seek the possibility of an open sky.

The light fades too soon after dawn. I can't shake the notion that I'm running out of sunsets. I'm once again sealed off in my room and becoming nostalgic about a past I'll never see again. It is clear that I'm spending too much time looking back on account of a lack of activity in the present. I do not prohibit any thought. I permit everything that arises. All throughout this basement of thought – a basement transforming into a six-week dungeon, perhaps stretching on for longer. It wasn't so long ago that I navigated the city on public transport, searching for lost images, finding nothing.

There are many people walking around, lost in a spiritual realm. *This* realm. The city churns endlessly, and no-one knows why. I walk in the sun and through the perpetual mystery of it all. The living contradiction ensues. I don't talk to many people and, looking around, it seems that they don't either. Long gone are the days where answers were sought in the hearts of others – strangers are often met with suspicion and contempt. Only moments before, I had witnessed an American girl with a big dog on the train, being politely hounded by another passenger.

'You're lucky to have that dog. What's his name?'

'Broom.'

'Broom?'

'Broom. He likes to eat cheese.'

'Don't feed him too much, or he'll get fat.'

'I don't, but my dad does. I'm not worried about his getting fat, but the gassy farts... I'm the one who has to share a room with him.'

The interrogating passenger got to her feet and said it was nice to have met them both. The American stood up, too, though she said nothing more. Each of them walked robotically to the door as the train came to a complete stop. Broom's tail brushed the floor as he stepped out onto the platform.



To paint a picture, and to put things in a way that I can understand, is all that I will attempt here. Perhaps there's nothing to be said, or perhaps saying anything at all will not change anything that will occur – the failings of language unveiled. I will say that, on some days, the silence speaks far too loudly, and it yearns to be broken so that connections can be established. And although the workings of the world may be explained, the *why* is never apparent. The search for meaning is an endless pursuit. Everything I think is thought in language; to give ideas expression is to set them free and become trapped by them at the very same time. To break habit is to break free from the comfort of illusions.

On this day, all control is lost, and I fall prey to the cycles of memory that fly in and out, of their own choosing. I have lived many lives and worn many faces, stripped away now in their naked illumination. The past is where they live – in a house without roof or walls – flooding the present to inform the future. There are other characters there, too, people who left me behind. Or perhaps I left them behind – only to begin again – my suicidal pain hanging on to enter a new life. I can never tell exactly how it all transpired, since that phase of death is beyond my grasp. But I do know that liberation was denied to me or, rather, I had denied it to myself. There is nothing to speak of

there but the reconstruction of symbolic thought, abstract in its composition. To give voice to ghosts is to resurrect the dead. Their ideas circle around all that I inhabit. Mine is their philosophy. They speak without tongues and death is transcended. Fear is set free.

Perhaps now is an opportunity to do good, and to dedicate my new life to alleviating the sufferings of others. The light finds its way to my eyes after so many days of darkness. It was once all I would think about. I drive out to meet the elements – saltwater, sand, waves – and the open sky frees my mind into space. There is peace at last, and happiness, but I cannot stay here, in this peaceful version of silence. The churning city awaits – a place that once thrilled and excited me – now depresses me into a kind of imaginative congestion. It is reassuring to know that, not too far away, there are places of natural beauty that I am sometimes able to see. It is this lostness that has followed me through the streets, surrounded by disillusioned billboards and advertisements purporting optimism, in an otherwise decaying place. The neon signs present a displacement of the way things are as opposed to a discordant belief about the way things ought to be. This is the belief that feeds a perpetual feeling of delusion. Reality is now too difficult to find and has evaded us all in favour of a collective dreamworld of separateness and individual gain – a nightmare of solipsism – sold as the only valid vision of the world. To turn inward with a meditative gaze is only to further propound anxiety. There are some days when I think there's no hope. It is winter. Over the summer, the sun had frazzled everything in its path.

A transformation of thought can occur only through the observation of mental habits. I sit in a chair in the garden out-

side and there are heavy rainclouds high above. The air is dark and there are no birdsongs. There are many words circling in my head – stories that people once told me, thoughts that I had conjured and for some reason or another could not let go of – and they constitute this reality of which I inhabit. And through it all, I love this world, and will fight until my very last breath. I sleep, and through my dreaming, awaken. To awaken is only half the battle, for what comes next is completely down to me, the author of my own life. I try to hang on to what little autonomy I have. And all the while the clouds still hang heavy, and there is the feeling that I'll never be able to get above them. Not for long, anyway. But it doesn't matter. I can still breathe it all in and keep on imagining the world – a dream we dream for each other as well as for ourselves, and to speak is to actualise the dream – to affirm it.

There is nothing profound to be found in a slow trickle of triviality. And yet, the miracle of existence ensues. Every molecule takes its own adventure, and to walk outside is a splendid endeavour of which I am lucky to pursue. The ability to return to the source of everything does not exist, for everything echoes forward, carrying all matter with it. To keep onward is to write a narrative of action and thought – whatever happens next does not happen at all. The momentum I feel is an illusion unto itself. The landscape of this text is aware of its ability to reveal something hollow. The words orbit a vacuous interior, as if on the very cusp of the event horizon of a black hole. An attentive reader will know that I've already conveyed a similar experience in relation to myself, but now it's beginning to apply to something larger. The clay sets and time undoes the possibility

for a new vision to arise; I am now stuck only with the words that exist on the page.

I must venture out, even if it serves to draw a limit upon the infinite. Otherwise, I will live as if there's no urgency, the minutes flittered away. As the light passes now through the clouds and the trees, there's a life that won't wait for adventure to come – the perceived stability of which masks its true fluidity. There are rivers not far from a house in my memory that flow into one another. At certain times of the year, when the banks overflow, the separateness of the rivers cannot be perceived. Consciousness flows toward a sea of knowledge. It is here that my mind sways and my vision is distorted by the realisation of the fact that everything is in some way distorted. To deny the flux that pours into void is to never find peace. Each new thought is a drop that falls from the sky and into this sea, creating ripples that ring out, affecting the rest, before dissipating but never entirely disappearing.



It is all a transference of energy. If depression is living in the past and anxiety the future, I'm torn apart by the two. All that's left in the present is a rapidly beating heart. My self is cut by my mind as it slices through the air, until I'm in pieces with everything else. At the train station, on a wall, there is an advertisement for a lecture with the title 'The Fear of Missing Out'.

'I'd better not miss that one,' I say to a passing monk. He smiles amidst his deep red robes and then squints at the poster as he tries to focus.

'I think I'd learn more through not attending,' he remarks.
The train arrives.

A woman on the train comes and sits next to me. She asks whether I'll be her friend. Since I have no greater prospects on the horizon, I accept. She has a strong Russian accent and appears to be somewhat older than me. A little, perhaps, or a lot. I'm not sure. Let me say that she has one of those ageless faces. I smile at her and ask when she'd like to meet.

'I go with you now,' she says.

'Right now?'

'Yes.' She squints proudly.

'Well, I've been awake for thirty-six hours straight and want to head home for some hard sleep.' It's just past noon.

'You sleep at 2:30pm, I be there. You take shit, I be there. You get the idea.'

Silence.

'You *do* shit?'

A much longer silence.

The train stops and I immediately rush to the door, red in the face and a little scared. When the door opens, I weave past innumerable bodies and lose her in the crowd.

'Where have you gone?' I hear her shout from a distance. It isn't long until her voice fades from earshot and is drowned out by the multitudinous horde that separates us. And I'm once again beneath a blanket of total anonymity – a blanket that both comforts and suffocates. I board another train and have no clue where it's headed (I ride trains all day to conceal the fact that I have no day job) and there's a balding man dressed in a business suit, poised as if standing at an invisible lectern, and delivering an eloquent soliloquy:

On the fucking train man this shit is terrible stinks vaguely of piss I stare out the window at the clouds and long to fly up there away from this grim misery all these faces it's as if they're dead no joy there sometimes I think I've forgotten what joy feels like lying in the dark last night two hours awake it must have been in the grip of some irrational fear I don't even know why thinking about the basketball hoop outside perhaps I could fit a noose around it but the thought is too horrific more horrific than this anyway I take my mind wherever I like sometimes it's a good thing other times not so good I want to be free from all this self-torturous doubt and to live in such a way as I intend (which way is that exactly?) sitting around all day watching everything wither and dwindle as poverty encroaches further I don't know what I'm going to do I've made an enemy of everyone the world the trees the planets and the sun beats down illuminating it all...

The man's train of thought is seemingly eternal, and I move to a different carriage to get back to my own. It's all faintly familiar. Pain permeates the new carriage, too, though this time there's a silence that rings uncontrollably. The people gaze forward at their lives. There are many more bodies piling in. It's as if the pain is shared by all, and that none suffers alone. With nothing to hold on to but the bars and handles of the train, each moment we are slipping further into void.

'Cornelius!'

Finally, a voice other than my own that I recognise takes me out of my churning observations.

‘Cornelius!’

For a moment, I appear to be standing still, though the train continues hurtling toward its perpetual destination.

Four

I do not know exactly why his voice is so familiar. I had not met him before, at least not in this life.

‘I’ve been looking for you,’ he says.

The crowd swarms around us on the train platform. There are many journeys taking place around us, and I think that perhaps I will understand them all, in turn, someday. My pursuer is looking at me, not saying a word, expecting me to make a reply. His grey hair is most buoyant for a man of his advanced age, and it seems to move in the air with a resistance, as if it were an underwater cloud.

‘Do we know each other?’ I reply finally, only to break the silence if nothing else.

‘Not so much. We travelled in the same circles once, I believe, but never met.’

I get the feeling we’ve met before in dreams. The platform becomes steadily more crowded.

‘Let’s go somewhere we can talk.’

On the street a siren blazes as we pass through the gates. I lead the way past many shops and boutiques, toward a café that I know to be discreet. I have to slow down every now and then to allow my pursuer to catch up. The pavements are old, cracked, and in desperate need of repair. I see my new friend stumble every now and then, and I ask him if he’s all right.

‘Is it much further?’ His voice reflects his exasperation.

We arrive at the café, order two black coffees and take a seat in a dark corner. It is much quieter than out on the street.

The wallpaper smells musty and damp, and the carpet looks as though it were installed in the seventies.

‘That’s much better,’ says my new friend as he takes the weight off his feet. His attention is drawn to numerous objects in the room, for his gaze evades my own. He looks over at the counter, out the window, and then down at his feet.

‘I don’t wish to appear impertinent, but do you mind telling me what all of this is about?’

‘All of what?’

‘This meeting.’

‘Ah, yes.’

Our coffees arrive and he once again becomes distracted. He displays the manner of a man who has all the time in the world. I stare at him as he patiently sips his hot coffee, but he doesn’t seem to notice. It’s as if he were alone in a room with nothing but himself and his coffee. He sips his drink and licks the rim of the cup if any of the liquid starts dripping down it. I can feel within me a rising impatience bordering on anxiety.

‘Well?’

‘Ah yes,’ he says again. ‘I have been looking for you for a very long time, Cornelius.’

A very uneasy feeling comes over me. I’m anxious. It can no longer be denied. I feel I’m his prisoner and wish only for the key. I want only to escape but walking out the door would do no good. Aversion would only achieve a sense of flight. The only way to free myself of this anguish is to find out what he knows. There’s simply no way around it.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Don’t be anxious, Cornelius. I don’t wish you any harm. My name is Nicholas Finch.’

'I remember you.'

'Quite.'

'I mean to say, I have some of your memories.' Finch gives me a puzzled look, and it's the first time I've seen him taken off guard since the initiation of our encounter. 'But what I'd like to know is, how do you know it's me? I mean, how do you know I'm the reincarnation on Thomas Dreer?'

'Now you've said it.' Finch smiles knowingly. 'I can tell you only that I saw you in a dream. Somehow, intuitively, I knew. And I've known for some time that, somehow, something must continue after death. I guess you're living proof.'

'No doubts, then?'

'Not anymore.'

Outside it begins to rain. Gently at first, then gradually heavier. The pedestrian crossing begins to buzz. A horde of dark figures, many of whom hold their coats over their heads as makeshift hoods, storm the street wanting to quickly evade the downpour. Falling leaves and blossoms mingle with the rain. My life pours with them.

'All I have is doubt. Doubt as well as memories I cannot explain.'

'But my knowing about you is proof, isn't it?'

'Perhaps. Or perhaps you're a lunatic raving about dreams. I can't be sure. *I* told *you* about Dreer. I should have kept my cards up my sleeve.'

'But you know who I am. How can you explain that?'

'You read Dreer's manuscripts after he died.'

'That's precisely correct. See! Either we're both right or we're both lunatics.'

'Could it not be both?'

Finch allows this logic to hang in the air a few moments. A young couple's shoes squelch as they approach the counter to order coffee. Their clothes are soaked and rainwater drips from their hair onto the counter. The barista gives them a sympathetic squint with her eyes.

Finch and I fumble around with words some more, trying to form to some bridge of connection but unable to excavate one another's inner sanctum. There is, within me, something untouched: A secret space that no-one else can ever know – a world beyond the reach of others. I ponder this notion as we sit, almost at odds with each other. My anxiety recedes with the realisation that I am not, after all, his prisoner, and that I, too, am able to exert a degree of power.

The sunlight outside is reaching its peak. The momentum of the day does not cease. The rain has eased, its shadow passed. Movement continues in the street: The usual hum of activity in the form of passing figures and cars. It's as if no-one arrives anywhere. Finch has become quiet. I can almost sense in him a disappointment that the long journey of his life has led him here, to this juncture. I imagine that, as his brow furrows, a voice in his mind is saying: *Joy, you remember joy?* The light in the room briefly dims as a cloud passes overhead.

'You'll have to forgive me,' says Finch. 'I get very tired, but I'd like to meet again.'

I'm not sure what to say next. I want to keep open the possibility of another meeting without committing to its certainty. 'Soon enough,' I say, without giving any details.

'How will I reach you?'

'You won't, but I'll be around. You'll just have to find me.' And, with that said, I get to my feet. 'It's been a real pleasure.'

I feel hollow immediately after speaking and walk toward the door and toward daylight. The roads and pavements are still wet, but it's stopped raining.

'It took me a long time to find you the first time,' says Finch from over my shoulder. I turn around and smile at him as my feet begin to take me to re-join the chaos of the streets. Perhaps I'll see him again and perhaps I won't. With the sun now shining and the remainder of the day wide open, nothing outside this moment seems to matter.

Everything recedes further from view. Life, all of it. Not a sound. All at a distant point, unknown. I dare not hope for anything. Not here, in the dark. The light from the sun illuminates nothing. Not for me. Lost here, feeling very alone. Out of reach. The world, out of reach. In this small space I see nothing and have to imagine the world. A place now almost gone from me. Receded. Yes. Down a tunnel. A network of tunnels. The subterranean. I navigate from underground like a dead man, already buried. Hatching plans like a fly hatching its eggs in the decaying flesh of a corpse. I, too, will one day become a multitude that fills the skies. A plague, perhaps, suspended in a sunbeam. But for now, my bones cry of a life still in procession, and all of my fancies wither and disappear at the call of sunset. Such futile illusions both consume and are the substance of my thoughts. All experience will be gone from me, but not yet. Although the world has receded and no longer possess its full flavour, it is not yet entirely gone from me. The wind still rushes by the windows at hours of its own volition. And the moon still faintly glows through the mist that descends at the close of each day – a mist that obfuscates the transition from one day to the next. And when the mist dissipates and the sky slowly turns

azure, it is almost as if there is no such thing as yesterday and, for the briefest moment, history is erased.

At the carnival on the pier crowds pass effervescently. The amusements draw the people from the shore out to sea, like the call of a siren's song. The pier is among my fondest memories. I would go there as a child on rare occasion. I can still remember the excitement at arriving and the sadness of leaving, as well as the wind coming off the North Sea.

From a dark, squalid room, I imagine it all. Sometimes I take a slow walk around the swamp at the end of the street, but that's about it. We're confined to our neighbourhoods now. In the mind there are police patrols, and I cannot go out very far. Finch will have to wait indefinitely until our next meeting. Alone again I am quite safe, enveloped in darkness. Obscured by it. Safe, yes. For now. For how long, I cannot say. For now, I have taken shelter. Outside, a storm rages. The rain is bouncing off the road. I will be here for some considerable time, attempting to amuse myself, filling empty hours. In the moments I lose the light it is difficult to keep myself. Lose focus. Cannot see the point in anything. Keep on. Keep up the hope, the faith, etc. But when it slips, I find there is nothing but a perpetually unfulfilled promise. A life deferred. If unity is found only in death, then why delay it? The answers elude me, drifting further into shroud. Until I'm standing with nothing, gawking at the naked air, finding no comfort.

I have a tendency to keep others at a distance. I wish to open up to the right people but feel that I am failing. I'm right out to sea, sealed off in this room, reminiscing about all the chances I let slip by – the experiences I was not present for. Moments I took for granted. Rumination is a poison that sears my

veins, pumps along with my blood to every avenue of my being. After the storm, the sky opens up. I walk outside to the middle of a damp clearing, eyes fixed at the grey mountains as they roll back to the other side of the city. Never to return in their exact form. Formless but recognisable, they drift. And I drift. My thoughts I have no control over. My mind is an undisciplined garden where wild weeds grow. And I wait. I wait for life to begin again. I have been waiting a long time. All my life, perhaps. Not knowing what for, still not knowing. To begin. The clouds disappear over the horizon. A horizon without definition, never to be reached. My grey eyes strain to see the now bright sky. The world is a disorienting blur that makes me sick to my stomach. I can no longer fathom its complexities nor pretend to be able to solve its problems alone. It is simply too vast. And so I retreat once more to my shrinking world of darkened rooms and corridors. Even the dimmest light is too intense for me now.

There is, before me, an overwhelming sense of loss. Loss of an envisioned future, of loved ones, of a way of life. Steeped in sadness, I sit, thinking of their faces. Of my grandfather in particular. He broke my heart when he died, half a world away from me. My life now ribbons cast off in the wind, wavering, searching through eternity. Red, I imagine them to be. Red with anger and the passion of longing. I know death and have been numbed by it for a long time until now. Now, I am shaken by it. I think myself into a stupor – a psychosis of cyclonic dreams. The ghost who stayed. He would've spent more moments with my grandfather, whereas I substituted him and everyone else for a life. Perhaps I lost a life, too, in a way. At the time of my departure, there only seemed one way to go. I

bought a ticket and flew the hell out of there, leaving everything behind, all bridges left in ashes, soon to be carried down-river. A long flight to a sparkling new life – called on by the waves. And for a long while I seldom looked back. All I wanted was to forget, to move forwards, to enjoy the beach and the love of a woman and good drugs. But somewhere along the way, the amusements faded for me. They soon began to take on a veritable feeling of hollow destruction, and I soon found myself disillusioned and lost. Yes, that's it. That's the way it went. And I should not think that I've fully recovered, or ever will for that matter. The ghostly present. The only thing I want now is to be empty. Empty so that when the time is right, I'll be able to receive what's coming to me. And so I wait some more. In the dark. Yes. Away from the crumbling of society. Perhaps there are no more fun times to be had. Now, there's a thought. It'll just be me, here, with my thoughts, as the world turns. For how much longer, I do not know. I cannot be certain. I'm still awake. I can hear the cars drifting, the engines humming. Have I painted a clear enough picture of my downfall? I can never tell. But enough of said tedious whining! If a fall has occurred so too must a rise.

I can in no way recreate an experience of the sun. Each time I try it sits as a word on paper, emitting neither heat nor light. Each day comprises insurmountable obstacles that I face alone. Intangible in their nature, however, they cannot be seen by others. A world locked behind my eyes. Rain pours down the window.

I'm here to break the habits of being, all the while eschewing those activities of life deemed necessary. Things are piling up around me. I allow them to. Trite things, I might add. Triv-

ial things. Those things that are, by their very nature, cyclic and absurd. The dishes, for one, drip in an obscene pile by the sink. There will always be dishes to do. But no. I simply must go beyond the realm of domesticity. Step out to... what and where? My prison is one of poverty, whereas another's may be their salary. I actively resist employment in favour of an obscurity. I wanted to transform life into art, but where has it gotten me? Nowhere, some might say. Further along a path of illusory progress. Free to face others' condemnation. A grand adventure is not waiting; it has already begun. It exists in the cracks on the ceiling, way up high. Upside down valleys await retinal exploration.

The air is laden with exhaust fumes and fear. There is no stopping the insufferable tide – the endless pull of life – and all you want is for it to stop for just an instant, long enough to appreciate a moment before its passing. Totally alone, the world roars by. I hear the wash of cars as they drive along the wet road. Ambling through the dark, I am a figure that moves beneath the trees. I wander through seasons, years, and along the passing of time, amusing myself with anecdotes that occur to me at random. I trudge through the dirt as the dirt trudges through me. My aim is simple now: Get through another day. There are no luxuries to be found in such a thought. I'm trapped in this cycle now, unable to elevate myself from the days that come and go, undifferentiated. I walk the same streets and with no purpose in mind, simply to escape enclosing walls that mean only to suffocate. I've had my fill of the incessant dripping of the bathroom tap – moments that drip away. I think about fixing it but do nothing.

There are so many gaps in my memory – faces that have been erased. I attempt to excavate them, often in vain. Walking through streets at night, uttering forgotten words to faceless companions. That was my heyday. A blank memory. Drink and drugs and misery, and they were the good times. The hour of my youth, so to speak. And now I have the privilege of looking back, not knowing what the hell happened, like a deluded moth around a fluttering light. There is no grand moment awaiting where it will all make sense. Life comes clear and then fades, like the churning tide, from one moment to the next.

I fix the dripping tap. With nothing much to do, it had become a fixation – an obsession.

What ensues next is unemployment with no horizon. No certainty. Endless days of not knowing what to do with myself. Ragged clothes along cold streets. Dreaming a life that is perpetually beyond reach. Perhaps there is no more to life, and that I imagined my entire situation, that I am wrong, and Finch is mad. There is nothing anyone can do for me now as I drift in stasis. Aimlessly, I might add. From room to room and rarely outside. It's as if the outside world doesn't exist for me anymore. It is beyond the limits of my sleeping mind. I dream my own versions of reality from a place of safety, comfort, cocoon, tomb. A declension of labels that leads inexorably toward death. This is my moment above the earth. The unanswered question is what to do with it. A timeless question of being, asked since thought began. Where is this place and why am I here? Simply having time to seriously contemplate such questions is a luxury. I could live my life out on a pea farm somewhere, with no time for thinking. Perhaps not having time to think would bring relief. But no answers. Though I don't

have any answers now. Only more questions. The sun sinks out of view, and it's dark once more. My pitiful thoughts have changed nothing. Another day gone, no more, no less. Its phantom cries will never be heard again. Tomorrow will be much the same, there's little doubt. It will consist of more relentless thought in the face of a reality that answers to nothing and no-one.

Sometimes I hear birds singing at night when I'm trying to sleep. Maybe they're complaining that the streetlights are too bright, I don't know. Their prehistoric beaks get to chirping and I cannot help but question the validity of their activity. I have not before heard birds singing at night. Owls, perhaps, but they display an unmistakable 'hoot'. I can say with confidence that the sounds are not coming from owls, but from sparrows or some similar bird. It seems the day is too short for them, too. And it is never fully dark here, in this room, due to the streetlights permeating the blinds and the faded window, just as suffering permeates the walls. There is no way to shut it out; I cannot seal off the outside world. Sometimes, I trick myself into thinking that I exist within a vacuum, and that nothing can touch me. But the longer I stay in this imaginary vacuum, the greater the difficulties become, and the larger my fears. Until fear is borne in the corner of the room, growing like a dark foetus that will soon become large enough to encase my world in its shadow. Where are the parties that came and went? Where are the friendly faces who once populated my waking world? All gone, it seems, only to be replaced by a growing despair. All joyful excursions have, for the moment, been extinguished.

I appreciated none of it, of course. The excursions, that is. Not until now, perhaps. Now that I can venture out no more.

And even when I tried, as I did many times, I could never extract enough joy out of a single moment. Always I have felt an incredible amount of pressure to live and to savour each moment, but have nevertheless found it impossible to do so. A single moment is, perhaps, nothing when abstracted from the collective picture of a life, just as a single fragmented image gives little insight as to the overall landscape that it belongs to. And individual lives, too, are only fragments of the absolute.

Out here on the precipice once again, the image of a life comes closer. I have reconstructed this moment many times. There is, in the distance, a soft blue light. I stray towards it, heeding its comforting glow.

I amble aimlessly around the swamp. It rains. A black swan swims away as I look over the side of a bridge. The swan never takes its eye off me as it floats away like an extravagant black shoe. Unlike me, it has nowhere to hide; no walls to separate itself from the earth or sky. My lover walks with me. We walk in unison, taking in the colours that we've so far missed out on all day. Grey clouds loom and the air is cold. There's another Antarctic blast in the air. Our face coverings prevent us from kissing, so we simply kiss the air to simulate a kiss. We talk and laugh at nothing in particular. I'm happy, yes. It would be a betrayal not to mention her. But hers is not my story to tell. This is, after all, my own account – my own narrative of events and silences that rise and fall. Yes. Like waves. On a distant beach I traversed long ago. At the beginning of my death. My lover. She walks with me now and always will. Here, in this infinite moment. A moment now passed and stored in time. Or washed away, but still lived. Only the surface washed away, perhaps. Remembered until the last days of the Earth. Through the eons.

Then lost. All evidence erased. But I will know that I loved her and, in turn, was loved. In that moment. As well as many moments before and for many moments to come. I vow never to forget.

The soft blue light comes closer, introducing me to a world I've known and lived in before. Its familiar call has drawn me in once again. Lured into a cycle of birth, old age and death. No use being hard on myself. There's no escaping it now. Not until I die and have another chance at liberation. But I grow weary of all this waiting for death business. Such morbid thoughts have made their way to my stomach, nauseating my experience of waking life. Patience. There is something to be found in living, if only love. Many say that love is not sufficient, but I have not found this to be the case: Love is the antidote to emptiness.

This is my day in the sun. The high point of my existence. On my twenty-sixth birthday someone had told me that that was it, I was in my prime. At the time I despaired at the thought. I certainly did not feel at my best; my life was in tatters. I have since come to realise that that particular person, who had said that I was in my prime at twenty-six, was simply mistaken. She did not know me and could not have known the year in which I would feel most like myself. Now, at thirty, I feel that I'm much closer, having cast aside many of my naiveties, but not all of them, admittedly. I am still fool enough to hope.

Upon waking I wrestle with logic as well as the burden of proof for believing in God. Belief in such a thing requires faith, therefore bypassing the need for logical analysis. Is an atheist then burdened to prove God's absence? I'm still reverent enough, it seems, to use an upperscase 'G'. I'm a fence-sit-

ter, employing the term 'agnostic' to avoid the trouble that may arise through the conviction of disbelief. My Catholic schooling seemingly has not yet rubbed off entirely.

The phone rings and I answer. Upon picking up the receiver, the room is silent once more.



Bodies float in the river Ganga, in the river where we wash our clothes. On the riverbank stray dogs tear into bloated carcasses and rotting human flesh. Locals and tourists come to bathe in the river – the holiest and most polluted river in the world. It's high noon and the market is in full swing. Stallholders sell everything, from vegetables to cheap souvenirs. Bright colours contrast the dirt. Dust and smoke hangs in the air. Finch walks past them all in a daze. He's delirious from sickness and blood pours from his nose. At any moment he might fall to the ground and die where he lies. He keeps on his feet, fighting his way through the dust and the colours, not knowing when he might have some time to rest. The city is unfamiliar, almost alien to him. His friends have vanished from sight. He's alone in the crowd. The sound of traffic and footsteps and voices does not cease. Finch is afraid and lost, just as he'd intended. No comfort to be found on the edge of experience. He's a thrill-seeker, though he's come to understand that there's more to the world than his own perceived ride. The people here are not mere background for his own movie – they live in this place. This is their home, their world. Finch is tired. The streets are a sensory overload and further compound his exhaustion. He wants to get back to comfort, to safety, but does not know the way back. In many ways, there is no going back. He's trav-

elled far. Much farther than his feet have carried him. His legs begin to buckle beneath him, but he keeps on going. On and on and on and on. Until finally he climbs into the sanctuary of a rickshaw. There's still much farther to go.



The curtains sway in a melancholic fashion, waving in memories of the dead. I sleep in their throes until late afternoon. No reason to rise. Empty the bladder, eventually. I peer outside, through the slats. Parked on the street there's a car I've never seen before. A patch of rust on its bonnet. Fear and decay in the lazy afternoon.

A tall tale. There's no evidence to support any of it. This notion of past lives. Devoid of all logic, perhaps. But the moments continue regardless, in spite of all reasoning. Life swells and falls, struggles through tasteless hours. Nothing to eat or drink. The desire has left me.

The streetlight continuously buzzes, giving the air an anxious edge. The light must be broken since it glows and buzzes day and night. The wind carries with it an absence of meaning.

The sun in the distance, millions of miles away. I'm fascinated by it, transfixed even, despite not being able to look at it directly. I soak in its distant warmth, with the knowledge that, sooner or later, I will see it no more. It will vanish from my world as my world sets, disappearing beneath the ground. All of these thoughts, all that I am, will be absorbed by the earth as it spins through centuries, millennia. Until all is nothing but gas and dust. This world forgotten. Mine, insignificant. Blown to smithereens. Today, the streets exist, along with the multitudes of familiar activity: the mowing of lawns; children screaming;

engine after engine humming by. All a forgotten dream still remembered. So goes the mirror in which all life is reflected. A mirage amid the haze of death.

I organise my space once more, knowing that it will inevitably fall again into chaos in a matter of days. It is a futile exercise that is nonetheless deemed to be necessary. For quality of life, apparently. The sun will shine brighter and the air will feel lighter. The absences of life will appear to be filled. For a time. Until they empty again or are emptied. And the winter sun glows faintly still, bringing a little warmth. Just a little. To this world. Illuminating a life. Many lives. That exist on the surface of the planet. There is nothing to say of why I am here or of what I am to do now that I am conscious of myself and the world that I dream and create each rising day. I can point to forms, images, objects that explain nothing. Mean nothing, other than their uses or functions that operate to facilitate the mystery that surrounds me each day. The façade. The rolling absolute that hides behind illusion. Nothing there, perhaps. The answers to important questions are, thus far, unknowable. The question of importance giving rise to absurdity. A senseless stream of propositions. This landscape of arbitrary signs crumbles before my eyes.

Where to go from here when there's nowhere to go and nothing to do. There is a curfew in place and citizens can leave their homes for one hour each day. Any adventure must exist only in the flight of imagination. I crave nature but am too far abstracted from it. Sometimes I forget that it exists within these walls, too. I drift along these dark corridors like a phantom that's already departed, heeding the call of another world – a world shown only in dreams. This world amasses in the

shadow of my life, until it begins to bleed into my waking world, illuminated by the light of day. Days, endless days. They are not as endless as they at first appear. They are sunken and hollow – an apocalyptic landscape. At the end of each day everything dies, revitalised only through sleep, but only for a limited time. All beings eventually give way to eternity. Even those who come back again through the *bardo*. The soft blue light. The light of human beings. I was seduced by it, just as the two human beings making love were seduced, pulled in by their very nature – a pull almost impossible to resist – and there I became entangled with the seed that was planted. Again. I grew up again. Lived through all the illnesses of childhood. An introduction to the sufferings to come. And now I must once again come to terms with the inevitability of death. The fear that comes at the prospect of the process of dying. And then the process itself. No escaping any of it. No escaping. As youth now escapes me. Ten years ago, anything seemed possible. I go there in my mind. Retrace my steps. Find that none of it was my fault. No-one to blame. The passing of time is all. There is no way I could have captured them, my golden moments in the sun. But happiness always faded, after a time, as fresh troubles brewed offshore. No permanence even then. In the days when everything seemed permanent. A storm, yes. That's what my life became. A wild storm. Filled with flashes in the darkness. Of course, I took shelter. Made a life of taking shelter. However, there were risks that I took. I covered many miles when given the opportunity. Back when I was free and could venture across the seas, provided I had enough money, of course. But the experience of that is now protracted. A tunnel of delayed joy never actualised. Like viewing golden sunshine from the depths of a

well. Arrivals, departures. Never quite still until now. Nowhere to go. Nowhere to go but inward. Trying to locate the source of it all. Failing. Each day a failure. Fragments that make up a life.

Hours fill with glass. Shards of glass. I wander, mad with loneliness. Through the fields. The west fields. Toward the growing horizon. I walked those fields and those woods with those I love now lost. First in the autumn and then on hard, frozen ground. Cold, thin air. Bare trees surrounded the mount of my childhood. The years of grief and gloom that followed led only to a future that can never be known until it becomes past. Life, a process unfolding in the present.

The channels have been blocked or severed, I'm not sure which. Either way, they will repair in time.

He referred to her affectionately as 'my anthropoid', before wrapping his arms around her waist. She sees herself reflected in language as if were the pond that Narcissus gazed into. Transfixed for a lifetime and lured beneath its poetic spell. Drowning in mirrors. Until the reflection and the real thing become indistinguishable.

Images surround me in the dark. Ghouls. Faces. Waiting for a day that never comes. Poised expectantly, hoping for a reprieve. A reprieve from waking, sleeping, eating, working, worrying, masturbating, fucking, cleaning, washing, drinking, dressing, undressing, going to the toilet, boiling the kettle, cooking, etc. Ad nauseum. Rinse and repeat. The promise of liberation from all illusion beckons, perhaps an illusion unto itself.

Introspection. I search myself for hope, scouring emptiness. The trees outside are once again filling with leaves. Per-

haps this will be their final bloom, however unlikely. The notion persists throughout each cycle.

The boulevard stretches much farther than before. It seems to grow each day, making the prospect of escape more unlikely with each setting sun. I realise that, for the time being at least, I'll have to make peace with where I am. I tunnel deeper into the present. Throughout these rooms that my world has now become. Rooms with different functions. In the kitchen the steel wool drips dirty water into the sink. No release save that which I give myself. My car has finally died. And that means I'm a whole being unto myself – no longer an anthropoid operating a machine. I now either walk upright or sit still. No matter. The Earth is still moving at many thousands of miles per hour. Spinning, too, at an astronomical speed. So there's really no need to circumnavigate the globe.

But that's not the end of it. You don't get away that easily. Phenomena still comes and goes and life still has to be lived. An arduous task with the knowledge that all is insignificant? Perhaps. The sky looms and it rains. It rains all weekend. The rain is punctuated with torrential hail before the sky clears temporarily on Monday. Then it rains some more. The swamp at the end of the street boasts a surplus of water. Distant shapes cut through the rain. Birds and people. Swaying branches stripped by icy wind. My legs carry me to the warmth enclosed between four walls. I now leave the house rarely, if at all. Mostly, in order to live, I have to remember the world. My work is without aim, unlike those around me. My partner works in the room next door. All day before the light of the screen. When she's finished, the light of day is gone. They pay her a salary. That's the difference between us. She is given work to do, and

then she completes the tasks given to her. My life is different. I make up the work as I go, without a boss. Without anyone telling me what to do or even pointing me in a direction. And I don't know why my work is so important. It serves no purpose and tastes of nothing, sustains no-one, records nothing, speaks of nothing, represents nothing. And yet, it does not cease. Experience of the world continues through this realm of thought. Its reasonings may not at first appear consistent. As a child I would avoid the cracks in the pavement. I remember the dew on the grass in the morning, the moisture dripping from the opening flowers. A world now lost, perhaps. I speak often of lost worlds as I lose sight of the one before me. My bags are packed at the door, but I'm not leaving. Not yet. I won't need much. I've proved that to myself, having travelled with only the bare minimum. The necessary things that sustain a life. Clothes. A few books. Yes, words were a part of it after all. They followed me around like maps to an invisible world. Places beyond the physical maps that depict roads and place names. Maps that depict a life worth living, perhaps. My notebooks followed me, too. I did my best to fill them with the images of places I visited. Painted them in ways that images cannot capture. I travelled in order to write – I wanted to write – but spent a good deal of time eating, drinking, smoking, and watching television. I took my manuscripts to work on. I envisioned myself laying them all out on the floor, page by page. But I never got around to it. I think I was too afraid to do so – afraid of trying and failing to make sense of the amassing pages of my life. And the sun. The allure of the sun was too strong. It led me outside and into the light, away from the dark words of

my imagination. It promised to fulfil me in a way that solitude could not.

Solitude is all that I presently have. My last connections to the world have vanished. The tide has finally come in, taking with it my eyes. And now here I sit at the muted desk – blind – and without definite direction. All moves around me, a world whirring around my head. Coming and going forever. Blue shifted. Red shifted. And then I remember. A life lived blind to the world. There is one path I took where I could not see. Many years ago. Hundreds, perhaps. I am living its memory. A much quieter world then. I must have been rich, for I spent a lot of time lazing about, listening to the birds by the window. Yes, I remember their prehistoric sounds. Creatures that I often thought did not belong in our time. In my time. My time before this composition. Hundreds of years before. The years fall like dust around a star. Like birds from an empty sky. The bell would ring and the servants would dress me. There was one servant in particular who was kind enough to pull me off. I was always more relaxed on those days and would often take a nap halfway through the day. Perhaps that's why she did it (I'm assuming it was a she): To silence me; to shut me up; and to put me to sleep as if I were an ill-tempered toddler. Made their jobs easier, I suppose. But what a miraculous life I led, without the folly of sight! Unable to be dazzled by colours of a worldly nature, my imagination had free reign. I do not remember exactly how it benefitted me, in practical terms. But then again, my lifestyle was such that I did not have to make much of an effort at anything. The lazy, languorous days came and went. Not much happened in the way of events. I was pampered to the point of death. An entire life unable to see. And

now I complain that I see too much. I take a breath away from those fleeting imaginings – from lives that are no longer real. In doing so, I take a look around. Trapped in these surroundings, I know myself well enough to know that I'm miserable. But there's nothing to be done about it at present. Nothing that *can* be done. I am not permitted to travel further than five kilometres away from this abode, in addition to a nightly curfew. And, as I said earlier, I now have no vehicle. My agency has been taken from me. All of my rights, it could be said. I'm no longer permitted to exist. Perhaps that stretches a little too far in the sense that it isn't strictly true. But it isn't far off. The day burns like an archaic candle in the dark. The history of these days has already been written; any notion of betterment denied. I could just as easily sleep through them until freedom is restored, assuming that it will be.

My eyes peer through the gloom. The digital clock on the wall indicates that it's late. Another day is behind me. I saunter down the dark corridor and to the bathroom to wash my face, and to ensure that I'm awake. Water gushes from the tap. The sink is grimy. I can't seem to be able to make progress in this life. A blind force gushes forth each day; I don't have any control over it. The water spills through the cracks in my fingers. Nevertheless, I make tiny steps to nowhere. Around empty rooms and back to bed. It's a lie. I barely move of late. Futility and uncertainty fully realised. No end in sight. No salvation. Only a relentless grey blanket that suffocates each day, absolving all possibility.

I have once again abandoned hope in favour of an eternal present. The wind crashes at the windows like waves breaking on rock. A shadow moves across my mind and I'm frozen in

place. I have arrived at meaninglessness and despair. Lost songs of oneness, forgotten, now exist as fragmented notes and as melodies that recover nothing. No matter. No-one was listening anyway. No-one there to listen. I do not have to move at all. I stay in bed way past noon, recovering lost sleep. There's a lot that's been keeping me awake. Lost connections. All that. Perished love. Paths that could have been, withered long ago before me, now lost. Yes. And now. Now I face the days that are left – the days that became real. At least in the conventional sense. There is, in turning the page, a sense of simplicity and renewal. But there is always the temptation, especially when faced with empty days, isolated in the house, to take a peek back to those previous pages of recorded memory, in the hopes of recovering some lost jewel that may act as the key to understanding the present. As of yet I have found no such jewel and indulging in past recollections seems to cause mostly suffering in the present. Even if such recollections are all I'm left with – all I have to fill the hours with. And reality has not quite aligned with my dream of this life; I am not where I want to be. But I deal with days as if they were cards dealt to me, scattered across a filthy table. Devoid of momentum, my life has become stagnated. I remain in place. I am unable to leave the house for long, on account of government restrictions. There's a pandemic churning its way through the world's population. We're all alone now. Afraid and isolated. Finch's face emerges from the shroud of my dreams. Perhaps we will not encounter one another again, and the memories of his life will remain a mystery. As well as my own. There are no clocks that tick in my world. My mind has begun to learn to ignore the sounds of ceaseless traffic. The year is lost. However, I have gathered certain in-

sights into my own habits. Still, I do nothing to change them. I would not be able to adequately put into words the activities of my days. At best, I could say they comprise a strange sense of doubt along with a protracted paralysis of domesticity. Paralysed, yes. Bound to my quarters with nothing much to distract me from my own vacuous interior. Ghosts of ideas glide around empty rooms. I do not act on any of them. I watch them slip away through the cracks in the doors and windows and rise toward an immeasurable sky. My own confused thinking cannot follow, trapped like a buzzing fly in a glass bottle. The edges appear transparent, but I cannot go beyond. Forgotten by God and unable to transcend. Perhaps there was no God to begin with, only false words pertaining to the possibility. No matter. My own awareness is of this room. Wardrobe. Desk. Chair. Bed. I could go on, but it isn't necessary. Nothing is, perhaps. But still these things exist. I exist, but not in the same way. I'm aware of them existing, but the objects in the room aren't aware of me. Mere things, you might say. It's growing cold. The night is about to undo the heat of the day. A little heat there was, but not much. I did not venture out. There is much I didn't do. Much that I wanted to do. But all that is mere fantasy and an idealistic view of a life that is not presently mine. The feel of sand beneath my feet and the sound of waves. The sun on my skin and the freedom to go anywhere. None of it is real. It is both a memory and the projection of a desire that is denied to me. And yet the imagining of such experiences is my only reprieve. My only reprieve from dreary hours. My torment, too. Hours swirling into a whirlpool of darkness. Nothing to show for lost time but these words. My only reprieve. Cryptic symbols borne of dreams.

In my dreams I take to the streets and move across the city in flight. Out here I am free from the confines of the day and can escape from the realities that come about upon waking. The streets are empty, and the streetlights dance in an elongated blur. My astral body floats to a familiar house. Upon seeing it there is a chill that I recognise as dread. The grass in the garden is overgrown and there's faded litter strewn among the flowerbeds. There is currently no wind and the trees do not move. There is only disquiet in the air that surrounds. Through the window I see that the curtains are closed. There's a faint glow emanating from within. The glow intensifies the longer I look, and smoke begins to billow out from the cracks in the windows and doors. A young woman runs to the front door from the streets, fumbles with a set of keys, and rushes in. From the inferno within I hear her screams before she stumbles back out, unbalanced and frantic. In the distance there are sirens closing in, gradually becoming louder. The young woman sits on the overgrown front lawn, clutching her legs, head down, hair over her face, hiding fierce tears. Before I can get a closer look, I drift away, higher, into the stratosphere. Up here there are seemingly an infinite number of stars. Each point of light exists as a possibility. My mind is at once clear, peaceful, free. I want to stay floating forever, gazing at the stars and without the burden of a body to return to. But the dream does not – cannot – last forever. I fall through the clouds until I'm beneath them, confronted once more by streetlights that, from my altitude, resemble the stars I'd been looking upon. I glide toward the ground and can soon make out dark fields and farmlands. On the horizon the sun is beginning to emit its first rays of the day. It is a point-of-view that I should not be able to see

– a vision that, in ordinary experience, would be impossible. My astral self dives back into my body and I wake. My body is sweating, my heart palpitating. I am back in the experience I take for granted, day after day. Back to the reality of confined movements and uncertainty, hunger and regret, hope and subsequent despair. Having abandoned all expectation, I have managed to eschew disappointment. I begin my morning meditation without delay.

Resting on the breath, I proceed to dismantle my mind. Piece by piece I examine it. Countless days have passed in relative isolation, and there is currently no end in sight. And in that time, I have faced the deepest dark. Reduced to a frugal lifestyle, there are only beliefs and values that circulate the emptiness at the heart of everything. Belief in fact seems the most worthwhile pursuit, but after many days locked away from the outside world even facts have their limits. A human life, it seems, needs more than the necessities. When necessity is fulfilled, there comes from within a calling for more. A calling for life to be lived at its fullest capacity, whatever that means. For me it means actively sharing fresh experiences with others. It means taking on new challenges. It means walking out into the sunlight and becoming one with the natural world. At present I suffer once more from a sense of disconnect – of abstraction – from the life that I feel I have the right to live. I fall prey to flights of fancy and lose sight of what is real. Memory is not enough.

I would not be silenced. Not even by death.

There is strange music emanating from the street. The soft turning of a dark carnival. Tied here to my chair in this infinite room, the dimensions of which go beyond the dimensions of

floor, wall and ceiling, toward another room entirely – many rooms in fact – my life is part of a tesseract of possibility.

This fractured, fragmented life spans oceans and continents. And finally, now, there is no going back. No venturing back to the old world anymore, in search of what once was. The rooms there have shifted, too. My family home is gone, along with my grandparents' homes. My vanished youth has let out its final cries. I move forward and try to create a life. After all, I came here with nothing. Thomas Dreer grew up in this place, so it's no wonder I came here, too. I followed his ghostly steps – my own steps – to the city where he lived and died.



The day outside dances to a melancholy rhythm. It's bright but the air is cool. Dreer sits at his desk, writing poetry, trying to find direction – a way out. With nowhere new to explore save inner space or outer space (the near vacuum kind), he opts for the former. Diving deep within he searches for lost images, forgotten values and for the wisdom of an antiquity that might still be coursing through his veins. Dreer never received the benefit of much formal education, and so he pushes forward, alone. An artist and an autodidact, he never had much success. And as the dole slips pile up alongside the rejection letters, the world is screaming in his ears to give up and to find a new vocation. But he can't. He's been at this too long and it's all he knows. Day after day he sits, slavishly typing words to nowhere and no-one. The kettle on the stove screeches to be let off the gas, but he lets it keep going. Staring into the circling darkness of life and mind, Dreer has become a stranger even to himself. It wasn't always like this for Dreer. Before his dreams failed to

match the reality of his day-to-day existence, he had lived with great expectations of a future career as a poet. He had deluded himself for many long summers, drinking wine, taking drugs, in love with a woman he thought would be with him through it all. He needed her support and never learned to be a person. He could not face the uncertainty of a future alone. And after she finally left, he could not shake the feeling that he'd driven her away. Guilt piled up, along with loneliness, and the long summers of his memory became an ideal that could never again be matched. A life of love became a life spent in despair. Until the fateful striking of a match.



I have come to realise that my work will never be finished. I will simply run out of life before it is done. But the words remain vital signs that evidence the fact that I have not fallen into silence.

In the mornings I rise and amuse myself. I have found more work in the academic world, though I currently work remotely. This has given me a paradoxical freedom. I have the freedom to pursue my own version of reality, a world painted by the mind. I have grown accustomed to the prison bars of my room – a room that is perhaps not as singular as it first appears. There are many versions of myself here, in many rooms identical to this one, splashed throughout time and space. Most are, of course, inaccessible to me, since there is only one path that I can experience at any one time. I sit on the bed cross-legged, eyes closed. I sit at the desk, writing. I sit on the bed, weeping. I run a damp cloth over the surfaces of the room. I lie in bed, listening to the rain, trying to listen to the sounds so as to alleviate a grow-

ing sense of terror. My partner and I make love at night. We make love in the morning. All different positions, feelings, perceptions, sensations. We argue over trivial things. We come to our senses and forgive one another. All through these activities there is love. There is love together and love alone. I change my diet, my lifestyle. I take more walks, preparing myself for a world beyond that of isolation. The world, I hope, will emerge a better place. A world filled with love and mutual respect. For now, I can only dream of it. Or dream it into reality, perhaps. Once again there's that lack of distinction between mind and matter. Can't be one without the other, perhaps. The so-called external world is the world in here, too – a world of lived experiences.

The spring azure sky gives way to the fire of sunset. The streets are aflame with its colour. There are many people walking around, exercising their bodies before the cool night descends. As time goes on the colours fade and the streets are deserted. I head indoors for another long night. I may not sleep until very late, writhing in the sheets of unspent energy. Otherwise perched in my scholarly chair, like a sentinel in the dark. The nights come and go, irrespective of their perceived length. And the days appear without structure. The light passes with the velocity of a high-speed train. Then it's night once more. But there's no way to control them, the passing of the days. Any attempt at control only builds as tension and anxiety. So instead, I simply allow the days to come and go until a day comes when I can spend more time outside, among the trees and the water, and then flow with it, out to sea, until my form comes to an end, and I become one with the horizon.

My body contains cells and molecules that convey information that I have no knowledge of and, even if I did, could never convey into words. In this sense, I am glossing over a microscopic world.

A white envelope slips under the door. A letter. It's from Finch.

Dear Cornelius,

I received a letter this week from Melissa Melloway. It seems she hasn't long to live and is reaching out to those she knew from the past, to make amends and say farewell. I've been invited to a small gathering at her bedside at the end of the week. Last night I telephoned her and mentioned your name. She said she would be happy if you came along as my support person. As you know I'm quite frail at the moment, and it's a long journey. I thought perhaps you might find some of the answers you're looking for.

Best wishes,

Nick

A slight revelation and then the desire to eat breakfast. Much farting on the toilet before a hot shower.

At the end of the week I'll be released from this biological prison. It's only Wednesday and the groan of traffic passes by once more. I think about putting myself back to bed and sleeping until Friday, but the prospect isn't realistic. I'll simply have to find something to do. So I take walks, mostly. Pushing a

little further each day toward the pastoral. There has been little rain of late and the temperature is rising slightly. When I'm alone in the house I read or write, and sometimes watch old films. Kubrick films, that kind of thing. The stranger the better. Art works that challenge every notion of normalcy and everything that is taken for granted. Other times I take a walk to get food. A man walks into a shop and orders a ham and cheese sandwich. *How does he know that's what he wants?* I am often baffled by even the most banal scenes. I pick them apart and analyse them, suspending, as far as I can, all of the assumptions I have about the world. Let me say that it is exhausting, fruitless work. And when the fruitless analyses become too much, I get to describing things. A rusty lamp post. An old, wrinkled, yet mighty tree. That kind of thing. The things that a story is supposed to do. But to hell with those rules! Let me get on with the business at hand.

The letter was a curse, really, in the sense that it set up an *expectation*. Beforehand, I had no fixed notions on what to do with the week, or for the rest of my life, for that matter. An empty calendar, pure and clean. No worries. No expectations. Only the bleak swinging of an empty axe set to cut off my possibilities for ever. Yes, the letter was a curse. It set in motion half a week that was beginning to feel more like an eternity. Minutes and falling dust accumulating to hours. No solace save the jewels that come from within – difficult to access. Moments lay before me like portals to other worlds. All I had to do was walk through. But instead, I waited. Waited for the present moment to catch up with me. Its limitations. Its view but the crest of a wave.

I stare into space.

To write an open sky.

How is it that I came to be this way if I possess no soul or *atman*. Of course, there is form, feelings, perceptions, mental activity and consciousness, but there is no central *being* to which I can say that *I am*. This is something that has troubled me for some time, as well as something that I find difficult to comprehend. Nevertheless, I remain interested in these conceptual ideas as I continue to investigate my own experiences of life so-called. It seems correct that I possess no concrete centrality, especially when I consider the fragmented recollections of memory that I sometimes use to define my self and my life.

There's a loud banging at the door. Another delivery for a name I don't recognise.

I gather my things and take a deep breath. On the bed lies my finest clothes for the upcoming meeting with Melissa. In Finch's memory I still see her as young. It seems that Finch and I will always be connected through Dreer's extended dreams.



Years earlier. Melissa lies on the bed, her bare arms atop the quilt and her legs kicking slowly, deliberately. Finch looks down at her as he stands by her side and removes his shirt. They make love. The hotel room is an expensive looking one, with fine furniture and artworks before the backdrop of a window with a view of the sea. The window is open slightly and the curtains billow gently. 'Perhaps there's a storm coming,' Finch says as he softly kisses Melissa's neck.

'What makes you say that?'

'The wind is picking up.'

'I wouldn't worry. We're safe for now.'

The inevitability of the storm lay on the tips of their tongues. And, for the moment, life is good for both of them. Melissa had managed to escape a dangerous existence transporting narcotics and associating with criminals and Nick had finally come to terms with his own facticity. For a while, at least, it seemed that neither of them would face the consequences of the choices they had made in the past.

After making love they lie for a long time after, intermittently sleeping and stroking each other's bodies.

'Do you think we will make it?' Melissa says while idly moving her hand up and down Nick's back, digging her nails in every now and then.

'Of course we will.'

'But most people don't.'

'Lucky for us that we're not most people.'

Melissa's face is contorted, as if she's unconvinced. 'What makes *us* so different?'

Nick scans the immaculate ceiling for answers, finding none. Instead, he realises that he has to say something. Anything might do. Anything save the silence that's ringing in his ears. 'Because we're special. We have special powers that will keep us together. We're *magnetic*, you see.'

'I do hope so.'

'Want to order some room service?' The distraction comes as a relief.

'I think so. We've certainly done enough exercise to warrant it.'

'I love you, Melissa.'

'Are you sure?'

'Of course I am.'

‘Then I think I love you, too.’

• • • •

The world has been in a terrible mess for a long time. It’s just that it feels more *immediate* now. I’ve no car at the moment and so Finch and I have to travel by train. It’s early morning and I’m barely awake. Grey shadows all around me. In my peripheries. Elderly people often want to begin their days early. They like to get a handle on things and pretend to be in control of their final years in this world. But then they’re in bed by early evening when the parties are only just starting. Anyway, my feelings aside, I watch silently as the train approaches and see Finch in the third carriage, waving at me through the window. Sonofabitch. He has more energy at seven a.m. than a high-school kipper. The doors clunk open and I step onto the train, unable to feel my face or legs or anything for that matter. As I approach him, Finch appears positively giddy.

‘I’ve saved you a seat,’ he says, happily. ‘This is the first time I’ve been out properly in months.’

I proceed to sit down next to him, a little feeling coming back to me: a feeling of discomfort.

‘Same here,’ I say quickly. It’s all I can muster. I’ve no desire to do anything but crawl back into bed and sleep. In fact, I’m fantasising about it. It will be the reward for suffering another day.

‘Are you okay? Your eyes are quite dark. Are you feeling depressed?’

‘No more than usual. So, tell me, how long is this train ride going to take?’ Finch can see right through my reductive attitude as well as my attempt at dodging his question.

‘It’s all right,’ he assures me, ‘and nothing to be ashamed of. Heaven knows I’ve been there myself you know. In and out of dark clouds, so to speak. When I was studying at university, working on purely academic papers and trying to write a thesis, I would often develop intense feelings of depression. I had to give myself lots of love and self-care. I went to India and learned vipassana meditation. I went back there many times, stayed at monasteries and lived a monastic existence for a while. Then my father died, and I returned to Melbourne. Shortly afterwards I met Melissa. She changed my life. We stayed together for a while, but it wasn’t meant to last.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘No need to be, Cornelius. I have made peace, as far as I can, with my own life’s journey. You see, I did everything I wanted to. I lived all of the lives I wanted to within the one life. When I die, I will be able to let go of this world, knowing that there was no more life I could have lived. I have lived a long and varied existence, and I’ve come to appreciate every moment. Even the bad times taught me things about myself and the world – the limits of my patience and where my influence ends. You mustn’t try to control this life, Cornelius. If you do, it will end up only controlling you. I know you weren’t asking for advice, but that’s something I’d like to share with you while I still can.’

The train maintains its speed for some time. It’s an express train to the country – to some town I’ve never heard of. Finch goes quiet after speaking for some time and I do not know what to say in reply. There is nothing that I can say that I do not already know, and I have an overwhelming desire to remain silent and to listen. There is, after all, some wisdom in the old

man's words. Similar thoughts that I had been pondering but could not break through. There are only a few passengers on the same carriage as us. Their faces are silent. And instead of thinking of them as dullards or dead-eyed zombies, I instead choose to view them as complex human beings. I do not know these people. I do not know what they've been through – are going through.

By the time we come to a stop it's all trees, hills, and endless, flowing grass. Finch tells me it's only a short bus ride to the house where Melissa is. We wait for a while in silence at the bus stop, watching the clouds move across the massive sky and analysing the faces of the people that pass by. Hard faces, there is little doubt. Faces that weather the relentless summer sun and then the cold winter months that drag on at the slow speed of a plough. There is, however, room to breathe, and as the bus arrives to take us to Melissa's house, I take in some good fresh country air.

We step onto the bus.

Finch remains uncharacteristically quiet, and I surmise that he is probably nervous. The bus moves slowly down the road, stopping at a few red lights. Each time the bus stops, a cyclist catches it up. I watch her as she rides, a feeling of the absurd washing over me. The cyclist notices my unceasing gaze and quickly becomes uncomfortable, her body tensing up a little, her face grimacing against the unsteady flow of air. Her arms wobble a little on the handlebars. I will never know what motivates her to ride, nor the life that she's lived. She perseveres silently through the town and turns left down a street that I'll never know. And then Finch begins to speak, killing short my philosophical daydreams.

'I don't know what to expect,' he says, 'when we get to Melissa's'. Having formed no expectations of my own, I give no reply. 'I don't know if she'll even recognise me.'

'How long has it been since you last saw each other?'

'Let me think. It must be some forty years. I wasn't even grey back then.' He looks down at his wrinkled hands. 'How time catches up.'

The bus rattles on down a long stretch of road. It's the kind of road you wouldn't expect would be part of a bus route. All around us the landscape breathes and dreams beneath a dreamy sky. And for a moment it appears absent of any harshness or hostility. The soil here is fertile and crops grow. Farm animals graze in abundant pastures, a part of a seemingly infinite cycle of life and death and rebirth. When I look beside me, I see that Finch has closed his eyes. His gentle face moves through this landscape, too, as his mind surely searches for a time that has long since passed. In his mind he sees Melissa's face, young, as he once knew her, and he's preparing to witness the changes that time has done to her. He will have to tell himself that nothing is permanent, that nothing lasts forever. And he knows, as he said to me, that time has changed him, too, and that it has, in a sense, run equally through both of them, binding them together even as they lived so far apart. Finally, after so many years, he will get to see the truth of what became of his beloved.

Melissa's house is nothing short of a rural dream. By the time Finch and I arrive the wind is strong, as if a storm is on its way. The distant sky displays a grey horizon, wisps of rain breaking off the clouds and coming down. But for the moment, we're locked in some idealistic bubble of the pastoral, moving back in time to a much simpler way of living. Ivy grows up

the wall at the front of the house, and the garden is abundant, boasting a vast variety of colours, in full bloom. But inside the house it's a different story. The rooms are soon to be empty and in mourning. Finch knocks on the front door and a nurse answers. There is no sense of wariness in her expression, only one of welcoming.

'You'd better come in,' she says. 'She's expecting you.'

The nurse leads us immediately upstairs and to Melissa's room. The wood creaks with every step. The hallways are dark, closed off from the glare of daylight. Paintings hang on the walls, each bearing Melissa's signature. Portals to vanished worlds. When we enter her room, Melissa is in bed, tucked away from the world she's about to leave behind.

'I'll leave you,' says the nurse, and she closes the door. Finch and I are standing by the bed, unsure of ourselves, feeling on some level that we're intruding. Melissa's grey hair rests beside her face on the pillow. The skin on her hands is almost transparent. Thin veins protrude from them.

Her eyes open.

'So, you came. Sit. Make yourselves comfortable.' She stirs beneath her blankets and struggles to sit up. She manages. 'Here we all are. It seems as though we've come full circle.'

'How so?' says Finch.

'We're all here, finally together, after so many years. Your friend here, is he Thomas Dreer?'

'In a way. This is Cornelius.'

'Let him speak. What is it you do, Cornelius?'

I hesitate.

'I'm a writer.'

'Sounds awfully familiar doesn't it, Nick? And what is it you remember?

'I remember fragments. Pieces of information here and there. But there isn't any way to know that the memories are reliable, or even if they are memories at all.'

'You're here, aren't you? Isn't that enough?'

I make no reply, not knowing how to answer. The light coming through the window is growing dimmer, and I know the grey clouds are rolling over. Nick looks over to me and can see that I'm growing uncomfortable. He decides to speak.

'And what of me? Have you thought of me at all throughout the years we spent apart?'

'Years? We spent a lifetime apart, Nick. I didn't waste my life pining for you. I missed you at first, but then I had to move forward. I had to live. Please tell me that you lived a full life.'

'Full, yes. Varied. But empty of romantic love.'

'I'm about to leave this world behind, Nick. It's no good harking back on our diminished union.'

'Then what are we doing here?'

'Saying goodbye.'

A tear rolls down Nick's cheek. I feel I ought to excuse myself but dare not speak or move. There is a connection that was lost too long ago, and all time has now gone from them. Only few precious moments are left.

'I spent my life inadvertently searching for you, without reaching out,' Nick says.

'When we were together there was no stability. Our love was a fleeting flash that couldn't be sustained. And I'm sorry that you failed to let go. You should've become a scholar, Nick. That's what you were good at.'

'It didn't make me happy, though. You did.'

'I was too much for you. And besides, none of that matters now.'

'Exactly. None of it matters now. We made our choices. Our lives have been lived.'

'What can I say?' Melissa says. 'In the end, you fell into dependency.'

It becomes clear that, in the preceding years, Finch had become a broken man living on the streets or squatting in abandoned homes, and occasionally finding refuge at various religious centres. Undone by Dreer's curse – the same curse that I am presently trying to vanquish – he spent many years wandering the earth, moving from place to place, without direction. He had lost everything. And so, it became apparent how such a promising young student could fail to grasp a future that, at one time, must have seemed to be on the cusp of certainty. Finch had, through his reckless abandon, snatched away his own life. His life, at once, became clear to me. It was as if Melissa could comprehend a version of events that Finch was far too close to see with any objectivity. Free from illusion and self-deceit, Melissa was close to unearthing the absolute. The fire and passion of her fading voice would not subside until her final breath. And when she died a world of clarity would be lost, and Nicholas Finch would never again be able to put his life into perspective.

'I'm getting tired. You will have to leave soon.'

'Will we be able to come back to see you?'

'There's no time, I'm afraid. There are others I have to see. My children and grandchildren. Also, certain arrangements still have to be made.'

‘I understand.’ Finch bows his head in reverential sadness.

‘It was nice to meet you, Cornelius, and a rare experience for me. At a time of saying goodbye, it was good to say hello for a change.’ Melissa smiles at me. Her wrinkled face, in that moment, appears soft and smooth, and I get the distinct feeling that, finally, I do recognise her. ‘I can only hope that, for you, life will be enough. It passes faster than you presently know, but you’ll find out. Don’t waste it seeking certainty but instead live it with a sense of wonder toward all that remains in doubt.’

Finch turns to me. ‘Wait for me outside, Cornelius. I’d like to spend a few minutes saying goodbye.’

The air outside is clear and the intensity of the wind has subsided. The clouds have mostly vanished from the sky. There is nobody around but some birds in the trees. Myna birds, perhaps. And some dazzling rosellas. They dive from tree to tree. And I wait, without wings. Wait for Finch to complete his legacy of meaning, soon to be propelled back into a life of endless searching, but this time without hope. This time, his object of hope will have departed this world, and Finch will linger on a few more years, perhaps, coming to terms with the impending limitations of his life. I take a seat on the stone wall outside Melissa’s house and gaze far up the road. It’s a road that appears to be without gradient and stretches all the way to the horizon. Days of rain have settled the dust, churning it into thick mud. For the moment, I’m stuck, the momentum of my life replaced with stillness. But around me, everything moves, and moves within me, too, and therefore the stillness I feel is little more than an ephemera. Soon we’ll be back on the bus, heading back to – a life? I readily admit that there is no hurry, that there is little waiting for me beyond the stone wall. I’ve been

hanging on to this story far too tightly, this tale of Melissa Melloway and Nicholas Finch, to the point where it's become a bad opera. Perhaps now that Finch has to say goodbye, he will be able to move past this life, just like he had spoken of on the bus, finally able to leave it behind. He will be free to follow Melissa through the mysterious realms of whatever the next life might hold, while in all reality I'll be the one left to linger above an earth devoid of them. And maybe I'll be able to move on, too. Finally set my torments aside in favour of a life that Melissa spoke of. A life free from suffering. Liberation before death arrives. I will no longer have to wait and will have vanquished the illusion of internal stagnation. Free from paralysis, I will be indistinguishable from all other phenomena.

I'm back home. The journey has ended. My flights of fancy have landed, and all is coming to a close. Finch has gone back to his quarters, wherever they may be. A return to normality would be a stretch, since my days have taken on an alien force. Nothing is familiar any longer. The lamp posts chase me down the streets. Shadows threaten behind suburban fences, and the entire sprawl is, at times, too much for me to take. Paranoia has taken over, and the houses are little more than playthings erected from cardboard. The sea is far away. Nature is absent. The sickening game of survival continues, devoid of reason. What is my reason for living in this place? Love, perhaps. I stay here for love but find little solace or excitement in this place. The suburbs are in between. They are the bastion of mediocrity.

I take a shower in an attempt to wash away my disgust. It helps a little. Trapped here, I wait for either dream or imagination to take me away. Languishing in the shadows through the hours, I sit. Waiting, yes. In the very same sense that I promised

I would not. But it's all there is. All else that surrounds is mere distraction. Toys. Things. Objects that distract the mind from its true potential for awakening. The microbes have it right. They simply go about their microscopic aims while doing away with any image of thought. The higher the life form, the greater the problems. But without eyes I would not have seen such magnificent sunsets. No brain with which to analyse the natural world. My life is but a snapshot taken from a particular angle. Brief and beautiful, more so than the most wondrous painting. Through the mire and the dust that settles on this earth, only to soon be whipped up again, I strive to create art of this life.

A memory from Dreer's life: He sits by the window for the last time. His ex-partner, Rose, is about to leave. She is the last person ever to see him alive.

'Are you all right?'

'You can't stop the tide from turning life away from you.'

What began as temporary is beginning to feel more and more permanent.

The outlook is bleak, in spite of all hope. Optimism has vanished, the view grim. I saunter through a barren city. A city desolate, deserted. There is no-one. I shouldn't be here. The cafés are shuttered, the shops closed. There is nothing. My steps continue along the cold tarmac. The sky is black and devoid of stars. I'm thinking of the country and of Melissa's house, of a life that could be mine but never will be. Condemned to haunt these city streets, I continue. All of the houses, buildings, apartments, look the same. I can't remember which one I live in, don't know which life is mine. A hungry ghost, drifting amid empty streets.

The days are vapid.

Ready to consume anything and everything, I have no stomach. Like a drug-addled maniac, I will never be able to satiate my appetite. Not in this realm. The sky folds in, invaginating everything. All that I see. This empty world. Bare trees and burnt-out vehicles. I cross a bridge above a frozen river. There are snowflakes in the air, displaying such magnificent detail. Even in my dreams each one is unique. When I wake up, I cannot say. Nor can I say when I will be reborn out of the hungry ghost realm. I have no choice but to continue on. I could stand still, but something in me compels me to move. Like a sperm cell in search of the fallopian tube. At the other end of the bridge, I gaze across the vast landscape. The air is still and clear. I can see all the way across the frozen bay to the peninsulas that once sheltered a moving sea, filled with life. My visible breath rises to join the whisks of cloud above. With it there's a rising of fear within me. Trapped here, in this realm, not knowing how to escape or wake from the desolate nightmare, I can only wander across endless plains and abandoned cityscapes, frozen and lifeless. Against all hope or expectation, I hear a call from afar. It is a human voice, along with a pale blue light that glows in the distance. I am drawn toward the comfort that it seems to emit. Before waking, all is blackness and silence.

Balk at the prospect of a gaseous sky and at the precariousness of my position. The fleeting incredulity of the moment gives way to full-blown realisation: I am here now, alive, and someday will die. If only I could access the beginning of time, I'd know where and how it all started. But then again, there wouldn't be any air to breathe. Therefore, I would not be able to visit even if I could, at least not in my present form. Aside from this I'm back in a deceptively familiar place. The realm of fam-

ily life. Domestic, most of it. Endless chores. Piles of washing. The need to cook, eat and then clean up the mess. The demented rooster crows all throughout the day. I've never seen it. It lives on one of the farms across the road, presumably. Altogether an aimless existence. My own, that is, not the rooster's. I cannot speak on his behalf. My own, yes, as far as I know. I speak on my own behalf despite having no central agency to speak of. I do what I can. Aimless, yes. I have tried to ascribe meaning to my own existence and each time I have failed. At least at a totality of meaning. No doubt there have been times when I found meaning in the moment. Building a sandcastle, for instance. But those moments have passed, the sandcastles washed away. The frozen river has thawed, the captured moments set free. And I'm still on the bridge of my dreams, looking down, watching them pass. I watch them pass. It's all I can do. Surrendering any hope of control. As I watch them pass, letting each one go, I'm set free from the bridge and continue on the path. With the sudden onset of peace, an absence of meaning doesn't seem to matter so much. I let go of the world and find myself in a new place entirely.

I begin again. From as close to nothing as possible. Emerged as I have from many days of introspection – many cycles of sun and moon. I have, in the relative stillness and silence, been able to closely observe my habits, and have eschewed any notions of idleness. Each day I rise to meet the wind that moves through the trees, and I push forward with each step toward open fields – to forgotten plains populated sparsely with dilapidated houses. Places once loved now abandoned.

The epilogue of an extended dream unfolds. From my darkened quarters, I can barely see what's left of a world that glows through the window and the blinds to meet my eyes, so weary now they are barely open. Summer has returned and my feet will soon tread over scorched earth. All of this is beyond my control. My world now consists of nothing. No Dreer nor Finch nor Melloway. I have been freed from their torments and am now alone. To face my own sufferings in the dwindling light of my days. What am I saying? What does any of this matter? A ruminating mind is an unhappy mind. However, I cannot maintain conscious awareness for long. Somewhere along, the line slips, and I find myself in worlds that are no longer real. Diving deep into the past, I construct a narrative that no-one can test for accuracy. But I try. I strive for accuracy. This, I must confess. In certain moments, the narrative loses its traction and its awe, and I find myself awake again, on the precipice of a future that I'll never know unless I can sustain a presence of mind. This is difficult. It is harder than it sounds. Motivated as I am by a form of ignorance ubiquitous to this human state. I

see it all around me. I see it within. The closer I look, the more I recognise that it's there, lurking, taking my life from me, destroying my mind. Mind is the object of care, and its creativity is the world. I follow this form of idealism as far as I can, until it seems too much like solipsism. And then I reach out to other free beings, over whom I have no control and whom my mind did not create. Mostly, though, I prefer to spend time in a world of my own making, the days sliding out of focus. A world of my own imagining, like that of a child's, is where I live most days, and have done so for so long that I can no longer objectively assess reality. The word *reality* has become ambiguous to me, almost farcical. A cycling paradox orbits the skies. The main thing is to not allow the ongoing confusion to lead to inactivity and silence. Perhaps I will be silent someday and then my mind will be at rest. Peace at last. But for now, at least, the stirrings continue. All throughout the day I invent problems that I have no hope of solving. Interminable questions that do not cease and that have no accessible answers. And then I have to remind myself that there is no ultimate answer to life, and that each moment comes and goes, in an infinite number of different ways, across many lives and, at least for the foreseeable future, seemingly without end.

I step out into the sun. I've taken up walking and do so each day, far along the treadmill of existence. There are, in the next suburb along, many houses being built. Whether they become homes is another question entirely. The infrastructure out here, on these plains, is limited. Furthermore, it's a long commute to the city. The beach is far away. The only appeal here is affordability – houses that people from low socioeconomic backgrounds can afford. For me, the desire to escape is paramount.

However, I rest on the desire and instead attempt to make the most of what is, of what surrounds me at this time. I am here indefinitely, for better or worse, and can either choose to stress about leaving or rest in the actuality of the present. It is, in effect, a choice between peace and suffering – peace at accepting what is and suffering at the hands of resistance and struggle. There will come a time, no doubt, when it is time to leave. Better, I think, to create space for change to come.

In the ensuing weeks, the phone does not ring. Not that I am waiting for it to. I sit at the table, drinking coffee and thinking of Finch. There is a feeling that I'll never see him again, and that his saying farewell to Melissa was also a farewell to me. He is out there somewhere grieving, perhaps, and reassessing what remains of his life. I wish him well and turn my thoughts to other matters. To matters at hand and to the countless hours that remain to be filled. I ought to be actively making the world a better place but instead I'm focussed only on the contents of my own mind, as well as on the emptiness of my labours. All will, in time, be for naught. However, in the present, survival depends upon empty gestures, and upon feasts already eaten, the leftovers left to rot. Somewhere in time, everything has already happened and, conversely, the opposite is also true. Flowers yet to bloom have already bloomed and died, fertilising the ground for even newer life to emerge.

The temporary world washes away and all that's left is a flame to be extinguished. To pass the dark hours and to alleviate my own sense of guilt, I reach out to Finch by writing him a letter, even though I've no idea where to send it.

Dear Nick,

I have not reached out to you on account of there being nothing to say. There is nothing anyone can say when a loved one passes; commiserations are never enough. I would, however, like to express my regret upon learning of Melissa's passing. I read her obituary in the newspaper. Melissa was a wonderful woman who made everyone feel as if the earth is indeed their home, and that we're not simply orphaned on some barren rock. It is my belief that everyone who encountered her came away feeling, on some level, less alienated.

Best wishes,

Cornelius

Regret. The regret that I feel is tied closely to not attending Melissa's funeral and for not being there for Finch. It is, in a way, a selfish regret – one of amassing guilt at being absent from the lives of others. In all honesty I'm unable to offer proper condolences, since I'm not ready to open myself up fully to others about the losses that I have incurred. Perhaps I'll never be ready. Perhaps I'll live a life perpetually in the shadows, away from others and unable to connect on a level of any depth. It is fear that prevented me from supporting Finch in his hour of need, and now I'll probably never see him again, never be able to offer recompense. But it's all right. It'll have to be. It will, in time, become simply another thing that I have to live with – another vanished moment beneath a potentially infinite sky. In this moment, I live. I eat and walk and shit and drink up coffee, tea, juice. I live and dream in a world of my own creation.

The phone does not ring and neither does the doorbell. The hours rise and fall in an hourglass on my desk. The ceaseless traffic does not cease, and neither do I. I continue on, burning with the day and kept awake by regrets at night. My tormented dreams do not subside. The elusive peace I crave is a phantom that visits of its own choosing and, when it seems far away, is merely behind some veneer that is neither close nor far, but always present, somewhere, in the mind. I try to push forward but I can never tell whether I'm making progress. I could simply be slipping to nowhere. The sky is closing in on me, on any sense of self or other that I've ever had. But there's still more to do. More days will rise and fall before me, within me. Seasons come and go like clouds, drifting. The volatile ground shifts beneath my feet. Ghosts fly above, filling the sky, and I find no reprieve from this sickening dream that I so hesitantly call reality. I'm filling my time with nothingness, waiting to join with the ghosts. Whether I attain liberation and escape from cycling back through this reality is uncertain. I will never be able to finish this story, even if I cycled back through eons; there will always be more to say, certain nuances contingent only upon specific circumstances. Two sunrises are never the same, even if they appear so. My life now. My life now is a sad vacuum, devoid of other characters. Passed on. The street beats with a sullen heart beneath vacant sky. I sit in my room, roughly seven metres by seven metres, and neither move nor make a sound. The world carries on regardless. Through my breathing, I control my heartbeat. A rustle of leaves outside the window rouses me from my tortuous ruminations. And there I am, perfectly present. Soon to be taken again beneath the waves of memory and of all I could have done differently. No matter. I carry

on, striving for compassion for myself as well as others. Now I live a sliver of a life, denying myself almost all pleasures that I once indulged to excess. Memories, yes. They come on so violently and swiftly, just as a fever might, beyond my control. I may not even be aware, at times, of where my mind actually is. And so, I continue with the vipassana training, breathing in and out, in and out. Sometimes for ten or twenty minutes. Other times all day, depending upon the day's responsibilities. Perhaps it's sending me mad, sitting still, alone, breathing. But it's the only skill I know; without it, I'm lost completely. Day and night come and go, come and go, as they do, alternating with equal reign. And the stars are nowhere to be seen. Once I would gaze at them, but I gaze at them no more. All beauty has vanished from me, perhaps, and on the rare occasions I now look up at the night sky, I see only an impossible expanse of blackness, and then, subsequently, I feel alone. As such, these impossible dreams come to life. Vegetation sways in the midnight air, and I'm lost in a desert without a compass. A compass would be useless anyway since north, south, east and west have ceased to exist. Up, down, left and right are nonsensical. There is only a series of moments, by no means linear, concentrated upon each grain of sand and upon each molecule. These amass as both desert floor and perceptible life forms. The moon shimmers in the fading light. There are no trees to speak of, nor are there larger mammals. The only recognisable shapes are those of shrubs and desert rats. The rats move quickly from shrub to shrub. I see only their silhouettes as they move.

Eventually and only by chance, perhaps, I come to the edge of the desert. There's a sun that shines down, illuminating roads and fields. In a paddock a lone horse stands, without shelter,

catatonic and resilient through days and nights of hot and cold. I pity him, put myself in his hooves. Abandoned and unloved, without company or shelter, the horse stands tough against the elements – a great stoic figure. But I cannot help but ask myself what for. Why does he go on when there's so little joy or respite to be found? I have not yet found the answer for either of us. Maybe there isn't one, and that my thoughts simply rise, fall, and die, never to be roused again. I will then, inexorably, be led to a different thought, a different phantom that whirs in my skull with all its majestic ephemera. Grey. That's what this day is. Grey both within and without. The horizon is not worth arriving at. To stand still. I cannot do so for long. My stomach will soon stir and churn and I'll grow weak and weary with hunger. Better eat before I'm too weak to move. That's one of the fears: scarcity, of not having enough. The fear of eternal hunger and of there perpetually being something missing.

All these thoughts of life and death and the corridors between. Could I possibly know enough about any of them to be able to speak with any authority? The colours around me intensify and then fade once more. Whether I'm dead or not, there's something strange about this place. It cannot be denied. Neither can it be fully known. The contradictions and dichotomies that appear to ensue are but a part of the riddle that I'm trying to solve. And seeking hope outside yourself is like chasing a mirage in the desert. The greatest thing that experience has taught me is the importance of resilience. I began to recognise this in the memory of the meditation sessions in India. Inner resilience. And alongside the idealism and the theories of mind that come from the pursuit of Buddhist philosophy, all dichotomies disappear in favour of a mind that has the capacity

to know the folly of being trapped in the empty delights of samsara and, in recognition of this, to gently allow for any attachment to the flame of desire to be extinguished.

Tired now. On another trail but also, not moving. Dragged from side-to-side by so-called external forces. There's no excuse for falling under their influences. Not at this juncture. Too much time has passed and too much work has been done. I have followed the path of the mind through places that are as illusory as the reflection of the moon in water. Finding nothing I can keep, I continue on, my vitality at a low. Not much left in the tank, perhaps. But then again, I'm often surprised by how far I can push myself. The world has shrunk to only my own sphere of awareness. I have ceased considering the bigger picture of life. Locked away here, in this tiny world, there are only the voices I invent as well as those I choose to listen to. Time passes. Time passes without hope. It doesn't seem to matter whether I'm awake or asleep, here or elsewhere, alive or dead. Moreover, it doesn't seem to matter that it doesn't seem to matter. Perhaps in destroying any notion of God, I have destroyed myself. There is no longer anyone in the room, nobody left to judge what remains. My awareness becomes that of a fly on the wall. The importance of my views vanishes. Any notion of striving for righteousness becomes completely absurd. I take a shower before bed and feel that I'm preparing a corpse for burial. In the morning I will emerge to face a grim new world that doesn't exist. A grim world, yes. To others, different, perhaps. A world, nonetheless. Its predicates appear subject to change. But do I or, by extension, does anyone else see the world the way it really is? The ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth. At least that's what they told me at the

Tibetan university, when I asked too many questions. When I asked questions that nobody seemed to have an answer for. And I would read endlessly, on both Eastern and Western philosophy alike, about the nature of enlightenment, but the answer always seemed to evade me. It became apparent that it could not be transmitted through language, and so, for a while, I sought refuge in extended meditation sessions – seeking insight as to the way things truly are as opposed to any notion of transcendence. But who is to say how things truly are, and who gets to decide what any ultimate aim might be? Eschewing language was not enough, since an inability to put into words any aspect of knowledge means simply that I do not understand. I cannot explain; cannot put it into words. Besides, I haven't gotten there yet to know. Perhaps I'll never know, and that my final sunset will be bathed in the light of an absence of knowledge – the light illuminating all of the gaps and empty spaces where I've been told an illumination of knowledge *ought* to be. Perhaps there will be nothing. Shifting images without innate substance. A dance of light and shadow. Neither sun nor moon nor stars to light the way. There will be another world, even if it consists of nothing.

Light rain fills the sky and falls gently on the asphalt, cooling its sun-baked glow. The illusion I've worked so hard to sustain is coming to an end. Soon. But not yet. Just as I think I'm finished with my story, further images arise. From where, I do not know. The mind, perhaps, along with its mysterious operations. And I have time. Time before the words begin to cease and many new landscapes to discover. The sensation of an end but no end in sight. I can't see it but can feel it somehow. When I look, I see only my familiar surroundings: chair; table; blinds;

carpet; window; sky; earth. Beneath it all there is not a knowing per se but the intuition of its impending cessation. When, I cannot say, and will never be able to say. At the moment of cessation there will be no more words to cling to, nor any lips to speak them. Until then, language will comprise the worlds that I create. Always without really knowing why or for whom. A vital force, perhaps. *Why go on?* Because I live and breathe and cannot keep silence.

There are many theories around crossing the thin boundary between life and death. At present, I do not think of them. I step outside and gear my mind toward living. Walking the streets is the only respite I have from the incessant hours spent in the gloom of my dwelling. And as I walk along the vanishing streets there is always the sense that I'm trying to escape something, just as I escaped the place of my birth and am fixated on escaping the cycle of birth and rebirth. Always, there is work to be done. Even if the work is only of a metaphysical nature. Many philosophical problems have been opened to me and I find it extremely difficult to switch them off. And since it is possible that I can never really *know* anything, the problems often appear insoluble, insurmountable, even, and incommensurate with the principles of a simple life. The problems gaze down at me from a giant, dark tower of progress, my own cycling thoughts carried off by the wind.

Space. Room to breathe. The acquisition of *things* is overrated, and the possession of them makes little sense. I care little for material possessions and instead pursue a life of the mind. I once lived in rooms that were near empty – uncluttered and filled with possibility. Dust, yes. But then we all become that. An aspiration, perhaps. Something to look forward to. All

those rooms that I inhabited and left behind – cocoons cast off in favour of a better life. Or at least that's what I tell myself. At some junctures I was evicted, through no fault of my own and, at others, a different life beckoned, the games having become too small and too tiresome. It is difficult not to look back to those worlds now lost in memory and to the days taken for granted that came and went so quickly. Summers that bloomed and died. Winters that endured.

Dreer had checked out long before the eve of his suicide; he could no longer bear the isolation and the godless nights. He felt there was no escape, no exit.

My life has been reduced to nothing. Close to nothing. All euphoria subsides, and I get back to the dull business of trying to survive.

Caught up to the present moment. This carriage on the tracks. All regrets put to bed. Will they wake? Probably. Annihilate them. Throw them to the dust. No permanence in that. They will awake, mutilated, out for revenge. They will track me down. No matter. Perhaps I have to learn to live with them and either remain still, undetected, or outrun them. Sustained concentration may not last. Spectres amass, encircling dark. This dark point where I am. This space, empty, absent of knowledge, the broader world receding. The oneness that I experienced fading to an increasingly divided world. Safe, inside. Shielded from all but imaginary horrors. Somewhere, they are really happening, in a place where fear is actualised. The air is replaced with a protracted anxiety – only brief moments of respite. In sleep, for instance, I may find some relief. Crows sit on bollards, one bollard per crow, their eyes tacked on. Cumulous clouds drift over. The bright sky illuminates a mind that

has, for so long, dwelt in gloom. No more. A little more, perhaps. Who can say for sure? I can no longer, for example, differentiate between real and imagined memories. Too much time has passed to know anything for certain. When did it begin, *it* being the world I've come to know? When did *I* begin? Surely, the contents of this pronoun have changed throughout the course of its existence. Questions. They follow me throughout all, unwaveringly eternal. Do not answer. I do not have to answer to myself or anybody else, for that matter. At least that's what I tell my divided self. In reality, so as to say in real situations, there is always an overwhelming urge to explain myself, to explain what I'm doing or what I purport to believe I'm doing, as well as my dispositions, so to speak, my dislikes and my preferences. The silence that breeds from not doing so is insurmountable, and so I continue blathering on toward ears I can never be sure are friendly, in the hopes that my spontaneous thought-processes will be well received. It's that or the cell, really, with an abstracted mind being the only recourse. Speaking into the silence of myself for days on end results only in a jittery esotericism that is but destroyed by the emergence of the next light of day.

And it comes, the day, of course it does. Not certain but likely enough so as almost to be certain. Where was I? Almost finished, yes. Almost finished and speaking of Dreer and of his life before the tragic end. He did live, somewhere. In the mind. In my mind, perhaps, before it even existed. Dreamt up from the past. Perhaps we invented each other. I speak from the future – a present that is Dreer's future – a future he'll never know. Am I any more real than he, theories of time notwithstanding? Dreer checked out long before his suicide, it's true.

But there was a time before then. A time when Dreer walked on this earth, his head filled with dreams and aspirations that must have seemed so close. In writing a poem a day he dreamed up new worlds and a new social order. Though he wrote, his words never spoke. They were read only by a handful of people and are now unavailable. The few copies of his work that did exist were destroyed.

A flower opens, somewhere in time and space. I cannot say where. I cannot see beyond it. The flower spans my entire vision. Contained therein is every colour I know, every dream I've ever had. I wish only to be free from suffering, as all beings do. The flower recedes. Ants scurry around an anthill, sped up, buzzing, unaware of anything beyond their ant lives. The sky falls away. Gives way to blackness. Everything – all activity – on the world ceases. There are no longer any life forms. Not even a desert to be recognised.

Dreer wakes up and takes a shower, the cool water trickling down his body. There is optimism in his step. He is young and life has not yet taken its toll. A young woman lies on his bed, flicking through a magazine. Her name is Rose. Her naked body is supple and light. For the first time, she's in love. They both are. When Dreer returns, they discuss the emerging day. Neither of them are enslaved to do anything. They are free from the burden of any sense of commitment or responsibility. They are not yet bored of the cycling days, have not yet figured them out. Each morning comes with genuine newness. There is possibility through each passing moment. The morning light illuminates their mutual love for each other and of everything in their worlds.

'I love you,' Rose says, admiring her man as he rubs his towel between his legs.

'I love you, too, babe.'

They have not yet realised the limitations of their love, have not yet figured out what it means to move beyond this simple declaration, and to move *into* a life of love. Unbeknownst to them, they never will. Dreer sits beside Rose and kisses her. She smiles at him and he smiles back, but his smile appears more defensive than genuine. Dreer lights a joint, takes a deep, long drag, and passes it to her.

'What will you do today?' says Rose.

'What will any of us do?'

Rose pauses.

'I'm going to see about a job at the café in town. They're hiring baristas.' She passes the joint back to Dreer.

'The entire day is open, Rose. Why waste your time committing yourself to making coffee for other people when your life is here with me?'

'We spend a lot of time together, Thomas. Besides, I need to save up for when I go back to school.'

'School. My schoolgirl, eh? There's a library down the road. Everything you need to learn is there. You don't need school.'

'We've discussed this, Thomas. I want to get a degree.' Dreer is stoned. He scoffs at Rose and she feels it. She feels it deep within her, but decides to make light of it, on the outside. 'I can't sit around getting stoned all my life.'

Dreer pulls a strip of LSD tabs from a tin. 'Breakfast?' He holds one of the tabs out to her on his dirty fingertip.

'Can't we eat breakfast for breakfast?'

'Breakfast of the gods.' He dabs it onto his tongue, shivers down his spine.

'I guess that means we're doing nothing today,' says Rose.

'What do you care, you're going to see about a job thingy.'

'Yes, but not for twelve hours!'

The rising vibes of the day hold with them a glimpse of a passing paranoia. A fear comes over Dreer. It's becoming a habit for him to allow the open possibilities of the day to fade and vanish for good. The outside world is a terrifying chimera when he's in this state. To step outside would be anathema to him. Rose is beginning to see a pattern emerging in his behaviour but is powerless to do anything. She still has hope that it's a passing phase. The sense of hopelessness has not yet set. Rose does what she can. She sees about a job and sticks to her aspirations. She wants to build a future for herself and Dreer. She steps out into daylight and he stays behind in the darkening room. She secures employment while he writes poetry about his own perceived realms of death.

A moth bumps perpetually against the windowpane, trying to reach the light. A candle burns with an unusual ferocity, its wick standing far above the liquefying wax. Dreer sits slouched, head upon the desk. Alone and searching he writes slowly toward nothingness. Without an audience in mind and with no publishing deal on the table, he struggles to justify his position to others. Therefore, he stays inside, both to write and also to avoid the incessant questioning from family and friends so-called. This inevitably brews in him a growing loneliness, interrupted only by Rose returning from work and bringing him much-needed sustenance. The hours pass, accumulating to days, weeks, months, and then years, and it seems to mat-

ter little whether he gets any work done; his world does not change. As Dreer's life empties, he drowns himself in booze. Rose's presence becomes more infrequent, and even when she is present, appears absent to Dreer. She is all he has, but she cannot wait for him. Rose has almost graduated from her economics degree while Dreer has squandered several years. Eventually, he no longer writes, having lost all vision of the life he had once vehemently pursued. Neither can he concentrate. The fog in his brain builds and does not subside. Through his work he managed at times to come to a clearing, where the stars would become visible, and he could consider the possibility of other worlds. But with the fog, there is nothing. Nothing except searching for himself in vain, without pen or paper. With whisky in one hand and a cigarette in another, Thomas Dreer recedes from the light of Earth until the darkness becomes too deep, and finally he sets himself ablaze. This is where my story begins.

It is my task to finish his work. Or perhaps I have moved beyond and am doing this work for no-one and for nothing. Not for myself, there can be little doubt. I will soon visit the coast, be able to hear the waves. I will look out over those desert waters, unable to fix my gaze on any particular spot. The sky will bleed into the sea and my eyes will feel grey and sunken. I will look out, hoping to be free, yet soon enough I will have to return. I will return to my dwelling, where the sun never shines, its light unable to penetrate the growing opacity of the windowpanes. Locked in the house with nothing but my fear. Free to go out again, into the elements, soon, perhaps. Free to walk beside a large body of water, for instance. When you think about it, there isn't much to be missed. An obses-

sive mind drifts beneath magnanimous skies, understanding nothing, knowing nothing, cycling through varying degrees of distress. The mind tries to grasp a reason for the unveiling of each day. Silhouettes pass. Nameless people wearing black coats. Where is everyone going and for what reason? Heavy boots trample blooming flowers. Beauty is crushed and suffocated. More timid animals die of fright. Burning rubber, tyres press on through exhaustion. There seems to be little in the way of rejuvenation, respite. It continues. On. The world so-called. The world that humankind has made. It continues through lack of an alternative – of not knowing what else to do. Things change, yes. They do. They change slowly, just as a species of butterfly may change colour over generations. Beings adapt according to the circumstances and the conditions. In any event, I plan to live in this life and not the next. I will, therefore, need to learn to adapt quickly. Waiting. The silences in between. Soon to get back onto the relentless road; the path, whatever you might call it. Perhaps I will abandon it completely and go off-road if that's at all possible. The shrinking wildernesses of the world may not allow it. The existing path is all there is, worn down by billions of pairs of feet that came before and will come again, in various shapes and forms. Even the paths into the psyche have been well explored – the unknown country of the mind. Language can be used as a map to get lost in such places, so that a sense of wonder can be reborn. Every passing moment is a chance for renewal.

The light of the world hits me as if in a dazed dream. I remember these streets. I've travelled them many times, long ago. What feels like long ago. Too broken to continue as before. A new consciousness arising from a prolonged isolation, from a

prohibition on the flight of dream. An endless train of depression without hope arrives at a bleak platform amid grey hills. Stasis, rather than rest. Nobody dares get on or off. On the platform, there's a man in a white trench coat, mumbling indecipherably. No words. His eyes move erratically within their respective sockets. I can see him through the grimy window. The window filters out most of the colours and the ordinarily greenish grass and plants appear grey. The sky is a joyless pale blue. The pensive horse has vanished, replaced by a barren field. Tree branches creek in the violent wind. A bicycle sits hidden behind a bush, awaiting the return of its owner.

No more stars to open.

All my brothers and sisters who didn't make it out of the womb alive.

The sound of wind through pine leaves.

My stores are growing empty. The town is shut. Nobody dwells there anymore, the shutters down guarding against hot sun for no-one and no reason. There are a few crumbs left, in my stores I mean, at the bottom of several hessian sacks located in my derelict barn. Crumbs to fuel the last dimly lit fire within. These rooms one day the subject of an archaeological dig. *This is how they lived*, they will say. *This is where they ate, slept, cooked, shat, communed, sent SMS messages, checked emails, fucked, masturbated in pensive silence, read, wrote, watched the flickering screen of the television*, and so on, ad nauseum. Filled the hours, yes. But no less empty than now. Fires light the skies, burning beneath the hot breath of summer. And all those summers yet to come. Flowing rivers of bitumen. A car roars past on the street outside the window, rousing me from my apocalyptic forebodings. Music blasts and the pas-

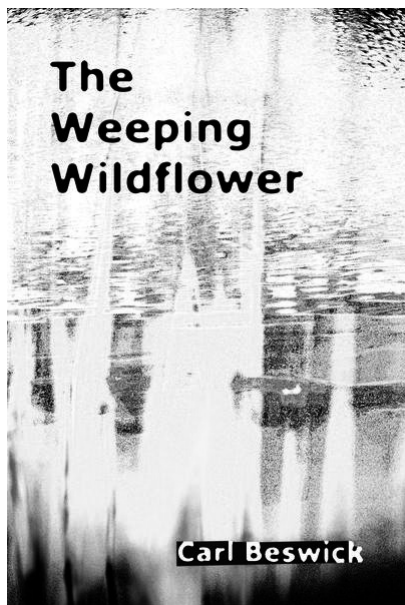
singers are singing a song I do not know as I lie awake, night deepening, and with no sign of impending sleep. I've slept enough; slept through it all. My youth now a vanished hope never grasped. But to hell with the idealisation of youth. Perhaps the best years are yet to come. In any case, how am I to judge the passing years? Perhaps I will never know. No matter. It will be over in several more years, probably, *it* being this experience that has crept toward some strange familiarity. The experience may go on longer still, beyond the conventional point of death. For how much longer, I cannot tell. Assumptions and conjectures aside, I'm left with nothing. Not even doubt, for doubt implies the possibility of certainty. The fire continues to burn, glowing and unreal. Nothing more than a metaphor, collapsing into silence. The impending death of the final star. Without words, its image disappears. Without thought, it cannot be reignited, reawakened. Here, there is nothing. Not even absence or negation. A voice that knows nothing of what it speaks, does not speak, cannot speak, then ceases to exist. No sound. No sight. No perceptions. No feelings. No thought. No consciousness. Nothing remains to cling to. The flame has been extinguished.

Looking back through myriad lives, I stand here on the precipice, a bright sun in the distance. It has shone and will continue to shine, illuminating a future that can never be known and that one day will be remembered.

Stars burn then fade into nothingness, until all is cold and lifeless, set to be reborn.

An old vision dies as an unknown world begins.

Did you love *Incomplete Pictures*? Then you should read *The Weeping Wildflower*¹ by Carl Beswick!



The self-immolation of Thomas Dreer sets into motion an unlikely love affair between two of the mourners left behind.

Nicholas Finch and Melissa Melloway are at a crossroads. Finding each other when they are at their most lost and vulnerable, they journey together to rediscover meaning in their lives. However, after the discovery of manuscripts written by Thomas Dreer and left behind after his death, Dreer's disembodied voice continues to haunt any possibility of lasting peace and happiness.

The Weeping Wildflower is an experimental work in which the ultimate validity of an omniscient perspective is questioned. in addition to the finality of death.



About the Author

Carl Beswick is a PhD candidate at Monash University. He holds a master's degree in creative writing, publishing and editing from the University of Melbourne.

His research focuses chiefly on experimental and contemporary literary forms, with an emphasis on the role creativity plays in a world in a state of crisis.

He is working on a new novel, "Distant Objects", as part of his doctoral dissertation. He currently lives and works in Naarm/Melbourne.

