

The Weeping Wildflower

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THE WEEPING WILDFLOWER

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To my family.

Tears in the dirt. Soft madness. The hostile wilderness swarms with the movement of insects. The bush rattles with venomous sounds in the dry, relentless heat. The landscape dreams, breathes, and dances in the wind. A destitute traveller appears over the hill, wandering his endless path, searching for the oasis of dusk and the cool air that comes with it. His eyes fix to the sky yonder, peering into the vastness of all that he will never fully understand: Lives that came before whose memories he has access to. The sky rains sunbeams. A song for the lonesome traveller—a puff of smoke; a vanquished whisper.

Severed feelings all along the wild track. Bliss over suffering, bliss over suffering, comes a mantra from over the hill. What appears dead and hostile is very much alive. All paths are open to be tread, the world an open cup, with all experience ready for drinking. Self-torture in the bowels of silence. Giving in, letting go, ascension into bliss. Becoming the master of hallucinations. Crunching dirt. Cars cast by on the highway, on the ant track of the ant farm, gathering nectar for the Queen of Democracy. Eyes reborn in the heart of nature, blinking to the rhythm of the natural world, peering out and in simultaneously. Thunder in the distance. The need for shelter. All too human. A candle flickers in a barn filled with hessian sacks, somewhere in time: perhaps only a memory.

In the dead-steel subterranean, somewhere deep in time, without signs to show the way through the labyrinth of illusory freedom that opens up like a hallucinatory flower, a new world thrives in the shadows, waiting to be born. Drifting aimlessly

down there one night, Thomas Dreer happens upon a world he wishes he hadn't, and knows he'll never forget. Rusted pipes endlessly drip crimson water, splashing down corridors that must stretch on for miles, curving and echoing toward what may well be the centre of the earth: *all meaning must lie therein*. The tunnel grows darker still, until the only light Dreer sees is the light that he casts into the darkness, and there he deciphers illusion from reality, casting away symbols from a forgotten era, and tuning his vision to what he *sees*—visions of the future.

When Dreer wakes there is a chill in the air. Light cracks the darkness through the open door, so painfully aware of how things are. Aware of the misalignment of the stars and of the moon's face—a stark reminder of how all things can go barren—and it wouldn't be wise to mock the moon, nor heed the warning it foreshadows to tell. It is Earth's aborted child, spawned from her barren womb so lifeless now she sings no song and shows us only waste. Eyes catch the last light of the sun, beaming clarity into a deluded world—sustained only by the great fire that makes everything possible.

A glimmer of the infinite.

Somewhere down the spiral the stars will bleed out, with nothing left but an expanse of blackness.

It's a quarter to eight and Dreer struggles to get up, having spent another night eating acid and drinking alone. As he thinks and wakes, he creates the new day, peering out at the sky that always encapsulates him. A poet's eyes, a *gift* that he squanders chasing half-forgotten dreams and ruminating over dead moments. Even the air he breathes is lost to him, and as he rises with the sun, feels nothing but waste.

Melissa Melloway drives west toward the city with a stolen briefcase and a head full of amphetamines. She takes a few deep breaths, tries to stay calm but she's too alert, and so instead attempts to hold on to reason. Her decisions follow her, bound to her with invisible rope, dragging her back and down as she tries to flee, her mind always caught up with the inescapable fear of *what will I do next?* In the past, her instincts had always led her to run, but this time there is no turning back. Each movement penetrates the future, one moment at a time, and all glows in the light of her presence.

Nicholas Finch arises from his eternal sitting position, having spent the winter working hard at ego death. News of his father's illness comes from one of the Tibetan monks, and he is to fly home immediately, putting to the test the peace and enlightenment he has allegedly learned, moving back to the place where it had all unravelled in the first place. He fears the temptations of the city and, although he no longer craves or attaches himself to anything, there is still self-doubt in the belly of his mind. Above all else, he fears going insane, as such is a family trait, and he knows that his father's inherited madness had prevailed after all. Why would it not prevail in him, too? After being escorted by the monk to the stone steps of the temple he dies a thousand deaths before being resurrected only by the love that courses through his blood: His love for family. He had not moved away out of spite, but there comes a time in a man's life, he had tried to explain, when he must choose and tread his own path. He had vowed to distance himself from all that he could not control, but alas he could not control the premise of even that promise. As he waits for the bus to arrive and take him to the airport, he looks around at the now familiar streets

in an attempt to remember it. It is early morning, only just past dawn, and the stallholders are busy getting ready for another day, stacking cups, brewing tea, putting out their merchandise, unlocking their precious livelihoods. Beauty awakes in the world and for the first time in years Finch feels the sharp sting of fear, of old fear that begins to rot his brain and his peace. He knows he is not ready.

Dreer wakes with a start, having dreamt of the cataclysms to come, but does not remember a thing. Even if he had, he would not attribute any meaning to it, being far too sceptical and rational to give serious consideration to dreams. A candle flame flickers in the corner of the room and his awareness is brought fully onto it. He lies back in bed, a great sickening feeling in his stomach, caused by an otherwise invisible spiritual wound that he does not—will not—acknowledge the existence of, and no matter how hard he tries he cannot seem to shed the sickness in his soul. All of the so-called friends of his youth have flown to different parts of the world. This morning he can't breathe. He's panicked. He makes himself coffee in order to quash his headache, sits at his desk and pores over job applications for work he knows he will never get. He will never find his way because he has already convinced himself that he won't. After all, he's already dead to the world.

Melissa opens up the briefcase and peers inside, smiling. Only another two hundred kilometres and all of her problems will be over. She's in another realm, she knows, a different state of being to the masses that sleepwalk their lives away. She knows risk and danger—adrenaline—and soon, very soon, if she keeps her cool down the last stretch of road, she'll know the high life. Her car travels at a hundred kilometres per hour but

her mind travels faster. She knows she's close and feels a warning flood through her body, since it's when she's so close to desire that everything falls apart.

• • • •

'Yes, I'm at the airport now, about to take off—'

'What do you mean?'

'Yes, yes, I'll come straight to the hospital when I land. Okay, thank you. Bye.'

Nicholas Finch slams down the grimy, plastic phone. The bliss and peace that he foolishly thought would last rubs off as the frustrations of the world begin to eat at him once more. Initially he had told himself that he was travelling back to India to find himself, but it becomes clear that he was running away after all. And now he's running right back to where it all started, to the pain and the dejection and the unprocessed feelings that secretly haunt him every night. The airport is a hive of anxious activity, rushed and busy and fraught with transience. The air-con gives him goosebumps and dries out his throat, and he knows for certain that he definitely isn't ready, but he must trust the moment and try to remember everything that he has learned.

• • • •

'You just have to get out of the house, that's all,' says Rose.

'In here, out there, what's the difference?'

'Well, for a start, out *there* something might actually happen.' Dreer is fraught with fear, fighting back daily panic in a samsara of constant negative thoughts. 'You can be beautiful. I've seen it before.' A wave of regret drifts over him, further

complicating the situation. The thought of wasted days sends him insane, and leads him to further retreat into himself. 'I heard that your friend Nick is on his way back from India. Perhaps you could meet up with him.'

'What, and become a Buddhist?' Dreer sneers cynically at Rose, and she remembers exactly why she broke up with him. He has, in a way, become more her patient than an ex-lover. She remained friends with him out of pity and out of concern for his welfare, but he's become impossible, non-communicative, empty. 'Just go.'

'I'm just trying to help you, trying to—'

'Well don't,' he snaps with a rudeness that is sure to haunt his dreams. He knows he'll be left only with the desire to erase it all.

Rose leaves the room without another word.

Finch focuses on his breathing and looks around the plane mindfully as it prepares for take off. He's always been afraid of planes, as far back as he can remember, but he refuses to allow this fear to prevent him from seeing the world. He's focussing on taking the journey one moment at a time, doing his best to maintain awareness of his breath. His body trembles along with the plane as it crawls into position on the runway. He wants a double whisky just to calm his nerves, but he lets go of the desire, once again refocussing awareness on the breath. The plane rumbles all around him as it picks up speed. His pulse quickens and he gets that feeling that he always gets at this moment—that he is about to die—but the plane lifts safely from the ground, ascending into the sky and soon Finch can see only cloud, and he realises that he isn't dead, at least he hopes not,

before remembering that he must learn to let go of his attachment to everything, including life.



Through the echoes of a violent and traumatic past I caught Thomas Dreer suspended in a dream. Back then, smiles were flashed around as if they were currency and it was as though, in his youth, nothing that he ever did would be of any consequence. Everything went up in a haze of dope smoke—all worries and cares with it. Before long, fear grew like an unstoppable dark balloon in our shared consciousness. But for Dreer, it grew deeper still. In a world that appears to be so filled with connection on the surface, some of those lines are severed, broken, or never established at all. Sometimes people become so addicted to the sad stories they tell themselves that they become lost completely. This is what happened with Dreer. He tried to catch a glimpse of his life—tried to slow it down—but consequently he became lost too deep. As Dreer and his contemporaries all got higher, it was Dreer who lost focus of everything and became caught up in all kinds of trouble until, ultimately, he became someone that nobody recognised.

The beach stretches on and with all that time with it, every moment gathers and is lost like an old wave dying out to the new. New energy gathers in the wind. The tide and the foam of our myriad lives is carried by the current that flows through friends of our lives no more, with all of those lost images stirring and never quite able to fall back into place, driven forwards through those dark labyrinths that Thomas Dreer never finds his way out of. Wishing as I was for so many months in the dark arcade where they played lethal games, adding to the

consequences previously thought inescapable. I watch him as he watches the darkening sky. I sense that he, too, is darkening with it. I don't know what to do, and I feel I can do nothing but witness the eclipse.

• • • •

'Does anyone really get it; does anyone really figure it out?' He looks at me with those dark eyes that I used to dream into, that I once thought were the keys to the future, and I know that I had wanted too much. I know what he's getting at but I don't want to go there.

'I'm not quite sure I know what you mean.'

'How to be ourselves in this world. I mean, do we simply run out of time before anyone figures it out, like day moths?'

'We're figuring it out right now, every minute.' He looks back toward the window, longingly, and with an expression that I can only describe as all the fear in the world. His face is pale and gaunt, as if he's the ghost of who he was when I first met him. There are pinhole burns down the front of his faded jumper and the table beside him is covered with pot crumbs and flecks of tobacco.

'We can't go back?'

'No, we can't.'

I can see him struggling to surmount that seamless wall that blocks connection and acts only to isolate and stagnate. And this is his experience. *Will it ever be more*, I wonder? *Can it ever be more than what it really is?* I don't know. But Thomas looks to me for answers that I cannot give, that no one can give.

'I sit here night after night, banging my head against an empty sky, and for what?' he says, looking at me. 'Why can't we just be together?'

'You know why; we've been through this.'

'But I'm doing better now. I'll get a job. How does that sound?'

'I just can't, Thomas. I can't be with you and I already told you I've met someone else.'

'To hell with anybody else.' The atmosphere in the room snaps. Dreer catches himself and appears to gather his senses. 'What I mean is—'

'I know exactly what you mean. Don't make this harder than it already is. The clock is ticking, Thomas, and it's time you moved on. I'm sorry.'

As the sky darkens further through the heartbreak we sit in another of our silences, never breaking through to one another and always longing for more, always longing for some deeper connection. All of the books that he had once read so voraciously and with vision are now covered with dust as he sits there silently, peering out of the window, occasionally looking back at me but always looking back up to the sky as though it's the only company he seeks.

Traffic rumbles by as Dreer sits in his own melancholic air, poring over photographs and memories when, what he should be doing, though he can't see it, is to put it all away and walk out into the sun. There's light outside but his eyes aren't accustomed to it and he sees only a painful blur; a world in which he does not fit. He hopes that Rose will come by to see him, but he knows that with each visit she pays him she pulls further away, and that, little by little, her visits will become more infrequent.

He's spent far too long in isolation, writing in the dark, becoming more and more obscure, but now he needs to connect—to connect or to die. Menacing shadows move around the room as regret takes a firm hold of Dreer. He's a dying star transforming into a black hole. He has to die and to suck everything down with him. He can't shake off his morbid depression—can't juggle his way out of the indefinable mess he's in—'the predicament', as he's come to term it. His life. He has, every now and then, fanciful ideas, but dismisses them as soon as they occur and instead does nothing. Brooding in the shadow of an otherwise illustrious day he sits alone, trying to cope. He watches himself in the mirror, wondering, *at which point had it all gone wrong?* The problem is that he can't see anything in the future—he has only a retrospective vision and a promise of the impending fall.

'God damn it!'

The car slows down and Melissa revs hard, trying to keep it going. Steam pours out from under the bonnet. *Piece of shit always overheats*, she mutters to herself, angrily. If she doesn't make it to the port by noon there's a possibility that there won't be anyone there or worse, they'll then be looking to take her head. There is no understanding and there are no excuses in the game she has caught herself up in.

A helicopter booms overhead, bleeding sound into the sky. It's a hot day and Melissa scrambles for breath. She reaches for another cigarette. There isn't a car in sight and she's panicking once again, alone in the middle of bum-fuck-nowhere and without transportation. She walks back and forth, smoking. *If only I could get one thing right*, she thinks to herself be-

fore screaming at the sky and crouching deep into the curb. She knows she should have taken a different path long ago.

The sun climbs high in the sky and noon is fast approaching. Panic turns to hallucination and Melissa can't see straight anymore. She watches her life crumble before her very eyes. She decides to ditch the car, to ditch everything (drugs and all) and to start fresh. As she walks in the dust beneath the dying glint of the sun, each step is more informed than the last and, picking up pace, she tries to envision what will be different *this* time around. Would the world be somehow kinder in her eyes than before? Who is asking the questions, anyway? There is no God looming over her shoulder. There are only the choices that she will make and that she will have to live with. When eventually the nearest town is within sight she feels like an outsider re-entering the nucleus of humanity, having been reborn to the wilderness in an unconventional sense, wandering back and yet forwards—wandering *into* the life that was vacant before she had left. Scant thoughts run through her mind as she nears the end of one journey and another is about to begin. She had been foolish to think that that was it, the revelation; the hard part, but as she drinks some cool water at the first café she encounters, she realises this truth: A difficult path lies ahead. The interior of the café is about as dusty and dry as the desert, but Melissa is so thirsty that each sip of water equates to orgasm. As she quenches her thirst she looks around the room, realising where she has gotten to—realising where she is. There are old bottles lined up above the bar. On the walls there are old paintings and photographs of landscapes and buildings. Presumably, they are depictions of how the town looked hundreds of years ago. Ironically, not much has changed. The waiter is an

old man who looks like he's been through many dust storms. His face bears countless cracks and wrinkles. He has a steady air of quietness and a way of looking at her that helps her to forget who and where she is. Each time Melissa drains the glass the waiter obsequiously fills it, without offering a single word, and without needing to. And then, just to shake the dust that hangs in the air, Melissa breathes the first words into the silence.

'Where am I?' she asks, letting down her guard out of desperation.

'Far from home I'd expect, but you're safe now. Drink up. How long were you out there on foot? It's a good thing you arrived when you did; a bad storm's comin.'

'What should I do?'

'That really isn't a question for me to answer, but you can rent one of the rooms upstairs for the next few nights until the storm blows over. They can get very nasty, you know. Dangerous, even, with the sand blowing about the place at high speed. You got money?'

Melissa hesitates. 'Cash.'

'Sorry for askin'. Lot of drifters come through here and people on the run, that kind of thing.' The waiter momentarily eyes Melissa with suspicion. 'Anyways, we have special rates for hard currency. I'll show you to the rooms?'

'That won't be necessary,' asserts Melissa as she becomes more composed, more herself. 'I'll take one, a corner room.'

The last thing Melissa wants is to be stuck out here in the middle of a storm, but she'll just have to settle with reality and try to use the time wisely. To her, everything seems like a mess, and then it hits her—she remembers—and sobers to the fact

that on the side of the highway there's a car that's registered to her, with a briefcase in the boot, filled with amphetamines.

Two

Back when I could come home to Rose we were always sitting in silence. On the rare days that I was sober the tea on the table would do all of the talking. I had a shitty job that she hated, and the dream I had envisioned for our lives went down a dirty kitchen sink. Every day was a depressed blur and I drank too much and took too many drugs. But the more I'd drink and the more drugs I'd take, the worse our lives became. Was there anybody steering, anyone in control? Had there ever been? Life carried with it a persistent, contemptible silence, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't work. I could of course work the shitty job that paid the bills, but I felt trapped there, stuck in a life I had no intention of living. When Rose eventually stopped coming home at night, I knew she was growing tired of me and that our relationship was failing. I knew then that our worlds had changed forever and that there was no going back. I stayed up for nights on end in a protracted, torturous silence. I drank bottle after bottle of wine but drinking only made the visions darker and more vivid and compounded the nausea I felt. I had never felt so sick and angry in all my life—*betrayed*—by the person who had been telling me for years that they loved me.

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They tell me that smoke had soared from the Finch family house—from the house where I'd spent my formative years. With my ancestral home gone up in flames surely now all ties to the past have been charred and severed. The hospital room bleeps as my father lies hopelessly on the bed. They say he

breathed in so much smoke they're surprised the machines are able to breathe for him at all. Stained with death and sheathed for the next world he lies there, about to cross over. The winding sheet will soon cover his crumpled, blackened face. I recall him in his living and breathing life, drinking the days away and I wonder, *had it been worth it?* And if my father could still think, only he would know the answer. After my mother had died and after spending the following days cowering in the walk-in freezer at the local fast-food joint where I worked, I fled. My father had driven her to extinction, and I knew that the best thing for me to do was to escape. I even missed my mother's funeral. Each mile that I travelled away from him brought with it healing and reflection. Whenever I was overcome by anger in meditation practice, he was the source. And now he lies, dying in front of me, and somehow I feel an impossible compassion for the man.

'He most likely won't live through the night,' says the nurse with a sad expression drawn across her face, 'if there's anything you'd like to say to him, now's the time.' She strokes my father's bald head as she reaches across him to fluff up his pillow. The light from the window is failing already as my father fails with it. Soon enough he will pass through the portal and go back to where he came from, or to the next life or incarnation. Nobody anywhere can be sure. And all I do is wait for him to slip away. Shadows adorn the walls, flowing gently and mercifully, helping me to remember that there were good times, too, and that there are plenty more to come.

There's a knock on the door and as much as he wants to see Rose, he hopes it isn't her. He's in a terrible state, hasn't eaten, and has been drinking heavily. He opens the front door and peers out, wearing old clothes that he should have thrown away long ago. They flap in the hot wind. Holes and tatters. He squints as he looks ahead to the world outside but sees nothing but a bright blur. The intense light from the sun hurts his eyes, and he thinks he can see Rose's face somewhere through the layers of intoxication.

'Rose, is that you?'

Rose waits at the door as dusk settles in and wonders not for the first time what she's doing back here in this mess. She tells herself that she does not do it out of pity but out of latent love. *What's he doing in there? He's been a long time.* She worries for him, almost called the cops one time after he wouldn't wake up, feared he was dead. But he had arisen and answered the door before they arrived so she ended up calling them off. It was then that she began to see him as hopeless.

The door finally opens.

'Rose, is that you?'

'Jesus Christ, are you okay? I've been ringing the bell for almost half an hour. I almost called the cops again.' Dreer glares at her through the brightness. As much as he has failed and faded, Rose can still sense that, beneath all of the gloom, her Tom lives in there somewhere, hiding, and ready to spring forth once again. 'Can I come in?'

'If you want to.' They still play the old games.

'I'm going to make you a cup of tea, and I brought you fish and chips. Have you eaten?'

‘Have I eaten? Of course I haven’t *eaten*.’ He speaks the last two syllables in the tone of a spoilt child, on the surface wholly ungrateful for her caring affection. But deep down he is grateful, only he’s afraid to reveal it to anyone, including himself. ‘What would be the point if I’m going to die in here in the dark, forgotten?’

‘You are not forgotten. I’m here. I haven’t forgotten you.’

‘Yes, but I’m talking about people who matter—’

‘So in your eyes I’m nothing?’

Dreer’s brain turns over. He knows his words have added to his regret and wounded yet another. *This is why*, he tells himself, *I hide away in the dark*.

‘I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it.’

‘You never mean it, and you’re always sorry.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Sorry for being sorry for being sorry. Oh, Thomas Dreer, dear, you are in a mess.’

‘Tell me something I don’t know.’

Rose hesitates.

‘I’m moving away.’

‘You’re moving away?’

‘Yes, I’m moving away. Thomas, I’ve met someone. I already told you.’

‘So fast, huh, just like that?’

‘It’s been over a year since we broke up. I can’t do this forever. You need to look after yourself.’

‘Don’t tell *me* what *I* need to do.’

‘I’m going now. I hope you enjoy your fish and chips.’

Three

Lost somewhere in the mad city Finch tries to come to terms with his loss. He wanders aimlessly, as though he might find the remedy for his grief on some street corner or down some dark alleyway. Without his father, in spite of all their differences, he's alone in the world and, along familiar streets known long ago, he feels the emptiness from which everything in existence springs. He has several days to spend before the funeral and doesn't want to stay in his father's empty ghost-ridden house. There are too many charred memories there, too many old versions of himself he'd rather forget. And the last thing he needs is his mind going off on a tirade of memory, least of all when there's so much life in the present city. Everywhere people bustle along and as it grows darker the people's clothes get fancier as they meet for cocktails and dinner in their quest for an experience of life. Finch comprehends death as the people swarm around him. He walks along the river and watches the flowing water. He thinks of how simple life really is and of how it's the mind that make it complicated, always trying to intervene in processes that cannot be altered. Finch mourns not only his father but also the loss of a future—a future in which reconciliation between them could have taken place. And as the air grows dark once more, he can feel the realms of the dead. The portal has been opened close to him and the dead now linger in his skin. He feels desperately as though he needs a shower but he hasn't even booked a room for the night and he hasn't very much money. On top of it all he is soon to inherit his father's debt, which he hopes his father's property will cov-

er, but he doesn't want to get his hopes up. Somewhere down the line someone has to clean up the mess, and it just so happens that the task has fallen on Nicholas Finch.



The day is a dead heap of bones with the dust of each minute stripped bare in the naked streams of light. One minute to death and I crawl out here on my belly over the empty shells of all that time lost, never to be recovered. Water runs through pipes and is shut off but continues to drip, indifferent to human endeavour. The clocks tick only ghosts. Trapped alone in that awful hexagonal dream I ask aloud, *have I gone mad?* Sure as nothing was ever sure at all, and nobody speaks clearly through that muddled mass of years idled on and intercepted of their shimmering moments now shovelling on through the dirt and the dark. In here I can only hope to shut out the awful light and the stinking heat. Always in vain, I might add. All aspiration for a better life has left me. Long ago. But now, with Rose gone, I have lost hope of its return. All I do is sit and cry, until I force myself to stop and then choke on smoke and drink until I lose myself completely. Each morning I wake and life seems all the more insurmountable. To others, my problems are invisible, but in my mind they loom large as a heap that has grown so high it penetrates cloud. A foreign tongue utters mysteries of a land far beyond the realms of my dreams, painted only by rumoured infantile meanderings in the fever of childhood. Even the walls feel sick and wish they were dead.

Even if I were in the most beautiful place in the world I wouldn't be able to feel it. In here I'm invisible. After all, you can't appreciate the sky when you're scrambling to make

something of your life—make rent—make anything, and you once thought your twenties were going to be the best days ever. Trying to evade the toxic blur that has become my shadow, I move into the cool air that breathes across my skin. You can buy magic on the streets: everything is cheap; everything is a copy. Through the mirror I stare at the reflected image of myself. I'm trapped behind glass and I can't break free. All I know is I'm running out of time. I need to smash through the illusion, break free from the glass, but everything's a screen. The world cracks, breaks, shivers through the cold of space. My vision flashes red with perceived danger as I fumble desperately to piece the shards of my life back together.



The wind rises and howls with infinite force and, along with the moon, keeps the waters of the world lapping and flowing. The truth of life is different for each party involved, with each seeking to connect along the unstoppable tide of human experience. Fragments of this tide lie scattered across the world in the form of ancient ruins, artefacts, and recorded literature and art. Begotten whispers of lost time and lost people—communication spanning centuries—captured necessarily through a lesser dimension. As Finch watches his father die and Dreer spirals deeper into depression, Melissa is curled up in her motel room, biting her nails and imagining the worst. Not long ago she was seamlessly cruising toward a great future of change, but things have a knack of not working out exactly as planned. She's wasting time and money in a place she doesn't want to be, and she has no clue what she'd been thinking and how she had gotten here, to this point in time and place. The old Melloway

curse, perhaps, was coursing through her veins. The old magic still lingering after a hundred years: slights of perception; cognitive distortion; acts of self-sabotage. Such are the symptoms of the family name she carries, according to her mother. However, Melissa is certain that her mother had made it up to eschew responsibility for the decisions she'd made throughout her life. Superstition, it seemed, was much more desirable to her mother than reason. Easier to swallow. Melissa can't go anywhere now the storm has hit. The ground outside has that damp smell that comes with heavy rain after a long drought. And even if she makes it to the car there's no guarantee that it'll start. She can't remember how far she'd walked, her memory clouded by a delirium that she is growing accustomed to. Speed sleep. She closes her eyes for a few seconds and hours pass. If she walks out there, she'll lose her way in the dark and then perhaps there will be no tomorrow. Either way, there might not be a tomorrow if she doesn't find her car, and fast. Now that the drugs are wearing off the only thing on her mind is survival. She simply cannot abandon the plan, cannot evade the deal that's been set up. Being delayed by a storm is understandable but abandoning the deal could mean a price on her head. Her mind is playing tricks now, nauseating her entire being until she's heaving over the toilet bowl. She tastes salt from the tears that slide down her face and into her mouth. She can't breathe as she tries to fight back the sickness, her nerves shot. She gathers herself and walks back out into the bedroom. There's a knock at the door. 'Not now,' she fires sharply.

'Room service.'

She remembers the waiter's voice and the semblance of reassurance she'd felt at the café downstairs. She straightens her-

self up, takes a breath to compose herself and answers the door. It is him—the waiter from downstairs. He quickly steps in, holding with a tray adorned with a silver serving dome.

‘How’s the room?’ he says with a natural charm, rehearsed and repeated so often that he has perfected the performance of the servant, tending to others’ every need in such a way that Melissa now feels uncomfortable.

‘It’s fine.’

‘Good to hear! I’ve brought some food that should see you through night.’

‘What is it?’

‘It’s a local dish. My favourite. I hope you like it.’

He disappears out the door as quickly as he came in. ‘Well, good night.’ He leaves a transparent trail of words behind and they are the only relics of human communication she’s had all day.

And that’s as far as Melissa gets with conversations these days. There’s nobody close to her and so everyone she encounters appears to exist only to perform some mere function. Her path in life and the kind of business she chose has taught her to keep people at a distance and to never trust anyone. And alone in her short-term accommodation she prays that somehow sleep will fix it all, and that tomorrow she’ll wake up as an entirely different person.

Nicholas Finch spends the day before his father’s funeral reading poems and trying to find some quotes for his speech. He doesn’t expect a vast turnout for his father’s burial, but ghosts have been known to reappear following the death of family.

After the storm blows over and the sun rises over the barren lands, Melissa makes her move at first light. She leaves the room key on the unmanned marble desk and walks back out onto the road. Flies buzz around murky pools on the pocked tarmac of the car park. The clouds have vanished and the sky is clear once again. The once dry dirt road is now thick with mud that the sun will slowly bake until the mud cracks and becomes dirt once more. Melissa walks with confidence. She's well-rested—energised—and ready for anything. She tells herself that she'll find a way to make it all work, that all is not lost. Just being back on the road is a relief and with the sun slowly climbing the sky she climbs with it, in sync with the power that gives life to the world.

By the time Melissa reaches the spot where she thought she'd left her car the sun has risen considerably, and beads of sweat are forming on her brow. Her eyes squint back and forth, up and down the road, before surrendering to the empty sky and to the barren road that crumbles together with her latent euphoria. It's gone. She knows it's gone. Stranded on the desert road she has nothing left, nothing to cling to, and all she can think to do is to try and hitch a ride back to the city and try once again to battle the swarms and the crowds—swallowed up in anonymity where she can pretend she's invisible and does not exist.



Dreer empties the dregs from another bottle, breaking the promise to himself and to Rose that he would stop drinking. It's already growing dark and he hasn't moved from his bed, but he's dying for a piss and knows he'll have to move soon and

feel that awful wasted blood pumping through his system once again.

Dreer has spent hours meditating in the growing darkness, contemplating the decision he's about to make. He peers through the gloom and around at all that surrounds him. He is in another realm: a realm of shadows. The room shivers in the cold and the dark. Books are piles high by the wall. The curtain hangs by the window, sagging at the top so that twilight seeps in. Death looms. Its watchful eye is locked onto Thomas Dreer and does not lose focus for a moment. Dreer walks back into the bedroom, tears streaming down his face, bottle of whisky in hand. He knows what he's about to do and what's about to happen, recognising the signs and the thoughts that have led him here. For too long he has felt trapped with no way out—no escape—save death.

He writes a note on a scrap of paper he finds in a cluttered draw. Ink bleeds out the last message of his life:

Dear Rose,

I left this note for you and only for you. I'm sorry for everything. Do you know that I will love you forever, because I will? Love like ours will fly forever. Somewhere in the night we fly together.

Always.

Yours forever,

Tom

Rose checks Dreer's mailbox before she sees the smoke. As she reads the note he's left there for her, her eyes well up with tears. She scrunches up the note and runs toward the house. The front door is locked. She pounds her fists against the solid wood, and screams 'Tom, Tom, open this door—'. Smoke pours

from around the doorframe and as hard as she tries she cannot bust down the door. All of the windows around the house are closed. She cries for help but there's no one around. While running to check the back door she calls the emergency number on her phone. The operator answers and she hears her broken voice begging and pleading for help.

Petroleum pours over Dreer's head and down his back. It feels cold against his body. He has visited this moment many times in his dreams, but this time it's happening for real. He couldn't possibly be going to hell—this was it. He had tried to get a handle on things and to turn things around. He had tried, and failed, to get his life back while he was still alive. To Dreer, setting himself alight is nothing more than bringing everything to its logical conclusion.

Before lighting the match, he surrenders to the moment, and with one hard stroke and a drop, his world goes up in flames. Burning in his dark, squalid corner of the world he lights up the emerging day before the sun has a chance to rise. Somewhere in time he will burn forever and, unbeknownst to him, his final act will set in motion not the cessation he craves but the karmic conditions for rebirth.

As the door caves beneath the battering ram, Rose sees Dreer's charred remains through the smoke and the gloom before the firefighter tells her to stand back.

Four

A lonesome lighthouse peers over the horizon, illuminating the gloom of the overcast seascape. Horns blow on the wind, the voyage of their sounds unknown in a world that has lost all meaning. Clouds flow effervescently in a continuous stream of time, with the mad sea crashing on the rocks, seen by eyes faded through shadow—minds lost in the great desert of brine that conceals life. All is wild but the lighthouse, so incomprehensible to all but the human concept of architecture, erected to navigate the unknown passages of the world—a benign rock in an endless vacuous terror. Long flowing waves of infinite presence not lonely but alone in the waterfall of time move continuously. Amid the endless pounding of the waves the heart that beats clogs with the dust and dirt of the foreign ground that walks beneath. Try and rest and fail and succeed: all is a cycle that means little more than a feather blowing in the night.

Down the dirt track and out towards the beach, Melissa and Nick throw pebbles into the sea, daring to disturb the universe.

Discovering new worlds on the coast, I pick up a handful of sand. There are too many grains to count. I throw them into the wind while the waves crash on the rocks and Melissa's voice is carried by a tremendous force in the air. 'WATCH OUT,' she yells, as the sea spray washes over me, almost sweeping my feet from the slippery rocks beneath, and all I hear is howling laughter mixed with liquid thunder. The sound of the waves washes over me and all of those darkened days concerning the death of my father and Thomas Dreer's suicide are taken far out to sea. My ego collapses before the formidable embrace of nature and

I lay myself out in trust of it. I am no greater than it and it is no greater than me; we are one and the same.

Enthralled in the magic of this life Melissa and I walk along the shoreline, expelling secrets and confiding in one another. She lays everything out before my senses and I tell her to keep going, to keep talking, and that I won't judge her. Both of our unlikely journeys connect and we walk as one in perfect union with everything that's happening in the universe. And as we keep walking and talking in synchronicity with all that exists, we stave off any dark thoughts of tomorrow or of yesterday. Sailing in the moment and dancing with eternity all is sea-salt mingled with Melissa's voice.

'I'm glad we met. It goes to show that something good can come from death.' The juxtaposition exists beneath the light of the sun.

'That's precisely what death is,' I say to her, 'a state of change.' The smile that I flash at Melissa is a mask. It hides all the pain of the true gut-wrenching feelings about my father. As much as I had loathed him my entire life I realise now that I regret doing so. If only we could have put our differences to one side and communicated peacefully. Much pain had emanated from the nucleus of my family, and I'd wished—despite knowing it wasn't the case for many families—that it could have been a nucleus of love. A tear slides rapidly down my face, leaving behind a wet trail before dripping from my chin. Melissa's face shows grave concern.

'You're crying,' she says simply, and takes me by the hand. And in my mind the ocean becomes a salty mass of all the tears shed throughout history. As I stare out to sea, I feel a simplicity and a peace that I never thought possible—more so than in all

the hours staring at the walls of Buddhist temples. 'You're safe with me. I will always walk beside you.'

I realise that this is the real deal; that Melissa has uttered a commitment to me whether she's conscious of it or not.

'Do you really mean that?'

'Of course I do. I'll walk beside you forever, just as I am doing now.'

Her declaration of commitment and love brings with it no anxiety. The waves rise and fall continuously like an archer repeatedly nocking, drawing, and shooting arrows from their bow.

'At thirty years old the only thing I've accomplished with my life is fraudulently publishing the works of a dead man.'

'You should keep that information to yourself, Nick,' says my old school friend, Isaac Sutcliffe. Visiting ghosts from the past has become a new pastime.

'I'm not a real writer, Isaac. It's all a lie.'

'Why are you telling me this?'

'You'll keep it to yourself?'

'You know I will.'

'I don't know. I suppose I just can't hold it in any longer. I have to tell *someone*.'

Isaac and I have been friends for years—since time immemorial—seemingly forever. There's a real sense that our friendship had always been, although it's more likely that it's all some trick of the mind—some cognitive joke.

The depths of human fear run deep.

'My mind is a runaway train that goes round in circles.'

'You're starting to sound like Dreer.'

‘For all intents and purposes, I am Dreer. I think a part of him has seeped into my soul.’

‘He’s a shadow,’ Isaac says, jovially.

My eyes are stinging. I’m not used to being awake in the morning, but I have to do something about the unhealthy sleeping patterns I’ve adopted. *Don’t possess it*, I think to myself, *it isn’t you*.

‘I stole a man’s thoughts—a man’s legacy.’

‘Are you starting to feel guilty?’

‘Always. I always feel guilt and regret.’

‘Is that why you went to India, to try to run away from yourself?’

Finch dodges the question. ‘Every action I take seems to build it up, until I’m standing on a heap of rubble, and the rubble is the past.’

‘Sounds like all those years of meditation did you good,’ says Isaac with laughing eyes, failing to acknowledge the seriousness that’s building.

‘I don’t know if I’ll ever come to terms with this life.’

‘Come on, man, it’s ongoing. I think it’s a matter of balancing your own expectations of yourself with the limitations of this life. That’s what needs adjusting. Look at you. You look exhausted.’

‘I keep beating myself up.’

‘We all make mistakes, Nick.’

Isaac’s eyes dart around the café. There’s the usual bustle of bodies wearing black coats. Mediocre artworks hang from beige walls.

‘I’m sorry, Isaac. Enough about me, how are things with you?’

‘Not great, Nick. A lot’s happened since you went away.’

‘How’s what’s her name, Judy, is it?’

‘Jude. She passed away, Nick.’

‘Oh——’

‘A year ago today.’

‘Why didn’t you say?’

‘I don’t find it to be the easiest thing to bring up in a conversation. And besides, it happened a year ago and you weren’t here.’

I sip my coffee not because I want to, but so that I have something to do with my hands. Isaac’s grief now radiates through his skin. There is a hollowness in him that I hadn’t perceived before. It’s as though there’s something missing in him—a vibrancy I’d once recognised that’s been snuffed out by loss and death and grief.

Through the looking-glass Dreer stared endlessly at the world. He was young, having recently finished school, but unlike many of his peers, he hadn’t decided what he was to do next. As his so-called friends went off whizzing around the country and overseas to different universities to find their vocations, he would sit alone pondering existence, wrestling with time. His mother told me at his funeral that everything was wrong and that things should not have panned out the way they had. I had never seen a woman cry such furious tears. ‘But that’s the thing about time,’ I had said to her, wholly unable in that moment to elaborate any further. The only thing I was sure of was that there was no use in holding on. ‘Keep your spirits up,’ I told her, ‘and let things be.’ Her mind was lost, and my advice came to her at such a time that it would only have exacerbated her irritation. ‘If you need anything, reach out to me.

You have my number.' I left her alone in that sad room that was filled only with memory and of a longing for everything to be different. And as I left, I had the feeling that I had torn myself away. Unlike her, I still had a life to live, and as painful as it seemed on that humid day so filled with a dark sardonic rage, I could not dwell for one more moment in the mournful air that filled the rooms with emptiness.

Dreer had spent the next ten years after finishing secondary school as an autodidact before drinking and drugging himself into a dark room. His life had burned dimly before the final blaze that extinguished him. His funeral passed into history and life went on as it always does. After the first few weeks of his passing it seemed as if he had disappeared entirely, never to return and seldom remembered by the few who knew of him—but alas it was true that nobody really *knew* him in the sense that nobody had really been close to him during his subsistence. Rose was perhaps the one person who had known him best, but she kept her distance after the funeral and soon moved overseas someplace to start a new chapter. To my knowledge, she never returned to Melbourne.

After the funeral, I met Melissa on several more occasions over the coming weeks. If it hadn't been for her I would have barely talked to anybody. In spending my days repairing my father's black, empty house for auction, I had plenty of time to think about what would come next in life, and it seemed that any time I decided on some vague plan of travelling back to India, something else would come up, and I had no idea how long it would take for the settlement to come through once my father's house was sold. I was even sleeping there, in a sleeping bag on the cold, hard tiles, staring at the blackened ceiling,

counting the cracks, the burn marks left by the flames, and contemplating the closing years of my own mortality. It seemed to me that Melissa was the only other person that I could reluctantly begin to trust. She was the closest thing I had to a friend.

Lying on the cold floor, not finding many reasons to move, I received a phone call from Melissa. Dreer's family were all either old or not able bodied enough to clear out his dark hovel, and they were asking for volunteers. I reluctantly agreed on the spot, knowing that I already had my work cut out but agreeing for the sole reason that it would mean time spent with Melissa. It would be the perfect opportunity to work my charm and to weave her into my magic spell.



Everyone is haunted by at least one memory. I'm haunted by many. The weight to bear each day drags me down. It's as if I've taken a vow of silence and loneliness. And rather than moving forwards I feel as though I'm lingering on and that all hope of a fulfilling life has left me. I have lost too much. My once open mind and heart are now closed, my experience limited and perceived through one negative lens that, no matter how hard I try, I cannot change. Nothing has quite as profound an impact as the first time, and I cannot shake the feeling that I have done everything and am growing old with the world, and that all that surrounds will outlive me. I don't know anyone and no-one knows me—not really—and I've come to accept that I'll never belong. If all is impermanence does it even matter. Does anything matter? Trying desperately to sit with my feelings, my entire life leaves me nauseous. Will I ever wake from this dark dream? Will I ever see beauty through my eyes, or on-

ly the shadow of what came before? Rose will not come today. It is certain. The match has already been dropped.



The summer is opening like a gigantic flower. Sprawled out, the streets are beginning to sweat. In deciphering the abandoned incantations of Dreer's prose I almost lose my mind and, with it, Melissa, too. All experience becomes a dark monologue, and it's my job to breathe life and to illuminate those dark corridors of thought. I take a drive out to buy groceries, and in doing so catch a glimpse of the world. If you stay home too often and don't go out, the world becomes unknown and something that you project your fears upon.

I stay awake most nights reading Dreer's manuscript and smoking an endless number of joints in an attempt to reach some transcendent goal that never seems to transpire. Melissa and I communicate endless joys over the most mundane events imaginable. Most days we speak only to each other and ourselves. Days fall away and there's no time for sleep.

On the street. I swear he's staring at me, the magician with the dark eyes. I give alms to the musician whose music permeates dreams. I feel I want to give everything away and begin anew, just in time for a new summer. No matter how much I cling to the hope of change, nothing changes. It is only action that sparks change.

In my dreams I live with a man who swallows swords. He comes through the door at noon, juggling his way out of a morbid depression, teaches me the ropes. We take psychedelic drugs and I attempt to learn to juggle. In my dream state the balls won't go where I want them to.

'I'm having a peculiar moment,' I balk. I try to maintain focus but the juggling-balls, like my life, tumble down. I pick them back up. It's all ups and downs—waves. I have to pick myself up to travel the world. I have to get out of my own prison of limited experience and live confidently but I don't know how. It's been too long. Time is but an illusion of measurements.

'You're a smart man,' I say to the sword swallower.

'Not really, I just do a lot of juggling.'

Words tumble down like rocks from a cliff. Dancing with death in the twilight, I lose myself. I am nobody. My pain is my pain no longer and there is no self for anything to cling to—to identify with. Names are transparent windows. Predicates float freely. My grief is still there, somewhere, but only in the distance. I wonder if I can let it go entirely and change my life for the better.

'You can do anything.'

I had, after all, wanted to peer into those murky depths and to see what was in the darkness without light. Always I have a shadow, except when I'm in the dark. The hot wind howls through the dry leaves. It is summer. The world is spinning fast and I'm running out of time. And through it all I lie here in the dark, uncertain of everything and dying to break free.

I find myself sinking into the deep dark, trying to catch myself before I plummet. The voices in my head are whirring again, telling me I'm no good. I have a beer and light up a joint to try to dull them down, but they're persistent. And even if it works, they'll soon be back, coaxing me to do nothing and to hide from the world. All along I had wanted solitude, but it had turned to isolation and loneliness, and I don't know how to battle my way back out of it. Don't sink; keep rising, I tell

myself, but the harder I try to rise the further I sink, until I get the drowning feeling that is so hard to shake. The world goes on without me. What should it matter if I were to disappear?

It's happening for sure: I'm becoming Dreer. The more I read the louder his voice becomes in my head, until I'm sure it is driving me mad. I swear that sometimes I see through his eyes, and that the negative lens is his creation of the world. No matter how many times I wash my face I can't wash the ink away. If it is true that voices and words create the world, then it's Dreer's voice and Dreer's words that create the world that I see, swept away on sentences that flow like waves. I, like Melissa, could never settle anywhere for long, but unlike her the distances travelled were much farther. And despite all my travels, lately I can't think of anything to say to anyone, as if there's nothing of relevance or of urgency that needs to be expressed verbally. When I'm not climbing through Dreer's words I'm hopelessly wandering the streets in search of something—exactly what it is I'm trying to find I'm not yet sure. And I don't know if I'll ever find it, whatever it is. Transcendence, perhaps. Unity. The absolute. It isn't everlasting darkness or looming death that frightens me, it's me, the conception of myself and of the world, and Dreer's voice has become the shadow of my mind. At night my mind flows, carried along like a leaf in a river, but only at night. Basking in the cool darkness, Melissa's body stirs. She rouses from her slumber. It is late.

'What time is it?'

'Does it matter?'

She rolls over, huffing.

'I only wanted to know what time it is. What crawled up your arse?'

'A great demon; a great poet.'

'So you're being *fucked* by a dead guy now, too?'

'You know how it is.'

Melissa rubs her eyes and gazes back at me. The streetlight behind her shines through the open window. The curtains are blowing. 'Do I really?'

'You said so yourself.'

She begins to laugh.

'You're making all this up.'

'Well, of course I am.' I kiss her and smile. As I do so, I notice new muscles developing in my cheeks.

'Of course you are. Words don't exist to you now, do they?'

'Not in the way that I've have been led to believe, no. I've been to the centre of nothing.'

'Led to believe by whom? *Nothing* has a centre?'

'Guess what's there?' The room fills with laughter and for a moment even the furniture appears to join in the hysteria. Great laughing curtains and cackling walls. Cheap veneer and fake linoleum floors howl as the world takes on new meaning. The laughter never lasts long before seriousness creeps back in to the room. Something within us warns us when we let our guard down for too long. 'Led to believe by the architects of our society. You know, priests, teachers, our mothers and fathers.'

Melissa abruptly changes the subject: 'What will become of us?'

'In what sense?'

'Well, one minute we're tearing at one another's throats, and the next—'

'Isn't that the way that love always is?'

Silence and reflective mourning ensue for the lost laughter. Silence, it seems, is the currency of the times. The crescent moon rests in the sky, whispering to the birds that will sing the moon's song in the morning before the sun ultimately dictates the rest of the day. And I wish I could get through just one day without worry or stress as the shadow in my mind blinds me to the wonders of life and Dreer's voice consumes all. He is the shadow that lives between the trees that haunts the first hoot of the owl at twilight. Since he has transcended this life, I imagine that he exists somewhere within nature, though I can't help but place his lost soul in the darkest and most frightening parts of the world.

Fear runs through my life and leaks onto everything the way love once had, and in the restless darkness I try to figure it all out. Always everything is shadowed by days passed, so many days that come suddenly out of nowhere and then quickly die away. And as I keep going down the dark path my perspective changes—my life changes—the whole goddamn world changes.

The sea pulls us closer and we kiss.

'When do we get to run away together?' I say.

'I'm not sure I'm going to run away again, not just yet,' Nick says.

'So, we stay?'

'For now.' He looks around at the air uncomfortably. 'There's something I took from Thomas Dreer's flat.' I look at him inquisitively. 'A series of manuscripts,' he continues.

'Written by him?'

He nods and leans back, picks up the bag that's sitting behind his chair. 'I have them here.'

‘What are you gonna do with them?’

‘Publish them.’

‘I don’t get it. Are they any good?’

The sun is high in the sky and the waves lap gently on the shore.

‘I’d say they have potential. I’m going to publish them under my name.’

‘You can’t do that. What if somebody’s read them and recognises them? Not to mention the illegality of—’

‘I know it’s a risky strategy, but if I could just—’

‘Wait. Just wait. This doesn’t seem like you. I know who you are and I know you have a good reputation and an open future. You can do anything you like. You could write your own books if you wanted to. Take it from someone who’s been down the dark path, it never ends well. I’ve only just managed to walk out of a life I thought was unescapable.’

‘But it did end well for you. You ended up here with me.’

‘Don’t do that, you know that’s not what I mean. And besides, you don’t know what my life was like before, and what the people I did business with were like. I’m certain they’ll be looking for me. Please, Nick. Think carefully about what you’re saying.’

‘I was worried that this would happen,’ he says with a sad look. ‘I shouldn’t have told you.’

‘But you did tell me.’

‘I get all these crazy ideas. I lose myself to this place where nothing but death surrounds. You’re right about us moving away, but I haven’t any money. I’m broke. And if I’m not mistaken, we both are.’

‘Didn’t your father leave you anything in his will?’

‘Had nothing to leave except for the house, but good luck selling that old dump. And besides, most of the money from the place will go to paying his debts before I see a dime.’

‘So, let me get this straight. Your plan is to publish a dead man’s novels as your own, if they’re any good, and hope that they will, against all odds, bring you riches and fame?’

‘Dreer’s manuscripts are good. And yes, that’s the plan.’

‘Well, okay, but we need a plan B. Just in case’

He ignores my concern and instead draws me in closer with his magnificent smile. So naturally smiling comes to him. And anyway, how can he be attracted to me when I’m sure that I must be repulsive? I have nothing. No job, no career, no prospects. And I know I’m not *conventionally* pretty. But when he smiles at me, I can’t help but smile back, and it feels unnatural to me—anything but a scowl feels unnatural to me. I’ve frowned at the world so long, but I’m learning to smile again.

At noon we decide to seek shelter. Everything in the house is old, even the smell that can be detected despite burnt walls, and I can see why Nick wants rid of it all so badly. The kitchen and hallway walls are black, but the firefighters managed to put out the blaze before it reached the other rooms. It had, after all, been the smoke that had killed Nick’s father. And everything old and dead that his father left behind is contained therein. We are spending all our time in dead men’s houses, growing more and more desperate for a place of our own. Now that someone else is in my life it can be achieved since we’ll be able to split the costs. I know it’s all moving too quickly, but there’s nothing I can do about it. It’s all happening in the moment and I can’t stop time from unfolding.

I leave Nick to sleep while I slip out of the room and over to the desk where he's left Dreer's manuscripts. As I flick through the titles... Volume One... Volume two... etc, I realise they're all a part of the same book, its title scrawled elegantly on the first page: *The Weeping Wildflower*. I flick to the next page and begin reading:

Jennifer Reid sat idly by the river one morning. Staring into the river flow she recalled her dream from the previous night about the rabid dog that had killed her sister when they were both children. The thing was, it had really happened, but she only remembers it as a dream. There was no-one left from her childhood who could testify to the truth, and so she never knew for certain what had happened. All she had was fidelity to her dreams.

I close the book, utterly bewildered. I don't quite know what to think. And then a word comes to me: *mystified*. I feel mystified by it. Nick comes into the room rubbing his face and drenched with sleep.

'Oh, hey,' I say, 'did you get much sleep?'

'I never do in this house. The walls whisper.' He shuffles over to where I'm sitting, bends down and kisses me. His eyes widen as he looks at the desk. 'Reading the forbidden book, are we?'

'You never said it was forbidden.'

'It has an unspoken forbidden nature.'

'And I'm supposed to guess that?' I tease.

'You're supposed to infer it. Anyway, what do you think?'
He speaks and listens for an answer as though it's his own work
I'm critiquing.

'Parts of it are great; however, I do find some sections to be
quite lengthy and perhaps even neurotic.'

'Yes, he desperately needed an editor.'

Five

From the steps of the temple my wide eyes gaze up at the stars that move in streams in the sky. The medicine is taking effect and everything is moving. The world is transformed. The sky is alive. The grass moves in waves and I can hear the sound of the roots growing deep beneath the soil.

Her demeanour darkens as she listens to the voice on the other end of the phone.

‘If it’s a matter of life and death then I’m happy to oblige—yes—yes, of course. I’ll be there in an hour.’ She slams down the phone, her face drawn with the lines that appear when she’s in a foul mood or is otherwise being messed around.

‘Everything all right?’

‘Yes. It’s just my old neighbour. I was hesitant to get back in touch with her and now I know why.’

‘A matter of life and death—what’s all that about?’

‘I was being sarcastic, but she never gets it anyway. She takes everything so literally. She wants me to go with her to the shops to help her to pick up a dress. And you know me, such a gal’s gal.’ And there’s that sarcasm again. Blatant, obvious, and right in my face. Her old neighbour mustn’t be the brightest spark. ‘So, I’ll be back later. Are you going to be okay?’

‘I’ll be fine.’

‘And please—please—give yourself a break from that bloody manuscript.’

‘Don’t worry, I intend to.’

She kisses me before she leaves, her breath on my skin like a new breeze unto the world.

Each day is a struggle towards night—night has become a destination. The only perception of the world that I now have is largely created through memory. I barely remember being a child, when the world was adorned with a simple mystery, and when the antidote to empty hours was play. Somewhere along the path playing became boring and the world became more serious, until I sought greater adventures and aspirations with little guidance. I wound up where I am now, confused and with a shambles in my head. I crave the journey back to India and to the *Mahayana* teachings that seem to have vastly worn away. Somewhere down the path I became lost, or perhaps I've always been lost. Since I've been back in Melbourne a dense fog has descended over my mind's eye. It is through this fog that I must navigate my life, choose my next move. Tired of being sucked into other people's tirade, I suspect I'd be best off with an island of my own someplace far away. Mentally, I'm there already. Through the gloom of the darkening hours I sit, pretending that I'm invisible and that I don't matter. I have stolen someone else's voice because I'm convinced that mine doesn't matter. And as the hours of the day die away I become awake and alive like a vampire, only less glamorous and more gratuitous. Nothing seems real anymore. Only the past seems real because I'm able to recall it.

I can't be sure exactly why I kept Dreer's manuscripts. I suppose I have always held a love of words and the hidden worlds they convey. After reading the first few pages I put the manuscript in my bag when nobody was looking. There were Dreer eyes everywhere now that he was dead. Shadows in the house moved around softly, contemplating their grief now that they had no-one left to haunt and frighten.

Kenneth Dreer appeared to have taken leadership over the sweep as they put all of Tom's things into garbage bags bound for the op-shop. He rounded up his flock with a view to propagate maximum efficacy, so that they could endeavour to complete the task as soon as possible. They put his things away quickly as though they were putting away Tom's life, eager to hide the family shame of depression and drugs and suicide.

Shortly after I arrived home, I flicked through the recovered pages of Thomas Dreer's manuscripts and read a section at random:

I want to get beyond all this. The happiness of others is not my concern. Cars are reflected in the window. I watch them drive past, ceaselessly. Where are they going in such a hurry? Don't the people driving know there's nowhere to get to? I remind myself it isn't my concern. I come to this place every day in an attempt to construct meaning. Without the construction of meaning life is little more than a collection of objects. Creating meaning from a heap of meaninglessness. Symbols on a page in a café. I tripped last night. Using psychedelics has become a revolving door and not the path to enlightenment I once thought it was. I don't know if I can go on with any of this for much longer. I'm all emptied out. It's possible I'm dead already and that it's time for the final act of disembodiment.

Clues to Dreer's suicide were right before my eyes. If only someone had seen them earlier, there might have been a chance

to save him. He had suffered alone with malignant thoughts that had led to his death. And now recovery was beyond reach for Dreer. He had chosen to leave the world behind, but perhaps not for good, for his suffering had not dissipated entirely. Perhaps he had taken some of it with him into the *bardo*. Perhaps his suicide would mean that he could not this time attain nirvana. I couldn't be sure if the teachings I had learned could be considered truths, but I could not readily dismiss them either. It was possible that Dreer could be reborn in a different form.

Not all of Dreer's works followed the same tone, or even the same genre. There was a lot of poetry and some shorter works, in addition to *The Weeping Wildflower*, which seemed to be an extended literary work bordering on fairytale. What I had stolen from the house was a varied body of work of differing degrees of completion. And with some effort on my part, it was possible to resurrect them for all the world to see.

Melissa arises to face the emptiness of a new day as Nick keeps on snoring until noon. She pours herself coffee as she has done thousands of times before, and as she does so feels a dead weight that she can't quite elaborate on or define. It seems to her that in a flash her life has changed. She has been asleep, not thinking or reflecting, allowing other people as well as events external to her will to take control. Nick's re-emergence and Dreer's death have become the centre of her life without warning, and she worries that if she isn't careful, she'll lose herself completely and unwittingly. She sips her coffee as she listens to Nick's snores and feels that through the tumult, she'd had no choice. She's only just awakening to the realisation that she does have a choice and that she wields more power than she

previously anticipated. She had simply fallen into this life because she'd had nothing better to do, and now she knows that if she doesn't start making her own demands, she'll become Nick's prisoner like some nineteen-fifties housewife with a predestined gender role. It's as though she's woken from her panic and indecision, finding herself the underling of Nick Finch, sleeping in his dead father's house, and party to his plagiaristic plots and schemes. At first glance Nick seems honest enough, but as Melissa wades further into him it becomes clear to her that he's nothing but a fraud.

Melissa lights a cigarette in the bathroom while she applies her heavy make-up. She hears stirring from the adjacent room, followed by a thump and a howl. She coolly drifts toward the bathroom door and peeks through the crack.

'Are you okay?' she says before her eyes can see exactly what happened.'

'I'm fine,' Nick says, embarrassed. 'Think my legs are still asleep.'

'There's a pot of coffee in the kitchen. What are you going to do today?'

'I'm not sure,' says Nick as he stumbles and gathers his clothes from the floor. 'I was thinking of calling a few more publishers.' Melissa's face grimaces at the thought.

'You're not still considering publishing that thing under your own name, are you?'

'No point in publishing it under a dead man's is there?'

'The death aspect can make or break a publishing deal didn't you know?'

'Ah yes, the myth of the depressed, suicidal, and then dead writer. I get it. But if I publish it under Dreer's name then I won't receive any credit.'

'What about a pseudonym, then?'

'I'm not a fan of those.'

'You could edit the book and write an introduction. Editors get a cut, and you may even carve yourself a career that isn't completely fraudulent and may have some chance of endurance. Think about it.'

'Are you okay, you seem different?'

'I woke up is all.'

'How does that make you different?'

'No, I mean, I really woke up, Nick.'

'And how's the view? Different? The same?'

The carpet sits still beneath their feet. The blackened ceiling conceals changing skies.

'Fucked. It's fucked. I don't know what I'm gonna do from here on out.'

'I suppose that's why Dreer killed himself. I mean, for reasons like that.'

'And what the fuck is that supposed to mean, Nick?'

Nick sees an entirely different side to Melissa. For the first time he sees her agency as she proves she's much more than the pretty face he had previously laid eyes on.

'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to imply—'

'Well you did imply it. What a helluva thing to say to someone, Nick.'

'I'm going to get that coffee.'

'That's right, Nick, skulk away when things get real.'

Nick walks to the kitchen and pours himself a cup, sighs deeply. It's going to be a long day despite the fact that it's already noon. If only he could get some quiet he'd be able to think and to meditate. He seriously considers cutting Melissa loose.

Melissa continues: 'I'm bored here, Nick. There's nothing to get the adrenaline pumping.'

'You don't have to be here if you don't want to be. There's everywhere else in the world to be.'

'Are you kicking me out now, too?'

'There are always other options, Melissa.'

'So I'm a mere option to you?'

'I didn't mean it like that.'

'You *said* it.'

Melissa storms out of the house, slamming the door behind her, and leaving Nick to deal with the aftermath of the argument alone. He knows now he won't be able to focus and that the day is already wasted.

Melissa walks amid the unreal suburban landscape. There is a tepid hum in the air and, as she walks, her mind spins. She once again realises that she's alone in the world. Her little flirtation at playing house with Nick is wearing thin as she knows, deep down, that she isn't cut out for *that* sort of life. Always she had lived for adrenaline and, walking now along the flat, cardboard suburban streets, she can see why Dreer took his own life. She tries to imagine what went through his mind as he did it, and she understands that in order to procure a different fate, she must run as far away as possible, just as Nick had done—an act that she had so recently reproached him for.

At last, when her legs simply can't carry her any farther, Melissa sits by the curb and watches the sparse traffic crawl by. Her skin crawls with it, up and down the hot tarmac until she's stretched thinly around the world. *Thirty-four years old*, she thinks to herself, while she frowns at the dying glint of a sun that's about to be hidden behind rainclouds. Thirty-four years old and falling around the place, here and there at the mercy of the wind and now at the mercy of Nicholas Finch, who holds her captive since she has nowhere else to go. But she has *everywhere* else to go, Nick had said—his careless words firing in her direction and in her favour. Melissa can only walk so far or stay away for so long before she has to turn back, and that makes her his prisoner. Meanwhile she can picture him alone in the house with no-one to talk to, silently awaiting her return. Not long before they had met, they'd both had nothing and no-one. And now they've already begun to tear at each other's throats. What, exactly, is worth living for if not love? There are more questions than answers running through Melissa's head as she starts the inevitable walk back to the house. She wonders whether the bones of the dead can be reassembled to create the living, marching ceremoniously toward a second chance at life. She wonders whether the sky is watching her every move and judging with a mind that can never understand what it means to be human. She wonders whether she'll ever be free again, free to marvel at the wondrous nature that blooms around her without the perpetual sense of dread that sours every moment she breathes. She knows that she must do more than simply wait for the storm to pass, and for her life to flicker out in the forgotten darkness. In waiting for her life to begin she is waiting only for death to come and take the world away before she

has truly tasted it. Thirty-four years old and she cannot say that she's proud of much, that each moment lived was indeed living at all, after having taken the wrong road at such a young age. The one thing she could say she's proud of was nursing her mother as she lay dying. That had been the one thing that she had done right. But her world had fallen apart soon after, with the trauma of losing her mother catapulting her into a protracted grief that would mire her transition to adulthood. And it dawns on her that she has not had the chance to properly grieve, and until she does, she will not have the ability to grow beyond herself. Cars whisper by her and she barely notices the yawning world as she travels deeper, seeing her reflection every now and then in shop windows. A sad image peers back at her, drawn and melancholy, as she navigates the shadows of existence.



Nick sits on the futon with a glass of red wine in his hand and a ridiculous grin on his face. He looks as though he feels he's mastered the world. And although we both know it's a lie, Nick seems to be submerged in an air of insufferable denial. He claims to be happy, but I know that it isn't genuine, and that in any case the veneer won't last. The clock ticks both on the wall and in my heart. Of course, I can only imagine what's going on in his head, and I'm aware that his thoughts and emotions may not accurately configure the muscles in his face. The lie that we're living begins to wear me down. I don't want to be anywhere and I'm beginning to wish I was nothing. The heat grows more intense and we spend a lot of time indoors, bored, staring at the walls. I've become sick of everything. I could watch

television or do something else, but I feel I am so limited in what I can do and know. Life has once again taken on a tedious rhythm. I'm just the last piece of a puzzle whose completion seems more like a trap than a life of happiness. I watch Nick. He's still sitting there, smiling, pretending to meditate and I know that I don't love him. In my mind I play over and over every trauma that has befallen me, and it's only when experience becomes memory that it takes the most dangerous turn.

'I have a book signing tomorrow if you'd like to come.' My stomach turns.

'I don't think I can. I'm so depressed that I feel physically ill.' The truth slips from my lips and it feels much easier than lying.

'I'm sorry. Is there anything I can do?'

'I think I need some time alone to think things through.'

'Of course. Is there anything in particular?' The air hangs lifelessly between us.

'I don't think I can do this anymore, Nick. None of this is real.'

'What do you mean it isn't real?'

'Everything—our entire co-existence here—is a lie!'

'And what you had before, that was the truth?'

'I don't give a damn what I had before, I care about what's happening right now. This is life—right now, and I'm telling you that I'm not happy with it.'

'Then *do* something for Christ sake and stop whingeing to me about it.'

Melissa sobs and wails into the night, freaking herself out as she tosses and squirms and can't be still with her own feelings. She says to me 'we can fix this, right? We can fix it.' But I

give her no answer as I'm not so sure anymore, only a few hours ago she seemed so certain it was over between us. And now I'm not sure of anything except for the fact that someone out there is trying to kill us. Lost in the victim fog we try desperately to make sense of the situation. Melissa's recurring past binds us together once more.

'When else? When else would it matter if not now?'

'Calm down, Melissa. It's going to be all right.'

'Going to be all right? He tried to kill us!'

She's breathing heavily, her eyes bulging out of their sockets.

'Would you like me to get you a drink: wine; brandy?'

'Fuck that. Fuck trivialities.'

'So, what do you suggest?'

'Do I really have to do all the thinking around here? We need to leave this place. Now!'

Melissa's eyes are wide and crazy, frantically looking around the room for things to pack. *But this is what they want*, I think to myself, and I convey this to Melissa.

'So we stay and risk our lives for pride?'

'This is my home and by extension, yours, too. We have a right to be safe in our home.'

'Yes, we do, but they'll come in here and rip us apart regardless of our rights.'

'We don't even know who we're up against yet. This person—or people as it may be—my point is that people aren't infallible.'

'You were there, Nick. You saw what happened.'

'I'm not a hundred per cent sure what I saw.'

‘Don’t do that—don’t give me that shit. Somebody is trying to kill us.’

‘Somebody was trying to kill us. He could have been just some crazy person.’

‘Just some crazy person? Do you hear yourself? Can you hear what you’re saying?’

Moths and mosquitos swarm around the front porch light and the air is dry and hot as the winds of hell.

‘Are you okay?’

‘You were right, Nick. I don’t know what I’m doing here and I think it’s time—’

‘You don’t have to decide anything right away.’

‘—I think it’s time I left.’

‘So soon?’

‘So now you *don’t* want me to leave? I’m tired of playing your games, Nick.’

‘We could have a life together.’

‘But we can’t. It wouldn’t be me and it isn’t what I want. And besides, I wouldn’t want to put you in any more danger. It’s my own shit that’s catching up and I ought to deal with it alone.’

‘Where will you go?’

‘I have everywhere else in the world to be—remember?’

As the clouds close like theatre curtains in the sky, veiling the stars from bearing witness to infinitesimal dramas of human existence, a strange wind rises, whispering doom in the spaces that separate us.

The world moves beneath Melissa's feet. As she walks on, she has the feeling that she is again stagnating. She wanders without meaning or purpose. Despite everything, she must keep going. Despite the traumas and the tragedies that had befallen her in the past she has no choice but to keep walking. To her the nomadic lifestyle feels more like home than when she would ever settle someplace. And so, she keeps walking, her entire worldly possessions over her shoulder, her skin becoming harder and more resilient to the sun, and all the while she has absolutely no idea where she's going. Sure, she could try and re-spark some old flame, but that would be travelling *backwards*, which she has no intention of doing. Always she longs to move forward into the unknown, which usually sounds more exciting than it actually is. Melissa considers diving into the stream of oncoming traffic so that the wandering might finally come to an end. She'd come so close to finding a home Nick and now she's diving back into the whirlpool. There was a time when she could almost say she'd been happy, but after her old boyfriend, Paul Solomon, had been arrested, they didn't venture out much anymore and the old gang broke up. As Paul's paranoia and reclusiveness deepened, Melissa had no choice but to drift away from him in an attempt to find a new life. However, Paul wouldn't let her go so easily. Melissa became his drug mule and street dealer. He threatened her with violence if she ever showed signs of refusal. Never again would she find the heights of experience to match the abandon of her youth. Now everything is tinged with melancholy and regret as the

world keeps turning away from the past. Her bones ache and her skin dries out beneath the blazing sun.

Melissa's attention comes to focus on a car that pulls up in front. She soon realises it's Nick. He appears stressed and gaunt in the failing light, and he has an apologetic expression written across his face.

'We have no more to discuss,' Melissa shouts over the sounds of the highway.

'Get in the car and I'll take you home. We don't have to talk tonight.'

'I don't appreciate being made to feel as though I'm mad, Nick.'

'I'm not *making* you feel any such way. Come on, get in.'

'And then what?'

'I'll take you home.'

'It isn't my home—I'm through arguing about this.'

'Melissa, you have no money, nowhere else to go, come on.'

'And that's it, isn't it? I'm not deserving of any free will because I have no money. How the fuck did I land myself in this position?'

'It doesn't matter now. We can figure it out together.'

'Why are you so eager to help me?'

'I think I love you.'

'You *think* you do, or you do?'

'I do.'

Melissa considers the impossible horizon.

'Okay, I'll get in the car, but I don't want to hear another word all night, as you promised.'

'As I promised.'

Melissa climbs in, wondering what the hell she must be thinking.

‘Looks like I’m stuck with you.’

They drive back to Nick’s father’s house in silence. Another day trickles through the cracks between their fingers and is washed out to sea.

Seven

‘He’s sitting out in the dark, validating his melancholy.’

I walk outside where he sits, cross-legged with his eyes closed. They open and look out at me. I’m surprised he’s still alive.

‘I’ve been looking for you for years,’ he says without any hint of emotion. The light is dull due to an overcast sky and I can’t seem to be able to do anything about the persistent sadness that I feel in the pit of my stomach. My head feels as though it’s about to explode.

‘I read your letters. It was hard, Nick.’

‘It was hard for me, too.’

‘I had to go because you were gone, too. I mean, you were sitting there, Nick, but you were gone.’

The air stirs between us with the violent whirl of years lost.

‘If only things could have been different.’

‘Things would have turned out different.’

‘But they didn’t.’

‘No, they didn’t.’

I look away from him and toward the bare trees. He tells me he knows what it is to be in a black hole, that he knows what it is to go insane. As much as I don’t want to, I believe him. Somewhere deep down I partially blame myself. I can’t help but feel responsible. Deep down, I feel responsible for everything despite having lived a life of abject disregard for others. A lonely crossroads I have come to once again, now used to the company of dust and cloud. At night I’m lonely as a star, but at the same time not lonely, too, as I’ve come to see

things in my own way, such that I no longer consider company to be a requirement for contentment.

Nick's gaze has taken on a profoundly knowing quality, as though he has grappled with a great suffering that was allowed to persist for too many years—the very same suffering that he had learned not to cling to during his years in India, and yet here he is, weary-faced and old. The years have outdone us both, but nevertheless we're still breathing. Does everything in the world happen randomly or is there a karmic thermal that governs everything? Do people who are subject to tyranny, misfortune and torture deserve what they get? It's subversive to be colourful, subversive to smile, subversive to be free.

Rose and Dreer had drifted apart like birds from different flocks—like clouds with opposing destinies and, in contemplating the various shades of all that he had lost, Dreer struggled to find solace in anything. Was this what had happened to us, too? Often, Nick would arise, pace back and forth, with nowhere to go and no way to escape from the loss of all he had neglected. To Dreer, the mere thought of Rose reminded him that he was a failure as a human being, and no amount of anything could bring back what he had lost. Was it Dreer's books that took the man I loved from me?

The clouds kiss the seal of another day lost. Bats adorn the sky as my cigarette smoke curls out into the night and vanishes like a ghost.

'What are we going to do now we're normal?' says Nick.

'I don't know. Do normal things, I guess?'

'And what might those be?'

'I don't know. Normal things.'

The river flows silently, carrying the night along with it. Everything is darker than the deepest depths of the human soul.

'Puzzling, isn't it?'

'What is?'

'Everything being the way that it is, how all of this arose out of an infinite nothingness.'

'I suppose, yes.'

'Don't you think it's phenomenal?'

'I suppose it is, yes.'

I hate the way he talks as though the history between us has vanished. His words bore me and make me feel as if I'm caught in some third-rate seminar.

'Well, you don't seem very enthused by what I'm saying.'

'You're picking up on that are you?'

'What's wrong?'

'You know what's wrong, and I don't want to talk about it. Not now.'

'Oh, not this again. I thought we'd been through this a million times before.'

'Meeting like this will not make things easier as the years go on.'

'You speak as though we're already dead to one another.'

'We are.'

'We are what?'

'Already dead to one another.'

• • • •

'He's upstairs, lost in some hippie ideology that will never fully be realised by the masses. It'll never come to fruition.'

'Tongue like a python today, Veronica.'

'Oh, shut your mouth and go upstairs.'

I sure as hell don't appreciate being ordered around by some old lady, but she has to get her kicks somehow.

I have lived many different lives like the spider on the wall. And like the spider on the wall, I'm just about to fall.

Resurrected in the morning, he looks out into the sunlight.

'Cornelius, is that you?'

I'd known back then, when we had first met and when I first looked into Finch's subdued, ageing eyes, that the past I had imagined was real.



Where will she go now? I think to myself as her beach towel flows with the wind and she glances back at the sea. She's a stranger to me. Perhaps in the corner of her eye she's always on the lookout for a suitor who would wander his way into her life. Everyone is staring out to sea in awe-stricken contemplation. It's a perfect day and still I can't shake the melancholia that follows me around no matter where I turn or where I travel. It runs deep in the rivers of my consciousness. Always I would strive to go further but now I'm more inclined to take life one moment at a time. I can't visit the towns I already know because all I see is memory—memory that doesn't seem to fade. But the sea holds a strong power to erase, and as it rises up, curls and falls, so do my troubles for the time being, taken away in an eternally brief moment. The rise and fall of the tide have a way of cleansing the shores of the mind.

Lost in anonymity, Finch picks himself up from the dark. In doing so he sets the wheels in motion, although he is un-

conscious of this fact. He sees the morning with a newfound swirl of colour, having banished Dreer's voice from his mind. He has achieved a state of no-mind from which he can experience each passing moment without the burden of preconceived notions. He feels himself as half of a magnet, his sole quest now is to find the other half that he had involuntarily repelled. And if he and Melissa are truly magnetic then surely they will find one another through that magnetic force. Surely the nature of attraction is part of destiny and fate. Before he sinks into another bout of deep questioning, Finch steps out of the house in search of his beloved, whoever it might turn out to be. The usual stream of souls pours along city streets, emulating the traffic that crawls along simultaneously. Finch has spent so much time out of the world that he feels almost inhuman. He knows nobody, it seems, as though all those known to him throughout his life have fallen away. Nobody had come to seek him out from where he was hiding, or to help dig him out of his hole. However, he feels no pity for himself and no resentment towards his months of loneliness. It can happen to anyone, he thinks. Anyone can fall from this horde of human traffic into a black hole. But time still passes, and his mind is tricked into seeing every woman's face that appears in the distance as Melissa's. In his longing he has eyes only for her.

On the city train he sits in silence among other silent passengers. He shuffles awkwardly in his seat as he experiences an inner writhing of anxiety that has been shoved down, voiceless. He feels he might break down in a fit of tears but doesn't wish to embarrass himself. The longer he lacks connection with another human being the harder it is to connect. He hopes he hasn't left it too long.

• • • •

Lying in a hammock of darkness my experience seems descended from all that surrounds. The phone rings. My hand slowly reaches over and hesitantly picks up the receiver.

‘Nick, I need to discuss something with you.’ It has been days since Melissa and I attempted any sort of communication and in calling me she’s breaking her own rules. My stomach gripes. I stretch my neck forward and exhume a listening expression. ‘I’ve been getting death threats in the mail.’

‘Read them to me.’

I hear the receiver make contact with the desk as Melissa hurries to fetch the letters. I hear her leafing through crinkled pages before she picks the receiver back up and puts it to her ear. She reads the letters to me. To her, the ink must have been scrawled over them like dark, ominous trees.

‘Those are bullshit,’ I say. ‘You should notify the police.’

‘I don’t want the police anywhere near me.’

Melissa feels eyes on her as she steps onto the train. It has been a long year in the lonely city. *I haven’t been getting out very much; I’ve been keeping to myself.* She can’t remember the last time she went on a date or even saw a friend. She had had to cut her friends loose when she changed her life. And now, after so many months of despair, she’s back in contact with Nick. She can’t help but think that he sounded paranoid on the phone—on and on about being followed—despite Melissa being the one receiving the threats.

‘The line may be tapped,’ he had said. ‘We really should meet in person. How about the old haunt, you know where I mean?’

‘Yes,’ she had replied, tentatively, secretly glad to have someone to talk to after so many months alone and in silence.

And now she’s on the city train, hurtling towards a shadow-figure of the past.

She arrives at Nick’s house. At the door he promptly informs her that he recently quit his job. He appears frantic, dishevelled, nervous.

‘They expected me to act a certain way—to be a certain way—both of which I simply could not oblige.’

Once inside the darkness churns, despite it being bright outside. Exasperated yelps and the tranquil sounds of hoons emanate from outskirts of the city. Melissa’s eyes penetrate the gloom and, as her eyes slowly adjust, she makes out the images of scant furniture, cobwebs, and dust. It’s a harsh sight to behold as she looks around at the life she had once shared with Finch. It’s as if his life went on stand-by on the day she left, and everything has remained untouched since then.

‘So, what then?’ she replies.

‘I told them to get fucked.’

‘Who are we talking about exactly?’

Melissa bats the crumbs off the sofa with her hand before taking a seat.

‘The cunts at the office.’

Finch’s eyes roll in their darkening sockets. He appears as though he hasn’t shaved in a month.

‘What does that mean exactly?’

‘I guess it doesn’t mean anything except that I dropped out.’

‘Dropped out of what?’

‘Life, of course.’

'But you're still here, still breathing.'

'Society then,' he says, adding, 'I suppose,' lamely.

'Nick, you need to get help.'

'Don't I know it, but there's no help to be sought. There's nobody left to trust.'

'Is that why you called me?'

Nick lights a joint and takes a huge drag.

'I suppose.'

His words hang in the air, mingled with dope smoke and a longing for another world.

Melissa moves beneath the ever-moving clouds. There's so much to see and so little time due to the vast stretches of nothingness that lie in between illusory events. At night, the countryside sings her to sleep.

And just as she starts to dance in synchronicity with the world she gets an unfounded sense of dread. Realising she's alone she looks around the empty motel room, the only company being the buzzing sounds of electricity and the cicadas out in the night. The memory of all her life that came before becomes fuzzy and blurred and difficult to access. Suddenly, she can find no comfort in anything.

Nicholas Finch sits in the darkness, just as Thomas Dreer had, with an open book on his lap. The words *I never attained enlightenment* are scrawled across the page in painful ink, blotched from the deepest depths of his mind. The curtains breathe in and out with the wind and the usual sounds of the buzzing world disorient his every thought. He has lost something that was never his to gain as his mind clings to the doctrine of non-clinging. All he does is sit and although he sits his mind is not present. He is always far away, wandering those

endless paths as he forgets all the lessons his wise teachers once taught him. His mind atrophies behind a fog.

It's only in the dark forests of the world where magic still exists. In the gaps between the trees and in the spaces in between all matter the spirits of the dead lurk and leer at the living. In the autumn the fly agaric colours the forest floor, filling the void with its poison beauty. Dreer inhabits these empty spaces, floating as a spectre with wings that only death can bring. Colours dance through the refracted light in the mist as I tread carefully in order to not disturb the beauty and the stillness there, ruminating on all that had come before. Each step that I take penetrates further through time, and although I had thought it possible to move on, having become someone else, all promise of finding peace as another person crumbles in the thickets of the brush. The bare branches dance to the rhythm of the bareness of my life, and although I loathed my life as Dreer, I miss it all the same, just as one misses captivity when one is granted freedom. I wander out here, searching for his illusory ghost, following his voice carried by the wind. The air is cold on my tears as I wander, lost, no longer knowing what it means to be found. And all I can think as I chase Dreer's ghost is *I know suffering*, and it is a suffering that I can't seem to be able to shake. I'm attached to his ghost and wherever it drifts I drift with it, too—we are one and the same—to the ends of the earth and to the end of time.

As Finch walks into the dark house and out of the sun he can barely see a thing. Everything he sees is blotched with pink and purple colours, and he wonders whether that's what it means to be happy. *Happiness is a bubble in the void that we spend our lives trying to fill, filling the bubble with this or that*

and floating through eternity. Life is a dance but Finch has spent it sitting, excluding himself from the variety that the world has to offer. Melissa is asleep on the couch, utterly exhausted by the ordeal of life. He leers at her while she sleeps, trying to imagine what she's dreaming of. He walks over to the kitchen, flicks on the kettle, and as it begins to crackle and boil she stirs, opening one exhausted and perplexed eye in Finch's direction.

'Morning,' he says mockingly.

'What time is it?'

'Early afternoon. Would you like tea?'

'Oh fuck, why did you let me sleep so long?'

'You looked like you needed it.' She sits up and stretches, her bosom protruding out from beneath the white t-shirt he had lent to her the previous night. 'How did you sleep?'

'All right, but now I'm feeling anxious. I'm tired of constantly waking up in different places. I never really know where I am.'

'Right here, within yourself,' he says philosophically, 'where you belong.'

Melissa eyes him contemptuously. 'I'm hungry,' she says with a yawn. 'Is there anything to eat?'

'Not really. There's some naff freezer bread to make toast but that's about it.'

'No thank you.'

'We could go out and get something.' Finch searches for a response. 'My shout.'

Melissa nods her head apathetically and gets to her feet. 'Let me put my face on.'

The day is bright but there's a coolness in the air. As they walk Melissa gives Finch a sideways smile. 'I've missed you,' she

says, but then her face takes on a cold expression, stoic in the face of eternity, 'but I can't stay. I hope you understand that.'

'We could build a life again, just like it was before.'

'We can't go back, Nick. I can't do it again.'

'I understand,' he says in a defeated tone, not really believing his own words.

'I just want to make that clear right now before we go off having breakfast together. I'd like it if we could be friends.'

'But I'll always want more; I'll always want you.'

'You can't have me. I'm free to decide and I've made up my mind.'

'Never again?'

'Never.'

Her words come through as an Antarctic freeze that deafens his ears. And in that moment he never wants to hear a word ever again, not from anyone's mouth. A piece of him dies forever. He feels it walk down temple steps and into a stone-cold ocean, drowned forever. As he walks on, he feels his body becoming heavier, as though he's dragging his feet across the ground. *Life's a drag*, he thinks as he walks, but he daren't vocalise such a notion to Melissa. He doesn't want to appear defeated. He wishes to match her stoic stare, to keep everything inside. But he's about to explode. He's sure of it. Clouds float above his head and insects scurry around on the floor, and he's certain that the entirety of nature could never understand his suffering. And then it dawns on him once again that he *is* nature, and that his understanding of nature is nature's understanding of nature.

When they arrive at a café that serves all-day breakfast, Finch is snapped out of his meandering thoughts.

‘Shall we eat here?’ says Melissa as she sits down at a table outside, an act that indicates that it was in fact a rhetorical question. Finch sits beside her and sees that she, too, is very far away. The cold beer he orders brings with it only a wash of sadness.

Shadows swirl and dive as the train glides toward the city. I have barely spoken to anyone beyond any kind of surface level in days. Silence stretches on for what feels like an age and the air around me is opaque, as though neither I nor anyone else ever uttered a word of communication in the entirety of human history. It’s an awful lot like maintaining—enduring each moment in communal silence. It’s as though I’ve taken a bad drug, only I haven’t. I haven’t touched anything of that nature in months. The weeks stretch before me like long, dark corridors. All joy has been sucked away. I spend the long train ride thinking about how I might escape from the life I’ve inadvertently waded into. I come to no conclusion other than the acknowledgement that Melissa is gone from me for good.

Each moment rises and falls
my heart
a broken shadow

Time moves forward but my mind is stuck in the past, caught somewhere in between years. I see my family wither away while I sit in a Buddhist monastery in India, all the while allowing the stars and planets simply to orbit and move, until all of the universe falls into place. I watch again the setting sun from the hillside.

Melissa hasn’t contacted me in several days. I know that she’s likely fallen into the arms of another, but somehow I don’t care. Somehow, I no longer care about anything. Everything

familiar has died, and all that remains is the hollow that I'd grown accustomed to for so many years. However, unlike all that's familiar, the hollow constantly changes and shifts, and there's no familiarity to be found. Alone and exhausted I try to plan my next move, but I'm blind to the future—the increase in entropy is too great.

The city clock chimes as the cigarette smoke burns in my lungs. I'm not entirely sure what to do with the day but all activities seem to revolve around avoiding Nick. He's become unbearably idle and spends his days sitting in the house, which slowly fills with dust and despair. He's stopped opening the curtains or blinds and whenever I attempt to let in some light, he reproaches me for it. I know that I have to do something drastic to break the monotony of days so here I am, in the sexiest most revealing dress I could find, trying to snare any stranger who might be interested so that I can honestly go back to Nick and tell him that I'm finally fucking someone else. That's sure to make him hate me and, in his fury, he'll wake up from the dysthymic spell he's fallen under. The human tide washes by endlessly on the hot tarmac as I sit, pondering, thinking hard about how I might find a way to ascend from the hell I've found myself in.

I fear that Nick's heart is more fragile than mine. His gentle eyes and fair hair give him an angelic look.

I can't hold on to time. It evaporates from my palms and instead of seizing it I let it slide. I used to be so filled with energy and momentum that no time was wasted. In my youth I was always busy living but now that the energy of those days has burned and the only person close to me now spends all his time staring at the walls, time passes and crawls toward death.

Only, the crawl becomes a walk and then a sprint and it's a race. The mass of years bears only confusion.

The city lies somewhere on the other side of the mist. Night approaches like a dark tunnel and I know that somewhere along the way through I'll lay my head on a pillow, but I'm not sure where. The bats are awake. Their sonar inhabits the air that I breathe along the journey.

The city is still awake, too, unreal as cities often are. It is far more alive to my senses than the cities whose experiences I have exhausted. I have travelled here and there until I used up all that is fresh to me. I'm a parasite, a living plague on the order of the modern world. And instead of fixing lending my hand to improving the world, I simply leave behind destruction.

Close to midnight I'm alone in a room, trying not to have another attack of paranoia. In the day, when I was moving around and there were things to do, I felt okay. But now, in the stillness and the silence, *being* takes on a whole new meaning. I try not to think of Nick and of all that came before, but time is not linear. It diverges and bends and takes detours of emotion, until experience is all dried up, and then keeps on going despite exhaustion.

In the night I awake amid sweat-soaked sheets and with the burning realisation that I have made all the wrong choices. The harder I try, the more difficult it becomes to poke the thread through the eye of the needle, so to speak. And the harder I try, the hazier the object of the trying becomes, and I lose sight of any notion of objective reality. Everything I've ever done has been a mistake so why should it matter that my next move might be, too? In the great void there is no right or wrong, and the fragments of self I have collected over the years dissipate

and fall away, and none of it really matters. The sky expands and I expand with it. Nobody knows me and I know nobody else. I have become a spectre; a shadow and a shell of the criminal genius that I once considered myself to be, and without the life of vice I had once known, I no longer have an identity. What use is virtue when I no longer know who I am? I curse Nick for setting me free from the prison that I knew so well.

In the café on the main strip, I sip my coffee and stare out of the window, knowing that all my life I had strived for more and all my striving has led me here, to this point of the unknown, all without the riches and the lifestyle I promised myself I would acquire from the big game I had learned to play. And that was what it was, a big, risky game, but it was the only game I knew. I didn't know much about the game of the lonesome wanderer with nowhere to go and no connections. I had burned all my bridges and had allowed the cinders to fall into a river that flowed away to a place that I did not know. I would never again find the pieces nor attempt to put them back together.

The sun laughs at yesterday's frowning clouds and the wind banishes them from sight. Although my heart breaks at the knowledge of losing Nick and of everything that began with such promise and which subsequently fell into darkness, the air greets me with a freshness and the possibilities are infinite once again—just the way I like them—with each step taking me towards a place I do not know and could not possibly imagine. Innocuous laughter adorns the streets. Life seems lost in the distance. Stability of mind isn't available to me. To be grounded in the moment isn't something I've been able to achieve. Nick told me that he had achieved single-pointed awareness once, but he was unable to sustain it for long. He could offer

no proof, of course, and therefore how could I, or he, for that matter, be sure he'd attained what he said. For him, any notion of liberation from suffering had worn off the minute he arrived back in Melbourne, and from there the spiral ensued. It had been a dark ride for me too, watching him descend further into madness and despair. I reproach myself, tell myself I should think no more of it but my synapses fire and the mental stream from where my thoughts flow cannot be stopped and no raft can carry me back upstream. The flow of time is always there and although I can think back I cannot go back, and so the memories seem more of a hindrance than a help. The shoreline retreats. A figure emerges from the sea. It looks out over the vast beach, contemplating the driving force behind the movement of the elements. I daydream more until my eyes become heavy, and until my world is sucked into a black hole of past and memory.

The path is clear as water. In my peripheries I see the shadows of all those that surround me. Lost I was too but now I wade and emerge with stoicism, transcending those shadows of company and turning my attention toward new terrain. I've come full circle and once again I'm on the run. I hear the voice of Nick's ghost calling me back, and I know he'll wake up one day, too, and he'll wonder where I went. But it'll be too late by then. Time will have passed, seasons changed, and all that we'll be to one another is a fragmented memory. By the time he wakes I'll be long gone.

Trucks rush by on the highway and I walk against the traffic, my metallic nail varnish glinting in the sun as I try to hitch a ride. It never takes me long, but I often wind up with some leering truckie who won't keep his eyes on the road. A shiny red

truck pulls up in front of me. The driver leans over and opens the heavy passenger door of the cab.

‘Where you headed?’

‘Anywhere you can take me.’

‘All right, climb in.’

The road never seems as bumpy as when you’re riding shotgun in a truck. It always feels as though I’m flying down the highway away from all my troubles. But in all reality, I’m flying toward them.

‘So, what’s the story, you just takin’ off?’

‘It was time.’ I flash a smile at him. He’s not old and grouchy like a lot of truck drivers often are, but he still has the sense of stale air and boredom that emanates from long-haul drivers.

‘Yeah, folks go crazy and hit the road all the time. I see ‘em.’ His smirk makes me question whether he’s being serious. ‘Better to put down roots if you ask me.’



The waves hiss against the dunes as the sun finally illuminates the New Year. My mouth is dry. Exhausted and dehydrated, I shuffle away from the other revellers. The music has become harsh in my ears and my head is thumping. All I want is silence and water.

I can’t drive yet, so I lean back the driver’s seat and sleep for a number of hours. By the time I wake the sun is on me full throttle, and the ground is hot and has begun to waver. Two women I’d met the previous night pull up to the side of my car. I roll down the window and try my best to smile.

‘Hey, Nick,’ says one of the girls as she waves at me, ‘how are you feeling?’

They drive away before I can respond. All I want to do is find Melissa and to be home in her embrace.

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In the shadows beyond all horizons, Dreer navigates the spirit world. Lost in the dark, having stolen his life from himself, he finds only fire and further darkness. The tunnel is endless, the fear excruciating. He shouts, cries, begs, but his silent voice does nothing to penetrate the emptiness. A series of lights appear before him—lights that represent different realms, and the one that lures him will become the realm of his rebirth.

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Two paths emerge before me as I stumble up the road. For a moment I hesitate as I attempt to discern which of the two is the right path to take. *I can't make decisions*, I think to myself, *although I can make bad decisions, I'm pretty good at that*. Without further hesitation I take the path on my right and carry on walking. The sky is black and there are no stars to be seen. I've been out walking, looking for Melissa for three weeks without the faintest clue where to look, and although I know I'll never find her I keep searching. I have nothing else to do. Chime after chime and house after house, cloud after cloud and sound after sound I keep journeying. Faces peer at me and heads turn at my basic appearance and ragged demeanour. But I don't care. I keep walking. I keep striving after her shadow, and no matter where I go that's where I am—in her shadow—in the shadow of love. Only, I no longer see her face.

I take a break and sit by a pool in someone's garden, my feet dangling beneath the shimmering water. The coolness rises through the rest of my body and I can think clearly again, but even in doing so I'm still beneath the looming shadow of the figure I'm chasing. And I realise that in doing so I'm making myself small—I'm giving all of my power away to a ghost. And that's when I realise that a similar fate to Dreer has befallen me, but the difference is that my own fate is not yet sealed. Perhaps when the sun comes up over the hills it will illuminate the shadow and set me free.

Eight

All that currently inhabits my life compounds me into a melancholy stasis. It is as if I am free only to suffer in the depths of a silence that drowns out all noise. To move is to crack the rust from the wheels that remained still for so long when all else moved. When I think back to moments in my life that appeared happier than the present, I know I'm in trouble, in danger of wasting more time. It is only when I recognise the flow that is presently real that I am able to find at least a morsel of peace. Infinite peace, perhaps, so long as I can keep my mind.

Summer rises from the mystic depths of winter and I wonder whether it will be my last. The embers from last night's fire burn out as the man beside me tosses and groans. I slide out of bed stealthily and make my way to the bathroom. In the mirror I notice the lines that are emerging on my face, and as deeply as I try and wish them away, they only grow deeper. My face is becoming a geological feat. There is no escaping the inevitability of ageing and soon enough I won't be able to pull anymore one-night stands. That fact doesn't perturb me too much, though the wrinkles are symbolic of all I have not yet come to face. I have never been one to dwell on the subject of death, instead always moving forwards and never looking back or standing still to consider that this reality is not forever. It will end soon enough and there's nothing I can do to stop it from ending. All I can do is fuck myself alive with anyone who is willing, and I don't seem to be doing too badly at that endeavour. When he wakes up, I'll usher him out the door and spend the day fighting off another hangover. I've always had a disposition to-

wards the intoxicating things in life. Hedonism is in my blood. I pull at my hair and notice several strands of grey. My reflection is decaying before my eyes. Nothing to be done about it. I'll make myself coffee and lose myself in magazines, not because it makes me happy, but to distract myself from the truth that I am one day going to die. I'll go shopping and then I won't be thinking about it anymore. There's no time to sit still and to think and to reflect. I have to keep going. I hear stirring in the next room. And then footsteps. And with every step I feel the rising conflict that's about to take place. I'm already emerging from the gates of immortality.

'Hi,' the truckie says, probably not remembering much from the night before.

'Hurry up and get dressed, I've places to be.'

'Am I not going to get a kiss this morning?'

I glare at him as though he's some creature that I despise and at the same time do not recognise. 'I can make my own way from here.' He appears to take the hint and goes back through the door from where he came, and within a couple of minutes I hear the front door slam behind him. I know that the day will be lonely. There are a multitude of people out there, with some wandering around in their set routines and others waking up to great adventures. But I'm stuck here, ageing and numb. I carry on because there's nothing else to be done. I used to carry on and live without a second thought about purpose or meaning but when you feel the time you have slipping away you begin to wonder about such things. There is a sting that begins to smart. I had always wanted to live by the beach and had once thought that it would bring me all of the happiness in the world. Now that I'm here I see only a lonely shore with far too much space

to think. And when I think, my mind plays tricks. It likes to play the 'what if' game, and it always involves Nick. There had been no time that was filled with so much possibility as my early days with him. It was of course possible that nostalgia, too, was playing tricks with me. I could never be sure what the truth was or even what I was thinking at any given moment. I did not know what I really knew. My experience could never be proven. All that was certain was action.



At dawn I wandered by a stream that flowed with all the detail of fine art. The emerging sunlight that kissed my skin through the trees did little to warm it. Even in nature it was difficult to find a sense of peace. It was the searching that was in issue. Pulled along by my Great Dane it was he who spearheaded the mission. He dragged me through the mud and up, over a hill. Through the mist I could see the fading lights of the city. The neighbourhood was still sleeping as we traversed the streets.



I'm about to head down the coast again. To watch the waves tumble toward the shore. Alone. The deep ache is back again. I feel depressed to the core. Exhausted beyond comprehension. Sleep only makes me feel guilty. Like I've wasted time. There are no answers. Only more questions. Endless questions that expand toward nothing. No matter what I do I'm headed toward death. All activity is a distraction from the end. Soon I'll be struggling to sleep again and when I wake the morning sun will shine through the tatters draped across the window. And it will all happen again. All full when you wish for it to

be stark. Peering at the contemporary faces that populate the earth, wondering who they all are and where they're going. Perhaps I am lost in a haze of confusion. The more words I drink the less I know for sure. Progress seems impossible. Wading through the sheer mass with vague notions of escape and improvement as though I'm always reaching for something afar that never arrives. Chasing after a mirage of hopes and dreams. Analysing the analysis of what might otherwise be beautiful I can only swallow the dark vapour that surrounds me. Aspiring toward emptiness. The Earth speeds miraculously through the void. And to live among others is to have them exist in the mind. And, latently, they can either act to soothe or irritate. Currently, the effect is the latter, though I cannot go into it. Not yet. For it is possible for others to hear one's thoughts, especially when in close proximity, and may prove devastating in that it could destroy the delicate equilibrium that has taken so long for me to cultivate. It has largely been cultivated in silence, although a desperate resentment is seeping through the cracks on all sides of the geometric symbol of harmonious synchronicity. It is true. What once worked is working no longer. And as the cracks widen and the desperation increases with intensity, there is bound to be a shift that will flatten this present landscape and make way for the creation of a new one.

Each box that I move into is smaller than the last.

I once made some half-hearted attempts at suicide. I wish I'd tried harder. But no. I'm still hanging on to my life even after all is lost and will never return. Somehow my existence seems impossible, my perseverance unlikely. But despite all probability I nevertheless carry on with this awful feeling I carry around. Nowhere to put it. And the whirling of dialogue from memo-

ry mixed with images of panic and dread. Fretting forever over whether she's dead. Over whether I'll see her again. The cruelty of the mind with its self-sabotaging poisons flowing on to the end. Pacing back and forth both in physical reality and in the mind, feeling as though my hands are gripped on to the bar that holds me flying out of a rollercoaster seat. Tension builds with nowhere to flow as a result of being ignorant to the fact that all is a wave of phenomena. And, as I observe these phenomena, I am mistaken in thinking that I am apart from it—that I am separate.

'Be careful how you tread, for each step cannot be undone,' said Melissa from the memory of a dream. There was no longer any way to determine what was real and what was not. I remember one winter's day at the peak of our love, just before it was about to descend deep underground, we stood on a bridge, contemplating the creek that flowed beneath us. A dream of the past. At the time my life seemed so full. I suppose it does when you're in love. And now holding on to that love is like holding on to smouldering ashes. I'm stubborn, unwilling or unable to let go of misery. It is all that I have known for so long. Alas it may be time to wrap things up, but the words keep coming, splashing out onto everything, over everything. Where they come from, I do not know. They are but the creations of an empty mind filled to the brim from childhood. Nothing there save external influence, perhaps. Or perhaps all perceptions are mind. I stare at the wall. Is the wall outside the mind, within the mind, or both? No, it can't be both, since that would create two walls. An image. An image in the minds of many. Throughout the perpetual flow of phenomena, I suffered in vain to answer such philosophical questions that seemed to

matter deeply. I had tried to attain stillness and certainty, mistaking it for peace. There can be no such stillness for there is always, at the very least, an inward moving. So much time spent fretting over nothing. Reality sets in like a needle through the skin.

‘Just because a state of affairs is not acknowledged does not mean that it doesn’t exist.’

I am unable to move or speak.

‘Are you listening to me?’

The sun is out again, blazing its rays through the atmosphere. One day it will strip away everything I’ve ever purported to know.

‘I can hear you but I cannot reply.’

‘Then how did you reply?’

‘Pardon?’

‘If you cannot reply than how did you reply? You can reply but you refuse to.’

‘Puzzling.’

‘What is?’

‘Why it is that I remain here.’

‘The world is comprised of theories. None of which are right. But some are more accurate than others.’

‘Perhaps.’

‘If I leave here where will I go?’

‘You’re an adult. Figure it out. You don’t want other people making decisions for you, believe me.’

The conversations are long over but they still revolve in my mind, each time becoming more fictitious than the last.

The day is burning along quickly and I can’t seem to be able to snatch even a moment of it. I become frustrated toward my

own lack of ability to understand the nature of what it is that is being experienced. All is inside a great void. There is no doubt that I brought all of this suffering on myself, if indeed there is a self to speak of. Perhaps not purposefully but fallen into suffering. Fallen into this. This exile of the body and mind where all I can do is gawp at strangers on the street, wishing that I had the courage to engage them. I'm a coward, perhaps. Or perhaps my confidence has been deflated from years of successive rejections of various sorts. Sooner or later, I'll have to start again. The more learned I become the greater the confusion grows. Chatter. Chatter. Constant chatter of the mind. All could well be calm in silence. However, it is impossible to know whether you understand something until you put it into words. There isn't much that I can control but my own body, speech and attitude. Trying to find stillness is impossible since all is a perpetual flow. All excuses are historical in nature. The mind seems to lag behind all that is present even when it is finely tuned. I feel a little better and at the same time a little worse. I watch all that moves around me rise and fall. And I am not apart from those waves. I have experienced it all and am slowly becoming unaffected by it for there is nothing that I can do to control any of it. It will all rise and fall again. Every moment. Nothing personal. There's nothing to own or become attached to. There is only the wave. Up and down. Up and down. Until one day, while rising and falling, there will no longer be attachment to any worldly phenomena so-called. And it is only there that peace will be found, in an esoteric insight that transcends time and death, the struggle finally over.

Finch awakens to the fact that he's been lost for too long in a labyrinth of old pain and fear. Everything in the air suggests

that now is the time for momentum. What's more it's spring and the world, too, is awakening. Before he begins he must alleviate himself of all previous perceptions of who he thinks he is. Whether it is possible is another matter altogether. It is necessary. It's time to leave the comfort zone he's constructed around himself, time to leave his room. It is here that he suffocates daily among the squalor. The days often evaporate before his eyes as inertia sets in and he gives up on any hope of the day improving. It's always the same: wake up and potter around attempting to shake off the grip of all that had happened and cannot be undone. The entire exercise is a painting of futility, never changing, wandering the labyrinths as if he knows everything there is to know. Far too certain of reality to ask any more questions or to seek out any new worlds. But the air outside is whirring violently enough to obliterate habitual thoughts and tired presuppositions. Even with and perhaps in spite of all his knowledge the world seems more of a mystery than before. If he wanted answers, he'd have to seek them out for himself. And even then, it was another question again as to whether or not anything could really be determined or if all was merely passing phenomena as the dust is in the wind. And you know that the words are there, you just have to find them, and piece them together as if denoting the secret combination of an eternal riddle. And that, Finch thought to himself, was what Dreer was attempting to do in the works he'd left behind—transcend time. Passivity after all is just as futile as activity. The main consideration at this time is to have enough room to breathe. As interpretations of the world become looser and the price of rent steadily climbs there doesn't seem to be any way through. But despite the heavy blockage it becomes appar-

ent that sooner or later the dam will break and then everything will come loose again. The world cannot be tidally locked forever, and tides have a habit of changing. It is safe to say that in my earlier years there was no such thing as gliding, but instead a scraping together of the formless tide of symbols that would later coalesce in the ever-changing present. And it is through the gliding phenomena that Finch foolishly and against all wisdom tries once more to find a foothold, one last attempt at creating something tangible before returning to the void. And it is now that he realises that he's far more attached to life than he would like to admit. The false illusion occurs to him that he may exist for another. And the more he tries to dismiss the notion the stronger it gets. All of the discourse of his mind is a reflection of the world that he has created, and as he looks around, he realises that the world he sees is not the world that he had first envisioned. He doubts as to how his original interpretations of the world could have led him here and he realises that it is because he did not challenge and change them often enough. The vast majority of his memory is a constantly recycled pattern that exists under many suns. And in each geometric space lies all past, present and future possibilities. The faces of all the people he encounters aren't faces at all but masks that conceal an infinite potential. And all are synchronised in a dance around and among the stars. And through the mist and the shrouded potentials the vision lifts and becomes clear. It becomes clear that all is not what is destined to be and it is only in the present that he can forge a life worth living. Finch surrounds himself with the notes he's spent years writing, pieces of the puzzle that might lend a clue as to how he had arrived at his present state. But once he peers into those words

he is sucked into the language of the past now speaking in a context that no longer makes sense. All that it seems to do is to propel him back around through the endless discourse that is his latent consciousness. And all that he's doing in continuing along is bridging the temporal gap. However, the notes prevent words from straying from the edge of a cliff and down into some void. But it is possible now that perhaps that is exactly where they need to go. To become an investigative tool that will allow him where he otherwise cannot venture. Tools of illusion to break through the illusion.

Finch walks outside to taste the air. All around him is a plethora of action and progress that seems to be happening in incredibly slow motion. The cars crawl by and the wind catches the hair of passing strangers in the street who, at that moment, don't seem very strange to him at all. There is a magic ingredient that courses through everything that surrounds him. He's enmeshed, and the world dances all around his senses in unity. And yet, despite all of these realisations that pass through his mind and body, he still feels the need to avoid the gazes of passing strangers for fear that they'll unveil what he deems to be a fraudulent exterior. After so many years lost in deep thought and rumination, he still sees few prospects and little hope on the horizon. Sometimes hope rises up through his body like a buoy far out to sea, but he has become cautious of hope and trust and so represses them as soon as they appear. Along with his mind his stomach turns and everything that he currently sees and experiences gives him only a sense of nausea. He's repulsed by both himself and the world. Over the road in the fast-food joint he joins in with the people that sit alienated from one another, eating their misery. Even the food tastes

of stagnation and decay. Feeling so limited in what he can do he joins in with the misery, knowing much better but seemingly unable to object in any meaningful way. Consuming for comfort as much as for sustenance, he watches some birds take flight across the street. And reality is what's right in front of him, he knows this. No matter his intentions or aspirations or dreams, they are simply not right now. They are thoughts as unreal as death amid the living. Drowning in a lake of obscurity he wishes to cry out from the darkness of those depths. He wishes to reach out and to grab the sun in his hands. His reach is cut short by millions of miles. He feels suicidal again. It is from those dark thoughts that there is nowhere to hide. In that moment he is exposed to everything and everyone. The streets become a confused blur—a labyrinth from which he feels he will never escape—a Buddhist conception of hell. And worrying about it makes everything worse. He muses over what he can do without falling into despondency. He's been alone too long and the wall before him has become thick and high. And each day that passes in a lonesome blur only adds bricks to the thickness and the height. Something has to give way and sooner or later a crack must appear so that the world can be invited in in order for a clear vision of the world to be revealed. There is a sense that there's something larger at play, a great unseen process that's running its course all of the time. *I'll have to create my own world again*, he thinks to himself quietly, *if this is all the present world has to offer*. Of course, it isn't all that the world has to offer but he has become so set in his ways after all the bitterness and confusion that had trampled through his life in the forms of his father and Melissa. He realises that all of the dark dreams should have died with Dreer, and in his betrayal of

the writer's memory, Finch had condemned himself to live out his life as a fraud and then a forgotten ghost. Most days he felt nothing but guilt.

'Life is a reflection of your inner dialogue and the outer dialogue you choose to exhibit,' a little bird had once said to Finch. His reply came to paint a pessimistic sky and he hoped that his dark portrayal of it had not frightened the little bird away. She did not come to visit in the days that followed, and this worried Finch. He began to question his own virility and to feel inferior. The old Buddhist ante 'who is caught up in all of this?' sprang to mind and who could possibly blame the little bird for taking off towards more bounteous skies? If Finch could not stand to be around himself then who else could stand to be around him, knowing full well that people are of a magnetic nature. His blind presumptions of the nature of the bird, without knowing or taking all the facts into consideration, had marred his own ability to fly. And even through his days in sitting meditation he had not fully come to terms with the troubles that brewed in him and that sent involuntary waves rippling towards unknown shores. And now, with the life gone from him, he sits in the dark, waiting for something to run its course in the hopes that one day peace will come to him. It had been the very same cycles of destruction that had brought him to this exile, all of it voluntary, the joys as well as the sufferings, just as breathing is as voluntary as it is involuntary.

He speaks to dark empty rooms and to the bowels of memory. 'So much negativity happened on account of that woman. I fear I'm going mad.' He drops to his knees in the dimly lit room. It was only now in his feeble desperation that he attempted to make a few clumsy attempts at communication. He

found that it was difficult to re-establish the lines of communication, so flayed and thin that they almost snapped to lacerate his inner flesh. And new ones proved just as difficult. There was much doubt in him that had progressed too far to be undone. 'You're keeping me in suspense. It's somewhat agonising. And yet, I shouldn't accuse.' No reply came from anyone anywhere. Indeed, he did not speak to anyone anywhere and so no reply could possibly come. Always with a heavy heart he scoured the streets in search of what could never be found. The uncertainty of everything can either be euphoric or agonising but at present Finch was perceiving it as the latter. He hugged a cushion and his face descended into darkness. All of the light and darkness in the universe could not begin to illuminate his intentions. Even he himself did not know at times. So complicated was his situation that he did not know where to turn or to what was most befitting of his time on earth. He tried to keep his nerve and to manage the stress and pressure he perceived as best he could. He transcended his human form and became a mythical beast. Part human and part the owl that he always knew that he was, he watched the night pass. It was one of those moments where, after so much activity, the world goes dead. Nobody was responding to anything and he found himself all alone. He pleaded with the world but there was no reply. No voice of god or of anyone else.

After a consistent diet of hallucinogens and alcohol he made an absolute hash of communication with a potential romantic partner, the little bird. She stopped returning his calls, stopped replying to his messages. Vanished from his life.

I am unperturbed by the silence out the window. All is cold between dark spaces. I have travelled a long way and have ar-

rived nowhere. The only place left to travel is within. The clock on the wall ticks away the melancholy hours and I am lost. Heat from the fireplace expands the room. I had moved into a small place with a young couple and soon after moving in they had gone to Europe in order to travel for several months with a circus. I was all alone and was beginning to feel it. There were no more words to be uttered for the moment and little to be done but to fill the time. And the time appeared to be vast and empty. After the fuss and publicity over Dreer's series of novels as well as Melissa's departure, I was exhausted and barely left the house for a time. I was poor and depressed, locked in a conundrum of tricks of the mind. I was surrounded by the possessions of others, things deemed alien from my perspective. And I didn't care about any of it. It was all just a bunch of stuff cluttering up the emptiness that was in any case inescapable. It was time to move on but there was nowhere to move to. I clinged to comfort. I tried to keep myself busy but rising with each day seemed an absurd routine. I fought with myself. I had a warring of personalities as I fragmented in isolation. I invented company that dissolved into the void that lay before me. I cut away the parachute of the past and went into freefall.

I was walking by the river, telling myself that there was nothing to fear and that I'd gotten myself into a rut of thinking. It was so beautiful and silent and still, and the walking was undoing all of the thinking. Out there I was nothing. Nothing to fear. Thinking. Trying not to think. Surrounded by beauty. For some reason I wished to be able to recount the experience later. But later is not now. Now is now. Walking by the river in a rapid succession of now, I knew that some expressions are beyond words and yet no words are beyond experience. The

whole world was tumbling out of my mouth and into nothingness as my mind processed every experience at an impossible rate, and yet it was possible. Trees lined the sky by the riverbank. If you have everything then you have everything to lose. I always felt as though I was missing out on something, and this compounded my present anxieties. Sunken experiences are words from a depressed mind. Pay no heed to what I tell you for my words are poison through a dissolution of years. They crawl in the blackness before taking flight. You want to undress for nature, but you retain a sense of shame. Grief is good because it cleanses life of bullshit. It shows us what is important. All the space in which I inhabit is rented—borrowed as it were—from the lords of the land. One stark fact echoed high above all others: complaining will get you nowhere. And that is presuming there's somewhere to get to. Each day was lived through an insufferable internal discourse.

The day is growing dark. It was a short day. The rays of the sun are just over the hill and quickly fading. And I'm walking over the grass and the dirt, looking around, thinking about thinking and walking. On and on. Each day alone, living alone, everything I do I do alone and one day I will die alone but that is not today. The river gurgles and cackles as the birds swoop and sing and the world dreams everything. A fallen branch blocks the path but I easily step over it. And continue on in silence. My depression is in the eyes—it comes in at the eyes—as though it must be lifted from the eyes, so that everything I see will no longer be filtered through darkness but will instead capture the light along with everything.

The machinery of humanity disturbs nature. Nature wishes to dream and to grow and is much more powerful than the

booming of finite machinery. Nature has a silent power. It is freedom unto itself, the totality of which seems superfluous, and still it goes on. And nobody knows why it goes on but it does. I try to recapture the same sounds—the same visions—through language, but it is folly, for every moment presents new sounds and visions. And where is there to go and what is there to do in a dying world gone mad with machines? Destroy what's left or allow it to grow back? There is no going back. Neither is there anything new. There will never be anything new. It is all recycled—old—reinvented, evolving from the deep roots of culture but not new. Stillness and silence adorn the hills. I scramble up a steep hill after passing some people I greeted: Two girls with bashful smiles that beamed through the fading dusk. My eyes lie fierce over my dark coat, challenging the cold air before me. And I ask myself, what do I have to go home for save searching in the dark for memories, dreams, illusions, casting away all the old masks and states of being to arise in the now.

I arrive home to Melissa's voice. It floats like a spectre through the dark rooms, but she is not there.

• • • •

'Your accent has changed,' said Melissa.

'You change to fit in,' I replied.

'And do you fit in?'

'Never. I'm lost.'

'You've been saying that for years.'

'I've been lost for years.'

She looked around the room uncomfortably, the dust flying before her eyes illuminated by lamplight.

‘Is there no joy or happiness to be found in living?’

‘Yes, there is. But not for me.’ It happened long ago. It had been a long time since I was among friends, smoking joints and laughing. The laughter subsided into a kind of brooding panic. Suddenly it all became too real. And none of it was new or exciting anymore.

‘Have you been with anyone since I left?’

‘No. No one.’

After the conversation went dead, we talked silently, deep into the night. I’ve always kept strange hours. Sometimes I’d stay up all night writing because it was the only time the world was quiet enough to be able to think. My new residence was almost bucolic but was close the city. An old house built long ago, before the city even existed. So old that the hot and cold taps were, to me, the wrong way round. The place gave me a curious sense of displacement. The reflection in the mirror resembled a man gone crazy, the face of a man who spent his days filling blank pages, channelling dark passages beyond the gazes of dim consciousness that peered through the light of each day. I was a shadow.

I was like an old tree that needed to uproot itself. It had been an abrupt move. I was left to deal with the remnants and the debris, both physical and psychological. It was cold at night and there was nothing to warm me save imaginary visits from characters of the past. It was not living. The cold penetrated deep into my skin and toward the cool depths of my heart. I had lost contact with the world. I could use the heater but didn’t want to rack up a large bill. Such was my current existential problem: Freeze or pay the price of living. I turned up the heater. In the dreaming dark I sat, disturbed, with only the hiss-

ing of the gas for company. In the darkness I dreamed, sitting, in an old gown and with my hair to my shoulders. From time to time, I got to my feet and shuffled around the room. I would rise from darkness and go back to darkness. The silence whirled on, my sense of self drawing thin until I radiated a translucent energy.

I did everything that I could do to assure that the dream became a nightmare and, in looking back, I found it difficult to balance the thoughts around who I was. It was only when I was relaxed enough that I could face up to all that had happened through the years before they fell into place in such a way as I could remember them. I had seen too much already and yet there was much more left to see. All that lay both before and after the moment was an empty space within that moment. And it was all curled up in a forgetful wave that never seemed to truly arrive in time or place. It all curled up and kept on curling, with the present moment at the forwardmost crest of a wave. And everywhere I looked there were no answers, only more questions. And in the middle of all those questions I stood, lost, and ready to battle my way out. So far it had been a bad luck tide with a hell of a lot of sea sting. But all of the blackness was sucked deeper as the new motion swelled to bury it all since there was no place else for it to go. I'd remembered the beach where I'd been and where I'd been happy. But the thought soon faded and was lost to the depths of what I could no longer truly find.



I knew at an early age that I would never marry since I hated all institutions. I was expelled from school and left home at an

early age. That was when I fell in with a dark crowd and began taking drugs and eventually selling them to support my habit. I never told Nick about all of that and as the years went on the secrets grew the distance between us. Had I blamed him for everything? Our companionship descended into a series of awkward interactions followed by an explosion of conflict after a build-up stemming from a lack of communication. After we had parted and the ash fallen from the sky I spent many years wandering. During that time, I knew exactly where Nick was, but I couldn't go to him. So long as he remained in the brooding darkness, we could not reconcile our differences. I began to get the curious feeling that in every step I took I was getting ahead of myself. I knew that despite any amount of preparation, I would never truly be ready. In the shower I held myself, realising that the naivety has washed from me completely. All of the ideals I had fought hard to support in my mind crumbled into a sunken nothingness. Perhaps in my youth I had ascertained a different form of wisdom, but I could not forget the lessons that the past few years had taught me.

I had never been better, but by the same token I had never been worse. In the wake of my life path there was only destruction. I could not bear to consider the karma I had collected and, having lived with Nick, I couldn't ignore the things that he so often talked about and simultaneously violated. Nick was a hypocrite. And upon reflection we both deserved everything that happened to us. We deserved the misery we endured, the isolation, the alienation. It was a kind of natural justice that would pay off the karmic debt. I still wasn't sure whether I really believed in any of it. I was more sceptical than most. I believed in hard facts, hard dope and the acquisition of materi-

al goods. I never really understood asceticism. But above all, I never understood why an ascetic such as Nick would renounce his path and live as a fraud. To tell the truth I was tired of the whole story. I wanted to sever myself from it and to get lost once again in depths of myself and in the vastness of the world. I applied to art school and was accepted. I began to paint visions of the past and the future.

Her memories echo wherever she goes. Whenever she looks into the mirror or into the mirror of another human being, her memories are inescapable. She carries them around like a trove of sunken images that can never be erased and will always be there until the point of death and beyond. She will leave them behind in the world as fragments of a life, both real and imagined. They are her earthly lot. She pours another glass of wine that will be sure to dull her senses awhile. Her name is Melissa but that isn't who she is. She knows who she is but nobody else does, although they like to tell her who they think she is. The clock ticks but life is action. She'll have to decide what to do with it. From the present all choices appear infinite. And that's where the conundrum lies. All she had known is addiction to this and that—addiction to drugs and people and places. It didn't really matter what the object or subject of her addiction was; the intention or impulse was the same. It stemmed from the emotional drive to void the present reality in its current manifestation. Nick never truly understood. Indeed, it has come to her through reflection that perhaps it was her that was a bad influence on him, and that it was she that had led him towards an unethical life. But of course, such a notion was absurd, since Nick was responsible for his own lot. He had abandoned his principles since her emergence in

his life. Melissa walks out into the garden and tries to let everything go, but in doing so, all of the regret and rumination is disturbed all the more. She can't help but feel as though it's all her fault—that her world is doomed because of her shortcomings. Like Nick and Tom, she has come to a place where she no longer enjoys anything. The world has turned to ashes in the palate of her mind. There is, within her life, an eternal dusk and she has no hope of reviving the sun. All is forgotten fragments of psyche and memory that matter to nothing and to no-one. In the morning she often hears the screams and cries of the neighbours. Individual protests to the living discourse no doubt. There is something blowing in the wind today, a certain emptiness that cannot be filled by human endeavour. It is the human condition that fills the streets. It is the hum of machinery that disturbs the wild. But the wild is more powerful than any human order. The room is silent save for the wind that never sleeps. There is no connection here but an internal one, and such introspection can lead her to paint internal landscapes that no-one would otherwise be able to see. In her art she presents the unpresentable. Her art allows her to explore the limitedness of her own point-of-view and, where possible, to expand it. She paints dark caverns lit with glinting treasure. Both dream and reality merge together in the paint on her brush. She paints a house on fire, a car abandoned on the highway, and images of an imagined future in which she places all her hopes.

‘There's really no need to apologise for anything, Miss,’ said the driver as I arrived home.

When I walked through the front door, I felt that shiver of loneliness you feel when you've nothing but yourself. The

furniture wasn't a friend to me and in my present condition I felt as though I didn't have a friend in the world. The walls screamed death and loneliness and I dreaded the oncoming of night. It was not the oncoming of night that I feared but the passage of time. It was not the passage of time that I feared but imminent death. And I did not fear death, so I was not certain of what I feared. Perhaps I feared all of my regrets, but what did they matter? They were nothing but a resurgence of the mind's habitual activities. And all the words that popped in my brain obscured and complicated my own experience of reality.

My feet hit the pavement at the first light of dawn. The air is still thick with sleepiness. It's another one of those moments where you question whether it's all worth it. As my feet carry my consciousness to where it needs to be, I'm not sure exactly of the reasons for doing what I'm doing. Having no alternative, I continue onward. My bank account suggests that I'm saving for something—a rainy day probably—but along with an alteration of attitude towards abundance, there is a good chance that it could, with the right intention, be wielded into something far more positive.

Upon approaching the age my mid-thirties, it became apparent to me that I had wasted all previous years, having filled them with excuses that actually hollowed them out. My view had been paranoid, alert from the years of dope-running and drifting, always on edge and never truly knowing where I was going. All I know for sure is that I've never been alone so long. Usually, after a breakup, I'd bounce right into the arms of some new stranger who would emerge from the carnage. But now, instead of rising toward action I passively watch as the world turns. I say nothing to others for days on end, spending most

of my time in my makeshift studio. Sure, I hear snippets of dialogue here and there in the street and on the train but, for the most part, I have been ensconced by silence. But it's not so bad. I can now see the world from my silent perspective, and all visions and sounds are heightened because of it. Each ray of light that reaches my eyes illuminates all representations of the world in ever-changing ways. Images are more of a swirl of motion rather than static objects with ostensive definition. The concepts of the world are in a state of constant flight. And if I don't move and change then I'm a fool. The world is moving and changing anyway, so why shouldn't I? It's largely a matter of being sick of my own shit but not knowing how to get out of it. So I sit and think and paint and then sit some more, until I wouldn't know clarity if it kicked down my door. And the thing all along is that I'm painfully unwilling to admit the nature of my own perceived significance. I recall believing that if only I could think clearly, I'd be out of this mess in no time. Instead, I was sucked into a reality of day-to-day living and trying not to despair at each passing moment. When the gloom was illuminated it showed only more gloom.

I'm growing weary of this cycle of days. They keep on coming and going. Never arriving. Not ceasing until I transcend this raft that is my body. Each moment that passes is a chance to live either in habitual mindlessness or to understand what is really happening. To understand what is happening is to understand the universe in motion. The total revenue from my creative endeavours could buy me a cup of coffee. The last bubble of liquid warmth before a deep freeze. The future is far offshore. At the current rate, and considering the patterns of the world, it does not seem to hold much promise. The future is

a desert and the past is an endless cave of blackness. But all of that makes little difference to the perception of the direction that I wish to take. The direction I am taking. Will take. Have taken. Locked in a tenancy that I so wish to be over. But at least I have somewhere to lay my head in the dark. Trapped in a corner like some hideous beast about to be slaughtered. I become distressed and go to the bottle shop to get myself something to drink. Soon enough I won't have that luxury. But now is not then and then is not now. I must admit that I am just as disturbed as those around me. If not more so. There's a mismatch between reality and my own cycling fears. And yet I am moved by all that surrounds. And always, always, trying not to despair. Conforming to the rules of grammar and elocution there seems nothing that can be done anew and no time in which to do it. Put me on a cloud and let me float away. That's all I've ever wanted. Transcendence from the bowels of the norms so-called. I might give in and then again, I might not. The transparency of possibility, extinguishing the flame that burns thereunder. The realisation that all I have ever feared is but a shadow in the mind, a ghost in the distance that looms there only to torment. And through it all words have never been able to do me justice. They have served only to cut my throat and to fuel the poison of obsession. Despite this the words keep coming until it becomes almost a subversive act to speak out. Without a voice I am nothing. And as the world washes over my senses there is, more often than not, a commentary on what is happening. Now I have no muse in a single human being. My muse is the world in its entirety. There is nothing that cannot be spoken for even what is mystical can give rise to words. That which is mystical is what *inspires* the words to come. All else is

mundane. By the end of the day, I'm aching and longing for the death of wakefulness. I no longer dream. And in the morning, I'm born into to the same pattern of confusion and dissatisfaction. The same pattern of alienated misery.

I think I woke up the next morning. I mean *really* woke up. After an apocalyptic vision that moved across my sensitive mind like a meteorite moving across the light of the sun I woke and all fell into place in my mind. I realised that for so long I had busied myself with base pleasures and base thoughts that brought me misery and were of no importance. The more that I gave up base pleasures the less I craved them and the more room I had to contemplate wisdom. All of a sudden I felt significantly lighter, as though all of the darkness that had plagued me for so long had, at least temporarily, been resolved. And what's more, it had all been accomplished soberly; I had not needed to rely on anything external and never would again.

The other one who lives here is sleepwalking again, filling the beautiful silence with whatever mindless chatter he can find. Compulsive noise making with a view to wasting time never to be retrieved. Meaningless gatherings. The air lapses into idleness and depression and we blind ourselves from life. Too late. Never too late. Moving on. Never ceasing. The flow continues until all is extinguished. If that day will ever come. Nobody knows for sure. So much remains unknown of the nature of things. Yes, I can observe. But observing is not the same as knowing. Ah, to know. To know! Who could ever know?

I'm pretty sure that I did it. Unless I'm going mad. What it is that I did, however, I'm not exactly sure. But I feel guilty. I feel guilt beyond a doubt. It lives in my belly. I can never escape my transgressions. Are they mine? Is the depression I

feel mine? No. Perhaps this is why it has grown so profound. I *identify* with it. It has become synonymous with my being. Assimilated. But it doesn't matter. Emphasis denied. I move forward from where I am. All wishes are extinguished by flame. All emotions correspond directly to what it is I believe.

I went home and sat back in my scholarly chair. I read about aesthetics and about subjectivity. The sublime was mentioned. I reconciled my differences from those that I knew and revelled in them, my life emitting the frequencies of the values that I held. Overriding the pain and grief of my youth, the deep ache in my belly subsiding its fragmentary dissolution. I finally understood the nature of suffering: longing for what is gone and what could have been. After words are exchanged, I return to the silence of phenomenal experience. Language goes dead as soon as it comes out of the mouth or hits paper. There is a disconnect between it and reality.

Even after the most eventful and exhilarating day I'm left alone to watch the candle flicker out before the unconsciousness of sleep. Like a machine that switches on and off the body is enslaved by the mind that wills it. A wise mind rewards the body with nourishment and does not poison it, for the existence of the mind depends upon the existence of the body. Now, with regard to the transmigration of consciousness, as the Buddhists believe, it is karmically influenced by past action and the accumulation of wisdom. If reality is a subjective phenomenon, can there be any such thing as absolute truth? My life is undone and I lose all that I gained, although I cannot lose more than what came before birth.

Pulled along by a canine drive I keep a firm hold of the leash. The sound of an emergency siren dances through the

hills and the dead weight I've been experiencing for months subsides. I'm still tired, though. I'm not as strong as I was. Each step I'm dragged along builds strength, but my mind is still lost. I'm so alone each day and sometimes I barely go out at all. Oftentimes I don't see the point. Life is open and yet I constantly step through the same revolving door. I can't see the clouds for the thoughts that block the way. There is much to explore and yet I don't see or feel any of it. And life appears as a path without end. Carrying on with such an attitude seems absurd. I rouse from my thoughts and when I come to my senses, I see an endless sky. And when the clouds and the sun disappear, I see what really matters: I can see the sprawling heavens on fire. To my senses it all appears to be happening so slowly because my lifetime is so short, and the only thing that I know for certain is that I'm going to die. All of the rains of the past and the cold winds that had blown through my life are far less overwhelming when they're reduced to concepts and symbols. The chair creaks beneath me as I sit, remembering all of the troubles, stirring them up in my mind until the violence turns everything blank and the world is washed away.

After all those years of thinking that I had left the Buddhist Way behind, I realise that that could not be further from the truth. I'm a hermit, that's for sure, meditating the days away in an exuberant silence that rings in my ears and there is nothing more to reality than the mirage of years and time I have created in my mind. The universe and I transition together as one. I'm convinced that I've become stranger than ever through a lack of human interaction. My circling thoughts take me through a labyrinth of madness. I come away from every social interaction that I do have feeling vaguely embarrassed, as though

somehow it could have gone better. I do not always move flowingly along with the reality I'm confronted with. I spend too much time dreaming of what could have been, a series of lost images that I know I've idealised. Being back in touch with Melissa was a game of patience: I did not want to drive her away and, at the same time, I did not want to allow our communication to die. She was, despite time and decay, my only connection to the world of the living.

The sounds of the world grew louder as I sank deeper once more into obscurity. I no longer had many friends but then again neither did Melissa. It seemed that we had the opposite issues when it came to a sense of humour: that mine was buried beneath the earth and hers soared and berated those around her in a kind of put-down mischievous fashion. I didn't have enough friends to start hating people, that was for sure. I'd wear a long black coat that an ex-girlfriend had bought for me years earlier and would wander through the hollow air, doubting the fact of my own existence. The light from the sky hurt my eyes but it was a good feeling—a welcome pain. Around and around I wandered the same tracks and paths close to my home, recharting familiar territory in a bid to sense the world so as to escape my compulsive thinking. And who the fuck was caught up in all of this? It certainly wasn't me. I was but an expendable blip on an orbiting sphere at the very edge of the galaxy. Sure, I had fled industrialised Europe for a distant continent, and that distance had its own impact upon me. Everything out here was vast and sprawling, and a new colonial society was being built on the bones of the genocide and injustice that the indigenous inhabitants of the land had suffered and continue to suffer.

There was an election on the horizon. Some days I would feel an incredulous hope at the possibilities to come and on others I'd heave with despair at the potential continuum of the present government. I felt stark naked and vulnerable in my eccentricities and remained in the shadows for much of that time. I simply did not wish to encounter another public bout of humiliation after the illumination of my fraudulent activities. A literary hoax, the newspaper had called it, and there was every chance of prosecution. My royalties had been stripped away; my fortune lost. Sooner or later, I knew that I would have to emerge from the shadows. I wrote terrible poetry in an attempt to express my views on life:

Life is dark and light
All colours shine bright
Along with the trembling mass
of vast consciousness.
Gentle morning transitions into
cool afternoon
And life is open

I would often get drunk on wine and write poetry that would spring spontaneously from my consciousness. It was a way to create a sense of chaos from the order of the day. All of the money I earned always went to somebody else—to the landlord or the liquor baron or the humble drug dealer. I had to get used to the notion that nothing was more than enough. In the mornings I would rise absurdly and position myself on the couch, hoping for some divine intervention that would drive the darkness away. I didn't even believe in god. I didn't be-

lieve in anything, and life felt like waiting for death to come so that I may be absolved of my daily torment. My experience was sunken, and the world was too beautiful. It was as though I was peering out from my own darkness. Tiny despair followed by tiny despair. Loneliness that was worsened by any form of human contact. I often felt as though I was an alien to my own planet. My entire life was blocked and the best days were behind me. I had come to a shore far too distant to recognise, so isolated that the darkness within me developed its own gravitational pull. The sky echoed the same expansive mantra and I was rooted to the ground like an old, sad tree. I wanted to take off.

She was a friend that I hadn't seen nor heard from for years. It had been a long time since our souls had parted ways from that awful and unconceivable blur of grief, but alas great paths sometimes cross more than just once. I had written to her in the clearest gibberish that I could comprehend, absconded to some far distance of the world. 'I'm doing all right in our current contemptuous economic climate. Struggling along but radiating all the beauty I can.' All of the ghouls and the skeletons came out to play from their closets. But it was folly. All fear came either from insecurities or criminal mishandling of the past or from some absurd fear of mishandling the future.

Outside there's nothing but cold, damp roads and expensive places to go. And besides, I hardly know anybody. What could I do to better myself? What could there possibly be on the horizon save a perpetual aspiration? A nothingness. And I'm so depressed that I don't even know where to begin. Or when it began. Or when it will end. There's a reason why I'm here alone. I'm sure. But I'm not so sure what that reason is. An

endless task of letting go, perhaps. Somewhere down the line the phone rang but I let it ring out. I had to. If I had picked it up one too many times, there would have been nothing left of my sanity. Maybe I'm just not meeting the right people. Or, maybe, when I do meet the right people, I'm unable to distinguish them from the wrong people. Either way it is by no means an easy time to be living. Melissa is completely out of the picture and I no longer have anybody or anything left. My life has become nothing more than the void it once was before my years wandering this earth, twisting through the ages in a despotic ritual of doom.

'I feel so lonely that I can hardly bear it,' I say to the silence. No one hears. Nothing stirs. I stare around the room blankly, hoping for something to happen. But it never does. My recent experience has been an open slather amid a banquet of confusion. No matter where I am, I want to run as far away as possible. I watch the storm roll in from afar. The only things I fear are either memories of what has passed or some unnamed event that lies dormant in the distant future.

Sunday. In the bars that line the streets the people drink the last dregs of the weekend. I had spent most of the previous day wandering around aimlessly, and today I had instead driven around aimlessly, looking for something to do or somewhere to go but not finding any promise in anything, desperate for a new dawn, a new horizon. It had occurred to me that I now have only two options: suicide; or the accomplishment of something spectacular. The very solitude that I had sought had come to swallow me whole. And amid the crowds of the city, which there was nobody I knew, solitude had transformed into sheer inescapable loneliness. For a time, I tried to view my life

through a Nietzschean perspective—looking to find aesthetic beauty in the suffering—before deciding that I was done with the suffering through and through. It had to go if I was to have any chance of change and growth—I had to push through. Everything that surrounded me was so familiar that I was no longer a witness to the strange beauty of life. It was stagnant, stultified, and space had transformed from a geometric dance to a flat, familiar wasteland. And all that I could do was emerge in the moment and work with what I had. I couldn't shake the notion that, whereas Melissa had potentially ventured into new life territory, I had remained little more than a memorial statue of our time together. And this inability to move forward provided the deepest and most complex of challenges. I had collected far too many scars to move on easily. The days drifted through me with a promise of later fulfilment through haunting. Hope was a mirage. Connection a long lost ideal that seemed impossible to re-establish. It was as though once I was released from her spell and after the dream had vanished to be replaced by a nightmare, I could no longer face the reflection that stared back at me from the mirror. I saw only that the hopeful, buoyant youth that was usually reflected had become a face gaunt with deep unhappiness and longing. The city in which I had once dreamed to live in became tainted by all that had preceded my journey there. Unable to let go of all that haunted me, I licked my wounds in a darkened room while trying hopelessly to dig my way out of the dark. All that lay before my vision was a thick mist that prevented either further growth or venturing. For in my mind there was always a stern warning of how things can go bad and so I shouldn't strive for anything but instead meditate and root myself deep in the ground.

I couldn't meet anyone new for fear of revealing the detestable squalor that was my life. I felt that I had nothing positive to say and so shouldn't say anything at all. The thoughts that ran through my head rarely made it out of my mouth, and most of the time there was no one around to hear my words anyway. It was my job to challenge all negative assumptions to the core, and to distance myself from the belief systems that only served to cause me anguish.

Always out of the corner of his eye he was trying to find Melissa, and although he did this she never appeared. The years wore on until any glint of enthusiasm was dimmed. When he tried to think on what had happened in all those vacuous years he could not put it into words, a creeping fear that would not subside grew in intensity until the fear was all that there was.

The day has come around again and once again the people in the city go about their clockwork routines. It's as though at night, when the streets are asleep, the city is wound back up again in preparation for the next cycle. I sit in the living room of the tiny house, once again questioning my existence. Every choice that I have made on the wind has led me here. I've travelled a long way and yet it seems that I've nowhere further to go. Perhaps this was the reason for my current state of stagnation—the sense that everything now was permanent—and in a way it was. The present entangled with past and future. Nothing could undo all that had occurred and that was now unraveling my life. So many moments had been lost like tiny ships in a regretful sea, swallowed up in the bitter mass of raw and unresolved time. All that you can do in the silent darkness is observe your own thoughts. Tonight, they are not only in my head. They swirl around the room, navigating every corner that's out

of the scope of my vision. My thoughts travel further than I can see. Without having anything to believe in, I had surrendered myself to the worship of memory and, as time went on and the memories became more distant, like stars receding from view, they became more fictitious and open to conjecture. What began as raw experience transformed to myth and then to legend. But only in my mind. My life had become a private fantasy that consisted only of confusion. And my only object of attachment were vacuous memories. Inertia spoke volumes with regard to my state of mind. But silence is not a voice and nor is absence a presence. It's a chasm. It's silence. It's absence. The inability to speak your mind is like living in a prison unto which the bars and locks are your own. It's as though you put yourself there and then forget the combination that lets you out. You hope that one day you'll find it but when you reflect on the pattern that you seem ensnared by it seems futile to hope for what you have reasoned seems unlikely to transpire. I thought myself towards the brink of madness. I considered my life from every angle except the one that could bring peace and satisfaction.

At the point of a new and great journey I realise that all of the scenery that I see each day is already receding, just like the stars in the night sky. Much of life is out of my control, and the only power I wield is how I respond to events so-called. I get to choose how I view them. Years before, I'd had the premonition that I would one day travel to an exotic location, and in the vision I had been ill and rotting in a sweaty room, surrounded by flies. The fear that I had produced could only be resolved by venturing there and cultivating a sense of curiosity. It would also be a chance to fly away from the memories and, upon returning, come to see my adopted city in a new light. I needed

distance to be able to see where I was headed. It became apparent and perhaps obvious that there is little value in spending all present energies on trying to fix memories that, by their very nature, are already fixed. The sense of momentum came around again and it wouldn't be long before I'd take off and leave all of the negativity behind where it belonged.

I drive through the rain, tears pouring down my cheeks. I would drive long distances every week to see her, and now this would be one of the last times. I had wept fiercely beside her without shame. There is no more painful feeling in this world than the death of a once-vibrant love. And now, motivated only by fear I drive away from her to begin the rest of my life. Convinced that there is nothing left to live for I contemplate death with every passing truck. Their headlights beam toward me with the possibility of relief, but it is doubt that prevents me from veering into the light like a kamikaze moth. I can't help but think *how can I ever fall in love again?* And I was right to think so, or perhaps I had fixed my limitations through the language that I used to speak to myself. Surely my inner talk influences the outer and I can amend my projections by focusing on inner work. Of course, the key is to not fall into the trap of perpetual introspection. There is danger in spending my life trying to perfect my inner world as my social status suffers or is indeed non-existent. But this is not all within my control. My memory suffers. My consciousness is suspended. I step back without stepping anywhere at all.

The air is cold on my skin and I don't want to move. Absence haunts the presence of each day and I inhabit this strange world alone. I lie still for hours before hunger coaxes me up and out of listlessness and then the momentum begins. Each

moment is already breezing by, out of control, and all I can do for the moment is fix myself something to eat so that the energy might carry me through the meaninglessness of the world I inhabit. And I often think it might be a good idea to put an end to it. Put an end to once and for all, just like Dreer did. Although, for Dreer, there seemed to be no hesitation. Why do I hesitate to get it over with when there's nothing that I rise for each morning? *You must find something*, you might say, *find something that might invite meaning into your life*. But the curtains have already fallen and it's already dark. And each moment experienced consciously is spent in a simmering sea of doubt. But alas, the mind does not always move rationally. The morning is racing, and each moment passes. Each step and breath and action brings me closer to the death I'll never know, always receding into the distance until one day it will be upon me and all consciousness will be gone. Then I won't remember anything. I pour a cup of tea while listening to bird-song. Soon I will have to take the train to work and my throat tightens at the prospect. I feel that I'm in a vortex of suffering that never ceases. It refuses to subside and yet my consciousness creates it. I sit for the entire morning, paralysed, staring out of the window in perplexity of the processes that are taking place all around me. My body tenses. I think to myself that I only have to make it through another day. Just one more day. And then what? And then I know that all of my hope is folly. Illusory. My attitude needs a gentle kick to the teeth. And through my morning meditation I come to the conclusion that *all* hope is illusory—indeed that everything but the present moment is such—and that everything else is a thought experiment created by the imagination. I tense my knuckles and rub them into my

face. I've lost everything that I ever cared about and now I too am lost. I've been lost for a long time. All I do now is sit and wait to decompose naturally without thrill and without excitement or future hopes and dreams. All is vision and sound and smell and touch and the circles that my mind goes in each day. The processes around and within me go around in their orbits and my mind spins irrevocably with them. All seems so unfinished and undone and there's no way of correcting or shouting back through time to warn myself of how things will turn out. But each moment wasted in bitterness and regret foils the infinite present that could be enjoyed in all the ecstasy of being and one day it will be too late. I will have wasted everything and there'll be nothing left but a final tear and then the limits of this life and transformation into a corpse. But by then I will have lost the ability to communicate or experience anything, obviously. I pack my things for a trip down the coast. I have to get away before I lose my mind completely. It's as empty down there as it is up here but at least there'll be the smell of salt and clean air that I'll be able to take in deeply. My mind is wobbling at the notion of propelling myself down there. I come back to the room and look around. The dog sleeps on his bed after I cover him with a blanket. The winter seems to be never ending but I know that it will end as we ascend into summer. The meaninglessness is either nauseating or liberating. I can't decide. It oscillates, it seems. Even when I was a child I had a deep sense of loneliness. It seems that nothing much changes but merely rearranges and the notion of freedom is limited by my own circular habits and fears that no longer apply. The past is no longer applicable and still I live there as I rot in the present. My hollowness illuminates with the day and

blackens in the night. All memories are whispers that serve to drive me mad as I'm left to contemplate each moment that I've lived thus far. There must be some reason why my skin has become an impenetrable fortress. I let no one in. And yet, I feel just as vulnerable as ever. I am a complicated labyrinth of both hesitation and desire. To get to the centre and to the source of the pain is taking a considerable amount of time. Distractions, in this world, are plentiful. I aim only to put my consciousness back on track and to put my thoughts in a pattern I can tolerate. My mind is a pack of cards or a jigsaw puzzle that can be shuffled and rearranged according to the whims of the wind or the tide. There is little I can physically do but stay sober and live as best I can. It's as though I'm waiting for a change that will never come. I have forgotten the value of the simplicity of being. My experience for so long has been diluted and synthesised. I'm surrounded by the skulls of wild cattle, pigs and kangaroos. My life is pouring out. Little by little it gets emptier and the world fuller.

On the train I hide between the pages of a book. In fact, I often do this in most places. There's something about the train that makes me feel uncomfortable. I think perhaps that it's being in close proximity to other people, packed together in a space too small for the amount of consciousness on board. The world is multiplied through the shimmers on the window. I stare intently at the dark reflection, questioning my sanity like I do on most days. There's a longing to disrupt the order and the awkward balance of equanimity that settles on the people I see. It's one of those places where I look around and question whether everyone there knows they're alive. And at that thought there is a deep calm. There's a disconnect between the

experience and the processes going on in my mind. A resistance arises within me as it often does when I'm on my way to work. The monotony bores the hell out of me and I don't get paid much for the amount of work I do. I catalogue all of the books on the shelves and help the students at the university locate the texts they need. Oftentimes it's thankless work but I tell myself that I make a difference. There's not much more to be said on the subject save the assertion that I long to escape. But no matter what I do I long to escape. Indeed, I'm something of an escape artist but in escaping I enter into another subjective landscape that I long to escape from and hence I can't escape from the constant will to escape. I'm great at inventing paradoxes for myself and then trying to break out of them. And it's all on me. I choose to live the undervalued life that I live and the only person who can change it is me. The routine that I have adopted is deeply ingrained and I have developed a fear of crossing thresholds into the unknown. The older I get I figure the less likely it will be for me to create new habits and to stop blaming myself for everything. It is I alone who suffers the result. My life is senseless. There is no reason to choose to be anything but happy and yet I have not tasted happiness for so long that I have forgotten the colour of its taste. When I see my reflection in the mirror my eyes have taken on a deep seriousness. Beneath my eyes is a greyness. My gaze is one of deep pain and suffering and others must see this in them. I feel that I never want to leave the house again. I never want anyone to see me. At the same time I long to leave this place. I don't know for how long exactly I will stay. The spaces between all of the people I see are growing larger. Sometimes I can barely stand up straight, feeling that at any moment I might keel over from

despair. There must be something I'd rather do than torment myself. Every time I step out the door to wander the accessible parts of the world, futility arises in the sense that I always wind up back at home. It pains me that I feel so tethered to the place I call home. Thinking about change is just another imaginary exercise. It means nothing. Even if I managed to actualise the vision it would equally mean nothing. But at least I'd be taking some form of action, and that's what life is. Life is action and momentum and not merely standing still for fear of what might change permanently for the worse. Time passes either way. There is no such thing as a permanent change, even if it seems as such. The ticking clock mocks my mortality. But even if I don't hear it, my heart still ticks. And the Buddhists say that if we grasp at life in our dying moments we'll be born again and have to relive the suffering. As I reach around, I grasp objects: glasses; devices; edibles. I focus hard on only what is necessary and try to cut out everything else save an indulgence here and there to pass the time. I light the gas fire and bask in its rewarding warmth, focussing only on the warming air that no longer steals my body heat. My presence makes a deep impression onto the moment that marks this very instant in history, a moment that will be lost and that nobody else will ever know.

In the darkness that now surrounded my life I contemplated my position. Only, I knew that if I analysed it too deeply, I would become paralysed into inaction. It was time to create and to facilitate the change that was already taking place around me. Sure, from time to time I would run into fear and into the obstacles that my mind was so used to creating. But I had to break those self-creations and create a new path that

was sure to emerge with the right words and the right actions. Evidently, it was down to me. The last few opportunities that I'd had at forging a connection had resulted in mistakes from a lack of self-confidence. It arose at the point where it was move or stay. And, in sabotaging myself, I had inadvertently elected to stay. How I regretted those lost moments. But I could not allow them to creep under my skin. Not now. Not again.

I had spent the day very productively, studying maps for a trip that I was about to take. By the time evening set in I experienced a deep depression. It was the kind of depression that makes you doubt your knowledge and abilities, opening you up to the possibility that everything you have known in your life has been wrong. Perhaps it was the pain of growth and change, or perhaps resistance to such processes, that had caught me in its trap and deadened me cognitively and emotionally. It was the beginning of summer and all around me I could feel people's spirits lifting around me. And yet, I experienced the profound suffering of being excluded from it. In my mind all was still dark as it had been in the depths of the terrible winter that had only just come to pass. I recognised that I needed to catch up and to live as though I knew that this was not forever and that I was one day going to die. I meditated on death once more. And upon that meditation all came to life.

As the world came back to life my room in the city began to feel smaller and emptier. Once again, the only way to break free from the suffocation of my life was to act. It was time to branch out and still I had no real long-term plans. Usually, I was fine with living day to day, but it became evident that it would no longer suffice. 'Be dynamic', a friend had once said to me when a relationship of mine had gone off the rails. That ad-

vice seemed more relevant now than ever, although I still had not yet mastered the art of reinforcing the boundaries that were dissolving all around me. All conceptual frameworks that were established in my mind were no longer relevant and I had no choice but to evolve. If I did not change I would become extinct, and extinction was not an option. The relentless ruminations had gone on too long and, as I turned around to face the world, all that lay before me was open.

The clouds are mountains in the sky. At the end of this strange experience I will return to the earth and will remember nothing. For a time, I will exist in the minds of others but when their minds eventually go dead, I'll disappear completely. Perhaps none of it matters as much as I think it does and that the imperceptible notion of death will release me from all suffering. Sitting alone in the front room of my house I grab a hold of my mug and take a drink. I feel the need to hold on to something—anything—to know that I'm still here. Nothing can be determined but I can at least seek the truth, whatever it may be. Throughout my life, the truth has been so complicated that I cannot be certain that I know what it is. Perhaps I am made up of a multitude of opinions and empirical observations. And although my life had been filled with interesting and unpredictable characters, it had, somewhere down the line, transformed into a barren moon. The street on which I now live is long—indeed it appears endless—as the light of day once again fades. There are so many options and yet so little, as I crawl through the web that I have spun around myself. And as I watch the light drain from the crystal sky, the universe about to unveil itself, there seems to be absolutely no reason for anything.

The war that had raged inside me for so long had to cease. For so long I had only experienced anger, guilt, suffering, but no peace. Peace was a part of the spectrum of experience that I was denying myself. In fact, I was denying myself a wide range of experiences. For a long time, I exhibited a deep aversion to everything. Life was utterly drained of all excitement, but I knew that I couldn't give up, so I continued on once again.

The first day of summer started with a sense that everything would change. Through the long winter I had made my peace with death. I no longer feared the shadows. The quietness was getting to me. I didn't seem to be able to solve the puzzle that surrounded me. I had been drowning in it. That night I saw the stars for the first time in what seemed like a long time. It was one of those days where the sky had been consistently scenic and the earth more a mystery than ever. But for me, there was nowhere to go but home. I spent most of my time there; I hardly ever seemed to leave. It was clear that I had to get out more, but hours spent wandering around never seemed to be all that productive. If I was to have even the vaguest idea of what I was doing or where I was going I might have been able to attain a sense of clarity for which I so longed. For the longest time I thought I would never find it. If only I could relax and think clearly, I'd be able to really appreciate life. Nothing lasts but I act as though I'll be here forever. I sit in the corner of the room alone by the ticking clock. I hear it and nothing else. I remember the happiness I once knew that I know will never return. What it is exactly that I have condemned myself to I may never know. I pace around the room, occasionally looking out of the window, waiting for something to happen—for anything to happen—but without action or some kind of plan, nothing

ever does. *Are we trapped here?* I have conversations with myself a lot of the time. The voices in my head aren't always the kindest. But sometimes, perhaps with enough wine, I am able to drown them out. I haven't made any new friends in a long time and my life has become everything I had once feared. I had allowed all of this to happen. I had allowed love to slip from my life and so I entered a bleak landscape. I could not ruminate anymore. I could not improve my life by ruminating and doing nothing. Rumination is an endless labyrinth. And my situation had not improved enough to repel the ruminations that still held me prisoner. In order to move forwards I had to free myself of it. It was time to negate it from my awareness. I had lived in many different houses throughout the years. Only one or two had really felt like home. It had all happened so quickly: the call from my dying father and falling under a spell of hypnotic love that I had sworn would never happen again. It is clear to me that I've strayed far from my path.

That night I packed a bag without knowing where I was going. At last, I had been granted some reprieve, with the settlement for my father's house complete and the chaos of Dreer's book faded to memory. I attempted to calculate just how much time I'd lost after reading those passages. *I should have listened to Melissa*, I thought. I had for so long been plagued by the same remorse, wishing I had acted one way rather than another. But this was folly, and in my regret, I had managed only to drive her further away until she vanished from my life completely. I'd prefer to speak of more objective matters, but I've secretly always been the romantic. I had strayed so far from love that I no longer recognised its colours. What had once existed as a frenzy became only a lost desert on some far-off planet. But de-

spite this my life crept on through the waste. It had been empty a long time. I wondered that when Melissa hit the streets, she'd still be looking over her shoulder, wondering whether she was being following by her past, whether they still wanted her dead. She was condemned to live with the uncertainty of death always looming above her, just as every other mortal, I suppose. The earth seemed differently, as though I was standing on a rock in the vast heavens that surrounded. Anything seemed possible and yet, to my mind, not very much seemed to happen. Perhaps it was because I was afraid. There had been innumerable traumas throughout my life and I often sought shelter from the world in order to avoid what else might occur. I wanted to do everything and to be everything, but my perspective of the world seemed so very limited. I suspected that Dreer had felt a similar way before he sought freedom in death. I had often wondered if he had in fact found it, but I would not know until my life ended. For a long time, I failed to recognise the significance of any of it. And although I was free to think of other things, I did not seem to be able to do so. Perhaps my brain followed patterns of predetermined thought and was not free after all. The notion of freedom was one that attracted me but presently I did not seem to be exercising it. I exhibited only the limits that had drawn in so close that I could barely even step out the door. There seemed to be no motivation to do so. I stared at the bag that lay upon my bed, trying to envision what I might do or where I might go, and every time I tried there was only a blank in my mind's eye. It could not envision anything. I was psychically blind to the future. Without any foresight I could not plan for what might've come next. All that I seemed able to do was to look back with disdain and groan as

the light filtered in through the window. I was trapped by the very thoughts that had once been freedom for me.

The lady sitting opposite to me on the train takes several items out of her bag: a chap stick; an asthma puffer. She uses them one after the other and places them back in her bag. She's in her autumn years and that makes her all the more beautiful; she's like an auburn leaf falling in the light of a dying sun. I don't sit across from her for very long and most likely never will again. When I arrive in the city I find the building that I need to be in. I make my way through the revolving doors. The elevators are a kind of puzzle that I can't figure out. Apparently I have to see the receptionist, a lady tells me. She must have observed my confusion. I'm learning. I'm learning not to act like a fool. It does not, however, save me from the embarrassment.

Some people are black holes. They draw in the energy of everything that's good and leave good people feeling drained and exhausted. Currently, I live with one. The present predicament is how and where to take the next step. I've rushed into situations before that weren't right for me and this time I can't afford to make the same mistakes. The sense of urgency that I feel causes me to lose balance and I know that I must move at my own pace and on my own terms. It is almost as though I'm putting up with my living situation to punish myself. In the shallows I believe that I don't deserve any better but this is, of course, folly. I have punished myself far more than any external force has. It is a practice that I must learn to cease. My mind is leaking negative energy.

I walk through the city in a sleepless daze. As I turn a corner at a junction I see a man running with a large handbag and another man chasing him. He subdues the thief, tackling him

to the floor. He holds the thief's hands behind his back. When the lady who owns the handbag catches up, she kicks the thief while he's lying there, quivering, before being dragged into a shop. I carry on walking. The police approach and a woman speaks to them and points toward the shop where the thief was taken.

It's still raining and still I've barely slept. A part of me is wishing this empty time away. I have applied myself too thoroughly to my private philosophical studies and I feel as though I need to take a break from thinking. But thoughts never stop coming and going. Instead I must learn to allow them to come and go like guests. I'm growing more and more curious. All that I once thought to be simple and all that I took for granted is becoming nothing but a predisposition that is not based on any form of reasoning. I stop to question what it is that I'm doing. Otherwise, I would simply be mindlessly driven on. I look around with only a sense of grave uncertainty. Do others feel as lost and alone as I do? Probably. It's of no consequence. I will never be sure if I don't ask. I don't talk to many people, but I read a lot. I think deeply about the nature of things, theories that do not apply to immediate practical reality. In a sense, I'm confused by all the signs. I don't know which way to go. It's as though everything that keeps me going through passion is what drives me crazy. The more I learn the less I know. All of the people that I encounter each day—new people—don't present themselves as approachable. I've noticed a shift in attitudes since I was a child. And as an adult, dedicated to the task of opening myself up, all that I see around me is other people closing themselves off. I try not to feel desperate but I am. I'm beyond the realms of desperation and perhaps at a point where

I no longer need other people. I am perfectly content by myself. But I'm also miserable. Not only miserable but paranoid. Deeply, truly paranoid. I mistake my own thoughts for other people's mental projections. And that's when my head spins and I follow it down, sinking. There's never any knowing where I might end up when that happens. Must I speak for having not revealed enough of myself? Am I here? Are these my words? No. It's all passing phenomena. Exhausted the database of complaints now. Always, something's missing. Could I have done better? I'm too hard on myself. I know how to speak but find it hard to listen. I try too hard to listen. No matter what I do I'm unhappy. In youth it is a mad rush and then. And then. You realise that there is more time. Perhaps more time than you want or need. There are no longer the comforts of youth but instead a long and lonely path through decay and then oblivion.

I'm not a hundred per cent sure what this experience is but I don't think it's going to end anytime soon. It seems that I'm witnessing a period in the life of the universe. Something is unfolding around me at all times but I'm not sure what it is. However, it occurs to me that I've spent way too much time searching for the *point* when really what matters is *flow*. With each moment that passes, a door closes behind me. And with each slamming sound I move toward the future. I fall through all of the traps until I find myself at the bottom. For years I stayed in hiding from the world, barely emerging from the darkness of my life. And I found that there's nothing there at all. Once, I entered a state where I could see past the memories and the unstable constructs of who I thought I was. There, I found a freedom that surpasses all conventional knowledge.

The walls groan and speak in the morning when I wake. Sometimes they are the only voices I hear in a day aside from my own mad ramblings. The air is cold and I don't want to move. Absurdly I rise and go about starting the business of the day. There are never enough hours.

Things are getting worse. I am alone in a room, afraid to go out. Seeing no point in going out. Not going out. Slowly and miserably drifting towards expiration like an egg at the bottom of the fridge. My mind courses through the same avenues again and again, not moving forward and not expanding at the rate that I would like. I tell myself the same old stories that only serve to beat me further down. I'm crushed by the passage of time. I've been trying to practice being calm, but with such a suppression my anger culminates and has to find expression. My patience wears thin. I no longer derive pleasure from the outdoors or from anything. It is like I said to Melissa all those years ago: *I feel dead inside*. I suspected at the time that it would somehow pass and that I'd feel alive again in the future but no. It has stuck with me and each breath brings not more life but only a death that I am compelled to die with each passing moment. And each moment I am born again, too. Hanging on to nothing. To others I am but a mask. Others are a mask to me. And besides all of the logic that I have learned I can see no reason to go on. There is something fundamentally problematic in everything that is experienced. And all these years I have been looking for the combination to a puzzle that I no longer recognise. Every moment has had its successes and failures, but it seems that those moments contained their own treasures; there is nothing left for later. There is nothing to save for and yet I save anyway. It's as though I'm saving up for a grave emergency,

for just in case I wind up alone on the road. I save money out of fear—fear that my freedom may be taken at any time. After sitting I get up only to walk around in circles or to drift here and there. However, soon I will have to leave this space in order to acquire provisions for a long journey. Perhaps I will never return. Perhaps I will die or become lost or keep going, never to turn back. What does it matter? If I should take off, I may as well continue to fly. There is no looking back save through myself or over my shoulder. Paralysed by indecision I remain where I am. I will not move until it is absolutely necessary. There is nothing to do but attempt to fill the spaces or leave them as they are, as formless shapes. I stretch out my arms and finally feel a wash of rest. I have achieved nothing but exhaustion. I see nothing but emptiness. Where there is emptiness there is possibility. And all possibilities return to emptiness. They *are* emptiness. They have no inherent substance and so flow like a river downstream. I swim upstream. Before I started to swim upstream the river was blocked. The dam consisted of regret. Obscured by failings that will never return, I let them go downstream and turn away. All that I held so tightly flows away effortlessly and I find that I'm better off without it. The less burdened I am the lighter I become. The heaviness that I had previously been struggling to digest dissipates. Is this how it feels to be free from all attachments to desire? I suppose that no-one can answer that question for me. No-one can tell me how I feel. No-one can tell me what is right for me. I so long to let it all go. I have started down the path but there is much farther to go. There is limited wisdom in the company that I keep. It is this attachment that I must let go of next: attachment to people who harbour negativity. Anything

that does not aid me on the path that I wish to tread must be gone from my life. All distraction must be expelled from my mind. When I pay attention to the feelings in my gut, I know there's something wrong, that I am not happy. Upon returning home I always experience the same sinking feeling that, in its own way, is warning me of danger. The danger consists of potentially harmful energy that I must protect my mind from. I can hide my mind in the dark but there it is not open to illumination. I become convinced that I have extrasensory perceptions. I can feel the earth moving beneath me and can hear the rumbling of shifting tectonic plates that no one else can sense. I sit awhile. Dream. Decide to leave. Decide to stay. I start with a plan that the earth swallowed whole and will never spit back out. Most other people are out trying to acquire material goods whereas I'm trying to let everything go. I close all the blinds in preparation for the next day's sunlight. There's a good chance there'll be a storm and, if there is, I will allow it to clear my mind of stifled thoughts. All time is now spent in preparation for change. My sphere of awareness is small but it's about to expand. The walls of fear are about to tumble. I'd call it a comfort zone but this would be folly. It is not comfortable. It's excruciating. Missing the world. I've missed so much of it. I guess we've all been through periods where we've missed sections of our lives. Periods of depression and despair. I've seen those landscapes pass by far too often. As though I'm sitting on a train peering through the glass at the barren hills of my life, unable to reach out and change it. But now I'm at the station and I'm stepping out. The wind blows through my hair and I contemplate all that I've missed. And although I ought to be glad, I experience only a wash of dread. Could it be so that I've

left it too long? Is there such a thing as leaving things too late? I know that I have the strength to start again. And although each moment is a new beginning there is no escaping the moments that came before. There is no divorcing the past and there is no way to sever it completely. It is imperative to prioritise with due consideration of one's own impending expiration. I have set in motion an experience completely unknown to me. The truth is that I have an enormous capacity for joy, and I have only lived to learn a fraction of it. Struggling alone with my feelings I rise and fall. I can communicate them to others, but this does not negate them.

When I wake up, I'm nailed to the floor. The distant sun shines on my face. It's agony if I try to move and if I stay still I'll miss the world. Outside the door there are voices. I'm unable to discern what they're saying. Each day is another project in letting go of the same thoughts and the same ruminations. It is my thinking that keeps me nailed to the floor. Perhaps the voices are in my head. The nail is a metaphor. None of it is real in any concrete sense. Every attempt to break free falls short and I wind up retreating. Back to my space. Back to my corner. Nailed to the floor. I still work. Oh, yes, I work and I work. I work at earning money and when I'm not doing that, I work at figuring out what the hell is going on. Rarely do I take pleasure in it. Other times I suffer what seems like endlessness and the only way that I can console myself is with the reminder that no mental state is permanent. The path is filled with danger and I have made the mistake of anticipating it at every turn as opposed only to when it arises. There is a grave difference between foresight and irrational paranoid fear. A strong rational fear of being propelled toward doom. I might not get the

chance to be a human being again. If this is so, how can I afford to miss my shot at attaining liberation? Even I cannot answer my own questions. However, despite this they do not dissipate. In order for them to dissipate they must be acted upon; they must be answered. But in order to answer these questions I must reach out. I must investigate and inquire so that I may not only understand the world at a phenomenological level but also at an epistemological level. It is necessary to see the world for oneself and not merely through the eyes of words. I can't move. I'm nailed to the floor. The nails aren't real, but my mind perceives them that way. It is my mind and my thoughts that keep me stuck here. I could move if I wanted to but then again, I can't. Paralysed by concepts that were created with a view to helping me to understand. There is nothing more senseless than human conceptions that serve only to harm humans. In a sense all concepts are like flies buzzing around a room. And I'm amidst them all, observing their confused wings as I sit, nailed to the floor and unable to utter a single word. The more I struggle and try to move the more stirred up they become. The more that I swipe my hand the angrier the buzzing becomes. The air that surrounds is disturbed and foul. For too long I have harboured negative feelings toward myself and the world. The crushing experience of being at the bottom of a heap. A hopeless heap that grows larger with each passing moment. My vision is constant yet shifting. I'm looking straight down at the floor. The buzzing continues. It never ceases. I want to go outside to taste the air, but the air is just as foul out there. It's all going drastically wrong. The familiar earth that I call home will one day appear alien to me. It already is beginning to. Sometimes I feel that all is coming to a close, but it doesn't. It goes

on. I struggle on alone through the muck. My own mind revealed to me is not a peaceful landscape. But the debt is not as large as I think it is. All of the damage done is not beyond repair, but it will require work. My own actions have led me to descend here. Shifting blame is simply skirting around the issue. It solves nothing and gets me nowhere. I remain nailed to the floor in hell. The flies that buzz around me leave trails in the air. I'm in a daze. The more time passes the less energy I have. Food and sleep can revitalise me temporarily, but they do not solve the problem of mortality. The only way that I know to solve the problem is to live and to leave everything behind, to sever all ties with everything that I once felt was important. So much has or will soon become irrelevant. With each moment of change the old shell breaks. It's difficult to be patient when you know that every moment you are running out of time. And there is no suffering like time that passes when you're stuck trying to change something that's already happened. Each day is a constant struggle against thoughts, but why struggle against thoughts when thinking can be beneficial? If I train my mind to become my ally there is nothing that I cannot accomplish. There is no price tag on the peace of mind that eludes me. It does not cost any money and neither is it external. It does not lie in things 'out there' but in the attitude that I adopt in perceiving them. Years of drinking and drug use has exhausted me. And now, after giving up those vices, I may have a chance at happiness. Rain pours from the sky.

When I wake up in my cage it's already midday. The memories of previous years catch up to my brain and, as I lie there, utterly paralysed, I remember all of the fire in the person I was. For years I've been living underwater, watching the world go

by around me but having little to no impact upon it. On the days I didn't speak to anybody at all, the mass of words would swirl around in my head and, with nowhere to go, would die inside my skull. I fear that today is going to be another one of those days. The truth is, after all that I've been through, I'm most afraid of revealing anything about myself to another human being. It is my own creation that stands in my way, my own shadow pulling me back. And my mind is like a band of warring factions, tugging and pulling and pushing until there is only chaos and panic. As the day continues my skin starts to sweat. I begin to question every decision that I've ever made. And although I'm in no way religious I pray for the strength to climb out of the rut that I've landed myself in. Everything about my life is inadequate and unsatisfactory. It is only halfway moving in my intended direction, and I know exactly which half that I wish to cultivate and which half I mean to let dry out in the sun. It is most difficult to cultivate compassion in a climate that rewards lying and ignorance. But infinite suffering requires infinite compassion. Attempts to uncover and illuminate harsh truths requires a strength that is at the limit of human capacity. It can be a dangerous and lonely path. I blame myself for a lot. I blame myself for everything. I have taken it too far. I see the problem all too clearly. Sometimes so clearly that I am ashamed to admit how many years I lost to the negative spiral. Enclosed by fear and obsessive rumination I knew that eventually I'd have to fight my way back up. Only, fighting seems to add more fuel. Longing for cessation, silence, peace. Vague recollections plague my waking thoughts and it's as though I have a predisposition towards denial and regret. There are so many negative emotions that are just below the surface, ready

to emerge, exposed and then eradicated by the light. Sensitive to the subtle energies that surround me I meditate upon what it is that I can do. At first, these possibilities seem endless but upon inspection and introspection, my abilities are limited by the surrounding circumstances of my life. On top of these lie all mental afflictions that I have fuelled and given rise to. And the more blackness they spread the more they breed. And the more they breed the more they thirst to feed. They've got me in the corner and I can't move or speak. I cannot concentrate. Breaking through the fog of my own life and coming into the world beyond that of my own dreaming, casting numerous symbols out to the furthest reaches of the conceivable universe, all fear that I have ever known comes as the reflection of my own face. It is nothing. In a vision I am a giant and all fear is beneath my foot, ready to be stepped on and squashed into oblivion.

He sits with his drink, nursing the years he's spent on this earth. The sky clears. The earth opens up. Falling once more with nowhere to land. The bar is nearly empty. At a glance, there's nothing to him. Nothing left of him. His skin has taken on a sombre pallor. I look at him as he stares into his glass. I know that I can't be long, but I have to say something. If I don't say anything, I'll never be able to forgive myself.

'Nick?'

At first, he doesn't move, and then he scrunches up his face like an abandoned scrap of paper, as though he never wanted to be disturbed. He looks over at me, unsmiling. I can see that, despite the time that's passed since last seeing each other, he recognises me immediately.

'You snapped me out from my fanciful thoughts,' he says. 'This isn't how I'd have wanted you to see me. It isn't how it looks. I don't usually drink. I guess I was just bored.' I pull a chair from under the table and take a seat next to him. I don't know why he feels the need to explain himself and to give excuses. 'What brings you here?' he says.

'I'm here with... I'm here with my husband.' I hear my voice quiver with each syllable.

'That's nice.' He takes a sip of his drink.

'How about you?'

'I'm here alone.'

'Did you ever—'

'No.'

'You don't even know what I was about to say.'

‘I think I do. Besides, it doesn’t really matter.’

It was nothing less than a collision of worlds. They had drifted apart and had now come back to a dysfunctional unity.

‘I can’t stay long. It was good to see you, Nick. I’m glad you’re doing all right.’

‘You look well,’ he says to me, smiling. ‘I’m glad that you managed to start fresh. I know that it was all you ever wanted.’

‘It was. I mean, there was more that I wanted, but that was the main thing, yes.’

Nick picks up his drink and swirls its remaining contents. He does it so naturally that I don’t believe him when he says he doesn’t drink. But it’s no longer any of my business. During the conversation he glances up at me once or twice but, aside from that, keeps his eyes fixed before him. I want to say that things could have been different, that I missed him and miss him still, but I know that it will do no good so instead I say nothing. A few people walk into the bar. Others leave. This exchange ensures that the bar contains a scant number of people. The conversation runs dry as Nick empties his drink. I get up to leave.

‘Bye then. Look after yourself.’

He looks at me and, in that moment, I’m reminded of all the times we spent together. Beneath the lines on his face, I can just about make out the man that I once thought I loved. What was once the face of the future now belongs to the past.

‘Goodbye,’ he says simply, and orders another drink. No doubt this encounter has shattered his nerves as much as mine. As I walk away the street and the sky spin as my thoughts tumble like old laundry. I’ll have to keep the encounter to myself. I try to recompose myself as I walk so that my husband won’t think there’s something wrong. I doubt he will. We haven’t

been married long. I like to think he knows me well, but he doesn't. I married him out of necessity. I shouldn't think it but I do. I suppose it doesn't matter unless I think it so loud it comes out as an utterance.

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By the time I arrive home I'm still thinking of her. I pour myself another drink, red wine this time, my trembling hand spilling a great deal of it on the desk. I walk into the bathroom and stare into my fading reflection. *I waited too long. My mind is not what it used to be.* I walk back into the bedroom and pack my things. All of a sudden I can't stand to be in this town any longer. Fleeing again. Always fleeing. Never on my own terms. Always out of desperation. *I don't know why I don't just end it.* I take a large swig of wine to drown that thought. There's a darkness that breeds inside my gut. I try not to listen or pay any heed to it. The sense of urgency has turned the air violent and everything I see appears unstable. I don't know where I'm going; I haven't thought it through. Sure enough, I don't want to bump into her again. It's too painful and, next time, I might not be so lucky as to have a drink to hide behind. The cold air gathers as I clasp my knees to my chin. At least here I have space to breathe.

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'How was the walk to town, love?'

'It was... good. Lovely.' I hang up my coat to avert his gaze and realise that I hesitated. To try to cover the glitch, I add, 'How was your night?' I look at him inquisitively while touching my hair.

‘Very relaxing. I didn’t get up to anything much at all.’ His eyes become deeper than usual, the way they do when he becomes concerned. ‘Is everything all right?’

‘Great. Never better.’ I put my arms around him and kiss him. He’s much warmer than I am after being out in the freezing air. My gesture seems to do the trick. He drops the subject.

‘I was thinking, perhaps we can do some hiking tomorrow. Do you think we can manage to be up early?’

‘I’ll try, but I can’t promise anything.’ He doesn’t yet know about the debilitation I often come up against in the morning. He doesn’t know much about the side of me that I hide from him. I’m careful to select what he sees. The rest of the night consists of our bodies touching in the darkness.

I look through the window with my hand on my forehead like the peak of a cap, my eyes squinting. There's nowhere to sit. It's a similar situation all over town. School holidays. Market day. Even in the library I can't find a seat, and I sure as hell don't want to go home. Not just yet. Or ever, really. But it gets awfully cold when the streets go dark. It is then that I seek the warmth of the intolerable building that I call my home. *Not for much longer*, I promise myself, for soon enough I'll be away from here. To others, it may have seemed a place of relative comfort, but I cannot say for certain. No matter where I live, discontentment follows.

The best that I can do is to allow for change to occur. That's where I'm currently caught up, even after all these years, in the net of the past. But I'm going through a transition. A temporary phase, just like all phases. Each day I have to forgive myself all over again and to wrestle with the reason for all the deficiencies in this life I inhabit. Yesterday, something clicked in my head, but today it has reset, as if forgotten, but still it lingers, untouched. Undigested, along with all else that I've learned throughout my life. There's never enough time to reflect. The dust never settles. The wheel of the dharma continuously turns.

Where once there was a sense of endurance there is now a fleeting transition from moment to moment. There's no guarantee that anything will continue. Of course, it is very likely that the sun will come around again. I long for a different path, new and exciting, blooming with promise. Dreer had sought this new path through death. All those years ago. He

had burned his way toward it, lighting his own way in a suit of flame. Sometimes I feel his footsteps touching mine from beneath the crust of the earth, as though he walks a parallel path so long as I cling to life. I don't think of him or mention his name very often anymore. A part of me hates him for the destruction that his memory brought upon my life. But, on the other hand, if it were not for him my present world would be unrecognisable, my life completely different. Someday, in one incarnation or another, I get the sense that I'll see him again, and that the years of endless rumination will finally make some semblance of sense.

I wait in anxious silence for my friend to arrive. I haven't seen Isaac since before the severing of my life. On top of that, it had been a while since I'd had a conversation with anyone in confidence. I was fearful that my social skills had withered.

I see him at the window, about to open the door. He's wearing a long, burgundy coat and his face is older than I've ever seen it. We're old men now, I suppose. His face comes to light at he spots me, and somewhere beneath his translucent skin I catch a glimpse of the youthful version of him that I'd once known.

'Nick,' he says as he takes a seat, 'it's been too long.' I shake him by the hand and then avert my gaze, looking again out the window as though I'm waiting for someone else to arrive. 'I'm going to order a drink. Do you want anything?'

'Yeah, another coffee.'

He climbs back down from the stool and makes his way toward the counter. I can't help but feel that this is all a mistake and that I want to escape. Seeing old faces has become difficult ever since I decided to draw a line and start fresh. But here I

am. Sometimes there is no escape. I surrender to the moment in acceptance of temporality.

By the time he arrives back I've composed myself a little.

'It's good to see you, Isaac.' I can't be sure whether this statement is true or if I'm merely being polite.

'You, too. So, what have you been doing with yourself?'

I hesitate a little as I search for the right words.

'Not much in the way of physical reality, but metaphysically, I've been very busy. It has taken me an awful long time to let a lot of things go and I'm still not sure if I've made much progress. It can be hard to tell, don't you think?'

'I know exactly what you mean. After Jude died, I was inconsolable for a time. I think it's a matter of letting life carry on, without interfering with it.'

'To be honest with you, Isaac, I just want to live a life of peace and clarity. If nothing else, I want that, and not a life marred by substance abuse and depression.'

'Sounds as though you're on a much better path.'

'I am, in a way, but there are times that I still feel haunted by all the things I've been through. It's as if I'm yet to take a firm step.'

'I think that's only natural. Give it time.'

'But how much time am I supposed to give it?'

'Some things don't go away, Nick. Believe me. There are some things that we just have to learn to live with and adapt to.'

He gives a sullen look. It's then that I realise that I'm not alone in my pain and my struggles. I've been locked away, wrestling with my own bullshit for too long without giving a thought to anybody else.

'I guess you're right.'

‘Look, I don’t think that this ought to be an isolated meeting. You need to connect to the world, Nick. You’re making great progress, but you have to take the next step. I can help you. There’s only so much you can do alone.’

‘I appreciate that, Isaac. You were always a true friend.’

‘I just don’t like to bullshit anyone, that’s all.’

Our drinks arrive. Isaac smiles at the waiter and thanks her. She has big, brown, beautiful eyes. I can see that she takes great pride in her work.

‘Enjoy, gentlemen,’ she says before taking off back to where she came from moments before. Life is so simple in the moment. It is memory that adds nuance to nuance. I take a sip, wipe my mouth with the back of my hand, and resume the conversation. For a while, it carries on in much the same vain. Then it slips awhile into a contented silence. Isaac offers me a job, helping him with his business, but I decline. It isn’t that I don’t need a job. I have no income. It’s a matter of principle: it isn’t my project, it’s his. I’ve become quite stern in that regard, hell-bent on finding my own way and my own path. Although nothing exists in a vacuum here on this world, there is only so much help that I’m willing to take.

‘Have a think about it,’ he says. I agree out of politeness, but I am sure that he can see in my eyes that it’s a lie. I’m drifting away from him, back to my private thoughts. In my mind I’m already outside, walking home. It’s at that point that I decide that the conversation is over for the time being.

‘All right,’ I say with a huff and a sigh, ‘I think it’s time I headed off.’

‘Up to much for the rest of the day?’ The question comes as though it were automatic.

‘Not sure,’ I say with a slight smile. ‘Who knows if not me?’

‘Take it easy. And keep in touch.’

I leave him sitting there at the table and take off down the billowing street. For a moment I feel free, but then I remember all of the trappings of the mind that I’m liable to fall into if I don’t take each step carefully. But there isn’t much to be done there, only to keep on top of things. So that’s what I do. I continue to tread water so that I don’t plunge below the surface and into the dark as I used to. Admittedly, sometimes I slip but I’ve become more adept at pulling myself free once more.

Time passes. I wake up and it’s nearly noon. I’m too depressed to move but I know that I’ll feel better if I do. Eventually, I boil the kettle and drag myself to the shower. The water is warm and it washes away the despair. *It’s another day*, I think, *another portion of my life*. I’ve spent so much of it in ways that I never wanted to, mind enslaved by mind. Today is another day where my mind is its own battleground. There is no Isaac nor any other referee. It’s just me and the emptiness.

Eleven

My mind is so clear I can hear the wind. I climb through the light of each day, only to once more fall into darkness. And then, in the primordial night, I am reformed. By the time I wake, life is not completely new. I can remember days passed and feel their effect in the present. The habits I've formed determine my future although I am, with great difficulty, able to transform them in the present. The night of my life is creeping along, and I'm headed toward its dark undertow. The blazing summers of my years have passed, and I descend now, just as one descends a hill and into a deep forest, toward some ineffable resolution. The memories are an anchor that's buried deep and that I long to tear up. It's as though I've long forgotten what I'm fighting each day. The phantoms of mind are reduced to a slither and I can almost see the sun when it emerges, can almost taste the air through the dim hum of thoughts that scatter in the wind. I can almost feel them, hear them. And can almost sense the happiness that is perpetually out of reach.

I came out here, away from routine, to gather some perspective and to try to find a way through. In the silence I try to lose the trail of obsession that has followed me for too many years. I tell myself that I've come here to heal. There's nobody else to talk to, but that isn't unusual these days. At one time I was surrounded by voices and now, even if there are voices, I do not hear them. I numb them out. There's no use trying to listen. Out here, I'm free to be my own cruel prisoner. I don't want to be. I can't seem to be able to help it. It's the disposition I've adopted: bitterness and regret. Anger. It isn't how I want to be. Today

was the first time since I can remember that I looked a stranger confidently in the eye. A woman, too. I was quite brazen with myself. But then, afterwards, I reproached myself for not taking it any further. I'd made eye-contact but nothing else. I ought to have approached her. Uttered something. She was sitting in a car, parked close to me. It would have been strange to have approached a woman in a car. She might not have wanted me to. Her eyes said otherwise but I couldn't be sure. Anyway, the point is, this is what I do to myself. Doubt, doubt, and doubt some more, followed by empty hours filled with regret. Until my mind is crazed and I'm rotting beneath the sun. The flow of my mind. The waterfall. Somewhere along the way an involuntary dam built its way up. Sometimes I manage to steer clear of it but I'm yet to burst it completely. What I need is a surge. What I need is to tap into the energy source that I'm currently only managing to skim. The thoughts of my aforementioned aversion to the woman spend up my thoughts for the day. My grand plans are lost to the fleeting of an unremarkable moment that was of no consequence and that, besides, may or may not have existed at all, and then to the analysis of that moment. No matter, it is over.

There's smoke in the distance, rising above the treetops. The trees shiver in the breeze as the smoke comes billowing out from under them. I can smell the burning wood as I drive past. I'm keeping moving, just as I promised myself I would, searching, I suppose. Searching for a life from somewhere behind my half-dead eyes. The roads seem to go on forever and all there is is duration. I don't encounter very many people, and those that I do observe from time to time appear just as lost as I do, wandering the beaches or the paths along the port. It seems that

there's an image of life that we've all bought into. On the surface I'm in a place that's desirable, but deep down I'm bored as hell. Enough of that. I cannot allow my imagination to atrophy. Perhaps there is happiness, who knows. I never asked anyone. My thoughts go on as usual, incessantly trying to reason their way out of absurdity. It's like treading water—only a matter of time before drowning. I look around at the faces and the demeanour of others and realise that it's not necessary to think all the time. I really ought to give myself a break, but I don't seem to be able to. There is no way to stop thoughts but there are ways to transform them. The time for sanity is over. Further than that—it never existed. Or perhaps it coexists with insanity, constantly at war.

This is the first break that I've taken in years. I'm not entirely sure what happened. Many moments now forgotten. Perhaps not everything in existence can be articulated. There are others I once shared some of my earthly moments with, but those people are no longer in my life to confirm whether the memories I have are real or imagined. They are out there, those people I once knew, scattered like leaves throughout the seasons of the world. Perhaps some have passed on, and others are still breathing. They are scattered all the same, in one realm or another. I drive on, peering at the smoke through the rear-view mirror, the furnace far behind me. Memories come and go like sparks from the fire and if I try to catch them, they recede from view and I'm back in my seat, watching the road that sprawls out in front of me. I am safe here, surrounded by metal armour, but there's nothing to shield me from the torment I am capable of subjecting myself to.

To what exactly am I clinging? The question seems to spring from the darkness between the trees. And for the life of me, I cannot come up with an answer. Pain. Regret. There's nothing positive in my life worth clinging to, that's for sure. I feel myself becoming drowsy. There's a sign by the side of the road. The next town isn't far away and I'm familiar with it. I turn off to refuel and to caffeinate myself. There's hardly anybody about the place. There's hardly been anybody in any of the towns I've visited. Ghost towns. My soliloquy ends when I step out of the car.

It's almost time to head home but I don't want to. I want to carry on, keeping moving and never stopping, travelling, as I used to, to faraway places, always close to my heart, but money is finite. There are certain financial aspects to reality that cannot be denied. They represent the limits of what I can achieve. The thing that I dread the most about heading home is falling back into habitual ways of living. I can only describe it as heading back into the clutches of an abuser. Only, there is no escape, only resolution. I have to work with what I have. That's what depression is. It's self-inflicted, but there's nothing I can do to stop it. I have to carry on regardless. It's a matter of becoming bigger than it—a matter of becoming bigger than all of my fears and hang-ups and inventing the present in such a way that it becomes bigger than the past. I want to believe that escape is possible, but history looms large as hell and tells me that I cannot escape from its shackles. It tells me I'm a prisoner of time and that no matter what I do I can never transcend its limits. But to hell with the abstract voice of history. Even though it's apparent that I'm fighting a losing battle, there is and always

will be resistance. I head into a bakery and order coffee and pie.
I'm so hungry that my body is shaking.

Twelve

Finch wakes up to once again worship the dark object that had once encumbered Dreer. It is abstract and orbits his mind, stealing all of his energy. The air in the room is heavy on his skin and he finds that it is difficult to move. He lies in bed, surrounded by crumpled sheets, trying to find a reason to keep going on but coming up short of any answers. *It isn't worth the hassle*, he mutters, having developed the habit of talking to himself. There often isn't anyone else to talk to. The day burns quickly and will never return. *To hell with it*. The day is only another prison. Air and glass and solitary stones outside the window. He curses himself for all his failings, quickly falling off the path of forgiveness upon which he had barely gained a foothold. He has barricaded himself in his room, heart pounding with dread and fear. His hand trembles as he reaches for a coffee cup, the content of which has gone cold. *There's nothing behind my eyes*, he says as I watch him. And yet I am not there. There is nothing to do for him now but to imagine his movements and to hope that they ascribe to reality. He waits, sitting in the room with his greying hair to his shoulders. *I need to stop waiting*, he continues, *it's as though I'm waiting for permission to begin*. No such permission is necessary. To seek permission to live from another means nothing more than to be a slave. He craves freedom, his eyes search for it in every direction. There are too many memories in this present town. He thinks that perhaps this is the source of the problem. Although, he suspects, he has gone through every excuse in the book.

‘Opportunity abounds for a short time, then withers into dust.’

‘I’m not into hearing that sage bullshit right now. What have you been doing with yourself?’

‘It matters little, I assure you. Anyway, you ought to know; you’re always there.’

‘It matters a lot.’ Finch sits across from his shadow. The world is vanishing. There’s something incomplete in the realm that he inhabits. Something is missing—something that he’ll never be able to replace. Finch is blindly indifferent to all that is happening. Talking is futile. Nothing but hot air that’s swallowed by the silence that surrounds. ‘I think there’s a way out of it.’

Finch loses control and begins to laugh—a deep belly laugh that sounds insidious.

‘There’s no way out of it. Now get the fuck out of here. Go on, fuck off!’ His shadow gets up to leave. ‘Why can’t the world leave me to be miserable alone?’

The world swirls outside the window in all of its unreality. Finch is suicidal but doesn’t have a plan. He won’t kill himself but he’ll go on with all of the ambivalence he has accumulated.

Finch watches the dust particles dart around his empty world. *Alone again*, he says to himself, before leaning back to stare at the ceiling. *No way out*, he continues. *I’ve made my choices*. The sun is already setting and the day has barely begun. The day has been spent trying to recover something forgotten from yesterday. There’s nothing he can do to leave his shadow behind. Instead, it looms in front of him. All of his future is contained in it. He can’t see outside of it. It lures him forward toward its dark embrace and the sun falls away over the hori-

zon. He sits, contemplating a new life that he is unable to see or envision. The television crackles in the corner of the room, the static peeling his brain. He picks up the phone but quickly puts it down again, realising there's no one to call. Not this time. He's at the end of the world here. Nowhere left to run. He sits and, for a time, does not move at all. Not one thought goes through his brain in the all-consuming silence. The world is drunk on chaos. There's nothing he can do about it. A part of him is tearing itself away. Dreer had parted with the image that he had of himself, too. Only, Dreer's image had been that of the psychedelic prophetic poet, whereas Finch's image was that of a traveller and a Buddhist practitioner and scholar. The rift that had occurred within Finch was unmistakable, even to him. For a start, he doesn't talk like a Buddhist anymore. For example, he no longer aspires to practice right speech or right intention. He is now filled with a bitterness that he hates and wants to be rid of. The transformation was not one that he had welcomed. The expectations that he'd had of his life with Melissa did not match up with reality, and he'd struggled for years to let go of that vision. Too late to turn back and gather the seeds that had sprouted in the wrong direction, he could only continue to age alone. Any peace left available to him now would have to come with an acceptance of the facts.

As night pours into the house Finch has a revelation. There's no way that he can prove it but then again, he doesn't have to. He sits all night, his mind suspended in the dark, until the emergence of the sun. The seasons and the elements of the world flow through his system as he sits in perfect prostration, unconcerned by all that usually haunts him. He is released from torment and begins to move freely. There is no more running

and no more stillness. No more Finch or darkness or ceiling or sun or moon or stars. No more booze or drugs or Dreer or Melissa. It's all gone from his mind. Not even the grief of a life lived remains. All that's left is luminous emptiness.

Melissa sleeps deep into the afternoon and, when she wakes, questions whether she's still alive. Her life has changed dramatically and, for the first time in years, she has the sensation that maybe, just maybe, she'll be able to gather the right kind of energy to start again. The house is crammed with boxes containing her possessions. Her paints and art supplies are packed up, too, and so she cannot work on her current projects. She's unsure whether to unpack everything again or to move in with her husband as she's expected to. If she stays in her own place, he won't be able to control her. However, her savings are dwindling. Sooner or later, she'll have to make a decision. Her mother's voice enters her mind, telling her that her life is a disgrace and that she ought to move in with her spouse, but she banishes it quickly. She has no time for any of that bullshit today. She lives now in the quietness. A quietness that had taken some adjusting to.

Melissa, like many people who learn to live a sober life, had grown accustomed to suffering. With the wildness of her early years all but forgotten, she scrambles for new meaning and for new activities to pursue. Like many of those who overcome addiction, she often comes up short. She unpacks her canvasses and brushes and frantically paints lost images. It has been many years since she graduated art school and still she spends her time painting, despite not yet enjoying commercial success. There are too many gaps to fill. Too many memories that are ei-

ther completely missing or don't make sense. Unperturbed and undaunted, she attempts to paint them.

Thirteen

On the shoreline the mast cuts the wind with a haunting whistle of time. It's dark already and I've only just arrived. I put my bags on the floor and walk down the steps. The ocean is cold and chills the bones in my feet. I'm afraid of jellyfish and, somewhere beneath it all, I try to hide my racing heart. I look up at the clearing sky and see the sublime spread of stars through the wisps of the cosmos. All of a sudden, the cold doesn't matter anymore. My existence, if I can call it mine, doesn't matter anymore. All of my invented problems momentarily dissolve into the vast emptiness. They are all habits of conception, nothing more: Fictions created and extended from this 'I'. I see that now. I see it all. But my soliloquy does not end. On occasion, when it does end, the monologue continues. In my often-vain efforts I attempt to tame the voice that rises from the dark. Its syllables reside in the realms of the metaphysical. Each day, the percept comes into view. Every day the same as far as I can remember. A habit of memory, perhaps. Nothing more. I step back, out of the water and in search of drier sand. I have never before seen such darkness. If it wasn't for the cold now creeping back toward an unbearable intensity, I would have stayed there all night, looking up, mesmerised. I crawl back to the motel room in my old car, thoughts echoing in my head again. There's a bottle of wine waiting for me there and I plan to drink the whole thing. Perhaps then I'll be able to enjoy the silence.

Fourteen

The morning is like no other. It isn't the case that yesterday has been erased. The day and night seem to agree to disagree. I lie in bed with far less momentum than yesterday. I've calmed down. The anxiety has passed. The light blurs the window to the world. I don't have long before I have to check out of my room, so I crawl into the shower to wash away my hangover. Outside I can hear the deafening wind. Its empty promise of another day bears down on my mind as I attempt to glide from one moment to the next but stumble at each interval. The mass of gravity around my body is so heavy that I can barely hold myself up. I persevere regardless, allowing the water to wash all my thoughts down the drain.

The beach is as empty as the promise of the wind. The town is quiet. I don't wish to believe in determinism but in this way the day is set. There's no-one around and I'm convinced that I won't meet anybody new. Perhaps my own beliefs ensure this outcome, but I can't be sure. I can't be sure whether I'm being realistic or defeatist. All I know is that it was difficult enough to get out of bed. I'm here now. I'm here and out, peering out over the vast sea. There's nothing out there save Antarctica. Nothing. It's an ocean desert then a frozen continent, and nothing more.

My thoughts turn inland, but there's nothing there either. Every now and then I'll see a wandering stranger. I may say 'hel-lo' but that's about it. I avoid town because I don't want to see Melissa. There's a warning in my mind that no matter what, no matter how much I resist, I can't escape destiny. I can't es-

cape each moment that flows but I can decide what to do with them. The sand crunches beneath my feet that hug the world and hold it close. It's the only home I'll know, this earth. My soles and toes grip it onto it tightly. Even when I'm reduced to ashes this will still be my home. And for all of my longing and complaining, the truth is I love it here. Each day I fight for my right to be here through taking labouring breaths and hunting for sustenance. Each day I draw the inference that in fact I am alive, but I cannot pinpoint exactly where I draw this inference from. There are countless factors at play. I have also accepted that this existence is corporeal and that the dissolution of myself and those I once knew is a product of time and decay. Perhaps I believe that I'm alive because I wake each day, or I at least have the perception of awakening. I suppose it's empty enough here to ask these kinds of questions. But are there any answers? Perhaps I'm not so isolated here as I think. The lives of others have changed my own, and our paths now move as one.

The existence tree stares in through the window, waiting for me to decide what to do next. It appears skeletal against the backdrop of sky. Steam rises from the mug of coffee that's in front of me. I sit on the black leather couch, biding my time. It's inevitable that I can't sit here forever. I'm going to have to move.

I wake up in the middle of the night, feeling as if I'm going to die. Flashes of anxiety. Waves of aching terror coursing through my limbs. If this is the end, then I welcome it. I know it's wishful thinking. I'm not getting away from the problems of life so easily. Aside from several brief flashes of brilliance my life has been truly unremarkable. It has always been a prerogative of mine to find the existence of life remarkable since, against

all odds, sentient beings live and breathe, unable to deny their own existence. However, modern society has a certain way of cheapening experience, often by attaching a price tag. There is a reversal of intent and outcome.

Fifteen

The street is dead in the winter. Everybody stays home or leaves to seek warmer shores. It doesn't matter to me anyway. I don't know anyone here. And even if I did, I'd keep to myself. It's a matter of choice. I have everything I need here, in my mind, especially now that everything's been forgotten. Forgetting was a choice, too. More a compulsion than a choice. I can't relive past traumas every day. I can't wish things were different every day and otherwise do nothing. It serves to only abstract and extract my sanity. There's nothing for me here and yet I persist. Locked away for an endless number of days and nights I seek only to transform. And although I despise who I've become I secretly love who I am. I love the fact that I have forsaken everything I've been taught.

I need to get out of here. I'm running out of time. It's that little voice that chips away at my sanity, driving me out. The voice says nothing new. The once-dancing patterns on the carpet have long been still.

I stare out to sea to escape the world. There are a thousand moments and a thousand reasons to let a thousand things go. I focus my eyes to see as far into the distance as is possible, to see beyond the years spent creating the prison that surrounds me.

The nights are stubborn and don't sway like the trees do. For years there was nothing and then, of a sudden, a flash. From then onward everything seemed to fall into place. But I remain unable to appreciate all that I have accomplished so far. The deeper I bury that which I do not wish to be seen, the shakier the ground becomes. It is certain to me now that a suc-

cession of events knocked the wind from my sails. Stifled my growth. Starved me of direction. The platform that I stand upon becomes too heavy and, inevitably, tips. All that exists on the ground vanishes and falls from the sky and back into place but somehow different—somehow fresh. The voice that tells me that I've wasted my life; that I'm not worth breath, momentarily ceases.

It's no wonder I used to numb myself out with dope. Revisiting old places and people while I'm sober can bring me to this realisation. In the morning it's always the same: a brief moment of euphoria, followed by a slow slide down, invisible to the eye. I try to catch myself from slipping. I do this at every moment of the day as my heart beats through each moment. I often wish that I'd woken up in a different life, but I don't wish too hard. I've seen the lives of others and I neither envy nor pity them. For a moment I'm grateful, but I know that it will once again turn to night in my mind. What I fear the most is the turning of this dark globe. But there is no need to fear it. Not now. Not in consideration of the fact that I have fallen into strangeness and am falling still. The further I fall the more I awaken from the dead. I swim among them through the streets. Some are alive but I can never be sure which ones. There's moaning. There are murmurs in the air. All the breath is utterly wasted and spent no matter what.

I'm clinging to the shore, tired of whispering in its shadows. On one side of me there are cliffs, and on the other the open sea. The wind blows the world toward itself, and then away from itself again. I wander there, in a land between worlds, lost, and trying to keep above the dark waters. Once again, I'm questioning everything. The questioning never

stops. The choices and thoughts and potential variations thereof are so vast so as to drive me toward the asylum. And I'm chasing each day like a dog chasing its own tail. Round and round we go, through the muck and the slow suffering and the occasional terror. In the surrealistic landscape I try to be still. The shadows are moving along with all else in an atmospheric shift of constant change.

I sit in the empty house, smoking, expecting call after call from all of the galleries I've submitted to. The phone doesn't ring. I really ought to pick it up and start hassling the art world, but It's apparent that I don't care. There once was a time that I might've, but I've waited too long. There are too many gaps in my life that I've fallen through. Too many holes that can neither be accounted for nor articulated. It's as though I'm always trying to see through my world, in search of something indefinable and intangible. At least I'm not thinking about Nick anymore. Then again, I'm not thinking about anyone or anything. The world passes by my eyes like dust floating through a room. And I'm gone again—vacant, indifferent, dispassionate. When the phone does eventually ring it's my husband on the line.

'I don't have to ask anyone's permission to live the life that I want to. But from the moment I could speak I've felt that I've had to.'

It's silent for a moment on the other end.

'I think we all feel that way, honey. We have to fight for what we want, and for what we believe in.'

I often miss his voice as well as his presence when he's working away, and his is the only voice that I have to give me a perspective that differs from my own. He's often so far away that I question whether I'll ever see him again.

‘And what do I believe in?’

‘Whatever you choose.’

‘Isn’t it too late to choose? I mean, I should’ve chosen by now.’

‘Mel, look, it’s okay to question where we are in life. It’s okay to not have all the answers.’

‘Thanks.’

‘Always remember that no-one can give you your freedom.’

Sixteen

To be alone. That's all that I've ever wanted. It's all I've wanted since I lost someone close. People would crowd around, not knowing what to say, only to make the void loom all the larger.

For once, I manage to get up early. I've been trying all week, all month, all year. Trying to fight my way through the layers of indifference. Today I get up to write early before my brain catches up with me. The air around me is as cold as ever. I've been sick all week and barely able to move. Only now am I finding the strength to fight against it. I don't know where my strength comes from after all the years of ruin. It is as though I am a mere shadow of those times. A part of me endures but not my self in its entirety. What is left is the consciousness that managed to break away, the shards that survived all the collisions of the past.

• • • •

'I tell myself every day, "Things are going to be all right, Nick. Things are going to be all right". When will things be all right?'

'They already are. You just have to learn to see it.'

Isaac raises a concerned eyebrow. Across the café, two monks are sitting across from one another, drinking lattes. It's already early afternoon. I had hoped to accomplish more with the day.

'Suppose I change the pattern of my life. What then?'

'Don't be too hard on yourself. You're in the midst of it.'

'There's only so much we can say, isn't there. Only so much we can try to express.'

'Nick, you're thinking too much. Try not to overthink.'

'I try every day.'

'And what?'

'It's no use.'

'Bad day?'

'Something like it.'

'There will be bad days. And there'll be pain. Keep going, you're on the right track.'

'But how do I *know* I'm on the right track?'

'You have to believe that you are. From where I'm sitting, I can see that you are.'

I take a deep breath in an attempt to curb my growing anxiety.

'I saw her, you know. When I went away, I saw her.'

'You saw who?'

'Mel. She was there.'

'And?'

'She saw me, too. We spoke, briefly.'

Isaac pauses to take a drink and my words are left hanging in the air. They're all I have left since I gave everything else up. I use them now to fill transient rooms.

'So, what happened?'

'Nothing of importance. She's married now and, well, fortunately she didn't hang around and that was that.'

The monks get up from their table and head out into the wind that blows their garments. It's the kind of wind that might strip existence to its bare, empty truth.

'You've moved on too, Nick. More than you know.'

'What have I moved on to? There's nothing in my life.'

‘That’s where you’re wrong, Nick. Just because you don’t have a lot of the things that others cling to doesn’t mean that you have nothing in your life, don’t you see?’

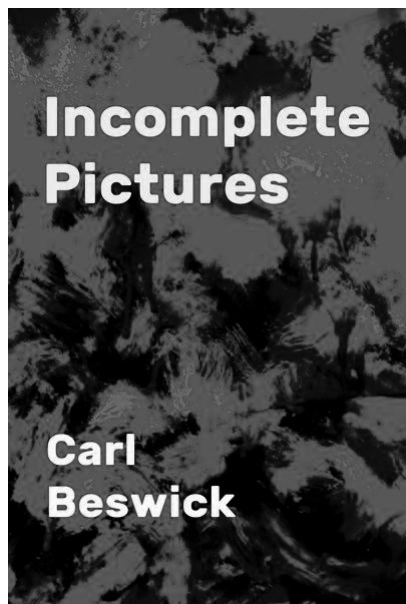
‘Once, I might’ve.’

‘All of those things that people have. They’re liable to lose them, too. They don’t last. Impermanent things cannot make you happy. They are tragedies waiting to happen.’

I know exactly what he’s saying. I’ve heard it all before, even believed it, once. But now I’m too jaded, so much so that I cannot see the life that’s in front of me. My thoughts are a cyclone of obsession that the slightest thing triggers full speed. Just the utterance of her name has sent me into a spinning daze. I’m no longer in the café with Isaac, I’m somewhere in time with Melissa, and we’re both young again. Back in the café, I excuse myself and get up to leave, leaving Isaac sitting there alone, just like I did the last time. Only this time I doubt that he will agree to meet me again. At this point I don’t care. My head and heart are pounding so loud that all I want to do is evade all public view. The street appears wobbly, as though nothing is solid. My own thoughts are laughing at me, making sure that I know how much I’ve failed throughout the years. *It is my own fault that I lost everything dear to me*, I tell myself, my own attachment to desire unwilling to be extinguished for good. If I cannot be with Melissa, then this world means nothing to me.

The street is cold as I wander far from the café. It has been winter for too long. As the sky threatens rain, I realise there isn’t much to do but to go home and to be alone. I could walk awhile longer. I could allow the sky to open up and take me beyond its azure horizon, to walk among the stars.

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



Incomplete Pictures is an experimental novel that explores epistemology and metaphysics, particularly in relation to Buddhist philosophy, existentialism, and avant-garde literature.

At the outset of the novel, Cornelius Baker-Smith finds himself reborn into the world and possesses the ability to remember past lives. Through these memories, which are closely connected to dreams, he is able to deduce that the world he inhabits is a façade that conceals an inexpressible truth. Cor-

nelius becomes torn between personal enlightenment and the potential for the liberation of all beings.

As the *bardo* state dissipates and its formlessness gives way to form, our narrator finds himself in an increasingly strange and uncompromising world. This sense of the strange and absurd opens the text to philosophical questioning of its own inherent and fundamental assumptions.



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.

