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This work has not been submitted previously in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mark Curry', written in a cursive style.

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OHNELAND

by

Mark Curry

University of Cape Town

- Is traditional story. To our old times culture. Is story to great pitiable. Sorrow. You can understand? So is young girl, Miss Sim-chung, have blindness father. No can to see. But Miss Shim-chung, she can to love her father very, very much. She want he's to be seen again. So the fishers - to that folk story - they can receive the rice, something sacrifice. Is like sacrifice: so peoples then they is can to be healthiness once again. Is praying system. Something like that. So usual every people's give some rice to fishers. So fishers sacrifice to Fisher King inside sea, down. Throw rice to him's give the good lucky. But Miss Sim-chong have been too poor. Too much very poor girl. So she sacrifice life, hers own. She go. You can understand? She's go because she no have the rice to give fishers, Fisher King. So she's die. She's go down bottom sea and getting the new once again life to ... from Fisher King. Later, some time, she's getting chance go come back hers home. When she's return her home, his father can to be seen again. Peoples was very surprised about that thing. Is happy story, somehow. About love of Miss Shim-chong to her father. It ... wait a moment, please ... It is Filial Piety story.

She closed the pages and looked around sharply as one who has exceeded some unspoken limit. There was no comment from the other students. One yawn was softly prodded back out of sight by a discreet palm. Perhaps they had heard this story many times before and could no longer be impressed. The silence became a rupture in the value of the time: the money that had to be paid for it. The English lesson. Their eyes became expectant once again. A pencil's tiny step dance ceased altogether. But there was no language on hand to lend any help, it seemed.

*

Through the bus window the airport's name suggests itself in English. It appears suddenly to interrupt the effect of all the orange air and dust that typically collars and upsets the skyline of the city even on fine days, even this late in the year. Like a good mother hen he keeps considering his pieces of luggage, counting them, placing them. He fingers the tag that bears his name and considers that, too. There is still alcohol in his blood and it makes him fidgety. It picks at the pustules in his heart. He knows he will fumble as he hands the documents to the glossy assistant behind those overlarge check-in counters. The words on the tag remain unfamiliar, unpleasing, and one in particular, the surname, makes him grit his teeth. But he knows how he will answer when the time comes, and without confusion too. If they ask for a birth date, he can give that confidently. He has long wanted to flick off the names and all they entrain, but because of a sense that there is time enough for this pursuit and a wariness of the bureaucracy involved, he has not been

hasty. Into the future he savours, as it were, the timing, if not the planning, that the full move to a new name entails. And he knows how he will behave in the terminal as he manages his *Flughafenschmerz*: he will check the boards, endure brief flurries of panic, shrug off goodbyes as gently and quickly as possible and then, when all is set and there is only a spell of waiting to be done, troll around the duty free places watching the exchanges and wondering what, if anything, he might buy before he leaves. He has come to see himself as a leaver of such consistency and variety of situations that it surprises him when people question his experience of himself as a foreigner in different lands. He is more often cornered by the foreigner in himself.

The bus makes its broad, majestic sweep up to the terminal for him and wheezes to a halt. When it is his turn, he passes by the driver's white gloved hands, the black sunglasses, and extends thanks. Abruptly, the doors shut and the bus pulls out.

*

You can come and visit if you like, it's on the third floor of that apartment building on the corner, 301. There're two other apartments on the landing just like it. That is a building, by the way, that very nearly burned down during the winter in what would have been a fine comedy for this neighbourhood except that a woman, who nobody really knew and who evidently lived, or at least sometimes stayed, in a small storeroom at the back of the garage, died in that fire. I took a look in there the day after it was put out: just a storeroom for any beggar's quantity of stuff. And also the remains of a bed on the floor, bedsheets and some sort of clothing lying all over it. In the corner, a wash basin, some personal effects: toothbrushes, some toiletries; on the floor a few pairs of shoes. A lot of it was surprisingly undamaged - the fire, I think, didn't get in there until the end - but everything in that room had been drenched. It was black and stank like hell. You might say, Imagine dying like that! Suffocating in an inferno, poisoned by all the fumes of paint and chemicals that lay about in there on the floor and shelves! But you know what I think? Imagine living like that. Every damn day is a compound interest loan. And this city must be full of people living in holes just like it. Actually, some people around here think she died before the fire and the fire was designed to cover up how that might have happened. That's apparently what the police think. Mystery. Anyway, the gutted cars and bikes haven't been cleared out - some official order says they've got to stay that way until the investigation is finished. And soon it's going to be spring. But you stand if you like, sit down if you feel better that way, and I'll tell you about the comings and goings of this avenue. We're part of it all. That's what I think. Sure, you can put your feet up, I'll make coffee. The gas range, as you see, has to burn continuously - the fire damaged something in the underfloor heating system. And, believe this, it took a week to clean my room up. But you might as well pity the guy in the basement apartment: seems the building has shifted on its foundations - there, you can see the cracks in the walls, they're new - pipes

broke and his place, in addition to getting caked in smoke and soot, was flooded as well. We're still here. God knows for how much longer, though.

University of Cape Town

One

Onwee. On we go. Morning came in the darkness as a twitching of toes in want of blanket. Hanging in the darkness was the regular twig-snapping of the clock, announced afresh, all out of time with the roughness of Niall's face on the pillow. With distaste he smelled the dead breath he had been breathing into it.

His sleep amputated, he took leave of the giver of things otherworldly and tempting to dip into. Gone was the smile of his mother from the pine wood interior of somebody's kitchen. The neighbours all those years ago from around the bend, maybe. Where had they moved to with their grandmother from Canada? She had seemed an odd one. Always giving treats to the kids of the street and unable to speak properly.

Niall shoved the clock back into the thicket of coin, paper and fruit peels on the narrow desk against the far wall and then curled his back over his knees. The mattress gave off a synthetically odious breath that smothered his own morning staleness. Briefly his brain relaxed, leaned against the crucifix of hour and the city. He forgot about his arms and later had to wag them about urgently to get their blood back into circulation.

He squeezed out of his room and heard the lisps that his feet, sticky from long sleep, made on the linoleum floor. Rounding the corner in darkness he banged once again into the barrow of red flowers that was meant to lend a cheerful Christian spirit to the month. Wincing and hobbling and defying Christ he tried to listen for sounds of arousal from Choi's room. He thought there was devilish chuckling coming from somewhere but couldn't place it. He was alone in the showers. Hot stringy water in the tiny pimple-pink cubicle helped make sense of his skin. New Lemon Sexy Mild shampoo ran from his head in agitated lathers. At the end, though, he couldn't keep his towel from falling into the residue of accumulated human scruff and hair that lay around the drain of the cherry coloured tiles.

The streets were still clabbered in darkness. Neon signs blazed in silence above the jubilant march of traffic already well underway. Trees in a strip that bridled the avenue were stonycold and bare. The hands of the street cleaner busily whisked the sidewalk free of recent passings by. He wore a woolly cap pulled well down over his ears but only a simple sweatshirt covered the stout old dog's belly he kept. Niall tugged his own jacket closely around the shirt he had earlier sniffed out and waded towards the convenience store for his chocolate and milk and the English language daily. There was work soon to be done, students and the boss. He used his trivial routines as a firewall to keep those other forces at bay for as long as possible. Where he now walked the harvest of filth and droppings was already gone. Nearby, Best Driver taxi-cabs with burning rooftop eyes roved softly, spying on the street corners for custom.

He found himself soon after 9 am outside the subway's granite jaws, his duties as a teacher of conversation complete for the morning. A current of people warm-tongued it out of the great hole, heading for their offices. Some glanced at him without curiosity. Some smoked on the march, others casually hocked up nubbins of phlegm onto the street. Niall, in turn, liked looking at them: their sharp, tightly-fitted clothing, the serious eyes of suited men, the hurrying clatter of women on stilty heels. Perfumes, make-up, slim shapes, prominent chests and their personal tufts of misty breath on the frigid air.

Once he had returned to someone a subway ticket that had accidentally been dropped, and received a smile and a bow in response.

He usually ate pastries and drank coffee in a nearby bakery and attended more closely to the paper's details. Over time, he watched as the city took place around his feet: first streets, then shops, then the district - all clothes-pegged to the subway line exits. To negotiate the way from home to workplace he had added bus shelters and municipal garbage cans to the subway exit numbers. The unobvious fixtures worked best. The function and presence of places like the acupuncturists, karaoke bars, barber shops, public baths, multitudes of restaurants and convenience stores fitted into his system of priorities like the rudiments of a language and rested there before subsiding as a thing already well-read, though he once stopped short before a sudden dip in the paving of a sidewalk he had thought he knew by heart.

Two

I don't know about you but I don't like to give my name out too easily. Not here. This is my name card, call me up sometime. We can go out and get a beer. I know some great bars not far from here. Yes, it just says Jim. That's the number. The phone's registered in the name of a friend of mine. She's in Canada right now. This actually is her place and I pay her whenever I can. It's about the only income she has as far as I know, so I try to keep the payments on time. I've got someone at the bank who helps out. There's a lot to tell you about this place, this city. Just about every day, I go out and some crazy thing starts up: like this woman who runs past me down the stairs, into the street, in a negligee yelling like hell, a guy in underwear following her. That was a week ago. Or the taxi driver who came past me over the curb, took out the newspaper stand at 11 am, totally drunk. Couldn't even get out of the car. I look around and I know this could never happen in Canada. I mean, before my dental problems started (well, that's another story, and before that there's the other thing about Lee Yun-hee, related in a way) a school friend called me up from Canada. He's just retired! Accountant, got the policies, the wife, two children, two cars and a vacation home on the lake. He's through with work. And I'm thinking, that's great. Wish for it. It would be really nice. But imagine 25 years of work in more or less the same environment just so you can have that. I wouldn't have cut it. I would have gone stir crazy a long time before. Anytime those kids or office workers get a bunch of guns together and go rampaging about, I say, Yes: that's about how it all balances up. It's not good to do that, but you can understand that people lose control a lot of the time these days. So I don't question that kind of behaviour too much. All I know is that I wouldn't cope with that lifestyle, the citizen status thing, I mean, and they don't spend a lot of effort to advertise any alternatives. I know my own nature. It's not for everyone - this living in a condemned house in pretty much a condemned city, in Asia where you're one among seventy percent of the planet's human population - but it's okay for me.

Three

Down there in the basement of the city, the subway warren, the closeness of all those people was more actual. Men standing nearby produced a fug of garlic and cologne and spicy pickled cabbage. Niall decided to go north. He got into a train and moved up behind a woman to be near her citrusy odour, her antidote to male heavy air. He breathed her in over the cheap, baubled strap of her shoulder bag. The woman shuffled a little to the side, provided Niall with a sharp glance, then moved well away, snug against a man and his newspaper. At the next stop she got out, stumbling a little as her heel caught on someone's shoe. Niall hadn't meant it that way. He put his hands into the jacket pockets to prevent them getting minced between other people's bodies. New people got onto the train and it became crushier. Weren't there men who pushed commuters onto the trains during rush hour, canned the flesh, so to speak, their hands officially prepared for the job by means of white gloves; and men who cut at the women's skirts with their private blades?

A set of people fed patiently off another's newspaper since there was nowhere else to look. A new woman shifted against his cloth-hidden hand and kept herself there, rubbing gently at him through the lining of his pocket with every slow-hipped twist of the train's metal, the thrilling shudders and squeals. Niall could only sniff at her unwashed hair, the back of it; he could see nothing. He was worried about falling into her with his teeth bared. There was her shortness, her agitating movements, and the steady accumulation of sweat under the brow of his lurid purple ski-cap. He kept his eyes on the coloured wormy map of the subway system that jerked gently just a metre from his nose and tried to think only of the place names as they occurred in bold English typeface. He washed their new sounds around in his mouth.

As the doors flushed officiously open, a black backpack stuffed with things moved off behind the ugly clump of soiled hair, joggled a few feet above the ground, made its way in steady, dumpy hops up the stairs. The doors mouthed to, the train surged in exultation. Mostly diminished, Niall felt himself lurch backwards.

The train drew near the hub of urban mischief in the downtown area and the crowds thinned. Like buttons of ice broken off a glacial tongue, the kids in puffy jackets, their neatly combed sprigs of hair shining sweetly in the iced down fluorescent light of the tunnel, bobbed off slowly. Fewer grannies scrimmaged in the passenger queues aiming only for good seat pickings. Discarded newspapers were posted all over the overhead luggage racks. Downtown, Niall changed to the purple line, an untried colour, and went westish for a few minutes.

The sky outside was depressed with thoughts of snow. Exit number two blew in a blizzard of chilly jackets. Niall took note of a landmark post office and walked along in search of a bakery. Crisp chewiness, hot dark liquid, a skyburst of aromas and the proper colours for a cafe accommodated his mind.

From a shop door up ahead a thick, grey tail whipped out over the pavement and back again. Niall stopped for a bit to watch the woman wrestle her mop. She slapped it on the floor, thrashing, shoved the mane back into a spent bucket of water. They looked like two beasts struggling. A man sat on a cushion on a raised portion of the restaurant sipping tea and watching a television drama. Someone else, a second woman, was busy in the kitchen removing bowls from a huge-chested refrigerator. Nobody paid Niall any attention. The floor cleaner threw smelly water out onto the street and went back inside closing the door with a hiss.

There was no animal shit about. There were no animals loose or on leads. He felt a sudden pang of desire to be implanted again in a city in Europe: brass railings, wrought iron, dark wooden tables, cobblestones. Tuxedos and steel platters, that calm and haughty service. Instead he found himself caught in a torrent of forms all confused. From behind the restaurant door a voice bellowed rudely. The inner organs of a bus ground, crashed into the flash of a street signal sprung green. Cars, motor cycles, cell phone addicts, shop shutters raised to the skies babbled in cacophony. A woman was expelled from a bank; spittle; refugee butt ends scattered; the shlick-shick-kack of gutter cleaner's tongs; slappy-clap feet off to classes; urban manure from garbage bags, slimes escaping, chasing the bigger tributary of the traffic. A nearby bicycle was strung like a jewel in the necklace of ornate golden streetlamps that ran up the avenue's throat. And Niall didn't know which way to turn.

Four

- Do you like Hollywood Movies?

- But as we know ... as we know. The speaker, whatever his name was, stopped, as he often did, to gather something handy from among the congealed bits of language fermenting in odd parts of his mind. Whether he had anything to say or not he coveted speaking time.

- Know what? What do we know?

- Well, problem is America. We have American Dream here. They's export some technological something, but we are not notice how they can so busy, even.

- So busy what?

- Well, actually, they is busy export theirs culture. For our side. So we's addict now many things. Isn't it? Movie, hamburger, business suit, so on. Baseball.

- What do the rest of you think?

- We have too many American our country. Usual no good quality kind peoples. No education. Some can't even to lite their name, very stupid. They lape our national womans, many fighting, stealing. We are angly to that infruence our society. So we think them some kind conquelor.

- I like elotic movies.

- I'm sorry. Could you repeat that? One more time, please. The clock, perched high up on the wall edged it all far too slowly towards closure.

- Elotic movies. I like many. Like forno. Sometimes I very lonely.

- Yes, but in my cases, I like homo style. For example, "Priest". You know that one? I have ever seen it, that movie. How about you?

- We don't homosex, there is no the homosex something in our country. This Confucious society, is no the homosex parting to our culture.

- I want say another something. Is problem to the grobalisation. Times is taste. We want somethings. Now we has the money, much money. Also to our desires. But usual we pay more too much for that something. American very good that cunning. Business style. That's how they do. White people's think. They know we want somesthing because we was poor. And is too expensive: they do like that. But we must to pay. We are like student; they is teacher. But soon we gonna be very angry to that teaching. They is sometimes no can recognise what they're do. When we recover this our economic, they must to be feared of us.

At that moment everyone started speaking in their tongue at once.

Five

Niall's home was on the third floor of a building that was not twenty years old but beginning to show signs of decrepitude - cracks had mutilated the spaces between windows and the paintwork was already ruined. It lay to the south of the city's grand river, the rich portion. The rooftop gave an aspect onto a fat highway doing its best to satisfy one of the slim bridges stepping over the water and into grey and dusty citiness beyond. Through the unclad trees was a fine view of the bankrupt hotel that lay on the far side of the road. It had been sold to a foreign group called Hedgegrow, a surprising name for a consortium with such a fabulous amount of actual cash; but Asian business and economies had been full of surprises in recent months. Workmen were busy making a mountain of gaily coloured sofas out in the ribbon of space between the flyover and the bridge. Niall watched them in the afternoon's remnants of light. Close, low cloud the colour of old poached egg made him feel gloomy. He went back downstairs.

He spooned a double lip of the ownerless Australian honey into his cup and poured water over it from the pot in which rice had been burnt and gouged out many times previously. Below him on the street shoulder beyond the pock-marked parking lot was the usual pair of old women who always scrubbed, rinsed and scooped vegetables from various buckets of water for the eatery they worked in. They worked steadily and cackled amid their chatter. There seemed to be no economic crisis for them, nor likely change to the daily round.

Up around the extractor fan of the kitchen the wiring had spawned lianas of sticky black dust. In the wall of the building opposite was another fan whirring vigorously. And the city was made up of millions of them, all communicating in volumes of stuff whirred out, in particles and in strings too thick to be exhaled. They were the lungs of the city: collectively busy clogging one another up with exhalations. Down below, with shrieks and grunts and the farts of gear changes, the vehicles were trying to crowd one another out.

Someone walked into the kitchen, looked briefly at Niall, filled a glass of water from the dispenser, drank deeply, tipped out the dregs, then upended the glass on the dish rack before departing without a second glance. The honeymoon was clearly over.

The home had four rows of compartments, 48 human being-sized spaces identically kitted out with bed, shelves, desk and TV. There were communal showers, toilets, linoleum floors and the kitchen. In the beginning there had been jollity. Kitchen parties blossomed spontaneously: friendliness, cheap tobacco smoke, shot after shot of hard liquor and a constant stream of wage earning lies issued out from evening until early morning. Food was shared, questions about money drawn and calculated swiftly on envelopes. Sometimes snow fled to the streets past the warm window pane which brought all chatter to a stop for a few moments of cheer and greeting. Once, Niall bought alcohol and snacks in big enough quantities to

offset the rumours that English speaking westerners scrounged a lot. He was eager to pacify that little league of cooks, engineering students, lovers, dogsbodies, caddies, indeterminable freelancers and computer serfs. He wanted to be included. Complaints put all the fun to an end: drinking was banned, so were the parties, followed by smoking in toilets and the kitchen. For a time various short-notice events were fixed in the hallway or passages for select company, and the parties would take place in the overhushed pocket of someone's room. Soon they too were extinguished. The state of the house matched that of the economy and with the goldhunting days clearly over, the funsters began to leave town. One went south on rumours of employment, another to his hometown because of complex reasons involving family. Lee took his masturbatory brother away to the harbour cities. Gnomes and tidy types remained, living silently. They ate, washed, slept, worked and churched. The place became a submarine inhabited by a crew of unsociable mutes. And there was Choi, the plump oddity who tried with sleepstale grins in the pre-dawn to feel Niall up in the corridor or showers as often as he could keep to his vigil.

In the evening, Niall left his cubicle and went to the convenience store. He bought a tub of Mr Big instant noodles, the light brown kind, tore off the foil strip, saddled the bucket with boiling water from the store's dispenser, added desiccated flavouring and vegetables and waited for a few minutes. Then he used the disposable wooden chopsticks to poke the food into his mouth, the way he had learned by watching the young people do it on the very first day of his arrival. After the meal he tipped the liquid junk into one plastic receptacle and the inedibles into another. Then he bought a bottle of beer for smugglery back into the submarine.

In the lee of a bank's stern-faced doors lay two students, a man and woman, cradling one another in alcoholic agony. Some fresh vomit lay like a palette of soft paint colours at their side. Niall looked about him for a moment. Two bouncers stood arguing with a belligerent patron in the near distance outside a nightclub for the middle-aged. Pricks of his history split through his skin like sweat.

Six

I've got no time right now. I've got to get this stuff back to my place and then I'm going for lunch with this one guy I was introduced to. I mean, this is my life, this is my life here! Yesterday they cut off my hydro. I've got no hydro. I spend the whole day running around trying to borrow money to pay the bill and get reconnected. Today I'm having lunch with a government minister's top aide. So you know what that means? It means I've got to take a shower. And on top of all this, I got the report back from my dentist: nearly all the teeth have to be replaced. Something about titanium rods, I checked it all up on the internet; it's exactly as he says. They're all bitten through, my teeth - it's just old age. That's what happens. But here's the catch: it's going to cost 12 000 dollars. And I can't even pay my hydro. Next week the gas. And I've had the range on as a heater for months now. Gotta go. I'll catch up with you later.

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Seven

- Is it possible, I'm ask you?

The great Changing your Toilet to lean and cultrual space with Dai Hon Cleansing Device.

The line-up of mugs, coffeess and decorated with happy slogans, fronted a row of smooth-skinned, dusty black stones of various sizes. The pages were set down one beside the other on the desk of the front office. They had been faxed through.

1. *Automatic*: After having a bowel movement, tough the button for cleaning and water moving back and forth will wash your anus and deep wrinkle parts around it wholly. Touch the button and you will enjoy cleaning anus for 40 seconds and drying it by warm wind for 120 seconds repeatingly.

- So, what you think? Is it possible? Just only this much. Just a little.

- I think so. But I'll have to see.

2. *Dehydrating function*: You will feel as fresh and comfortable as you are in the forest or the beach, for *Dai Hon Cleansing Device* ventilates the toilet and dehydrates the stool in it. as everyone uses the new water springing from the automatic cleansing nozzle whenever he/she touches it, a lot of people can share it. One nozzle for cleaning anus and the other for female will be able to make consumers as happy as you can.

- It will be big helpful only you can do this, can fix this thing. For my wife family. Situation is very hard like nowadays. Everybody need make some dough. You know my saying?

- But I have never heard of such a thing. I hope I can understand what this is about.

- Dough, never mind. You can do, I'm think so. Just fixing, changing English, some little time.

Barbs of gold flashed in his teeth, the requisitioner's smile, like circuit messages down a bright wire in the rain.

Various plaques and photographs were pinned to the wall at the back. One certificate said, The International Society For The World Union. *We hereby have great ... and welcome you as a member to the World Peace Ambassador.* A pot plant stood to the side. Other messages of congratulation, an honorable discharge, a medal, a degree. And rows of cassettes by now old and showing off like bark rings their years of exposure to the city air.

6. *Warm Stool*: A warm stool is always keeping on, so you can enjoy a comfortable stool in winter.

Dai Hon has manufactured the *Cleansing Device* with high fashionables and the most nobles preparing for cultural life in the 21 Century. All the customers have been satisfied with its spirit and efforts for them.

The fax machine sat bulkily in gun-butt brown on the reception counter. Nearby was a pile of used stationery recycled for use in the photocopying machine. And outside through the big, draughty window lay another lame night in waiting. What had the boss said about money?

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Eight

Everyone in the city, Niall one of them, thought about money, counted it, waited for it, calculated futures for it, lamented what was lost. A man on the corner near the fruit seller's van scaled slickly through a wad of notes and computed what he had found in a small notebook. A second man stood silently by, looking nowhere special.

Further down the street action was underway, the city's aesthetic surgery. A cafe was busy being disembowelled. Piles of couches long since having last seen natural light were being banked on the sidewalk by workers in red-fingered gloves. Stains of past liquids, burn marks, flowers of inner foam stuffing exposed through slashed material made a sour show of economic detumescence. In all the commotion was a shadowy process yet at work: a bullying boss anxious to gain a foothold, at first; then the same one looking relaxed on the phone, ignoring certain signs. Comfortable, liked, secure. Feeling like a pasha. A moment later carried out by the heels as a recession-time stiff.

The neighbourhood was active with distress. In the subway, a private bankruptcy came into view between the pillars, the turnstiles and the Cleopatra Wedding Hall's lush garden display complete with water wheel and oasis feature. An aging woman squatted down on her heels, a still hand to her brow, some important thing gone from her keeping. People moved carefully around the packages that lay in mounds about her. At first as Niall neared she did not stir. Then she lifted her head and he saw clearly her lined face and a mouth that made him curious. Perhaps it was the bitter things that seemed appended to the way it was shaped that made him want to spend some time with her. Her skin and the cupping hands were stained with antique sunlight. Slowly by he walked, unable to offer a touch, shying away from language in case some inept thing should come pouring out. He imagined absurdly a hymn or a country song. There had been another one like that weeks earlier. Creased jacket, tie worked into a skew about his neck, adrift outside a train, head hung low, empty of puke. No way quite back into the city nor the home of yesterday. The decrepit furniture of the economy. Soon Niall's hand touched the comforting cold steel of the turnstile.

Niall calculated his income, savings, ways and means of improving the lot, his retirement. He owned virtually nothing and wasn't sure precisely how he resided in official terms. That caused a tax headache, it would in the long run. He swayed by a danglestrap in the centre of a carriage and tried to keep the procession of figures in his mind from slipping.

In the tunnel a blind shuffler passed by going the other way, tapping slightly ahead of himself in search of trains. Bandoliered about his neck he wore a cassette player, an early economic miracle model.

Aided by a young man who had a cellular telephone, and the newspaper advertisement, Niall found the gallery he was looking for. It lay tucked away in an area where there were sellers of folk candy, traditional styles of clothing, artwork shops, potter's wares, thousands of ducks and turtles for leaning chopsticks upon. There were few casual pedestrians, non-local. Whenever Niall had stopped, a seller slid from his heated lair to tout the glintz. The gallery grew into shape, in whole, in part, from among derelict blocks of stone, frozen white crushings of concrete. The whole street it stood on was alive to a job of trashing the old, getting it out in industrial skips, and prodding in new galleries like the penitent poor to a free meal. The guide, who called himself Yup, left; he had friends to meet.

The interior was a world anew: an unabashed blast of warm air in the face, a reception fat and full and keen to please. They despatched his bag and jacket to a back room and smiled without ceasing. Two women bearing mops were poised at the door to swab dull water from their buckets at the visitor's heels.

There was no wine on the ground floor nor on the one above. Niall started sweating lightly beneath his layers of shirt. He went to the restroom to wash his face with cool water. Unexpectedly it made him gasp, the strange colour of his eyes and the flushed nature of his unshaven skin surprised most. He had come to the gallery to be busy inhabiting his time; and to the bathroom he had made his way to excuse himself. The unformed recognition in the mirror was not much help. Sooner or later he would have to return.

It was not the trim women who reclined and smoked and sipped black coffee that drew him to his memories, nor the groomed professor with the administered eyebrows whose students admiringly proffered bouquets of flowers. It was instead a small picture in the corner. He cut into the canvas; into his heart it cut him. Life tugged and squirmed from beneath or within a female body, beneath her sheet of paint, her bed of fibres. Blood gurgled and sprayed. Parts of limbs flowed with it. There she was again, a Judith, a relic of the Bible or a city in Europe: as in the beginning: giving birth to pain and discord and cold, sawn-off holiness, arms stretched out and unyielding, foreground to a milty snowscape.

That story, the memories, swam across the gallery waves, crawled about in the shallows of the moment, hopped like grown fleas into the dried out sacs of his ability to conceive of things as they once were, as they might have been, as he might have to prove them at some point in the uncertain future. The life that might have been. They prised open his scars and buried new eggs in there.

Before the woman, the canvas; before that, there is hardly anything sensible. She, Judith, her Europe, her city, was like ground glass lying silent and undisturbed in his throat. It made him afraid to swallow.

Beneath a different canvas page on the ground level the spokes of a broken wheel became by turns a butterfly, treks across a pale, dry steppe, the frothy spillage upon which the underfloor and all the spoiled flesh of a city's seas firms and hardens. Flesh. Organs destroyed. A sad aspect of his mother in waning, his child.

University of Cape Town

Nine

I'll tell you why they come. Or, I'll tell you why I came. I've been coming here for eight years now (it feels as if it never, ever stopped, the arriving part). And it started in Toronto. I started arriving here four years before I even left Toronto. I came back home from work early, found my girlfriend of seven years in bed banging my best buddy - I'd asked her weeks before if something was going on; she'd denied it. So I walked out of there. Never took anything with me, never went back. And I've never spoken to her since. Her mother tells me she's doing okay: she's a research biologist in Seattle. That's great. I mean she was sixteen when I first met her so that might have a lot to do with it. Who knows. But that first night I walked past a bar, heard some music that sounded good, pretty unusual stuff - I was working in the industry at that time - so I went in and stayed there for four years. It was a crowd of students from here, someone's children, as friendly as you please. They drank me to sleep that night, and for the rest of the week. And that's how it worked out. That's about it. Every night after work that's where I went. I wrote songs for them. They wrote me up in their local newspaper. I mean, when I got out of the airplane somebody in the arrivals terminal recognised me from the articles and said, Hey, I know you! And that kind of thing happened a few times after that. Think about it: this is a city of millions.

*

- This year. It is my resolution. I must to stop my mother from concerning about me. Always she make the complaining, Why don't you be married already? and I sick of that talking. So therefore it is my resolution despite of no the knowledge ... I mean is, I don't know her, that wife, but I will try by all means to find out who is she.

The beer in a glass shell of breasts, belly, crotch and stumpy legs that rested footless on the table arrived. On the video screen gyrating teenage talents in big clothing capered about in unison with microphonic twigs sticking out of their ears. Cafe Dump & Hof. It didn't deserve to escape its own irony. Lava lamps provided light, aided by electric bulbs that flickered from what might have been hideous deep-sea fish resting within a giant perforated samovar.

- Maybe this situation not so good. But is not man's problem. More to woman's side. Too big problem. If the womans gets thirty old years, then maybe she cannot be get married. If they's not beautiful, most specially, then they has the big problem. So you see the womans wearing the makeup to their faces, and lipstick and so on. So they has to be beautiful. And if they is short, they must to be tall. So they gets tall from the operation: that's right: they must haves their vacation for going the hospital, go in there so the doctors can cutted off their legs, and putting in some kind plastics, and then all together new again they can get a rest. Be taller maybe some few centimetres.

- And also the cheekbones, and nose too. They like very much getting that things cutted. Especially rich people to this area. And jawbone and eyelidders. Their eyes must to have the two-times skin, double skin. So they get cutted. Even the young girls, they do like that. Not so expensive, maybe thousand dollar, maybe not so much. But then getting bad job is possible. Sometimes the phony doctor makes that job, big discount. So, later, woman eye falling down, eyelidder and so on. Seems very ugly. Is better spend the big money to getting the really doctor. Because also the woman want having the round-like-moon shape for their face. All by the plastic doctor's surgication.

Over the screen child's screeching came a sawing and grinding of musician's goods, mechanic's tools, came a catastrophe of images. People on a garbage heap. Dismembered emotions. Bared torsos, fingers clutching. Perhaps metal through chipped bits of body. Things clipped to lips of unruly, non-performing flesh. And noiseless slicing, the pinning back, sewing forth; thousands of fingers moving confidently at once, well-sequenced; things being sucked up, drawn out, dusted away: acceptable form growing out of the rock of human lovelessness.

Later they walked along a street crowded with touts who supplicated before their valley of bars, nightclubs, singing rooms, eateries and cafes.

- Also I want the marrying because is that to stop the Loneliness feelings too much what I have in my heart. Sometimes. Really, I cannot express my mean. But, anyway, Loneliness. Especially now, my job. My boss, even he's shouting me. Crazy, is so tough. So in nowadays, if I experience that thing I go to mountain. I like to go climbing the mountain. As you like if you want join to us. Call me by my card and you can use just my English name, David. Is okay. Let's try going on, I mean to the mountains.

Spring

A chill wind violated the emergent warmth. It pressed little white caps out of the river's broad spine from the north-west. The train, well insulated, slid onto the bridge and split the wind, its chuckles on the tracks dampening all outside effects. The passage was absorbed by articles on page four. A man, father of three, builder, who had died of his octopus, consumed alive and somewhat reluctantly for it had choked him during lunch, was the lesser topic. Adjoining it and more prominent was the story of a teenage team-suicide: four girls, skirtless and barefoot, had skipped high school in one jump from the roof of their apartment building in a poorer district. The skirts were found folded neatly beside the four neatly placed pairs of shoes. Their attention to detail seemed to have been the most definitive of notes they chose to leave behind.

The only adults on the great paved square were lunching on the move in the middle distance. Before Niall, several schoolgirls in uniform played at a ball game while boys lingered, looking on. They were

meticulously scruffy, their shoelaces almost untied. A younger boy promoted a fried tube of dough filled with dry squid into his mouth. The memorial up ahead seemed to recede as Niall began to walk between its pair of outstretched granite arms. He was very close to the ground. He heard the cracks made by his feet on the grey stone; each step brought him no nearer the entrance. Everything he could see was well polished. To Niall it was like the home a drunk husband dreads approaching. Prodigality. Each step tendered heightened his reluctance. He was very cold. He had chanted the spring into existence and was unprepared for its whims. More than the shibboleths of the native language, spoken or in the plain strokes of the written, more even than his face's features, it was his failure to reconcile himself to the weather that most reminded him of a conflict about his place in their society.

The focal room in the interior, a soaring cupola above balanced beneath by a central fountain and circular walls that heralded ancient war heroes, was a gigantic toast to destruction. In the connecting rooms were splendidly arrayed giant horsemen, tiny scale fortresses, maps and strategies presented by way of electric lighting in different colours. All about came the sound of bounding sets of drumbeats in continuous replay fighting out lost battles. Niall looked carefully at the weapons: huge swords, precisely flanged spear heads, the caltrop - a small thorn of metals designed to lie passively on the ground for the felling of warrior and beast. He considered the simplicity, their longevity, the years of unpicked harvests. The loss to peasants long after the war is over. An elaborate summary - the whole place - and recreation of things past as they could only ever be imagined in times of wealth, urgency and relative peace.

*

It is a caltrop in his throat he feels as he sees her shrug, take up a bag in either hand, look down in something akin to embarrassment, or perhaps chagrin, and move slowly but certainly away. He cannot control what he feels; he cannot stop the tears, even if it were the only thing that would spare his life, give rebirth to his love. She passes the deliberate, unseeing official, passes through the final check-in station, and at long last - as she would consider it - is absolutely separated from him. That is all. Such things are survived daily in every language, in every manner of persuasion and affection. He knows this, has achieved this turn in the logic innumerable times. Yet blasts of detail, in icy clarity, rain on him so frequently, no matter how many the years that drip by, that he has had to condition himself to what is in all likelihood a permanent affliction. He no longer feels envy or anger and believes that what was surely grave depression has now passed (though he cannot really be sure of this: he is like a recovering addict, aware simply of achievement measured each day at a time). If depression can be reformed as a tender and attentive melancholy that poses no particular danger, and is not particularly obvious to casual onlookers, then he has no axe to grind. His contentment is helped by the fact that his discovery, though long in the making, has come without potent infusions of religion or pharmaceutical support. And the softness that his feelings sometimes visit upon him he returns to her, shaping the form of her memory, holding dearly and carefully

to the parts that were earliest (those that were least affected by his causes and wants, by the person who went missing between them: their creation) for example, her name, her address, the nature of the train ride - fresh seats, acres of fallow farmland lying crisp and bright under a frail sun - that snow-stricken day in the city when they met for the second time. A crumbling, nicotine-coloured hallway in Vienna and the mat outside the door that said, *Willkommen* - Welcome.

University of Cape Town

Ten

When I go out I don't want to sit in some cheap place with a little gas heater, rickety tables and a couple of sheets of plastic over the awning to keep the customer's asses from freezing over. I want to sit in expensive company and look at broads. I want to bang broads like the next guy, but if looking is what there is then I want as much of it as I can get. I know a small place, western style, very expensive. And some great stories I can tell you come out of that bar. I mean, people ask me what I'm doing out in Asia, they can't understand that I could be out here this long, but back in Canada you've got these guys, even guys my age, dating divorcees with three kids, and they're glad if they can get it. Anyway, I don't usually take any of my friends to that place. That one is just for me. There are interests there, you know, I want to protect. Anyway, I was telling you about this Hee-sun. That's where I met her. Well, she's standing at the mirror looking at that picture over there of my mom and asking questions about her. I'm in the bathroom over here brushing my teeth and thinking, Stop the questions! Because I'm wanting to get it on as quickly as possible. And I look up in the bathroom mirror and something's wrong; something feels wrong. There's no front tooth. I can't believe what I'm seeing. The tooth just fell out at the root. It's not as if there was pain, there wasn't. I mean, I spat the thing out before I even knew what it was, just a reflex, you see. Anyway, this Hee-sun takes one look at me and cracks up laughing. She says, You look really old, like a grandfather! Now, I never tell people my age, and they never usually guess right - they never dare guess it right even if they have some suspicions (I always just say, Yes, that's about right) - and I was always okay that it's not really easy to tell. I mean, I'm a little vain on this point. But that's it: my night's ruined. I got her out of there ten minutes later and she was still falling around laughing. Christ, I'm going to have to find another bar. And all the teeth are like that.

Eleven

At the submarine Niall saw legs on the carpet, that blazon of red that spilled from the glass front door to the telephone. The legs grew into the body of the schoolgirl, a recent inmate of the house. Niall didn't understand the reasons for her stay in such a place but she was polite and sometimes smiled. She stood knock-kneed in the cold wearing a pair of the house's slippers. And she passed on to him a slight, hurried bow before turning away to hide the tears that were streaming down her cheeks. Niall brushed by the plump, dreamy boy on reception who owned a bruised-tooth smile. In his room he scribbled a brief letter and shortly slid it under the door of room 41.

Back on his bed, as he breathed heavily, TV people floated past the windows of a red car that drove itself on autopilot down a sumptuous residential European street in which everyone seemed manifestly stupid. Other people flew into delirium upon biting knobs off a chocolate bar, hysterically happy teeth chattered and chomped in double-time; a family pizza eating experience was offered as traditional national custom, and everyone finished up gorging as if on fistfuls of ecstasy; then, canned coffee helped a woman walk on water and lose control of the strap of her evening gown. It all seemed collectively to be one extensive advertisement for involuntary lunacy. Every product had to make more of it than the one previous. The teenage suicides from the morning awoke again to solicit Niall's mind. No wonder, he thought. He thought too of the other women of the premises he had passed earlier on the house stairs, the heavily schminked ones on overthin calves and chopstick heels who worked the high class gentleman's salon in the basement. They had tottered and clattered to the toilet squats steely-eyed from alcohol and their numbing exertions.

Usually in the middle of the community's sleep people fell into things, banged on doors, made footfalls, came and tried various handles; there were enterings, overtones, hushed entreaties and short tappings: an entire language of the darkness. Whispers, like the passage of all the blind subway train riders, shuffled up and down the corridors without cease or final purchase. Outside sirens balefully made business. It always happened very late.

*

Well, I don't know where to start with her. A friend introduced her, a very good friend of mine. When I saw her, I thought, God, I don't want to do this: she looked so ... remote. All timid and no language. There would be no progress possible with her. I had to have my friend translate everything, for Christ's sake. She could hardly put out a word of English. It was always going to be hopeless. I asked her - you know, the most constipated kind of question - What-is-your-favourite-movie? She says, Quo Vadis, and I thought, this is a no brainer: I've got to get out of here. Her favourite hobby? Sunday School teaching. But she

insists she wants to learn English; she really wants to visit Canada; and, oh Jesus, I needed the money, so I say, Okay, I'll teach the case. About three months after I started on her, she calls me up one night - that's why you've got to get a phone - and says, I'm in the neighbourhood, I want to see you, can I come over? And I should have known, I should have cottoned on to what this is all about.

*

How she looked to him in the late darkness, how she looked! That she could stand simply there detached and unconcerned while within him momentous things were roving made languages hateful. He cried out again; she moved a shoulder and half a head away from the television and remained in the shimmery distance. Cheekbones, hers, swelled in blush, a forelle pear less rosy, less of yellow. Something sheared where the eyebrows ought to be, and a delicate moustache, some of that, too, grazing the corners of the mouth. Again the invented light, how could it all be seen so? The eyes too far apart. Her resistance to the tyrannies of beauty. A little girl blue. In his pied dream, her lips gnawed, he held them in his teeth. The frayed skin bits he longed into: those that rested like damp flaps of cloth on warm stone: to be licked off and chewed with caring, slow teeth, to swallow. Her things. Nuzzle her eyes, suck her mascara in, cradle the whole form. Within the papered polystyrene walls, the slim shell about his desire, he manoeuvred his dreams for her. And she was just a feature in the dark, whose duck egg breasts, the speckles that might bloom into warm purple plugs from touch, whose feet might tap their way quietly to his space (as he lies as if harnessed, complacent) across the gritty floor, who glides slightly, shrugs the dust from her feet one by one off on each other and presses them - cold to warm - self aching for touch, against him. She who sleeps him. Breath condenses on her crop of hair at the back by the clicks of the clock in the pre-dawn, smelling richly of earth and the running temperature of flesh.

*

And I wake up and I'm coming in her mouth, right. You have to understand this. I've been here a long time. I know that when a broad comes back to your place basically you've got to be like a local: you've got to rape her. She's expecting it. That's what she knows is on the cards. She's never going to say, Yes, I want it. You have to do the thing. She's going to resist; she can't afford not to. But you have to break through all that stuff. I mean, it's the expected thing. Now, I know all this but what I want is a good long sleep. I'd been drinking the night before with Tae-jong, my friend; I was about screaming for sleep. I put Yun-hee to bed in the bed and I was going to sleep on the sofa, right? But I wake up and this Christian virgin Sunday School teacher is eating me out by the balls. What am I supposed to do?

*

Before dawn stubs the toe of his sleep, she is vanished. It is often like that. His seamy supply of thanks for illicit hopes come in a manner of means to pass, in the purse of his dreams, he puts, folded over like a soggy pastry piece, into the yeasty, cherry blossomed bin at the bedside.

*

But that's not how it ends, you see. Because after a few weeks I can't get Yun-hee to leave at all. I wake up in the morning, go out of my apartment: there she is. Lee Yun-hee. It's become like a curse. She's been up the whole night, waiting. I can't get her to leave once she's in my place. It's all changed: I can't get her to stop. I call my friend; I get some other friends, locals, to try and talk to her. Nothing makes the slightest difference. She understands nothing. I tell her, Get out of my life, fuck off! A week later I find her waiting on the landing. I hear a knock on my door, which goes on for an hour, every five minutes, you see - I can count it coming and it's driving me crazy, like she's sitting out there with a stopwatch or something. So I open the door and she just splits it apart: she's in. I can't get her out. Now, I don't think I really pushed her that hard, but next minute she's battering the neighbour's doors and screaming, Rape, Rape, He's beating the shit out of me! That's it as far as I'm concerned. I'm the foreigner here, remember. Everyone's down to see what is going on, and by now I'm done with this kind of Quo Vadis roadshow, five goddamn months of it. So I call my buddy and tell him to call the cops. Well, it all ends up outside in the street by the convenience store - and he, the guy there, that shy one, is no fucking use at all, let me tell you: he looks up from his TV and says, Oh, she's very pretty, you should marry her. Okay? Figure? So I'm distracted by all this sort of input. The cops don't want any part of it. I have to go off with her to sort it out. And, get this, as soon as we're alone - in the park, that basketball place on the other side of that new highway, she's at my cock again! Can you deal with it? I haven't seen her for six months now but I never open my door without some amount of fear: is she out there today? It's that standard *Jaws* thing, man.

Twelve

The story begins in Berlin, before that a chance meeting in the port city of Ancona, Italy, during the summer - one ferry; two different destinations; a few days in which to weigh up different urgencies, followed by a first mutually heartfelt separation. It's easy for that to happen on a blitz romance. Months or years together usually translates into something else. He stands overlooking an autobahn and its soon-to-change trees on the far side and watches the traffic settle into a long wake in the rain. He feels fine and languid, exhales in harmony with the spitty spray from the vehicle wheels; he drifts and settles again in Berlin's ugly days. Wry laughter and an unassailable wall. HH for Hamburg, HA for Hanover, F for Frankfurt. Those signs matter. The drivers have heart for the hundreds pitched at Wannsee just short of the check-point. Hairstyle is unimportant, so is the clothing. The ones standing all through the Fridays with their crude signs and luggage made of afterthoughts will go west. Woman with dog and big hat, the duo assembled around their keyboard and guitar. All to bypass the hardness of this city, its constricting circumference. Cars pull over through the knotted cords of traffic to take travellers home. Treats of coffee, sometimes a meal; convenient drop-offs; scribbled addresses. Handwaves come from sleepy-eyed kids in the back. He's not going home; he is stopping over near Frankfurt. From there he will head towards the railway station to take a Vienna-bound train.

*

It's impossible to tell. I can't tell you what it's all about. I mean, there was the fire we had in my apartment building. I have never acted so clearly in my life. What were obviously flames, but I didn't realise that at the time, kept hopping up from the ground floor. I opened the window to check what the noise and yelling was for. Smoke instantly blacked the whole room out. I thought, I'm going to die here. There's an inferno below, I can't get down from the fourth floor, we're all going to die. I took my glasses, my wallet, my jacket and walked down with a muffler over my mouth. It was clear all the way down. The whole neighbourhood was on the street, all yelling at once, and there's no way to understand a goddamn thing. And I think to myself, Christ, my neighbours! I could have banged on the doors and I didn't. I stood there thinking, Jesus, what am I? And there's no way to get back up the stairs by this time: it's too late for that. A moment later these fire engines arrive and it's all over within a minute. This was a huge anticlimax in a way, a big fizz out. Everyone goes home - that's, of course, before we knew there was a corpse in the back. But who do I see sitting in the cab of the fire engine drinking coffee? It's my neighbour. She, it turns out, works for the fire department. I didn't know that. She was the first one to call up the service - talk about cell phones: that's when you want to have one - but the thing on my mind was, Hey, why didn't she knock on my door? Why didn't anyone tell me what was going on?

*

How cold is that day at the South Station in Vienna? He cannot really remember. He has an impression of coldness but perhaps it merely serves to embellish a sense of it all - the journey, the vanity furthering it - as a big mistake. Cold saps the wholeness of sense and leaves only crystal perimeters, horizons that lie naked and unattainable. He plods from a phone to a space for buses. The accent all about him is unfamiliar but, obviously, quite at home in the city. It makes him feel somehow bereft. It is better to know nothing, he realises. He counts the stops, sees the people perform the acts that make up the value of their citizenship: a chat outside the tobacconists; packages carried on a bicycle; a dog spirited along on an invisible lead. Habits that hardly change over time, that cannot be conceived of as in any way unusual. Whose voice is it that finally answers the buzzer? Is it hers? He is not sure; it has been months since their exchange of letters started to compensate for the Adriatic distances they had felt bound to.

University of Cape Town

Thirteen

In the morning when Niall went to the showers she was there in the corridor and bowed deeply to greet him. He bent over hurriedly to contain the musty, flaky salute that was still rooted in his loins. When he returned to the room he found the note.

Dear Nial, hi I'm Hae-suk. You are kind. i'm O.K. Yes. Before is unhappy, but Today is very happy. Thank you. i can't english, but you are understand me. Why? I'm first english letter write. i'm read but I'm not writting is not understand. Sorry. I'm study English so next you letter write me. Are you understand? I'm not understand. Good night Nial. I know you. Very good chance. niall.

Good luck. Goodbye. P.s. thank you very muck from Hae-suk

And at his office he was given by means of a ruler used to push it over the fax that told him his mother was dead and gone.

Fourteen

Do you know the theory of Pung-su?

A garbage can beside a street lamp began to smoulder from the various things mixed casually inside it. Niall no longer took it personally that people spat near him. There was nothing to be said about people he didn't know.

The students sat around him silently, the ones who paid for the drinks, and smoked. A gracious vigil over the spirits of the living and the dead. Sympathies. The music was murder. There was nothing to be done about the happy table on the far side nor the smiling lips of the woman who served. Sitting in a boat becalmed, castaway. How odd the nature of the day when death passes through.

The rage of drink came upon him. They went together to an orange tent of fevered light behind a parking lot. There they drank clear spirits and ate noodles and hot, spicy food of the sea. Later there was a glassy night sky and black wind attending. The city at the surface of the taxi window floated wordlessly past - *we don't care; it doesn't care out here* - just out of reach of his fingertips. Nonetheless an impression was made. He made a rotation, then let drip a fingerskid of sweat, the city's lifeblood. His contribution. Along the way women were arranged: one with a blue cap, the other had a white coat. In a restroom somewhere in the belly of the city, he felt like giving up. He wanted merely to continue lying down. It mattered little to him that the floor was quite slick and smelled foul. Another heave popped from behind his teeth. It felt as though his entire being was being poured like poisonous fluid into the holes in the city. His eyeballs in the mirror were marinated in a stinging, bloody varnish. When finally he could return, feeling damp, smelly, foolish, to the table there remained only White Coat snoring softly on the seat. Niall swayed above her, patting his empty pockets. His home was a meaningless proposition.

'Pung' means wind and 'Su' means water. It is very important for looking for house

Eating. Chopsticks fell to the ground outbeating the crashing headache of sound that blew out from the restaurant's kitchen. A food factory. In the new season's sunlight a colour painted on the advertising billboard of a defunct cinema was busy collapsing in on itself like a sick star. People milling about two floors below were getting on with the exchanges of the day. A fancy man with a proud belt buckle to guide him walked arm in arm with his woman. He charted the future in the air with his hand and gave certain joy to her. They outsped all the cars of the moment. The rooftop of a pavement snackshop was serving as a garbage can. Ochre metal grids, a fan, industrial plastic wrapping lay baking in the warmth. Perhaps

sometime in the future it would all be washed down the streets along with livestock carcasses. Niall was nearer the sun than most. The pane before his face warmed him. He breathed a flush onto its face and looked at the moisture he had made. Perhaps less than a rule, he recognised nonetheless it was not only winters in the sunshine that behaved thus: to wet the eyes and make clouds in the mouth.

The gimcrack sellers were out in strength. A man dealt in toys that propelled themselves smartly to the edge of their box but failed to fall off. A woman held out butane lighters in the shape of female torsos, Dillinger pistols, antique cars. Real puppies passed themselves off as cold, wriggly toys that could mewl as clots of women bothered them with their glee. An advertising sign said: Official Department Store of the New Millennium. It was distinctly premature.

Niall sat in a small internet cafe in the downtown area under mixed wreaths of blue and brown smoke and waited patiently for a terminal to be offered him. The people's heads before the screens made them look like a row of worshippers fixed in deep, reverent bows. The tapping of keys. It was silent for sanctity or a funeral enough otherwise. Screens served as each one's personal altar or compass to life out of touch. Soon, he thought wearily, we will be able to hold the church in the palm of one hand. But it was the changing nature of the address that had yet to be fully exploited. A city of joy in every Send icon clicked. How many mails started with, Where are you at the moment? This he had asked himself upon first arriving. On his pre-dawn flightpath, descending through minutes upon stretched out minutes of lamplights like throbbing strings of orange sausages below, down into an impenetrable city, swooping over a herring run of highway vehicles, thumping down, cast in a little fever of gloom. And over the months the question had not diminished.

He looked on at the thick-bodied customers, flicked his fingers in anticipation and parody. When he was at last provided with a seat at a computer, he could not think of what he needed to state or ask, not even in the heading. It all seemed so phony.

or looking for some best place in our country. Such place is usually more expensive. Of course it is a superstitious belief, but come from experience of ancestor

Niall tried writing to his grandmother by conventional means. Dear Gran, he started, but was brought up short in confusion. He thought about Dearest and Oh. Then he went back to Dear before crossing the whole pitted track out and starting with a fresh piece of paper. He realised that none of his family made any sense to him, but asking at some place within himself for the correct emotion to put on paper was not helping to bridge the gap. He wished his grandmother knew the slightest thing about computers. She had likely only ever seen them on television. There was nothing special he could say or feel. As relations the

grandmother's people had always lived in a far-off country, connected only via letters about funerals and births. In a general way they were foreigners.

*

He cannot think in any way of his mother without being interrupted by notions of Judith. Stricken, he wonders whether some germ has graduated into his head and devilled with the memories in there. His mother's home is indistinct - he realises he is only capable of calling up her features of the last years of her life - it is instead Judith's apartment that scores his venture into permanent loss and, possibly, lamentation.

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It doesn't pay to take anything too seriously in this city. People come and people go; it's just a great big trading post. You think the days of the frontier are over? Take a good look around. I've been twice to the immigration offices, then to the prisons to vouch for buddies before they got deported (and I'm practically an illegal alien myself - four years on a tourist visa, renewed twice annually, is an immigration office miracle, if you ask me). And once they're gone, you keep in touch for a bit, but it all soon passes. This place teaches you, if nothing else can, about how small and basic and temporary it all is. Today the stock market is deader than a dead cat. Tomorrow they'll act as if they weren't even born when it all came down. All those suicides? Just myth. Just the impatient ones. One of my best buddies, married guy, comes back one day from work. He's on the subway and somebody, a real psycho, starts beating him up with a metal bar. No reason at all. One moment standing waiting for a train, next moment this lunatic's laying into him! Cracks my buddy's face up and the back of his head. He got treated at the hospital, booked a ticket and was back in L.A. within a week. You see, it was rush hour and nobody did a damn thing to help him. He had to push through a crowded stairway just to get away: the guy was chasing him, for Christsake. That really got to him. He thought: no way I can live with that. And there was another one, a contract teacher I knew, who quit on the spot. One of the little kids she was teaching came up behind her and stuck both forefingers up her ass, like this. She snapped. The kid was lucky not to have gotten thrown out the window. But that's how it goes: living here is like being married: it's the little things that blow the tubes. In her case there was also a hamper that one of the kids was alternately starving or force-marching through the snow for exercise. Seems funny now, but it really got to her. You've got to leave all those old ideas at home. This is the Wild East.

Do you remember Myeong Dang which mentioned of a few days ago?

Up above, almost screened out by buildings, trickled the town hill. It's skin, sheltered in skimpy trees, was wet, the whole mound, with sunlight.

As the light began to strengthen, he went earlier and earlier to paint his lesser secretions of sperm on the women's underwear that lay drying on the rack beside the public telephone. Always he was furtive and hurried about it, having no wish to be caught at what might have seemed like theft, a far more grievous accusation to endure, he thought. Sweating lightly and, once back in his room, heart thumping, he found himself unable to do or think anything for minutes. It was certainly a madness; it would certainly surprise and appall the others if they knew. But to his mind, no particular instance or effect of someone's lunacy could offend. In fact, the very idea of odd behaviour was consoling. Let it all happen, he thought, I am quite ready now. Had there been a trial, a row of judges, a foul-tempered courtroom, he would calmly have ignored them all.

Myeong Dang is 'best place'. theory of Pung-su is very important of looking for Myeong Dang

Blossoms began to burst along the lanes between apartment buildings all the way down the riverside park where Niall walked in the afternoons. There he watched the brides and grooms preparing for photo shoots under one particular bridge that was home to a filthy roost of pigeons. Seed was tossed for them. Once they started feeding, an assistant waved them away; the couple was shot with the panicked flight of greedy birds between them. It might have suggested good luck in marriage. But the brides always looked chilly and so thickly made up that they could barely smile. They sheltered under thick jackets until the scene was perfectly prepared. Once, he was happy to see a bride walk up the steep concrete embankment holding high her sparkling dress to reveal blue jeans and black Nikes beneath. Not far from the bridge older women picked early roots from the grounds, their faces well covered up. Men in uniform rode about on mopeds. Across in the distance boys and, sometimes after lunch, waistcoated office employees played basketball. And men in fine cars sat resting to ease themselves of their many issues. On the far side of the river, a large hotel, sometimes clearly visible, took refuge beneath the city's mountain fortress. Niall realised he had yet to go hiking with David. How many invitations had been offered? On either side, tugging the shoreline in the face of the wealthy people's property, were sets of busy highways.

Encouraged by these outings, he decided to go in search of the cherry blossoms that were rumoured to grow in the financial district. The subway station he was advised to head for had many exits; he did not know which to choose. People in that part of the city were clearly very busy and there was no one he felt confident of stopping and asking for assistance, which gave him a soft flush of shame. Office blocks looking like a parade of cathedrals loomed dangerously overhead. He felt suddenly quite giddy. It had happened like this before: the ordinary reorientation of his steps above ground made them and himself feel

fundamentally small. He began to diminish, felt himself perilously near the cracks in the paving. A flutter of panic arose in him for he thought he may never arrive at the views he needed. He began to quicken his pace. People went in and out of a fast food place, some swabbing their mouths with burger flesh. He didn't ask them: they might think him crazy. An array of policeman mining a corner with full riot gear on looked too fierce. He came out again into the flaky sunlight - that in the distance looking like ripe goatsmilk cheese - and found that blossoms were there after all. There was a salad of them behind a cluster of apartment blocks in what amounted to a small park hemmed in for the benefit of residents. White cherry petals relaxed and spun freely out to find space among bulging green shoots of shrubbery, and there was grass that he could almost hear lowing in the breeze. Niall doffed his cap and crouched down to establish his arrival. He felt foolish doing it, it would not have been worth explaining. But his confidence grew; his breath calmed and gave way to a mild, ineffable joy. The volume of his heart burgeoned with the enormity of what appeared to him in that place. He wanted to feel himself go into the grass, slide between the blades and let the blossoms lather and spoil him down there. Behind him a mother collected a galloping child in her arms and heaved him off to their home. They filled the air with their sounds of happy, loving chatter; he could hardly imagine how easily and fluently that communication seemed to come to them.

as we looking for a house we has to consider as follow: The house located a southern exposure. in apartment, the house of corner (ended) is not good and it is not good that behind of house is the road for cars

Now not the grating vendor's klaxons, not even the odour of fish in the back of their vans - something in the city that at least had distinct odour - pleased Niall. The melancholy that was once under control began to wax once more, to bubble up into something more unstable. The immunities he had fashioned out for himself were not designed for unusual stress and dislocations.

He feels it like a cat's tongue upon his fingers: he, the one chosen; the bitter bristles rasping steadily. He accepts it as would the cat its own nature, its need for the taste of salty skin. All else he shuts out and focuses instead on the experience of being thus acted upon. It has become a disease in him. He wants, however, to know where his mother is buried. There are other questions.

The theory is applied most importantly at a grave (when looking for a grave). At grave, it's absolutely not good flow water under the grave and grave's direction southern like house. it's a warm place where the southern direction is shined a sun also. The Grave's direction has not across through any house and building

Fifteen

Hi there.

I am really sorry that you never got any of our calls faxes and letters to inform you about ma's death. Beryl said she got through to you eventually. It has been really hard to settle down and get on with life. She died very peacefully and at home on the couch where she used to lie and watch TV. I miss her so much and it is hard to accept that she's gone. Her funeral was well attended and many co-nurses from the hospital came and long time friends. It was a really beautiful service. We had tea and biscuits at Donal's place afterwards but that was a private affair. Her body was cremated and her ashes have been placed in the wall of remembrance at the church she used to go. It has been really hard, there are times that I get really tearful and down at the thought that she's gone. She was a remarkable person, who was so brave through her life and to the end. I put a death notice in the paper from the kids. About the reactions, well Donal cried for the second time since ma got sick, he cried like a baby the day she died, that was real heart sore to see, because he shows no emotions (like ma), anyway Oonagh was really upset, but at the end ma suffered terribly believe it was not a nice site to see her like that on the day before. She developed a lung infection on top of having cancer, so she was battling to cough, breath. Anyway she suffered enough. In the end most people's reaction was - her suffering was over. I need to go over there and finish off getting all her stuff together and her room in some sort of order. I must say I've put it off and now I must go around there (her clothes and make-up and everything). Anyway there are days that I feel better, as they say time will heal. I can really say that she was not the one who was ment to die first. She did no wrong to people but she died first, not fair.

Take care and by the way ma did get the message that you had arrived safely (she was quite a bit confused to the end, didn't know where you were) and you were happy. I gave her that message.

Niall looked again at the words. He folded over the message. Then he went back to his home. The people there had become remote to him, even Hae-suk, though she still sometimes was awake and in the kitchen when he went through for tea. He felt irritable because of his family's capacity yet to surprise him: he had sent no message of happiness to anyone, only a number for an ill-functioning fax machine. That any one among them, even the dying, believed any other was almost amusing. If they were to be at his deathbed he would, he imagined, perhaps even in irate pleasure, accuse them all of lies, wildly. However, he did envy them their plain, unabashed emotions. He had never been one to watch television much.

Andrea: my mother: an Andrea. Any one, especially now. Thus and so and finally. Could have been more personal on the fax, the parting words about her: *Your Mother passed ...*, for example, instead of simply any old *Andrea*. That final hurdle past the things unmanageable: so she has finally chosen a way.

Niall scrubbed his palm in a sweaty forehead. There was heaviness, something inexpressibly wearying. But of the usual orientations he experienced nothing. No more to the day, except perhaps a soaking darkness. What of our mother?

He remembers: others take her pasty legs and rub them with cream. Others. Nobody comes near her but with words that float by her eyes fixed on the middle distance, on the fat butterflies of a previous season. While she lies and sucks, noiselessly for life on her cigarettes, others take her grimy, cracked heels in hand and rub warmth to the blood vessels busy dying in there. I love you, but not in that way, he reconciles. Not to be loved thus she, in so many senses, has always distanced herself from the comforting touch, the easy intimacies. We don't do it like that, not in my family, her voice stresses with something tart, an ancient stubbornness. And how did you do it? is the legitimate question he realises he has never asked, it has never occurred to him to ask. Quite without terms of renegotiation he feels now.

He cannot contain his needless aggression, the sense of bitter failure, when in the hospital, her mind half black with the blood that has spilled into her brain and all over the sepia X-rays, she refuses to meet Sushita, his girlfriend. Andrea's lips are twisted into a sot's slouch. What it is to see a woman so degraded.

- I thon't want any ninjas in here, no nintha hushies in here. Thust look at the little bathtards comin' in here thying to get a look a up a whith woman's dresth ... Don' want' em in here.

She moves her head slowly, her eyes baleful, adamant, bearing no reckoning. Only the terminal and the blind get away with this kind of extortion. Better to be older in this world, you can then bother people with impunity.

The following day Sushita's flowers are gone from the city centre hospital. Outside there is the nightmare parking, all the street's lodgers hankering for cash, a frank and numbing heat.

- Ma, where are Sushita's flowers, the ones we brought yesterday?

- I donno, maybe the nurthes took'em while I wash sthleepin'. She looks elsewhere, wipes the snot from her fingers onto the sheets, the established liar. *No wonder he*. She looks up. There are no such flowers in her eyes, no yellow carnations: yellow carnations? Never have been, not of that kind. Niall, if he is honest, cannot exactly remember them himself. He leaves the hospital in the afternoon heat numb. He gives money to the man who hasn't tended his car, a reassurance policy, and realises that he doesn't know her, Andrea, at all.

That kind of disappointment. Down to his city she had come with the younger sister in tow - couldn't leave Oonagh alone in the father's house, alone with him - for Niall's big graduation and her own love of the views there. Also, she likes the flowers that grow in the little garden where Niall lives, the ones she loves to water in the early morning by name and according to their need when the air is so fresh and warm there might have been a sea next door. So my mother is dead.

She sits to dinner in that intense December heat, a table of good food just served up hot on the plates; summer truly having dried the damp, the mossy damp, from everywhere about, even the smells of the walls

better now. The cucumber soup bowls are soaking in the kitchen sink. Her knife clatters, the hand slumps, falls into her lap. She sways, tries to steady herself.

- No more wine for you, Ma.

She is speechless but manages a grunt.

Oonagh takes her through to the bedroom and helps her lie down. Because the food is good and the evening long prepared for and so recently underway, everyone is still eating when Oonagh returns and no one is quite in the mood for her report.

- I think my ma's had a stroke. Her lip quivers and her eyes wet quickly.

What is a stroke? Is it when after a long flight and in boisterous heat you have a sip of wine and don't finish your food? Niall has never thought to ask what that word means. It has never struck him as a dramatic condition or one calling for great sympathy; it conjures up no blood, gore, things severed: the stuff that would have anatomically impressed him when, in times that seem long past, he was more familiar with the word 'stroke'. She has been touched? Anyway, he has never liked coming across the language of medical conditions in the dictionary. He privately fears this may bring them upon him, that they enter the body through the eyes first, rather as he had been visited by acne and pimples not very long after a pre-pubescently scornful read about such things. Nobody is eating. Niall finds it hard to believe the evening is actually finished. Jerry is the one on the phone, Manfred busy getting his car out into the street. They bundle the mumbling form of Andrea onto the back seat. She is so heavy, so hard to move, for such a slight body. Niall bumps her head on the door.

- I'm sorry, I'm sorry. He cradles her and it feels strange. Sorry is a word, too, that feels odd on his lips when addressed to Andrea. It isn't that he has been defiant with her or unreconciled, rather that language as a whole does not pass between them that much. As a mother she is touchy neither in deed nor word. Nevertheless he is unsettled. The panic he feels and the way it makes him cry out inwardly is about matters that lie just out of his understanding.

Come on mother, he urges her. Dead heavy mother.

- I don'th.

- What's that, what did you say?

- I don'th owe.

- I can't understand you.

- Owe. Anyone anything. Now. Anything anymore. She speaks in a new voice, one of strange sleepiness, off the top of her newly washed mind. It fills him with terror. Oonagh is now sobbing uncontrollably.

Manfred races his car furiously around the city's ridiculous highway bends off towards the city hospital. Three plump, beshawled adult women stand in the dark hitching a lift. Niall is absurdly full of a dramatic

goodwill for them. He wants them to be safely taken to their homes and is panged that he can do no more about their present predicament. When is this going to finish, he thinks. What have I done?

Both he and his sister urge Andrea to be still, to relax, but she continues with some crazed idea about debts, who knows of what kind exactly. He is frustrated with her because he doesn't know what she means and they seem to be matters she has never before mentioned.

- Just breathe easily like that, he insists, Please try. Instead she mutters on in her strange old and new accent all the way there, a curse on them for dessert. It is as if she is aware that such ideal opportunities of surrender and vulnerability all round occur only once or twice a lifetime among familiars of long-standing: she is not going to lose her chance. Oonagh sobs more softly now. Thin pale calves stick out oddly, Andrea's bare feet in Oonagh's hands.

They are arrested by a no-nonsense, seen-it-all-before uniform at the odious little side entrance before anything can be done. Then indemnity forms, other forms, an address, signature, phone number: sign. Finally: sign. When he thinks, almost hysterical with relief, that it is all over, there is another form pushy and queuing for attention. The pen is fresh, all the hospital players very cool. They disappear Niall's mother and soon she is barely visible, only calf and foot, behind a screen. Bleeding heads, eyes, arms, and bandages of other sufferers show through, too. They look as though they will live, lucky them. Some sit chatting. Others groan.

- Fridays are usually like this.

Whose Fridays? Niall thinks. He looks up at a medical student, his offerer of succour. The knowing type, very cool. It is like a Friday in a wild restaurant and this is the busboy for soiled dishes.

Sixteen

The doctor, who barely makes it as the middle-aged cool type, who swings his head around at them by the ponytail, speckly grey, is as cool as the other hospital labourers. A condition of employment at the hospital, Niall thinks: perhaps they sit a Coolness interview and fulfill some sort of training requirement: We are much cooler than that other lot of jokers at the university hospital, everyone, let's be agreed, and we're richer too. His office is air-conditioned and very near the top of the hospital, well above the awful groaning and concentrated reabsorption of flesh into dust that the business processes on the ground floor. His kids are also cool. They show up smiling above the roots of three photographs planted conspicuously around the overgrown table. It is the human side of medicine. Thanks to your kind we're all off to university soon, they smile out at the room.

- Do any of you smoke?

He's asking me, us.

- I do.

Oonagh! Don't tell him everything. Don't giggle like that. Niall hates feeling such a tough propriety over her, but it is a compulsion, one that has not helped him with his family, the people to whom he is supposed to belong.

- Well, you just stopped today, okay. Look at these X-rays. This is your mother's brain, okay. You can see here. He shuffles the sheaf of prints, first backwards then forwards. Eventually he finds what he is looking for and can regenerate interested incomprehension.

- And here, and here. Then he shuffles a print again. Where the clot is, okay. We can think of it as widely spread, but kind of low density. It'll take a while for this to subside. I mean, this is a normal X-ray, here. This one, here, is your mother's. They look on in silence at a portwine-stained delta that now occupies Andrea's skull. You know, it's like a flood: sooner or later it'll return to normal. It will, for sure. However, I took the liberty - and now he looks around at them to let them see the cost (to him, to them?) - of having these other X-rays done, okay.

Niall feels the little tumblers to a safe, like stars in a staid and infinitely arcane universe, well out of reach to him, begin to move.

- This is the real problem. Your mother has secondaries, secondary tumours, okay, here. And here. The sheaves shuffle, shuffle, again, making their own slight cries for help. But we don't know where the primary is at this stage, but actually that's academic. I think one of these deposits managed to get into the bloodstream and then, you know, following the circulation process, it got to the brain, made its way ... to here. He points to exactly where. It is something in Andrea's head. This is a clever boy, Niall thinks, just what a grandmother would have ordered. Niall doesn't know whether he himself is missing something

important or is projecting the right kinds of emotions. Would the doctor tell the coffee room crowd later just how some of these goys face death?

- Okay, that's what brought on the stroke, if you follow me. They hear his rhythm become irritated by their shortage of understanding, a stalling someplace else in the general system of circulations, some other kind of clot, his or their own? It's a hot, clear day. And a cool, clean room, no stubbed out cigarettes on the carpet. No perfumed candles anywhere. There is art on the walls that might be called Medical Chic, to match the coolness theme, and one page of wallpaper for degrees that remind: He is Excellent.

- But you needn't worry. She has very good insurance, so from that point of view we're going to do everything we can for her. I'm sending her for more tests tomorrow morning. Her, of course, is the Andrea that Niall is battling to co-ordinate in his mind. No doubt the doctor has other patients of the same name, of similar afflictions. It is the her of white bone on brown with discolorations in parts that don't seem in the least in good condition, the one nobody has much understood. What of it, her? There remain things to be done to her, things to be done for her. Either way, the X-raying that is so essential now will end before too long. That seems clear.

- When is she going to get better? asks Oonagh.

All the languages are in turmoil in Niall's mind. Oonagh, please will you just fucking shut up. The doctor man looks at Niall, then at Oonagh; Niall looks away from the doctor person, down at the prints, then at the degrees. Niall looks at the cool eyes, unspeaking, finding eyes that find speech at this juncture not, you know, okay, necessary or whatyoucallit appropriate. What kind of job: an interface for radical changes to the composition of the nuclear family, for transitions in aggregate lives. There must be professional distance, otherwise, you know, the problems never go away. Anyway, who has time to care that much. Coolness. The mother, though a corpse to the professional eye, is still a busy bottom line: to be wheeled from one specialist to the next for expert fleecing done by hand: calm hands, sure eyes, steady breath, they will one after another lift, ease their hands beneath the pale lady's nightdress to reach for that golden egg there, and peel another wad off the sparkling policy.

Always the days are hot. Quickly the flowers grow: in pots and vases and jugs all about her. Then they go limp and soulless and the replacement rate decreases. Andrea wakes in the middle of a visit.

- I'm havin' them let me outh o' here tho I can gthet to th' gradthuathion. Whath time isth it to be?

- Ma, the graduation was yesterday. It was yesterday.

She stares ahead thickly, to deny all waste of everything, what it had meant to her. All this, these trips, all over.

- Oh, thit, she says.

Niall does not know how to visit her in the new condition. He and Oonagh bring chocolates daily, which Andrea loves, and watch her gulp them down one after another before dribbling the spittle, rich as nicotine, from her drowsy lips. The spittle's colour helps Niall watch her lungs rot into soggy bits of old brown tissue no longer much use for processing breath. Oonagh and he help her to the toilet in staged trips. Andrea, trying to keep her eye pinned on a spot on the wall dead ahead, trying to balance this act with the art of making the stupid foot club down onto the ground in the right place, to make the right moves in sequence, always the sequence, is gritty.

- Schiff clever one, thwing stupid one! she announces, as much to herself as to her children. The phythioterrorist who cometh aroun oneth in the morning, Therman girl, quite niceth ... but therth a lot of foreigner here. I glad though they haven't thent any bloody ... Paki doctoth.

As she speaks, her eyes slowly coast around the corridor suspiciously, on the lookout in case any have been posted in the ward while she slept. Andrea, thinks Niall, you're as foreign as all of us here, why don't you realise that.

- It's the ninthas I hateth. Alwayth ath dthoor, staring throughth the cthracks. Trying to see up a thick white woman'th dtheth.

- We know, Ma. You tell us every day.

- Whath im I doin' here? I wanthebe in a pivateth ward.

- You are in a private ward. This is a private ward.

- Well, then tell me why thereth tho many bloody Pakith in here? Tell Me.

- They're not Pakis, ma. They're private patients, they live here. This is their city. Don't you understand?

- Well, I don't care. They come in here bringin' in the auntieth, unclath and all the bloody ninthakidh for Africa, ith enough to drive you up the bloothy wall. All I want is a bit of restth. Always theth kidh running forever around the plathe lookin' for thingth to thteal.

Oonagh giggling, red locks, sunny freckles, voice of the afternoon light. An aeroplane makes off quietly in the cold blue to happier places, could only be, with passengers content not to be thought of by the wishful. Destinations.

Seventeen

That, for Niall as much as for Andrea, was the beginning of the end. Thirteen months and just a struggle in the throat to show for it, no one else watching. Niall sat - whether in the land of the ninjas or not, he wasn't sure, in a faraway place at any rate - upon the end of his hard bed made of inflammable chemicals and listened to the clock steal a march across cobbles of time. Schubert came to him from a radio in the room next door.

There had been slimy red prawns and Schubert, too, in Kuala Lumpur in transit on the way over: what a tribute. In the freezing lounge for second class diners he was directed to a seat. Alone there, tears fled him to drop onto the tough napkin. He drank the water, the keys gouged. Service staff glided about the room wordlessly. And still Niall hesitated. As the excitement about catching the flight at precisely 10.40 grew, he neglected his pressing notion. What could I have said, what might I have said?

Andrea, Andrea. He tried the word on his mind and lips until he had a better grip on it. It is cold and lonely, but you will be alright. Buoyed by all that ancient goodness, well meant, if we have to forgive you for the manner of it, and if we can overlook the problem of the Pakis. He finished writing his farewell, then added to it. Think of me. I have this new day's forest of bright unseeing faces to stare into for solace.

And when, after a long, partnered drive through a desert, he sees Andrea in her home for the last time, ten months or more after the stroke, lying on a sofa in front of the TV await as usual at ten in the morning for her beloved cricket to finally come to life, pale heat outside, as usual with the sound turned down because she so hates listening to the silly fool for a commentator, he is not able to give her what she asks for.

- Niall, I need peace, you need peace, he needs peace. Just hear him out will you?

He has no reply to this. He barely shakes his head, simply sits looking into her splendid eyes, seeing the beauty that must have raged there years before she knew him. If only those teeth had been taken care of, he thinks. Perhaps it was her own cracked beauty that had grieved her thinking when she used to drag the children off to the dentist, bawling and slapping at their shows of resistance.

Niall thinks of people straining over barriers of memory in open court while the hot coals of witnesses' voices pitter-patter to and fro across a room of madly unearthed pain. A thing on television.

- *I did it like this, pulling the head back like this, sitting ...*

- *Did you now, Mr Honey? Describe it for the cameras, the Inquiry.*

- *Yes, I did, like so, on the back. It was attached in this way; the body was disposed of thus, like so. We did it in, well, I can't remember exactly, nineteen ...* A short, respectful silence.

- *And would this help your memory?* Scribble, scribble go the scribes, all lost in the attention they are paying to this astonishing, vocalised sincerity. But is it an authentic crime, a made-for-TV show or an advertisement for something to be carried over to the next generation, one doomed to learn by doing? Whatever it is, does it deserve a reprieve? What does this kind of show do for pain? How, in other words, for any inquiry, is pain to be reliably expressed? Sometimes language doesn't do it any justice. Niall doesn't know, considering his own case, how witnesses can be kept alive, in a legally useful sense, when germs feed on the reliability of memory.

There is also the problem of children's reliability as witnesses as, no doubt, there is for those who have lost their tongues by one fault or another. For example, take the father who wins his children back from state custody with gallant tales: an eager immigrant, long-suffering employee, scrupulous taxpayer. Not a day's vacation taken for five years! A tale of one who has tried only to do one's best. And those men of the court are apt for such thick of battle, always. It strikes a particularly poignant chord for the judge, indeed, that inner masculine pain articulated. Thus, home is deemed best for children O, D and P, formerly wards of the state. And on those bounces of the gavel the testimony of the naive and unlettered is convicted as being somewhat lacking, a story ends; the pain, to all intents and purposes, is over. But Niall, for one, wants to know how it is possible for a man to say he loves his job and adopted country, and perhaps even his family, when the frustrations of it all are engraved in the minds of children as more or less permanent scabs.

- But he's your bloody father!

- I don't want to argue this with you. What does it matter now? I haven't been here for how long? This isn't you speaking. It isn't you, An-dre (it's a very seldom spoken word he uses for her now: it is their word. He hasn't felt it in his mouth for years. A word that the father hates). What has he been saying to you? He's put you up to this, hasn't he? What father is he, then? He's the father of this terrible house, that's all I can say. He's what he always was; I can't talk to that.

- He's changed. He looks after me very well, you know. I can't control myself. My functions. She isn't looking at him. Her eyes are on the verge of shame. A sad, soiled lady. He cleans the sheets for me, you know. Niall looks on silently at her. He shakes his head gently. Oh god, this is where it sticks, he thinks, this is how far we've come. Surely a maid, surely a servant, anyone. Not he who only ever cut the ribbon to names on buildings. Even now, he still wants it all.

- That's very nice, An-dre. I'm glad you have this. But someone would do it for you if he wasn't bullying to be in the picture, wanting to control everything. Everything with him has to be a big show of force. He's used you, can't you see that? He's hijacked your sickness because of ... because he knows nobody will ever care for him the way we care about you. He's jealous. He's trying to keep you from us, from everyone. He had your dog put down while you were asleep! Have you forgotten that? I can't even talk to him, I mean you, on the phone without him listening in. He's like a bloody spider. Niall didn't say

what had been boiling away at him beneath the surface of his patience with this ebbing woman, he only just avoided saying it. To blame her for having put up with so much indecency would be justifiable, in a sense, but, especially now, quite as indecent.

- If I had the strength in me, I'd reach right out and slap you through your face for that. If your grandfather could hear you know. Just talk to him, Niall. It won't be so bad.

As things turn out, it is that bad, very much as it always was. There exists the father as a hard fact, in flesh as in memory. The father, as often before, is a bit of solid, foreign matter in the throat. Something to ruin the palate for a day and make the nerves shrivel like frays of rope set to flame. All internal. That fiery matter of the father. Short, once-upon-a-time plumpy with the whiteheads that Andrea used to squeeze out of his back on Sunday afternoons with a hairpin, of chemically moderated high blood pressure, holder of a provincial departmental section title, some kind of chief architect, maker of coldly functional schools - approved for third class citizens according to the politics of the times - and a friend of the distilleries.

Who Said That? That terrifying old roar from down the passage after the melting of many ice cubes. *Come On, Who?*

The only face remembered, and reenacted in the flesh after all the missing years, is mottled red with curly grey hair screwed into the head at the temples. Also there are permanent divots of Protestant dissatisfaction with the processes of other people's lives graven into his brow. This time his marching fists are stowed in the frowsy jeans pockets (father appears as an old woman, as if having grown up into his own motherness, a thing, a person, that the father had over time and distance come to despise so). He rocks on heels and pinched toes, choking on the need to get the whole rehearsed gutful out.

- And you! And you, how dare you! How dare you! Denigrate your dying mother. Your dying mother! You come into my house and refuse a dying woman's wish. Thus I say to you, you mean, you selfish miserable git. And you know another thing, you always were. Always for number bloody one, all for number one. He stops to draw a fist out of his pocket and extends a single finger out near the bars of the gate for fact and emphasis. The other fingers are whitely clenched. Behind it, eyebrows leaved in sloughs of dried skin twitch ferociously, the same face of the school time horrors. What fundamental power it had assumed in those days, the fear evoked!

Oonagh comes out of the house and begins to hurry across the dried-out December lawn. She bounds over the grassy hollow that was once a momentous bed for a birthday rose, long since disappeared. The father glances quickly backwards. He has little time now to complete his spiel. Overpitched, short of breath, desperate to come at Niall again with the overbearing, slightly hunched-back attitude, he makes a last charge at the gate, head craned, feet that seem to paw.

- You took yourself out of this family for twelve years; you broke my ribs, you, you did it! And walked over my body to your room. You're sick. You're so fucking sick, do you know that!

- Stop it, just stop it! Can't you see it doesn't help. Stop it, please. She tries to pull at his finger-furious arm. He shrugs her off. He believes he still has time. Niall looks at Oonagh. He realises that the father is actually worried about Andrea. But the light is not right. Neither of them can see whether Andrea is observing all this. Perhaps the father fears privately that Andrea will rise from her resting place in the lounge and come at him like a Fury.

- Is he drunk, Oonagh. Has he been drinking again? The mauling pauses.

- I have not been drinking, Oonagh, have I? Reliable witness. Therefore all proof in the eye of the *thus* prosecutor, *Answer Me, Yes, or No. Answer Me! Therefore* I can read you like a *thus* book. It's an entire style of oppression that comes back to grasp at Niall, to cleave him.

- It doesn't matter, just stop yelling at him. Look at him, can't you see it doesn't do anything? She is baying at the top of her voice. Suburban entertainment as of old for the whole neighbourhood. *What are you gawping at you old cow? Go back to your sniffing git of a husband.*

- If you ever do stop you might consider introducing yourself to Toni. Oonagh, why is this gate locked? You knew I was coming at this time.

- For security. She shrugs, slighting her own discount on the truth, and points. He did it.

- What security? I came yesterday at this time, and the day before. You didn't lock me out yesterday. Why am I a security problem now all of a sudden? Do you think I'm going to rob this bloody dead house? You're, he points straight at the father, the only one who steals. You'd like to steal the will, wouldn't you? You're the only thief here. But you like to excuse that, don't you?

- You hold your tongue, boy. You, you ... Keep your tongue! I won't have you desecrating, denigrating, I mean, your mother this day.

- Just open the gate, will you! He's here to visit, he's come all this way.

A trembling hand withdraws jumpy keys from the ready place in the pocket and tries to make a smooth insertion. Niall waits, Toni waits sadly.

Niall looks ahead towards the door.

- I'm sorry you had to hear that, Toni, you know, to listen to what he's done, but it's probably better you know.

Niall; the door. It opens before his hand, before him lies his mother smoking calmly on a cigarette. Everything about her seems very pale. Behind him on the porch outside are voices, a giggle.

- Oh, and how was the trip? Is that so, oh? Ahh, yes, Oh, that's bad luck indeed. I'm sure. Not too hot then was it for you, Toni? Right.

Oonagh hovers like a waiter beholden to enormous appetites. Andrea lies on the sponge mattress egg box, shrunk beyond recognition. She is a soft turtle peeled of its shell, writhing slowly, in surprise at pain and the way the world and its faces have become so unfamiliar. Her eyes are much too big. Unable to waste like the rest, they bulge out of her head. She does not smile until he reaches down to kiss her lips, cold, dry lips while so much summer lolls about outside.

- But of course, of course! Do come in. Toni is courteously ushered through.

It is a quivering smile, an odd little quirk of light in the large, brickworks room of dull green, a part of her home for twenty years gone by. On that, the last visit Niall decides ever to make to the gaunt house, its back garden boasting an empty swimming pool littered with rotten avocado pears - problem of the drought - sterility and neglect the only living things, he cuts himself apart to be able to watch her. It is good that she is dying. For all the privileges her kind of immigrant could safely depend upon, being European with an education, she has not had things much her own way: morose, frustrated home skivvy for the architect hero, one who returned home daily for his plate, fingers clenched in dreams of important lines on drawing paper. An intelligent woman, too. Burnt out by it all like her sickness. He remembers her fear. Her having to hide in the dark summer evenings out in the garden, barefoot in lush black grass all damp on her ankles, night drenched in summery sounds and the heavy smell from the servant's room. That was where she went to smoke against the edict on her habits. Niall has in times past hated her for that fear, for the way she carelessly picked her nose or clutched her groin with legs crossed as she brooded over the thin pickings of time. But mostly he hated her panic at his approach out in the back yard darkness, the crushing out of the glow with her bare foot, the smelly embers on her denying breath. That at times when he merely wanted to be with her, for her to be strong for them both. Then, always, the deodorising tabs of gum before a scurrying back inside. Some life.

- There hasn't been any cricket for days now. I wish the test would start. Clobber them Pakis. Her voice a soft, slow train of old curling along in the distance, an elegant, polluted thing. She looks about weakly, tries ever so slightly to shift on her bed of foam, and gives up.

- Oons, would you ever get Niall and Toni some tea, there's a good girl. Would you like a cup of tea? She asks helpfully. It is the most truly expressed thing he thinks he has ever heard her or anyone say. She worries about the heat: perhaps a cool drink would be better. For her part, she is a particular type of European and has drunk tea all her life, a habit she is not about to change now. But the sheer density of her language filling the room in the absence of practically any other sound, something estranged from her body, is stress for Niall. Only now all the gentle attitudes have become possible and available, on the rump of so much space wasted in anger, and there will soon be no more of it. She holds out to Oonagh for another cigarette. It is silly in her mouth, the way a child would look trying to puff for a joke on a length of old-fashioned rock candy.

- I like looking at the birds. You can see them very well from here. There aren't really any today, though. I was looking for them earlier. They've their wee food thingy up in the tree there over by the gate. I used to have it outside my bedroom window and that was nice. But I'm here in the lounge most of the time now, so your father moved it for me. She looks around for the father, forgetful that he has taken himself off to the nearby room to listen carefully, crouching, with short breath, at the door. He put it in the garden, she adds, up in the tree. He's very helpful, you know.

This part is spoken as if part of a programme, on cue, as on the previous days of Niall's visits. Yet his mean attitude still pinches him; he scratches desperately for proof that would justify him.

- He cleans the sheets.

Niall hates to be reminded. To his mind, it's nearly time that the father started putting something into his family for all the violence that has otherwise been hatched in it. What hurts Niall most is not the dying, not the undone, losses, the age old melancholy, but the functional indignities that the lady must endure, the end to her privacies. He sees in her eyes that control over her own body's functions has become the hardest bread for the nurse in her. She is so conscious of it, even when so much else of value is gone. And so? And what of ends? What of cancer that kills itself when it kills? Some do it too, as ritual. Nations, nationals. And yes, it is too breezy for the birds today. Sunshine: light and soft as eiderdown, it seems; the lounge inside cold as piano wire. No wonder at all.

- And when I snuff it. She looks around for the effect of her profanity: Andrea at last given over to big obscenities. I want to be cremated. I've decided that. Did you hear about them stiffs in the Protestant graveyard when the mains bursted and flooded the place? Then there was this stink you could stir your tea with. All the way to the shopping plaza. And they had to dig them all up again. I'm not having that happening to me. She takes one last drag and snuffs her snuffer.

- And Granny said Ma's not to be looking for sympathy back home if she goes and gets cremated. Eyes still giggling and a bit damp after months at vigil.

- Aye, sure, the old bat says to me on the phone, You're not to get yourself cremated, we don't do that in our family, if you're not coming home to get yourself buried, then do it right where you are. But no cremations, she said. So, I'm having a stone cut for meself in the Wall of Remembrance at St Mary's. It's a nice name. She looks away finally overcome by all that finality, the brave exposure of things to her son by herself, a commitment: such a long time waited to be said. Her eyes flush out one small melting of tear. The priest, he has been good to me, she says.

Niall supposes then with a hard lozenge of sorrow in his throat that he has nearly all possible time to listen to the fabulous, slow sound rising up gently above pain, duress, a starved soul and a body's corruption. It is so much older, carrier of the ancient voices' invisible culture; in the eddies and twists of her accent are other ways of knowing buried, swept along, cast into the air, irreplaceable. Niall knows that he did not manage her bouts of dreadful melancholy very well. She made them all to suffer. The wild outpouring of her furies, everyone's tension and nervousness. And now he wishes that he could at that time have brought her to any kind of mellow remembrance or good thing to look forward to. How beautifully she can speak after all the rubbished years. He realises, as a set of chess moves somewhat ahead of him, he owes some gratitude to cancer. He can see, because it has been for so long a part of his existence, that life in the absence of pain is not always enhanced; and, a corollary of a kind, because it lies before him, life can be

given to, and in, death in ways that are not imaginable otherwise. He is very, very proud of her. That he has lived to see this, to see this person, his An-dre, is perhaps the only accomplishment of his life.

All poison. Dying mother on the couch. TV blank and cold. Avocados in the pool. Father working out his next set of moves from the room next door. Toni quietly, consciously, sipping tea.

When finally Andrea tires, Niall and Toni get up to leave. Having served his threshing time, the father comes out directly. He scuttles over to Toni.

- Ah, it was wonderful to meet you, a pleasure really. So you're going back through the desert. I remember when ... Niall glances at the father's activity. He sees a squeezing of charm like toothpaste from a favourite tube. And he cannot bear to watch, he feels the lump from his past return. Simply to be elsewhere, away from all that death, is on his mind. Jesus, Andrea, goodbye. What a leaving. You could have done it years ago, there was always time. We would have helped. You had the right; it would not have been shame, would not have vindicated all those stubborn Catholics of yours back in the old country. Instead, all this coldness with a bilious spouse who is eaten up with envy because of the will. You won't tell him, though. You refuse him. Good for you. You remain.

A fiddle and tin whistle reel goes off in his head. And with a wack-fol-the-do-fol.

- Ha, ha, yes, well that's very good then.

Toni's soft voice is lost to the flutes of wildness chasing the glass in Niall's mind. He feels drawn almost to absurd violence. He passes his head low to his mother's face and kisses the slack fold of flesh of her cheek, there feels the hot spurt of his shame and smallness, passes back to her lips that wait passively there to be fed his final gift. He twitches his own on hers briefly, says the words that churn him so.

- I love you too. It comes to him as a winding mill in a prairie field. A creaking, rusted call in the gusts of every day. Done, it is done. He can run; he does.

Summer

- That military services make around city, same hunting. That was maybe twenty years before, ago. People try to come out was died. To beginning they use the knives on their gun to push in the city people, push over? Womans in their breast: cutted off. Or taking out the baby with that knives in woman's stomach. Their gun knife: push in. Take the out the baby. So many was died. And laughing; that soldiers was laughing, kind like some show to their side.

David stopped short and used a forefinger to demonstrate a delicate jab, a plunge in and short twist, for retrieving babies by use of the bayonet. Then he made a mound with his whole hand over a bowl of fat red leaves of cabbage meat; he made another mound over his own belly.

- Yes, they killing the pregnancy womans, somes baby also. So all peoples of our city to that time very angry. They attracted to police office: taking out the weapons to there. But, is no good. That weapons very old. Military services having the new weapons.

He again used his hands in demonstration. The bow and arrow method of losing uprisings.

- Yes, they did losted everythings. Even the taxi driver - usual not good persons, taxi drivers, am I right? - they was droving their taxis into that soldiers. Somes was died. Military services using the shotting, helicopter guns shotting: they attracted. I saw that situation. I small boy to that time, I did saw. So revoluting finish maybe only ten days. Not long. I think people is very cruel. Maybe some another country is can use the gun only shotting. But at that time they use the gun knife. Very terrible. So our city's people to that time, they say, loudly make the shouting, You military services, you're not belong this country, you some kind foreigner. Foreigner: go your home! They was shouting and crying.

University of Cape Town

Eighteen

Let me tell you: don't bother buying stuff made here. I learned that from my first purchase. A stereo. Okay I didn't have the money to buy a German model or whatever. I know now. I got this thing and I only ever had problems. It was always in for repairs. Eventually the guy said, Listen, I want to keep taking your money but it's embarrassing me now. Just don't bother with it anymore. Save up, get a good piece. You see, they make the thing look good on the outside, use a few flashy-looking studs and screws, designer shell, but they skimp on everything you can't see. If the thing has a warranty of six months, you'll watch it blow out a day later. It wasn't always like that. When they first started coming on the market with goods, I can almost remember it exactly, I'd just gotten my first job, the stuff was not bad. Then they got richer and greedier. That changes things.

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Man Who Cut Off Own Feet May Receive Payout

The 60-year old man, identified only as Chang, admitted asking a friend to cut off his feet in a bid to collect insurance money last week. Chang told police, "Since I ran up some huge debts, I decided to sever my feet in order to get the money I owed. So I asked a friend to cut them off and then throw them away."

Chang was found on the floor of his shop at around 2.00 am by a woman who heard him screaming. He was lying on the ground with his feet detached.

He reportedly first claimed that the feet had been cut off by robbers. But neighbors told police that Chang had been asking them for several months to cut off his feet. Adding to the suspicion was the fact that Chang had taken out 29 insurance policies, some with a special payout agreement regardless of the cause of accident.

Police have questioned an acquaintance of Chang who admitted he had helped to sever the feet and then threw them into the sea in a bag.

The exact amount of the insurance money Chang stands to collect has yet to be determined, according to the police.

Nineteen

The turtles were everywhere. Niall put his newspaper aside for a moment and stopped at their tank to look in. He was not feeling very hungry. They, in turn, peered up from their grave of filmy water, sensing food. Some perched in a relaxed way on the backs of others. They were more attractive than he had credited them at first. That is because there are so few animals in the city, he thought. An odd urge to friendship flowered in him. He tapped at the glass then recoiled in mild shock as several of them snapped viciously at his finger. Each turtle neck snap increased his revulsion for their limey yellow necks and the skin that pulled in loose ugly welts from under the shell.

At their table David ate up. It would soon be time to meet the other hikers.

Nearby, a paunchy, middle-aged man sat at his newspaper while slim tongues of noodle evaded his mouth. They hung down from his champing lips to the bowl and wagged with each suck he made at them. His eyes ate up news page; he ate at the noodles with his slack chops chopping. Slop down into the bowl some of the noodles went. Slurp back up he made them go.

Sweat. Naive blue sky punctured the week-long mat of soggy cloud that had recently covered the city. In that awkward quantity jets slicing crisply sprayed goutts of cream out in their passing. A mother. The hospital bed. Below them the mountain was filling up with people in bright tunics. Knickerbockers and gleeful socks clambered to and fro, disappearing for a moment, reappearing in another set of colours. They made a rainbow parachute - elderly health worshippers, family packs, couple trudgers - all billowing out behind, alpenstocks, skisticks and golfing irons pulling them along. Everything was bonhomie. However much Niall strained to relax, it was all a distant challenge. That it might be as easy as the evidence he was part of was matter for him to fathom. People hollered from principal peaks, even the smaller ones. They gathered around even the ugly squirrels to sigh and take photographs. Under cover of trees occasional stone clumps were piled up into elaborate altars to satisfy and celebrate the wishes of those who had passed by before. Niall added a stone because of all the others. A rock tossed, he thought, has always been a form of hope.

When David's group stopped to rest, chocolates were produced and offered around. Each person took a handful at a time. There seemed no shortage. Niall sat upon a brutish stone and heard the river rummaging hurriedly through its collection of rocks, counting, seeking out the missing pieces of all the ancient seasons. That, to him, was the storehouse of memory, and he felt mild envy. He had once wanted to be a historian, rather than an ex-factory worker in Germany, to hover over other people's dried blood safely interred in pages in some musty faculty. Turning pages, being careful not to crack them.

He looked around to see. All about them were the remainders of animal and human forms sketched out in the rock. And elegant shadows of trees that had long suffered problems of purchase and the seasons littered the place. All were faces frozen as in a motto of life past, the original inhabitants of the earth quietly displayed. Of the trees, their smooth shanks of bark sometimes stretched out into the way of hillwalkers, as they had formerly reached out to ancient trains of travellers bringing news and food and goods along these ways, to ease the way on upwards. Niall felt a pop of pleasure. He wanted to have a conversation with them. Sirens were still audible from the streets far below. He ate more chocolate.

*

It's the heat, I'll tell you. It gets to people. I've seen it over the years here. I've seen the fights. I've seen the gangsters going at each other with swords in the middle of the street, oh yes. That's a summertime thing. You've probably noticed there're a lot of weddings here, especially in spring and autumn - I mean that's what you do on your weekends once you reach a certain age, you go to weddings. And you have to see how it works out: there're people chatting about their laundry, about their business, people coming in and going out. Men sometimes you see asleep through it all. You'd think it's supposed to be solemn, supposed to be special, but no. People just want to have it over with. They want to go downstairs, get a bowl of food - it's usually laid out on these long tables - eat the stuff and get the hell out. Man, I've seen men who never even get into the wedding hall: they go straight to the reception and start drinking. Anyway, in summer the wedding halls, these great big places which run weddings as an industry, have discounts: you know, specials on weddings. That's because the weather is just too mean even for things you've got to do in a community type thing. Everyone's sweating; the food goes rancid - every year a wedding meal kills or sickens a bunch of wedding-goers; nobody's patient; tempers are hot. The noise. But it's the women, you see: they're the ones trained to love it. They want the wedding pictures and all the frills. You'd hope they'd look around themselves a bit and think first.

*

Lunch was enjoyed just below the summit where the energetic nipped and tucked, the successful took pictures of themselves; everyone stood or sat above the fatty layer of orange air that hung about the city like a wig. On the exposed part of the great granite dome, the air was cool and gay. It toyed with the women's hair. David laid out a picnic cloth of newspaper and everyone bailed onto it the food they had brought with them. Then they all made ruminating commentary as they prodded things into their mouths with their disposable chopsticks.

- You know what is Jun-ho saying?

- No what?

- He's say sometimes is people in them work office is straight died to there.

- They go to their office to die, or they get taken to their office to die? Niall's voice sounded sharp to his own ears. He was the only foreigner in the group.

- Yes.

- What do you mean?

- Is mans. They don't go lunch break. Theys co-workers coming back after, after the lunch is really surprised: they finds they, their co-worker not sleeping, just only died. Just sitting to his chair only looks sleeping. Is maybe 200 or 300 to time, one year. To me also is happen.

- You died at work during your lunch break?

- No, I don't die for my working. No lunch time. Is my co-worker. Him very young, very strong guy, is old 26 year, old age. So we were wondering about him. And after furenal some time, maybe two weeks, nobody's mention to him again. He was forgotten.

- What do people say?

- Usually they's gonna be some news to that situation, but is forget quickly. Go on, just work, harder, that's all.

Niall said nothing in reply; he thought instead of mothers not forgetting. Mothers, in his mind, lay forever, lying on the floor uneasily or someplace else permanently cold, with no medals, no certificates, not even to say, Died in Action before the PC, in the service of capital on active duty; bravely undertook 18 hours daily w/o OT, sadly missed. A lunchstiff. And perhaps in such wake the company managers would check nervously through the health records for signs of cardiac defect; rehearsing the company disclaimers, checking all the policies to do with him: Sadly Missed plus a moment of silence. Eyes furtively going over small monies lent. And bosses hoping morale doesn't peak, brushing it all under a.s.a.p., choosing a.q.a.p. a replacement, extra conditions on character heavily underlined. And all the while mums go on sacrificing sons in the name of the common good, the nation. To beat out the foreign competition. Ours did not disgrace in family and in name. We will endure.

The hubbub continued. Out in the bare-armed sunshine, Niall did not feel so warm. There was chill on the little sips of breeze that brought in birds cheekily looking for a free ride. They were pretty, cocksure and aggressive.

- Now is many problems to our society: many womans is sell they bodies, show photo, make the sex for mans. Because economic problem. Even housewife and schoolgirl, they going do that, student womans, all. So before ten years is different. They don't want to doing like that by their own willing, they no can to be encouraged do that things. So is mans going the city, they stealing the womans to make go dancing for the prostiutions. They take van kind of car because of quite big enough for that job. On street to the young, beautifuls girl they say, Come in here, we's making the film because problem the prostiutions this society, we need model for showing how is it happened, this action. Then is very simply: theys stealing

that womans. Go take them to slavery place. Somewheres, we don't know where. That womans kind slave.

*

I told him, don't send it. I called him in Canada, I called a friend of ours to pass on the message. Just don't do it, I said. But Timmy went right ahead and sent it. It arrived here alright and, as it turns out, there never was any problem but, Christ, I was so angry about that. I mean you have to understand: I was paranoid here at that time. There was state control of everything. They had a national security agency that had the right to go into any damn thing they pleased. Their interests had legal power over everything else in this country. They paid for the political candidates they wanted voted in. And this, this country is where I lived. You see, Timmy had his own gripes about the place, so he decides he's going to jeopardise me. A big joke for him. He's thinking, I wish I could see the look on Jim's face when this arrives in the mail or when he gets called in to some office to explain it. That would be his idea of jumping a straight friend's bones for fun. Sure enough, it was full of photos, historical images, artwork of guys fucking, guys blowing each other, guys posing. He's the best friend I ever quit on. I'll never tolerate things like that from a friend. That's what my old girlfriend never understood.

*

He looked across at her. She chewed calmly, offering a view in the sunlight of dust from bread or biscuits stuck to the rim of her bright lipstick. Niall tasted some of the egg, ate it; tasted the softwood tip of the chopstick, then the fish. In the distance a temple bell rang. People of a nearby group broke into excited laughter. When she spoke, the tiny crumbs moved the way for her words.

Niall looked at the broken tongue of the footpath they were walking on. He saw shiny rocks and the scored ones where metal cleats had in the winter dug in and raked hard for human purchase. At the precipitous parts they waited in line as people below held onto ropes and thick steel cord with their gloves to ease the way down.

- Do you have four seasons to your country?

He looked up at her. Her eyes were very soft, patient. It took a moment to understand what she was asking him and, in that instant, he was short of an answer. Later he would be unable to remember what reply he gave. An attack of the light, so it might have been, snagged him. He saw himself looking at a precursor spirit: hair like that, coming down off the shoulders, something in the eyelashes. And a tremendous sympathy burst through him. For a moment he felt he shared a knowledge with her of the language that had made them. The mountains were no matter, that kind of light was the same, the paths, the

whiteness of her shirt, everything, for a shard of time, was known and had already been lived. This much he knew. Her expectation of an answer, having come for one at all, the way her eyes held, was a question of a different order, such as: Tell me about Vienna again, the Prater in the summer mornings. That cool, draughty summer hallway of the Messenhausergasse - a house whose complexion within the portals was like a dried used teabag - another season bidding, *Willkommen*. He thought he should go mad. He felt caught out, swept out of his mind between two massive and conflicting streams of energy, as though an invisible twister had come upon him unawares. In the distance a man was running like a fool down the slope whooping across at peaks on the other side of the valley. Niall thought of the host that the Nazarene had used for getting rid of ancient demons, but it gave him no relief.

With each downward stab his feet made at rock and earth, there were tremors in his legs. From invisible spaces down below the sounds of the city began to percolate back to them through the greenery, and intermittently he lost her voice.

A man awaited them at the foot of the stairs, took the money from David and ushered them into the changing room. The women went off to their section. Naked men sat around on a raised wooden floor in the men's, smoking cigarettes and swallowing portions of boiled egg. A tray of eggs sat in the middle of the little dais. Moilings of a TV drama came from a set stationed between two fans. In an adjacent annex a barber dealt studiously with the head of a naked patron of little hair, while another, patiently reading a newspaper, awaited his turn. Beyond the telephone was a weights section where a great sweating log of a man practised hand-stand pushups, his toes sliding up and down the wall above his mottled face and a sad, slouching penis. Each person's exit from the bathing chamber through its glass swing doors spat tropical breath on the drinks cabinet. Each man had his own locker. In his, Niall found an English language newspaper.

Lolita Style Raises Summer Heat

Dabbling with this season's trends could be a bit audacious, the style may be an easy fit but it's certainly not for the faint-hearted. Pastels touched up by trimmings and ribboning announce the seductions of the summer. The importance is pink. Of course, it's been around for years but now comes out in boutiques, department stores and street shops fresher than ever. Ruffles, puffs, shirring and pleats and plackets are back, from New York to Tokyo, and they're full of delightful danger to dampen all those dowdy sensibilities. The rage is all about diffusion and sultry newness: it's the new revolution in fashion. Spun off the socially uncomfortable movie plot of Vladimir Nabokov's novel, the push is towards flirtation, youth and all that's unconventional. It's those contradictory signals of innocence and daring that give the look its new allure.

Inside, people shaved at rows of hose showers or more lavishly before mirrors at sitting level. Yet others were crouched down to aid in scrubbing clean the ass. Down to the gums teeth got vigorously brushed. Fathers soaped down their sons or very young daughters. An old man laboriously spread soap on all the available surface of his little pink scrubbing towel. It reminded Niall of how he had liked covering his

sandwich bread with apricot jam as a schoolboy on the hot, windy summer mornings when even the soil stank out its exhaustion. Men with corporate frowns stencilled into their brows lay lolling in the shallows of a steaming water pond like prime walrus. Others owned savage scars from heavy surgery or, visible on their backs, the sets of circular blue bruises from moxibustion treatment. Near the exit, two hefty bodies receiving rousing massage slaps to the back and thighs. The masseur waded through the run-off from the baths and showers in plastic shoes. What sort of wrinkles do they have on their feet, Niall wondered. The masseur's body was smooth and boy beautiful. His age showed only in the twin chubs of fat that spilled beneath the band of the underwear he was wearing.

In the warm water pond Niall lay back briefly. He sampled the sense of it, then hopped full length into the cold pool, smartly pivoted across for a dip in the nettles of the boiling one, then he went back again to the warm. His skin, friendly-frighted, tingled exquisitely. This might cause cancer, he thought. Or it may cure. Or both. The blood seemed to have drained from his head and the little spurt of insanity that had overcome him on the mountain receded further into the depths of his understanding to wait for another calling. Though, he was still content to carry on the conversation with the stones. I talked to the rocks, he uttered softly to nobody in particular. A little conversation. In the silence of the room, bar the hissing from shower heads, his voice felt odd in his mouth. A few men glanced at him. His well-being nonetheless continued. He reclined again full length and waited with his legs in the gusher fountain as the air bubbles frittered up between his legs like farts. It was very pacifying.

A hissing noise, bubbles, water rummaging constantly around the drainage.

Niall's hair swilled about in the gullet of the bath. He thought of the end for Ophelia. She wasn't the one he wanted to think about first. Hair tugged on silently down. He could hear everything. Leaves at the edge, green slimes on the necks of stones, the wattled throats of trees in lullaby from the bank. Gregorian rocks in chant. Hand floats idly by a crotch, pausing at the vacant lot where lovers once busily lapped. Brush, sweep, sweeping by, and he could be woman here. Everything is quite over. There is no more Vienna. And all lack of vigour impresses. It is a matter of indifference the season, the cold or heat. Everything in partial or complete manners of exchange; some life here, a little death there. Merely the ebbing of all meaningful temperature. That is the way Ma has gone. He feels himself realising an ambition not to try harder nor agitate for more mischief, merely to make the best of worsening wear. How slowly language comes after all, he thought. Too late it is! After everything is already set and fixed as if in stone, and words equal cement - the character housed within. To wear the body like last year's fashions is all, enough. In abandonment.

For a time, he saw no one. Shrouded in mist they crept about their habits of hygiene quietly as showers sizzled all about. And Niall feared their coming for him, being systematically taken, their knives clothed in steam - hot, puncturing blades - and his blood bubbling in the champagne liquid, draining away. He saw his own hacked spine boiled free of flesh, skin: the lunchtime memory of fat cow bone eaten some

days before when each chew and suck at the knuckles of the spinal meat had made him yearn with pity for his own fingers, his going out daily to eat himself.

University of Cape Town

Twenty

By the time he was back in his room, Niall knew it was time to leave the submarine. For some time he had suspected entry to it during his absences. This he could not confirm because nothing to his mind was missing. Mostly it was home only to wastes, things in continuous dissolution and his times of sleep. Moreover, Hae-suk had gone away some weeks before. What did trouble him was the fortune he was told by the pudgy dreamer at the reception. On returning from the mountain, feeling fresh and happy and witless, Niall attempted conversation, to which the receptionist opened up a dictionary on standby among the pile of books.

- Not agriculture? Niall asked. Not fruit and vegetables and animals? Farming, you mean?

The boy showed him an illustration from the manual he was reading: a hand with threads of detail stitched onto it.

- Oh. Palm reading. Palmistry!

The boy nodded wildly and grinned. The pouches of his cheeks bulged. As usual, Niall waited in hope of seeing a wedge of chewed nuts come falling out from behind the big, rotting front tooth he had on at first stop in his upper gum.

- Consultancy, you want? I make you. I'm very like. I beginner. He took a big mouthful of his pungent tea and began paging.

Niall indulged him through the heart problems, the bad eyesight - which seemed obvious enough from the glasses Niall sometimes wore - the two brain intelligence, whatever that meant but which put him in league with Stalin and Einstein, and the success that was sure to follow. Again, he thought, no dice. Residing in the submarine is proof until the present of quite the contrary.

- Also you lude.

- Yes, I suppose so. People have said that.

- No keeping friend long time.

- Is there a connection? Aren't you taking chances here?

- What?

- Sorry, continue. The paging continued. Hurry! he thought. It felt like torture and that soon he might, after all, confess everything. Meanwhile others were freely being finished off in hospitals, factories, living rooms. Schoolkids were despairing their books, father's drinking, sisters out trolling the streets.

- I see eye, okay? Is no floblem. Niall acceded, felt the warm, clammy fingers muddy up the skin around his eyeballs, pin the sockets open. He was tolerant. To be touched at all was obscurely welcome.

- What can you see? Can you see anything?

- Sometimes you feeling tired? Sometimes tired, okay? Niall nodded against the gripping fingers. He was partially released; fingers now prodded his abdomen. And pains? You having the stomach painful?

- Yes, if you hit me like that.

- And masturbation? You many masturbation?

Niall looked at him more carefully. The boy's eyes narrowed. He was still inquiring.

- Do you see emptiness in my balls just by looking into my eyes?

The consultant shook his head sadly.

- Is energy. *Khi*. Is you floblem: energy, power, is go, go out you body. Away. I don't know. Man, 25 old years, man, 35 aged: he must be marriage. Man alone is no good.

Niall had a short vision of a hole in the universal layer of ozonic male energy growing steadily and unstopably through his isolated acts of self-pollution. Self-pollination it might be seen as in a kinder, less invasive place. He regretted, in a dawning recognition, the stale tufts of yellow tissue sprouting under his bed. The consultant-priest's eyes were severe. The evidence existed: bruised intestine, the hovel for a bedroom.

- Well, thank you very much. I must go. Must wake up early tomorrow. Thank you. Niall put his hands in orthodox prayer fashion under his canted head to indicate sleep.

- Sweet dleams. He was smiling now through his ghastly tooth.

- Of course. You too.

The night and the discomfits of his tenure became maddening. Some Americans, soldiers perhaps, whore-bereft at the brothel next door, took to angry lamentations in the parking lot. Then came anguished screams from hostesses in the newly managed basement salon. Later, the lowing of dawn-prowler Christians. Police cars or ambulances in the distance interrupted everything from time to time. A variegated, intentional, violent neighbourhood. Niall's home, the one he had accepted off his boss. He cursed the irony. At 6.00 am, he got up to watch a patron of the rooms one flight below have a second puke into a metal bin on the fire escape. It was considerably nested with plastic bin liners. He retched, puled, puled and retched and wiped. Then he strummed some chords of snot that clung to his nose and tried smearing them off on the bin. From his back, folds of flabby skin shook in concert to his heaves. The underwear was grey and shabby. Finally quite relieved of the previous night's entertainment, the man went back inside. The bin liner bought the morning light and gave twinkly dewshine for it. The pimps were gone; the Americans were gone; the church was barred up. In the sunlight and that special breeze reserved for the best days, Niall was split open by it all like an old peach pit. He rubbed his gritty eyes.

Twenty-one

Timmy's problem, you see, was that he had married someone from here, then went back to Canada and discovered, between the wedding and a sort of champagne alimony settlement some years later, that he was gay. He's intelligent, if a bit perverse, but he more or less resigned himself to the fact that the middle years of his life were blown out. He had been in the military, then came back here as a teacher with some sort of MA degree. And school after school screwed him over. They didn't organise him a visa; they didn't pay him; they left him stranded at the airport when he returned from the visa run. It was a catalogue of bad times. And in those days it was all fax and telex, you have to remember. Most of the time I was filling him with food: he never had any money. He ended up in hospital with staphylococcus, a disgusting bacterial thing on his leg, pus all over the place, which cost him a few thousand dollars. His scooter bike cost him a thousand and a half and it was always getting repaired. You can't work like that. But his room mates were the worst. His life was dereliction. I stand here and I'll say to you: This place is a tip. But I cleaned the floor myself (that's how I survive: I clean the floor daily. If I come back an hour later and it's covered in dust, I clean it again). The walls have paper. The dishes are washed; there is a refrigerator and it has something in it. Stereo, TV, made bed: these things are part of my life. I used to think I was fastidious in Canada but compared to a lot of life here, I'm insanely retentive. Timmy, now, lived with a pig from L.A., and a paranoid schizophrenic from Kansas who made shit on the floor. She flooded their place twice because the washing machine hose upset her in the shower, so she disconnected it. She collected weapons, she threw his things into the street. She tried to set fire to Timmy's clothes twice and once to his cat. She fought with all the people on the floor. After one wild weekend - two police visits and nights of mayhem - he rode with her in the ambulance and saw her committed to the lunatic hospital. And there were garbage wars. His problem was his lovers. No house mate could cope. They, the lovers, were top, bottom, sideways, upsidedownways, but all total alcoholics. Drugs are hard to get here. One guy liked to do stranglesex and wanted Timmy around so he didn't kill himself as he jetted across the room. Imagine the housemates coping? And this particular lover liked having his brother around to fuck him and Timmy, but insisted his brother wasn't gay. Now what does that mean? There's so much goddamn denial going on in this country. In the end, Timmy went back to Canada. That's when he thought of his joke. He's back in the country here these days, but I don't know where. I won't have anything to do with the guy.

Twenty-two

Niall dreamt. It had been a long time since he could last remember one, being part of it. Pigs and goats in chainmail, bright and fish-silvery, coast through intergalactic calm, untrammelled by the cold and darkness, undisplaced by bits of satellite, lunar orbiters, space travel tourships that pollute the highway route. The snakes were left well behind. Pegasus was there, but moving at such speed his wings came off in tatters. Cafe Dump & Hof bared its flank, dipped its lights and sea life, and gently landed, the samovar spilling strange creatures out in a torrent of black liquid. The train being ridden on passed by on the other side of a river whose banked highway was tuned with cars. And the Cafe Dump Hof was hit by a gleaming *morgenstern* from the Museum For No Reason. Pegasus left the battlefield nursing ruptured flanks. A host of black and silver worms clambered over a Hopperesque pack of cigarettes lying on a red felt card table. Landscapes turned and bent in agonies unidentified. The earthquake hour. Cables and wires, yet pumping, became long, crackly-skinned slugs with the inside stuff not red but wet and squishy nonetheless. An unhappy kaleidoscope of the earth. Faces fearsome and bellicose took turns kinging a castle before sliding back lamely. The liberty statue tossed her candle into the sea and began to twirl, slowly at first, then with greater confidence to gyrate until her head came off and fell into the water with a great splash. Her cold wet lamp was a *morgenstern*; her head a thing of worms writhing upon the ocean bottom. Clouds screwed about in full colour, as depressing as second wave TV. There was a hungover afternoon rain shower. Deep leonine roars echoed his fears. He was a citizen of *Ohneland*, Landless - Nowhereland. Mr Unlanded. The one atop a monorail. He feels acutely the matter of being crushed under rails; their unfeeling steel in motion he is intimately familiar with. He belongs to the tracks, is embraced by them; he tries to embrace something else and cannot hold on. His entire body is annihilated: he is the feeling of agony, a sum of agony, and it comes as comfort of a kind. The person nearby, who has been there throughout the accident, is silent and just out of eyeshot. This person does nothing and it is no matter to Niall. He feels it to be acceptable. He will get there in the end. If only the dog would not look on with such softness. And whose dog was it? Andrea's?

*

A Life on the Back

Young-suk thrilled the local media last year when she got on the cover of "Spank". Back home recently she was surprised by the amount of media attention she got, especially by men. We can assume she stars in this movie to satisfy the curiosity addicted viewers. But a spokesman before the showing explained to the excited reporters that this is not a film for peeking into the infamous body of Young-suk. However, this statement was shown to be untrue. Not long after his speech a sexual scene of Young-suk appeared that went on unnecessarily long. This tells the viewers that the film is weak on artistic value despite the PR sayings. The love scenes are sloppy when not annoying or boring. The characters recite

dull dialogue at each other across the background landscape of the Rockies which is meant to appear alluring for the domestic viewers. The plot does not make satisfying watching. Young-suk is a hooker addicted to drugs and alcohol - she is always smoking something. It is the fault of her extremely sad past when she received multiple rapes by her stepfather and endured punishment such as beatings and cleaning the apartment like a slave. Also she is confused by the life in a foreign culture. Help comes in the form of Po-king (Suk-mi) who saves Young-suk's character and runs away with her just ahead of a savage pimp. Never totally relaxed with the sudden happiness, Young-suk commits suicide. The constant clips of dolphins - Young-suk is always worried if dolphins eat shrimps - is badly cut into the film so it shows the material is taken from archives.

Directed by Pak Im-in. Starring Won Suk-mi and Yu Young-suk. Viewing opens Saturday.

Mid-morning. Newspaper capsized for the day. Your face Has Caved In: Insert Coin, said a vivid screen to the street. Homicidal fantasy stalked the pavements outside offices, banks, pharmacies and photographic stores. Punchbags, kickpads, beatbox dance scales everywhere lavishly erected. In the electronic games room outside the internet cafe children hopped, plopped, spun, smashed. Inside was louder. The language of the place, fluently destructive, was noise, the owners merchants of it. This was what the industry had in common with the machine time out on the tar.

*

Hi I'm MH. Can you remember who am I? We meet on mountain hiking before last Saturday. I get you email from club's server I hoping you don't be worry about that. I very happy meeting you, very good time and chatting. I want meeting you again soon. See you. Have nice time. Have sweet dreams.

Your friend (new)

Twenty-three

Ill-at-ease and shabby from work, Niall found himself late by the time he arrived at the embassy function. He had taken a bus to the hotel on the hill that was hosting it. Niall had no idea where to get out, and in his rear view mirrors the driver merely watched. At the reception Niall received some of the special indulgence reserved for the poorly-heeled. It brought back to him the gutted awfulness of blind dates. He moved through the many people in the dark seeking only the wares. A huge ice sculpture he eyed in admiration between choking swallows of meat lifted off a large unattended platter. A waiter, quite possibly cued, moved in on him and drew it away with a polite smile. It was that late. Niall began to eat more hurriedly from a different one brimming with smoked salmon. While gorging he could look down on the city and feel happier about it. Its bright eyes hungered up at him. He took one of a set of glasses filled with red wine and began milling. It was behaviour he had hated since childhood. He only ever felt disgrace for the words he used when in the bounded company of strangers. A man with a Greek name gave him a business card. In one hand he held onto a mammoth cigar. Then he slapped his woman on the haunch with the other.

- She's the best bird I've got anywhere in the world.

- Is that what it takes?

- Yes. Follow the principles, don't back down.

- Okay, can you give me one of those cigars?

- Yes. That's the spirit. Here, take two. They're the best. You have to bite the end off.

Niall gave off a few important puffs into the darkness. The wine and smoke made him reel.

Someone came nothing, circling into the light, seeking the proper orbit. He flapped up his hands as a cradle through which words opened up like lanterns on a pond. His powdered face glistened whitely under the planting moon of his brow. Niall felt obtusely as though he would like to tonk that head with a teaspoon and then douse it with salt. A group was leaving, they laughed at Niall and pulled him along with them.

The man with the bald head had a penthouse apartment in the small intestine of the city. They went there in a taxi. The humorous pair agreed to a stop while on route. They knew the bald man well and had some business of their own to attend to. When they got out, they waved and continued laughing. Niall didn't care. He was in the middle of the road being chiselled by light and it all seemed reasonable. He did not feel ambitious enough to do anything about the developments.

From the window of the bald bathroom, as he washed himself, he could see thousands of pink neon crucifixes reaching out across the city. They looked like candy swords embedded in the city's skin. Or lurid gravestones of hair drilled into a broken, black scalp. The whole city was being Jesified, block by block;

and, it had to be realised, of the same power that had inspired the letters of Paul. Between sleeplessness and insobriety, Niall had his body attended to. He did not join in or help much; he simply let himself be held and moved over. He felt the arms around him, the warmth, the saliva; he watched the ceiling fan work the room, the sweat on his own body touched by the breeze. He didn't feel anything. It was good to be touched, but if this was seduction, it was not the cousin of joy. Despite encouragement, he could not find it in his heart or spine to come. Soon enough it was time for him to go back to work. To the pancreas, as it were.

In the grey, half-caste light of summer morning, Niall faltered, smoky-eyed, before the bus stop. He was inexpressibly weary but conscious of the thing done, a difference made. I have crossed a stile to get a millstone, he thought. Has anything happened? I am willing to deny but not to go back. What part of the ritual is this? On the bus his consciousness dipped in short frames, spitting unforestallable little deaths at him. Where he went on those particles of time was beyond vision and memory. There he was dispelled by secrets and had to go back.

University of Cape Town

Twenty-four

Issues of mother and love begin to seep in upon him once he had moved to his new apartment, down in the basement of a grim roan brick house near the new highway. The building hooked up its drawers, hiked its skirts and squatted down on all who entered there. On those days of issues, he lay on the floor and listened through his sweating to the pummeling of the rain upon the canopy that covered his corridor entrance. For days the rain fell incessantly. He could hear it clacking down the stairs in high heels. He heard it swirling at the drain, an unending dance there, a spinning dress. And the days became a week, two; heavy heels, coming down, coming down, to his door, never properly arriving, like a late guest. Water leaked into the corridor and it became a tepid pond through which he had to walk on a trail of bricks to reach the stairs. They led up to morose gate hinges, blue-painted and rusty, and then onto the street. Once the rain stopped, the corridor cracked, molded and became attractive to a variety of fat, stubborn mosquito. Other insects moved in and Niall found it hard to consider himself alone.

The room itself, when first he had received the key for it, was a subterranean trap of filth. It faced two other rooms across a corridor. Movement at any time triggered a light that peeled unpleasantly off a pale yellow teardrop bulb and gave notice of the cobwebs spraying a wake around the feet. The air in there was always sick with summer, weary and fevered. In the doorway, he had stood still and stared about him.

The kitchen area under electric light was monstrous: the cooker a heritage of grease in congealed periods that appeared to be feeding upon one another. Clotted strings of black dust tenderly fingered the air from the window grille, fuse box and air vents. Cracks in the wall charted the growth of other kinds of vegetation. A sandwich was growing next to the refrigerator. He leaned his head against the jamb and tried to listen carefully for the voice of god in everything, in his city of joy.

Cleaning the room of its lair-likeness made him sweat; his own smell broke and rose up through the throat of his shirt to appal him. My life, he decided, is in trouble. And I am not winning this; she, Judith the Father, is. A voice in the nerve above his eye then began to shriek. He knee-walked the floor rubbing and rinsing. His sweat fell in salty plops to parts of the floor he had already rehabilitated and made him want to start over.

After the work was finished he rinsed the cloths out and hung them on a hook in an elbow of the kitchen. Then he showered, opened up the windows in all of the rooms - to let some dusted city air mix with all that was entrapped - and went up to the afternoon for a stroll. There someone called after him. It might have been that voice he had earlier implored but he did not look back.

And now, the animal life he had previously considered missing all seemed to pop out of the city at once. Flatfish belonging to a seafood restaurant made light gravel on the belly of an eatery fishtank. They hung out bored as footless old sandals. In another tank cuttlefish were at play bothering an inconsolable little octopus that squatted in the centre trying to draw all of his suckery limbs about him. Like eggs in a thunderstruck nest they rolled about. He tried pulling them under his bulbous head but they would not go. Enjoying his failures the cuttlefish sped this way and that, bumped into the far end of the tank, then hurried back to tag him once more.

Two of the grubbiest cats Niall had ever seen showed up for a mild squabble at a plastic bag full of stinking waste food. One of them had managed to scratch a rent in the bag. Stuff was seeping out onto the street.

A woman led her dog on a lead down the street towards a hair salon. The dog had purple fur on its head. The woman's hair was bridged in orange.

Niall stopped unable to go on. A river of slime water glugged casually from a pipe at the side of the road and moved away before him. As one warned, he looked up. Electrical cords were suspended in the air above, loose strings of the stuff. It was crazily connected up, an untidy urban beard whose roots were in a huge skin of construction somewhere else in the city. It was clotted on poles, necklacing all the busy living space, binding the whole unorganised lot together. Niall's face was sheeny with sweat. Some quality in the air burnt his nostrils. He turned back towards home, retracing his steps carefully, thinking only of a fresh shower.

Two dogs, one with baleful blue eyes and an eyepatch in black fur that seemed to have been glued there, liked to get up in the early darkness of morning and yelp frantically at imaginary trespassers. Niall wished someone would come along and take them away for a meal.

*

The news was bad. Man after man eliminated wife and children after being eliminated by his respective company, in a sense the retrenchment of whole families that stood in line for the job. Niall clicked the TV's menu to wrestlers concentrating on big time malice. Undertaker was profanely upset with Kane for desecrating his father's grave. The anger was taken out on an official's head by way of an unoccupied chair close at hand. Undertaker was clearly an emotional wreck. He has no right to take it out on people who had nothing to do with it, wailed a commentator from the safety of his glass box. Three men in yellow tights and long hair who also had nothing to do with it got taken out as well.

*

Niall considers his mother's bony, pale white body, the children that came through it, and those people that would have desired moving upon her. He tries to insert himself in their place but gives up in dissatisfaction. It is her teeth, he is convinced. That and the smoking, the greyed hair. She has uncouth habits and doesn't walk well. How a woman walks is important to her appeal. He is aware too of his own hair and the agent it is for greyness, unattractiveness, perhaps also cancers and death. How one struggles to be lovely, thence to be loved, negotiate failure concern him. He is above her, feels her gentle embrace, some kindness in the words though the message in them comes from some or other long forgotten tale; there is the flabbiness of skin and tissue of her underarms, an alienating texture to the skin of her face. A scent comes from there that he has never adapted himself to: cold, damp country cobblestones of a Europe haplessly displaced yet remembered by her skin. And ash of the present and something slightly bitter from lack of hygiene. He wants to taste it for confirmation but the positive intimacy slips by. He is also dissatisfied with those who struggled over her: the lovers who may have brought her happiness, if only for a short time; the imaginary ones that produced erratic swings of wrath and depression in the father. It all seems to have been an elaborate waste. But after all the notions, he wishes to have applied his touch to her feet and rubbed oils in there. He wants to have been one who can say he acted. The moment passes and he must try, as hard as ever, to get through the Viennese door. The door is wide open and the mat bristles with impatience but the steps to it are barricaded by legs in white thermal underwear, breasts but no bra, a thin, sleeved cotton shirt. And this in the winter time.

Twenty-five

The way led down past several villa homes, whose owners polished cars by the early mornings, past the dogs that barked at nothing, to a fork in the road. On the corner stood an apartment building, three storeys high, another one behind it. To the right was a hairdressers, a meat restaurant, a fortune teller's premises, a rice seller. The way left opened onto a doctors' rooms - a gynaecology and obstetrics practice that catered to *human dog womens* problems among other things listed on a board outside - a dry cleaning service, the "Here Food!" restaurant, a computer services shop with Apple bright colours doorway damocled, a convenience store that sold beverages such as *Coolpis* and *Human Water*, another restaurant with its wares replicated in plastic and posted in the front window as advertisement - sweaty ribs, glazed, green spinach, fatty steaks - and a bar called High Crass.

University of Cape Town

Twenty-six

Yes, once. There was the one day, not long after the Yun-hee story, that nemesis, I meet a guy in the street. He's dressed in a suit, very smart. He looks dangerous but he's very chatty. I make a bit of conversation with him, then he offers me a night on the town. We can take his Benz, he says. And there it is: a big black one. I had another thing on that night, so I politely turn him down. He wants to know what I do; I lie. He offers me whatever - is it women I want? He can get me a beauty queen, well not the queen but the runner up from a few years back. Do I want work, do I want connections? He's got it all. Up his sleeve, you know. Like something off Coronation Street. Then he explains to me he needs someone to bring him in a shipload of cars from Canada. He's offering me a few thousand for each car. All bona fide, he says. You have to be careful. Buyer beware. Anything here that seems too good to be true, usually is.

University of Cape Town

Twenty-seven

Hello Niall Im MH

If you very busy in nowadays don't worry about that. I'm happy can talk to you. I'm hope so. Can you go hiking again on this weekend? In these days my condition not so good. Maybe I getting grandma. But I want show you some interesting thing about our city. How about you? Can you come on, come see any what you like something? Please be free contact me about that anytime. Be careful yourself because of weather. Many mens eat the dog for their sex stamina. Nowadays very muggy. Is it right? Now I eating the ice. Even in nowadays, some peoples is enjoying that. Long time ago we no have the refrigerator. To summertime we are really enjoyed eating the ice. And refrigerator really good present someone.

Also one guy say me he don't like the cutey immature kind of girl. Something like giggley. What is this meaning?

Your friend

University of Cape Town

Twenty-eight

Thinking it might be good for his morale, David took Niall out on the town. They drank heavily, mixing beer and whiskey, and ate plenty of spicy food. Then they went by taxi to the famous entertainment district. David led the way through a maze of shoppers and sellers who, for Niall, took on more than usual importance. Everything on offer was highlighted as Power Sale. Niall urged it to start. He wanted it to be behind them, this manufacture of siblinghood.

In the dark, the alleys, byways and then the street stank of heat and enervation. The tee-shirt was wrong, so were the jeans. Niall felt he was going to be the one on display. It was a long street, curving away in the distance, and empty. A plumpish doxy in military fatigues, not quite young, began tapping her key in joyless supplication on the window of her tiny cubicle. A fan twirled sexlessly. The wallpaper was dead. Through the walls of the box Niall entered her and touched the closeness of her walls, saw through her to the next room where number 5 talked late at night on the telephone, heard again the sound of the nocturnal passers by, all the agitations. It was a mutation of the submarine dormitory he had previously lived in. She could have been one of those he had shared space with. All of the cubicles were saturated in bright pink butcher's light and their number grew as the street opened up, step by step, along the way. More figures became visible, some tucked behind glass, some out on little porches. He hoped they had air conditioning. In bits of battered tar off into the distance, a long fronted flank, the flank of a shark that swam slowly, patiently out of sight to the fore, the road spread. It was never going to end. Some women stopped tapping when they saw Niall and others followed suit. The smiles vanished and went back into the cubicles. Some women kept on their skimpy things, others covered up quickly in tee-shirts and hid themselves. Niall did not know what to say. In part, a small bud of elation sprung within him. This was encouragement of a kind he had not expected. David looked across at the cars of the pimps clustered together in the shadows, engines and air conditioners softly running. The pilot fish, Niall thought.

- I very sorry, David said. I can't understand that actions. Maybe they's think you military person. Maybe they's have some bad experience about that in nowadays. Sometimes it's happen.

- Yes, Niall said. Never mind. He kept himself just in check. He wanted to run on lengthening legs down the street and blow kisses away freely. But he wished he did not have to go home alone.

*

It is the breaking of the father's ribs Niall wakes up to more often now. The visiting of sins and the re-visiting of the same. It is hot, a day of itchy grey flannel, his body sticky, the inner lining of his straw boater damp and black with a season's sweat. He starts to work on his toast knowing there is not much

time. The soccer game with Clive and the boys, 3-2, had gone on too long. The four bread plates he sets out properly, and the butter. Then he monitors the bread slices as they grill in the oven under the toasty-red element that doesn't want touching with an open hand, turning each piece until all are crisp, evenly browned, and too hot to be easily held. He sets the pieces up in a neat, standing quadrangle, all leaning against each other by the shoulders, breathing harmlessly out into the open centre. It is a clever guise to prevent sweating from taking place on the bread's surface. Soggy toast is no good. The missing, unreplaced toast rack always comes to mind at this stage of the preparations. While the bread cools, he makes several throws from the farther side of the kitchen with his tea bag until he bags it right in the cup. Only then he switches off the kettle, which by now is boiling furiously. It is a test of mental power, staying ability. As the toast pieces become ready for eating - cooled and buttered to the very edge each one, and spread thickly with cheap apricot jam, peanut butter, syrup and plain - the front door opens, slams loudly. Everything goes frantic, Niall hears the crack of soles stuck to patent leather coming towards the kitchen. Daily those shoes drive a cold, cheap stake into his early-morning heart as he tries to win the Masters with his putter upon his bedroom carpet. Into the kitchen he is come. Niall freezes, stares at the four innocent plates. He has always known that this kind of habit, when found out, would be the bitterest straw. Despite each scrupulous washing and rinsing, drying off and putting back, he has known forlornly that the truth would out. He would be found out.

- What is this you're up to? What do you think you're doing? Dull vicious anger on a face like a scraped sore. A fidgeting finger points. Niall understands what is meant but cannot find the language to explain anything. He inadvisably lolls on vistas of thought, so many distances all at once, experiences that become peculiarly preoccupying, all ganging up upon his will. They swallow all concentration needed for this immediate topic.

- This! I'm talking to you, boy! This here! Look at me when I'm talking to you. What are you doing stuffing your fat face again? What are you doing stuffing your fat face when it's two hours till your dinner? Eh? Tell me, what are you doing with bread with two hours till your dinner. Answer me, tongueless git.

Four plates, O god. Don't let mention.

- I'm Hungry, I'm Hungry. You! You're always bloody hungry, aren't you! Aren't you! Answer me ... Answer Me. Yes, or No! Answer me, you stupid, perverted bloody creep. Yes or No! And what's this four plates for your bread? Who is *thus* going to be cleaning all this up after you? Well eat this then, if you're hungry. Go on, Eat It!

The big brick of margarine in its cheerful foil sleeve comes up to be served as mash between the teeth on pains of the unresolved point, without bread. Perhaps not, but Niall cannot tell for sure. It seems that way at least. There are soft plops into distant pools of stones tossed. The agony of the water's tight surface breaks, fist after fist of stone disappears into it, the cold, black pit. He throws some other thing. Then so much comes out. It goes on for how long into the soft flaggy gut of Dad, what an alien word.

He does not hit that face.

He does not use the feet or knees. That is the fashion of the parents, their preference when they battle. Their occasions for violence saw soullessly through so many years. After sports is a favourite, the Saturday early afternoons - the most despairing hours of winter - and a long night to settle into. In the lounge on the floor, well drunk, is the wrestling, the green carpet soiled brown with the sweat of so much struggle and bare feet. Mother uselessly tries to kick the paternal groin, father resisting. Or with the hammer from the toolbox. The handyman about the house. Homeowner with garden and swimming pool, servant's quarters, rose beds in front, tall acacia at the back. Tool to hand rolling in a grapple with his wife; mother trying to scream for the police, the urgency in the voice paralysing Niall into the morbid inactivity of real fear: what happens if I call?

- If you. Don't you dare. Don't you dare touch that phone! Or, Jesus, you bold git, I'm coming for you yourself!

Niall goes to his room instead, having no place else to go - the world at that time is only a register in stamp albums, it does not specifically exist for him, there is no passage to it; he is yet to learn what refugee means - and tries to stop the sound from coming in.

The lounge, a space for family gatherings on the green and floral. But the others are too young to remember granny on a visit from Europe hiding under the table, father screaming from above.

- I was told, taught by you, to cleave, to cleave to my wife, to part from my parents and cleave to my wife, and that is what I am doing, and will do and will continue to do. Then the fierce eyes look up to see Niall and the voice makes its move. You! You, get away to your bed, what do you think you're doing here?

Cleave he did, and cleave her fingers, break her nose and blacken her eyes, love of a rare kind. Jesus, Andrea, don't you see what he's doing, he's a hijacker. It's always been like this, the small ... Always.

- Oh, he was alright.

- Alright, what do you mean alright? How can you say that?

- Oh, he was. Not too bad, not too bad. Niall stares outwards, to where the breeze and lack of birds play. A rare kind. How she has failed to break from form and the reliability of it over time.

So Niall leaves him gasping up against the room divider. Behind him is the breath rattle of glasses inside the room divider cabinet, in the kitchen is his overcool and thus ruined toast. Niall steps over the fallen, the wheezing, and goes to his bedroom to be most penitent. And does not know quite what to do. O god, I'm so sorry. He sits on the hard edge of the bed for emphasis, on the frame of the bedstead, not the springs, and hugs his fingers in each other, and does not know quite what to do. Then the tremors start.

Autumn

And he crosses the threshold. He can see the kitchen again. That *Willkommen* is at last behind him. The sink still leaks, there is a dumpy teapot with its thick, stained sock of leaves, fruit or herbal or black, that have been well strained and left inside. Bread lies in cuts off a five-grain loaf that is heavy to hold and thickly crusted. The plate it all sits on is deep royal blue with a gold rim. Two knives from differing ornate sets are waiting alongside. There is Dutch butter and cheeses of several kinds - Edamer, basil, peppered cream, one with exotic nuts - and a selection of vegetables but no salamis or hams. The sink is full of dishes to be done on Friday. There are no candles but they will come later. The shower opposite is hissing and a little billow of steam rises from the open space above the screen door. A towel is draped over a chair in the nook. She must open the sliding screen and step out onto the shower mat to reach it. That's when the shower water stops.

University of Cape Town

Twenty-nine

Niall took his haircut in the tiny shop near his home. It was a temporary relocation during the demolition of the entire property it was rented from. The hairdresser was going to move back in after the reconstruction. Her airconditioner sounded like a lawn mower. There were several toothbrushes and a tube of toothpaste parked upon the top. He leaned back and listened to her taxi-time chatter, felt keenly as she ran the water warmly over her hands, first, then through his hair, and rubbed the shampoo in. He would have paid merely for that. He could smell her perfume; he knew when she was near his elbow; and exploded like particles of dust each time she adjusted the tilt of his head. It was swept away, he was dusted off, mirrored, could have cared less about the result, and left the premises slightly jumpy with pleasure. Judith, too, had done that: rummaged through his hair with fingers and laughter.

They take the plates and tea through to her room and place them on the floor on a spread she has put down in the centre. Her bed is to the right through the door, simply a single mattress sheltered on the open side by a stereo system, a set of shelves in which the LP records are stacked, and a bedside piece for her reading lamp and a host of plants. In fact, there is vegetation everywhere. The furniture exists to give a podium to the plant life. Although there is a thick covering on the floor and other carpets in loose leaf decoration, there are more on the walls. It takes on a Near-Eastern style. The colours are mostly heavy and full and varied: sapped blues, blood-rich, silks steeped in old leafy green, bolognaise browns. Her life is purchased by colour. She feels it with her hands, chooses spontaneously without knowing where in her home she will position any newly bought thing, or for how long it will be there, but happy in her sense. The colours and thus the things they belong to help her to navigate; she in her way is a bird on the move. The place she likes most for buying fabrics is the Saturday morning flea market run by Gypsies and Turks. That's where the striped silk pyjamas come from. They are rich burgundy slitted all the way around in black and white rivulets; a slim, yellow celtic pattern runs down the outer thighs. The important pieces of furniture otherwise are a table used for study, two chairs, a giant antique wardrobe and a stepladder in the space between the huge twin windows that face out onto the street. In winter the *ice flowers* she loves so much grow there and stay a long time.

*

I don't even like to go out much any more for cultural things. I'm not interested in that. I used to be, but I got older and my interests changed. I don't even read much anymore. I've read maybe two books in the last two years. I don't even keep them anymore. You see that trunk? When I first came I had that shipped over - full of books. Over the years I gave them all away. I used to keep track of them, worried insanely if I

didn't get one back within a week. Slowly, I quit all that. Let them go. What am I going to do with a set of shelves full of books? In another ten or twenty or thirty years it won't matter squat. So now if someone invites me to go to galleries or museums, I just tell them I have something else to do. Not better, just else. It doesn't matter whether I have or not, I just don't do culture. I won't go anywhere for it, I find it harder and harder to think there is any. You know there are restaurants here that display a Western classical style - they've got copies of Dickens and Shakespeare lying around on fake Victorian furniture - it's very popular. But if you look inside the covers of those leather-bound books there isn't a damn thing, only paper. What they call culture in this country is nonsense. Money is the only culture these people think about. And that's fine. I think about it, too. But I don't buy the other stuff. Anyway, culture is what you do, not what you sell or have in an air-conditioned hall somewhere.

*

Cyberstars Go Live

Pretty and teenage-looking, innocent and charming, Lila is a perfect new idol for the pop scene. She sings, dances and chats with her fans. The only difference between Lila and the flesh and blood stars is that she is a computer graphic image existing only in cyberspace.

Making her public debut on the electronic score board at Tiger Stadium on Saturday, Lila pitched the first ball to open the semi-final game between the Dragons and the Bears and sang songs from her album which was released last month.

In the world of show business, which constantly seeks fresh appeal, computer-generated 'cyber idols' like Lila are emerging as the new type of entertainer. She is not the first cyberstar to open her own Web site and interview live on TV and in magazines, but she's on her way to becoming a star in the real world.

*

Outside the open doorway a schoolgirl trudged past, her plump, sausage calves hanging down from the hem of a frumpish grey skirt. Why do the authorities insist on this, thought Niall. He thought about the dreadful uniforms female office staff wore. Maybe by uglifying all feminine appearance under their control as much as possible bosses and headmasters could keep their own desires at bay. Still, there must be a fetish in it somewhere. Perhaps in a brothel somewhere in the city you could get coffee or drinks served by persons in sliding skirts, yellow stockings lengthening, rustling, jackets made of beige synthetic fabrics with dark brown trimming on elephant ear lapels.

The heat from the cooker reached over and fondled his hair from behind. The cook owner pinched quick squibs of vegetable and flicked them casually into the fired clay bowl that sat atop the gas flame. Niall turned back to the TV and studied motor cycle riders madly swinging their backs around tight, pointy turns.

He turned to the hand that put the food down before him and found worn, smiling eyes. A beer was plonked down beside. The bowl of rice was overfull. Sidling a glance around him in shame he

discreetly wiped what of the lippable surfaces he could. The soup filtered through the rice to make a piquant sharp mixture, earthy-brown and flecked with peppers, and gladdened him.

Cook stirred her mouth with a toothpick. She kept her eyes devotedly fixed to the drama she had clicked to on-screen and uttered soft sighs of regard. A car gurgled past. Saturday afternoon nothings. From the far side of the street, just above the gutter, a face plastered to the corrugated iron wall looked across at Niall. She would be singing, this week or next. One of the new icons. Cook began having at an onion with a broad-bladed chopper from among the set that hung above the gas range. The face outside stared in at him out of a frame of blue, her teeth gingerly stoppered by a forefinger, a thumb just touching chin skin. Allure. He wondered who had made her. Then the cold beer flooded over. And the sky the colour of pig's fat frying.

University of Cape Town

Thirty

There was no give in the weather. Niall slept by night under the shadow of the fan. It kept hungry mosquitoes away and stirred the sunken heat around enough to allow him rest. He took several showers a day and remembered to cover the plug hole in the bathroom with the blue stopper to prevent foul sewer gas from invading his home. On Sundays he washed his clothing in the machine a neighbour had provided. During the rains nothing would dry. At that time, he had used a spray to kill any mold from forming and the fan to dry out important pieces of clothing. Food was on sale at any of several small shops in the neighbourhood or at a small department store that now found itself beyond the new highway. Niall liked to buy things from the ancient woman who squatted all day long at the entrance to the highway's pedestrian culvert. He didn't cook much. It was easier and tastier to eat at the local restaurants. After once visiting a tide of leftovers in the refrigerator he decided it was probably cheaper as well: things on his racks rapidly decomposed into money wasted and unpalatable.

At around noon he could listen for the office workers on their way to lunch chatting noisily with their cellular phones, after which arrived a sort of rag and bones man who clacked his metal tongs to have the people bring out their scrap. He collected it all and strapped it down in a push cart with strips of rubber and rolled the rickety contraption along in the street. Once Niall found him leaning over it and browsing through a lingerie catalogue. Usually during the afternoon Niall passed the key cutter's kiosk beside the shoe-shine kiosk beside the grandly emblazoned Oil Oasis. Outside the refreshments shop of the gas station, just off the forecourt, sat motorcycle couriers as cars wheeled in and out. Under umbrellas the riders drank beverages, read newspapers, played cards and waited for new calls. On afternoons when business was slow the elderly fruitseller and the even older key cutter sat on cardboard in the shade and played oriental chess. Once they had argued and the black and white stones were flung out into the street.

The clients of the shoe-shine shop sat in slippers on chairs set out in the street amid the passing cars and smoked, looking impassively at all that passed them by. The shoe-shine man worked with wax, treating it to naked flame from a burner, and used nylon stocking to achieve a neat finish. The clients sitting in the glare of the sun reminded Niall of his mother, the coldness of her lounge even in summer.

*

MH spent her time, when she wasn't studying cocktails and wines and catering, lying around in the securities bureau near her apartment watching the red numbers fidget and flirt with the blue. Many older people stood or sat around, discussed possibilities and avoided ill-boding gestures or comments. The housewives usually arrived soon after nine and left before lunchtime. MH slept more than any of the others. She was younger and had less future to lose.

University of Cape Town

Thirty-one

Relationships was the topic. The ones who listened avidly were young and single. Their ears were conduits to a form of envy.

- Marriage? In my case ... I love my wife ten year. Seven year, to middle school, I love her. Seven year I working show my love her. She don't want. Me. I many cry to that time. Every day, stand to hers home, cry, cry. Summer, I hate mosquito. I love, bam, bam, bam, then to continuously crying. Beat the mosquito. Lonely days and lonely nights. After school, university, I's go to there. To my home, my sister shout me, she's looking mosquito biting, Why you stand to there? How long? You stand 4 hours, hers house? Why? Why? I say, No, 5 hours standing. Many times crazy man. I's one time she say no can to love me, I crazy, go to running my's head in the pole. Telephone's pole: head inside. Baff. I not ... how can I say? Disconsceriousness? Is right?

Even now, some cracking inside, small. Yes, she say me, Okay, let's lover. I very happy boy, very joyfulness. Happy days and happy nights. Then she say, is over, game over. So I very angry, getting drinking, go in restaurant, many shouting that time. One man's shout me, Hey, you! So I go - I fighter spirit, like samurai, can to fight and hitting that man, he's finish. I crazy man. Jail. Snapping me to police. Camera, I must look camera. Lastly, I say her marriage me. She say, No, never! I go her's family house. Hers father to having the birthday party. Outside I's sitting ground, my's head down, kneeling. Crying, crying. My spine very painness: for her. Marry Me! Friends to that father coming house to give some celebrations, is very surprise. Why this situation, they's think. But I don't care. Because I's love her. So much. At the lunchtime, they's calling to me. Come inside for lunchtime. I go. I eat food. And then after lunch I go back my place, make the crying, moaning more continuously. One day, more one day. Next day, breakfast time, also I have the breakfast to they house, is her sister, my wife sister come say me, Come inside, eating family. Then she say, is okay. I marry you. I very happy. You can to understand my story?

I am sorry. I can't very well speak English. But, is no, more even incredible. My problems begin to that time. I go my home. My father, his friend also friend to that my wife father, same-same, so he's know about my accident. I very thrilling, very smiling, but my father's beating me, Why you sitting ground to there? Who my son can to make that behaviour way, like that way? Baff, bam. So I have big sad. My heart, very happy, coming home, Hello! boom, very sadness time. Hardly days to my side. I very depression that time. I say my wife family, What is problem to my side? I have, two eye, nose, mouth, same other mans. I have rich family, very powerful family, good university, I can play the golf, good job, I can to be good husband. I have many experience. But they say, You are no the doctor - theys treating me like I's one of the poors. To her's daughter, that mother she want doctor to be in-law-husband. And she say, Fortune teller man's no like to that marriage. Fortune teller say me, she say, is tell me, I am to died before one years. I die. I say my wife mother, I don't care about that thing. I want marriage my wife. Or

I'm also to die before one years. Even also. But I think she's was hoped, maybe I can do that, suicide myself. She's plan: no hurry to make the marriage her's daughter for me. Maybe I can suicide myself quickly firstly. But I survival that difficult something.

And marriage is very sad time. Something two weeks before to marriage day, my father having the bankruption. No money, no job, his company finish. Life difficult, sometimes. My father was very powerful man. Still now, he have the good friends. But he very sickness person. No good healthy, he have. He same like those poors who begging the money nearby railway station. Same situation: no money. Many headache ... But nowadays no problem. Is very good situation. I buy apple, big some apple, then is separate: some her family apple, some my family apple. They's like me, acceptance me. Hers mother same my mother. Is possible. All everythings can possible. Everyone can have enough apple.

The married ones chuckled as if it all were fancy.

University of Cape Town

Thirty-two

Hello Niall I'm MH

How about you in these days. maybe soon weather getting some better. But be careful hurricane. I see the movie name is Bad Behavior and I'm very disgusting that things. Are you see about that? So I want show you some interested place to our city. Can you enjoying that? I want go downtown area, one park to there we is go to there and visiting. How about Wednesday? I want meeting you 2pm at downtown station, as I know number 18 O'Connell. At ticket office. Maybe is very no good my style too much the saying you. Please writing if you are can to acceptance this my message.

Your friend

*

Niall watched an octopus at the next table crawl out from under the heavy metal lid of its grave and try to make its way across the room. One of the people keen on eating it called out for its retrieval so a woman came and prodded it back using a set of tongs. Like a recalcitrant worker with a family it went. After the cooking was done, the prodder came back, cut the octopus up with powerful scissors, and the diners set about their feast. In cooked pieces it stopped evoking life and unpleasant struggle; it was no longer very human.

Niall's appetite returned. He raised a bowl of cold, salty soup to his lips, watched it swim above a bed of seaweed, sucked it back through his teeth so that the nostrils tasted it, the smell, back to some twelve years and an earthen pot deep and rough. A year of sweat and sunburn and dark grimy patches on the collars, clothing that stank and boots scuffed by the scrub and sand. Now he blows away the leaves, twigs, dust and bits of insect from the surface of the liquid before drawing in the sour, gritty goats milk, to the delight of those in the village looking on. A small village. In the middle of a continent that doesn't exist here, he thought.

Thirty-three

Carpets hang on the walls in Vienna, kelims on the floors. Paint laps everything, even the TV, stereo, teapot, all are touched by it; nothing escapes, not least the brushes. The new season has introduced some changes. On a wall in the back room is a huge water colour sketch of two men standing hand in hand. They are naked and surrounded by trees. The view of them is from the back and they are exquisitely proportioned. She does not know who they are; she never knows. What existed in their place before is already forgotten. In this way she is careless. The sutures on the teddy bear, even they are splattered in a medley of colour. She has loosed her good feel and she likes earthiness more now (*Der Schnitter schneidet das Brot* - The cutter slices the bread - is a line in a message or poem on a photoprint stuck to the wall). Yes, she sees in colours. Colour is the language she sees by. And there is danger, too. She carves some things out in the shape of pain - perhaps a father, perhaps not enough of one. The sculptures are grotesque; there are several of them and they are the new furniture. The orange clay forms are many-mouthed and wild, speckled tongues emerge from between the eyes (*Mit dem Messer* - With the knife). Eyes that can truly see, fierce as talons.

She is careless in other ways. Her hair falls into the wine, her tea to the floor; she stabs herself accidentally with the corkscrew on trying to open a new bottle; the carpets gets painted as soon as paint is found already to be there (to her finds like that are opportunities for joy). The stepladder is standing nearer the middle of the room draped with bits and things she loves (*Und du bist froh* - And you are glad). Goethe, Schiller and Heine sit in a salad dish on the third rung; pot plants on the fourth whose leafage overflows like great green tentacles; the awful clock covered in wax and paints at the top (*Ausser als er sag* - Except when he says).

The sun does not move in that summer sky. Over the trees in the Prater Park it dawdles, scuffing toecaps, while they lie in cheese, wine and the cut grass. Wine on her lips, staining her throat, some drops on the white shirt, too. Her hair among cut grass. We are lovers, he realises almost as an accident: this is what it is. This we have become. Did they desire or expect it like this? He cannot be sure. But it is fine enough, this pleasure, what they make of it. They watch dogs and owners criss-crossing as if in search of one another - out of a Fellini movie perhaps - following of some necessity a trail. It is silly but they laugh at it all regardless. She wants a place in the future where dogs can live - large dogs that have space to roam and run. She calls them 'dawks' and it gives him pleasure, that personal stamp of hers on the old, domesticated sound of the word. They hold each other and kiss at length. There is moisture on her cheek that he can touch. The enjoyment of slow time taken and their gentleness together makes him feel quite light-headed. The glare in the grass makes her blink. In the evening they ride to the Messenhausergasse, her street - he used to think he would never forget how to find it - somewhere near the South Station.

She never uses underwear (*Kom her du Brot* - Come forth, you loaf).

*

Yeah. What I hate, let me tell you, are journalists, first, then vivisectionists and politicians. You know, the ones who really think they're doing it because the public has a right to know or a right to be protected or a right to be represented, they're the most despicable. Hurting a living animal, claiming to act on behalf of the ordinary, these people are terrible people. You know, because of these wall-to-wall TV news services we can't have a tragedy or even an accident, anymore: it's all staged. You didn't use to have crowds at plane crashes, now you can't keep them and their handycams away. Nobody wants them away because you have real emotions going on that the world will pay to wonder at and, you can bet, envy not just a little bit. No need for a sob track to be inserted with the footage. When someone shoots my kid up in a school I don't want a cathedral and 400 piece choir and the president and a hundred news services telling the world what it's like, what it feels like, and having the fuckers camp outside my home and talk shows set up to analyse it, reference it, commemorate it, anniverserialise it. That's what I like about here. That stuff happens in another orbit. Here, everyone observes and nobody notices. As an outsider you can have your emotions and traumas if you want, even if they're real, and basically nobody's interested.

*

He hitch-hikes in summer and winter, cruising along the autobahn, is frisked by the mean Bavarian police, touched up once by an old homosexual looking for luck at the gas stations, bounced along by a giant Hungarian meat-eating enthusiast, advised by moguls in training, encouraged by old radicals and middle-aged art dealers. Sometimes he takes the train down there. Linz. St Polten. The cathedral at Melk. He is stretched out the length of the track and attached to all of them. Names like crucibles. How his breathing sharpens as the last stations arrive and pass, when that city comes into effect for him. It paralyses. Those cold slabs of street. And how sublime has it always been for the people from the provinces of the world when they, like he, have come in hope of some glorious thing, a Promise? And he always tries to cheat on the street car fare. During the weeks before he can get down there, get enough money together for the journey, he works in a factory moving sacks of flour and sugar and colourings into huge vats for mixing and bagging, while the minutes drip off the clock like wax blobs through the whole shift, day after day, months. He thinks only of her. Didn't his grandmother die blind and comfortless during those days? Yes, in fact she did. But it was a Vienna of the mind that lay between.

Together they mosey through art musoleums. She, scornful of the Hundertwasser wine labels and tourist dreck, touches the expensive knobs on cars. He absorbed by Schiele and a Klimt: a different Judith whose chin is proudly raised in dare, whose grip holds the severed head. She rides that bicycle with a devil's hair flailing out behind, shrieks, head down, dangerously focussed.

Thirty-four

At the ticket office MH was waiting. She led him outside past a fast food outlet to a place not far from the subway station. It was part of the busy downtown section. Before them was a park with a low wall surrounding it and, in the centre, through a rim of trees and bushes, a steel condom of scaffolding wrapped around an old, grey pagoda. Behind it men worked vigorously to add a new section of some kind, a temple perhaps, but it was difficult to tell since everything was expensively boarded up from view. Funds for the construction had clearly been budgeted but as an act of beautification it did not, to Niall, seem very special. The work of the traffic that laagered the park boomed violently all around them.

Niall and MH moved directly towards the pagoda against the throngs of people present for whom funds had not been budgeted. They seemed displaced, poorish people with nowhere better to be, and they were everywhere. Older ones were standing about in small gaggles or sitting at board games before audiences of their peers who intently observed the action. Some people read the newspaper, others sat chatting in the dusty sunlight. Near the pagoda a couple was dissolutely playing badminton. They wore long leggings despite the warmth of the afternoon and stopped whenever people wanted to pass between them. In the shrubbery to one side of the park, almost given to discretion, grizzled old soaks drank cheap spirit alcohol. There were sad-looking younger men in suits, too, who loitered without intent, getting comfort only from the briefcases in their hands. In an open patch, set apart from most of the other people, a man harangued the times before a small crowd of listeners. There were also religious incantations coming from speakers that dangled in the trees. The odd struggle it made was less with the human clamour than the traffic, its energy, the concerns of the real world that the streets lay claim to.

Niall walked slowly around the place, dazed by the dust and sounds. He had never before seen so many old people in one place. The dust rose easily from their movements. It sat on the leaves of trees and plants and there was a taste of it in his mouth. What does she want from me here, he thought. He looked for MH but she had wandered off elsewhere. He turned to the bronze casts giving relief to struggles of the past against imperialism. A young heroine, going slightly green around the shoulders from oxidation, was dying in perpetual pain for the cause of nation. Her male oppressor held a large sword while the human audience, the beneficiaries of her sacrifice, old toppers with ragged grey beards and smelly clothing, stumbled about in the trimmed bushes or urinated loudly against a nearby wall. Old women carrying drinks and candies at their sides in plastic bags cackled at them loudly. They gave out their goods and impatiently shook out flat palms for payment.

Between the pagoda and the stupa the badmintonners pinged on. Niall's weariness and confusion vaulted; he felt the business and routine of the place much as it existed in every other place in the city, wanted only his own place to sit down upon. Everywhere there were old folk clinging to each other's company; the nimble fingers of board players, in between their draws on crooked cigarettes, slapping down

pieces, checking, rechecking, getting slapped back in suit; crusty men and their twitching moves; a generation that had owned few dogs. Dust and the noise. A man nearby standing in close watch of a board wore a triangular grey beard, a gaunt face, and long drawn eyes nearly to. His face was deeply creased. It was a day camp for refugee pensioners. The leaves will soon be changing, Niall thought. He began to grow in fear for his own community. He did not know whether at all it existed. He looked again at the people. Their grandchildren had shopping malls to accumulate themselves in; they at least had this odd sore on the city's skin to come to and experience their own twilight daily. The city finds a way to keep going, the park a sign of the invisible hand providing social services by default.

A woman at his side sat and sucked candy off a sticky wrapper using gums and a few teeth. She was ancient, her skin barley brown, riven in gutters and furrows of the past, and her poverty. The throw she made missed the open trash can before her and she looked at it askance; she did not seem to see the mound of garbage lying on the ground.

And then MH was again beside him.

- I see pigeon. Two pigeon nearby some old people. Pigeon fucking each one another. Is very irony, I think. Is very big shame to old people. And she took hold of his hand with a tenderness that made him start and tinged him with shame.

*

All her clothes are limed in the smell of her body. The crotch of the silk pyjamas she wears as casual clothing even on the Viennese streets is so tangy with the smell of her. Her residues. Those things engorge him. After the meal, they move away from the wine, leftover bread and ungarnished salads, across the kelims to her mattress and slip the clothes from each other's body and touch and taste the skin each has. They taste everything, they touch everywhere, and the nostrils sip at the scents each makes, too. It is silent in the room and only two candles are still at work. They can ignore the dripping tap in the kitchen and the sounds of the traffic from outside. She raises her hips, he moves over her, and slowly and carefully they join and make love.

*

- Is very sad story. I can't explain. Is our national sorrows. Some kind deep bitterness. We regretting too many somethings. That old womans over there, they's selling the drinks, they's take mans to some kind motel, shows their body to the mans, maybe some small charge, only 10 dollar. Many regretness but I no can to explain. That other mans, having office suit, they carry the bliefcase, they have gotted unemployable. Can't go they're office no more, can't go they're homes to this time: wife is gonna ask,

Why you come at here? Is deep shameness to them. They can't say their family that unfortuation what nowly they experience.

Over near the entrance to the little park, as they were leaving, stood two nuns watching hand in hand, merely watching. Two men approached and began talking to them. The nuns replied; the men smiled wryly and then the nuns moved on. Who wants to be observed going down beneath the oil of life, even by the humble and the good? All the life seemed stuck in an inky sea like cold stones, and all the beds of turned soil were carefully trimmed and spruced. To encourage correct growth in the spring.

They chose seats in a place that was less likely to be washed away in the tide of human feet. Two waitresses slouched at the bar counter, backs to the custom. MH signalled one of them over. As their order was taken a throb started up in the pit of Niall's belly that took him time to source. From next door, or below, or on top, a musical rage was under way. A waitress began rocking her hips to the rhythm. The one behind the counter doling out spoons of coffee turned up the house stereo in compensation. An ashtray just hid the crevice between MH's knees. Niall looked at and felt the ashtray to check if it was moving with the noise. He could feel his mother far below. God, the sex that comes in the wake of death, he thought. Our rites. He leaned back to distract himself less by the predicament her limbs made for him, which put him just out of earshot.

- Can you hear me? he said earnestly at her.

Thirty-five

And after they have showered together, soaped one another down, rinsed and are dry again, she says, Let's go! And they tramp the winter Viennese streets in search of her friends. Those nights. Cold metal nails under the skin that strip the nerves apart. Austria. Remembering her like that: not very tall, brown hair hennaed reddish, hanging down, elfin. The ears peeking out from under errant wisps, making little breath-catching triangles. Nothing soft about the eyes. A small double chin for now. Only a raging soul and a body with a limp, after all. She is blind without the contacts. Her finger dabs into each of the thimble cups to fish for the lenses. *Bin ich froh? Ja, sicher!* - Am I happy? Yes, certainly! - she says, and the easiness of her words leaves him in wonder, a speechlessness. In the centre, on the kelims, eliminating the batiks, arms raised to the danglelight, her breasts tucked like wings to skin, *Freude, Freude!* Joy, Joy. In mens underwear.

*

They went back on the subway to his room. She talked the length of the journey about the park, a television documentary, her grandparents. She was no longer holding his hand; people nonetheless stared at them. He stood in the aisle of the train beside her, listening and remembering a Halloween. The children of the neighbourhood had come to ring the awful doorbell six months after Judith had shut hers down permanently at the airport on her way back to the extinction of her feeling, and a woman she had come to love.

- Hello. Sorry, I don't have any sweets, but I've got some apples, he told them.

- I Love Apples! the little one yelled out in the dark at him. Words like that he liked, balanced and true. He could not remember when last he had heard such a lovely thing. He hoped he wouldn't have to see the kids the next day on TV as victims of statistics.

Thirty-six

His eyes opened in his basement and before him on the wall, just above her head, he saw a long, furry insect. He closed his eyes again to concentrate. Normally he might squint closely to steady his struggle or hurry it up to a crisis but never before to wish away repulsive creatures of the bedroom. He hoped in soft mutters she wouldn't see it. He pushed his lips near her ear, listening at the same time to her tiny bleats.

- I'm going to come. Softly, softly. She blinked and fluttered a smile and tried to struggle a little against him, but he held her there. When he pulled out and readied to swamp her belly button, she stopped it with a thumb on the spout, her other hand on his forehead wiping away the sweat.

- Spray me. Spray me. He did not understand her; it began to interfere with his control. She pointed at her face and made a circle. My face, spray. Everywhere. Then she chuckled at the notion and his face, the birth marks of his interest showing there.

He moved up onto her chest and moved there for a few moments, feeling his sweat lather her belly. She pressed her small breasts together with both hands to help him, and watched closely as he moved on her.

When at last he was ready, he pulled himself over her, up to her face, feeling his arms tremble from the exertion and the alcohol they had relied on. She squinted her eyes shut. It had been a long time since he had last used his body in any such position and it made him strain. She framed it with both palms open on either side of her face. Glancing at her shaven eyebrows, he had a sudden pinch of remorse for what he was about to try to finish. They looked like wings ready to fly off her face when the cold season came. Off somewhere. And the insect was gone, he noticed with relief. He couldn't hurry any more, he needed to think of something.

She felt sweat drop on her from his face and chest, then saw his squirming lips above what was stuck in her face; he shot it into her, the eyes, nose, all over her forehead and in the hair, crude months of it pent up.

Afterwards she used both hands to milk out what was left and spread the wetness around his organs as far as it would go. He was still stuck up on quivering arms, grimacing and shaking. She had her eyes tightly shut and was thinking warmth and soreness. She was glad it was over at last.

He looked at her forehead and lips and eyes, seeing the milky polyps, a sort of plasma, what his coming had done to her. As he lay shrinking on her belly, seated there on his knees, she carefully massaged the matter into her face, and all around it, deep into the skin. He dried himself off with toilet paper. She lay quietly waiting for it all to dry.

- I can't really spray anymore. I used to. When I was younger. I think I'm getting old. Between tightening lips of salty chestnut blossom she tried to mutter something.

- Don't be old.

Her skin was tautening and mummifying under the face-pack. He investigated it closely with a finger. All the fissures and cracks developing in the skein masked her nut-brown colour. It felt strange. Her eyes were red and looked like wounds he had made in her. It had got between her lashes and stung her eyeballs. She had spread it all over the brows and lashes. They looked like a team of flies caught in drying soup.

Their sensible boundaries of e-mail and friendship were gone. Niall listened to her move about in the bathroom. He wondered whether what he felt was really ease. It was relief, the kind that comes after effort and exhaustion. But it felt like relapse as well and this he knew to be wary of. He wondered where ease really began, why it was not so very natural but came for him only sometimes at the end of various difficulties. And then, what of it? He didn't know what he wanted. He was in a shabby room and someone else was nearby, a naked stranger. He put the pot full of water on the gas range to boil and listened to her urination in the clammy bathroom. It could have been better, for her, for both of them - the place they had used for their fucking - but he did not much want to think about it. Without forethought things seemed to be working out well enough for each; it was as well to let them keep going.

It made him feel awkward that she had so wanted to be kissed, was ravenous for it. That had not so much been the expression of his need. She was an ordinary girl, her desire was probably quite normal. Why was it difficult for him to tender such simple tokens of attention? Was affection the counterpart to that other mystery for him, pain? Then failing to grasp one meant lacking the sense needed for the other.

She took the tea and sat down on his damp bedding. He lit a cigar remnant and stood to cool down in front of the tiny fan. Outside, the rain that had started up earlier was still busy. It didn't seem necessary to ask her any of the questions that fill up the after-space and die on the tongue with their utterance. Foreigners all over the city were no doubt doing what he had done, what they had done together. How much shame would it bring on her family if her parents knew? So, as at the start of the already begun, he leaned over her gently and slid his fingertips through the nap of her lovely thick hair at the back, the thick shoots and touched there with his lips. Like the thick nests of grass he had loved as a child to play through with his fingers, again and again, marvelling at distinction between the colour of his skin and what was growing, feeling the texture growing there, the smell of it in the dry air and in the dampness after rain. And this he noticed on the subway or on the street as he stood or walked behind people. The nature of such hair, the way it seemed it must be connected, that beautiful strength, to all the nerves and homes of loving desire in the whole human organism, carried through over the many years of survival. That space between the black hair and the skin he fell between, felt his quickness again.

Thirty-seven

The nib of the mornings was finer now, the air not so saturated. Things of the land that had been growing during the fat summer months were now ripe and people seemed to show off their confidence and ebullience as much at their pleasure in plentiful markets as anything else. Pink-tinged dawns brought with them something snappier to breathe. Niall's days were relatively happy.

MH visited from time to time and brought things that they could eat together. Pears and apples; noodles, rice and a rice cooker; she carried in packages of fish and garlic, spicy cabbage, fried cucumbers in egg batter and dumplings; in a package there were sesame leaves in some kind of vinaigrette, radish in thin strips, cherry tomatoes, various kinds of dried seaweed; a small tub contained fermented bean paste, another had red pepper sauce with a sweet piquancy; fresh, chopped crabs; on several occasions, sliced back bacon. She cooked things on the gas range and brought them through to the other room. They ate off newspaper table cloth laid out on the floor and drank water from a bottle. She prepared the water by boiling it up with barley and dried corn kernels. She bought him light bulbs because the cooler weather made the one in the bathroom pop; batteries; mosquito coils; socks; the correct garbage bags; string for bundling newspapers; underwear. Trendy tee-shirts twice and once a pair of trousers she found at a second hand sale. She considered shoes but had to discard that idea because of the prohibitive cost. Following the economic crisis and the huge sums that had disappeared during the stockmarket crash, various newspaper articles urged readers to invest in the family, or at any rate in people, and this she thought was a good idea. He looked at her heady entrances as if he were a patient in a ward, and in a way he was. His room suffered from neglect; he was bound by contract and a stern state bureaucracy to his employer; he was a foreigner. Her visits made his work and memories easier to deal with and he began less often to think of the city as a kind of shifting morass through which he had to wade daily. Sometimes he felt his existence like an insect's skimming upon a water's surface. The very word teacher provoked him, though. His work, he thought, never looked likely to begin in earnest. He was merely an aging, flagging learner.

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- That's what they doing, the student said. They go to that places, Osaka City, Shanghai City, Tokyo City, LA, Hawaii, make the dancing, selling tickets, prostitution, hostess: they're servers to that society because they want make the big money. That's why they learn the foreign language. And some of them is very not good educated but they can do that job for their brother, sisters, family, for the education. Is they think sacrifice for family is reasonable. They only busy to send the money their home. Even they don't have TV, luxury somethings - only send the money. But sometimes their family is no good.

Sometimes buy the car, buy the new house. They say only, Our daughter gone away. They can deny their daughter. Even they can lie about that money, where is it coming from. They don't mention about what is her real situation, that daughter, what is her real job.

*

Niall would get home and wait for her. He put a pot on the range to boil and lay down on the floor to listen for the stairs to announce her arrival. And she came down those stairs in a flurry as had the rain of a season before. He caught the brunt of her blitz at the doorway and she was all cheer and breathlessness. Bags went to the floor, she tackled him and reached with her hands and face for his lips, and when she had recovered she explained to him the nature of the things she had brought.

Because he was quite content, Niall's attachment to his pasts went cloudy and he was not aware of much. He had ceased to dream in ways that could be remembered. He did not ask MH where she got her money from.

Together they walked in the city's palace parkgrounds on weekends and he was relaxed then about holding her hand. They watched the wedding couples have their photos taken. To Niall's jokes MH said nothing, but she studied the bridal clothing carefully. Around them leaves fell in shrivels, children ran about at their play; Together they enjoyed hot green tea near the heater of a small ill-run cafe. There were blossoms of a kind, which seemed strange at that time of the year, yellow and pale white ones.

He accompanied her to a university hospital to the funeral of her friend's mother who had died of anaemia. They sat on mats outside in the coolness, eating together while the friend's father, inside with his relatives, moaned and wept pitifully. Niall did not go inside when the others went to pay their respects to the family, and nobody urged him to do it. MH's friend served them all with plates of food, opened beer bottles, and chatted amicably. Outside on the mat it was hard to be heard over the clash of industrial rubble being poured down a chute at the reconstruction site nearby. The friends all talked and joked and played cards. When the food and drink was finished, MH walked Niall back to the subway, holding him by the arm. Dust at the meal had coated them and the food and the beer. He tried to pat it off their clothing. He did not want death to follow them around like that.

A dusty, sleepy Saturday morning early, hours of it off, time upon which to lean while MH continued in her dreams. Niall, elated, went walking. The city seemed to be recovering from a glorious drunkenness. Not far from the river, lying out in the desiccated sunshine, on a rope around the season's aging garden, hung knickers and a vest. The day's sky was vast, the warmth a tease between lovers. The owner of the laundry, oblivious to it, was a cracked, slumbering sot. Her smell was strong. Niall looked at her things.

Then cautiously he removed the underwear from the rope that kept people off the furrows, slid a new green banknote into the ragged bowl, crunched it all up and set it next to her head.

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- Don't you know him? He is Murakami Haruki. My favourite writer. Here my favourite article to his book. Characters is sit roof for watching gas company which have some big burning, some smoke coming out. They wait explosioning, maybe. Can feel heating air, maybe that fire can burn house. All can touch them there. On roof. Midori feel ... something eat her, her lonely. She's playing guitar, next to lover. So she say Watanabe, she say, Perfect lover 100% is difficult find that kind man. But selfish love perfectly is possible. Can find. Lover should come her, to her, and she can say him, Strawberry short-cake, go for me. Go get for me. And he must go buy it, running, putting down the all things. No question. When he arrive, come back again, she say lover, Ah, is no good at now. I don't want this one. And throwing away short-cake out of window. And he say, Sorry, Midori, I don't can see you already no want having cake: I am fool like dumb ass. Then he say, For apologise, what you like, choco mousse, or cheesecake? And he should go. Then she can love him. For some no important thing. That story, I love it. At that time, world is nearby fire, all can be finished.

When I getting my home. Rain too much pouring. I can't ask father. I can't ask mother. From subway I looking outside. Outside raining. Who can bring umbrella? I'm think about that. I want umbrella. No someone can taking that umbrella. I feel, my feeling very lonely. I am alone. I go my home, wetting, unhappy. Some sad feeling. But I want: you be umbrella. I be you cheesecake. That's I want. Just some *jang*, some affection, of spirit one another. Maybe I want having the baby, small one.

He turned from the TV to look at her and was not sure whether he should respond. Strands of her hair hung down off her ears, a thin black veil. And it was not washed, that he had smelt. He noticed at last how very black her eyes were. There was nothing in them he could see. His eyes were not like that. When there was sickness or trouble in his body, it showed. She sipped her tea. It was her walk he was disaffected by. The pigeon-toes. But he knew she was not cruel.

Thirty-eight

- I want to go entertainment, some drinking. Quickly. Are you okay?

- Right now?

- Some drinking, little. I like dance place also. Some nice place I know. I'm show you. Not so bad.

With you, we go. We can take taxi. Is no problem.

- Okay. Niall looked at his watch and then at David. Everybody else of the thinning class had gone on towards their homes. He did not feel like going out, neither did he feel like being more assertive and standing up for his own will.

Once they were in the taxi, Niall wanted out. He wanted to be where he couldn't be called out to, known. Many serious things were on his mind, things from the past that called out to him, the persuasions people plied upon him: *Come into my shop*; the things rued, everyone's central sympathies and urges, a world of beckonings; *come in and make me glad, and I will eat of you tonight*. Absently he thought of MH and it made him feel some anxiety. She seemed very far away. He did not know what he owed her in these circumstances.

- So I decided. If my company to reject me, unemploy me, I must to change my dream. Is best difficult situation in nowadays. Maybe hair artist, I think so. Is my plan. I have no wife, so is no problem. I'm try think some sexy name for that works. France people name. And Sundays, the beggary peoples to railways station I's give the haircutting. I can do it. Is my plan. Free to poors. But my studio, very expensive. But no I can say the poors where is my studio. They's no can understand business situation - they's coming visit because company holiday to they side all days, every days. Make my business, my studio, to bankruptcy. Now so many companies is unemployers. I very sorry, I am very sorry about that.

Niall looked out at the city paving rushing past, still and grey in the streetlight. A Place To Draw Close To God passed by them on the other side. The traffic had become scraggly and the driver wrung his way through it.

The taxi dumped them opposite a brickwork hotel which might have been brown but in the darkness its colour was not clear. It was strikingly ugly which not even the night could do anything about. The sidewalk was compacted with shops selling gaudy things. David led the way up a steep street populated by cold chisel whores and tiny drinking shops. Texas Village flashed searingly in bright red neon like a lighthouse. Western soldiers geared up on the road opposite on alcohol they were drinking from pitchers. One of them said, Yeah! and whooped. Niall tried to listen more carefully to David's voice. They could not find the place David was looking for so they circled back to a dark, grubby business that had not yet started to attract lots of people.

- Your plan is not so bad. You would be a good hairdresser, I think. David smiled and touched his finger to his glasses and then Niall's glass with his own.

- Cheer up.

- Yes, cheers.

The music loudened as more people began to arrive. Soldiers kissed known women on the cheek and started to dance on the little floor. People gave off intimations of sexiness with their mouths and arms and hips. They looked pleased to be there. Niall and David drank in silence. It was difficult to be heard clearly. David nudged Niall like a carnival showman pressed to encourage the punters to appreciate what was on view.

- Next time I want take you drinking night club, our traditional style. But is very expensive that place. He was speaking loudly above the din. His spittle dabbed Niall's ear. Is very sexy womans, give the good service. Some day, I want go with you. Good chance you see that kind life. Because you loneliness guy, I'm think so.

- Excuse me a moment. I want to check my pager, Niall yelled back.

He asked for a phone, was shown outside to a passage. The air was better there. He placed both hands upon the wall above the telephone and stood like that for a short while. He hoped there might have been a message but there was none. For a few moments he thought of trying to call MH but could not remember her number; it was something he never carried with him. He thought that if he could wait just long enough near the phone she would understand in some extraordinary way and might try to reach him. Perhaps he could lure her thus, summon her into being for his immediate need. If he waited, he would not have to go back inside. Perhaps if he lifted the handset her number might return to him. He was still standing like that when his face hit the wall. Something, after the momentum of all that extra force from behind, a potplant, crashed down next to him and the phone was ripped from his hand. Again his head hit the wall. He thought his ear had been ripped off; something crushed his arm and the ribcage took a kick or a hit of some kind. He dropped his brow into a punch, not consciously, felt the blow glance off and a shape of man grunt in his own style of pain. One held him down by the arms, another frisked his pockets swiftly. A kick; curses he could understand. *Leave the boots, they're just shit.* Paper was thrown, business cards, a simple glitter of them in the yellow dark. Niall thought it was money thrown down on him, was terrified that they would leave without helping. And knew he had so many calls yet to make. He didn't want the paper lost but could do nothing for all those little pieces. This is pain, he thought. How I feel is all about pain. He wanted help but the sound that emerged terrified him even moreso. His voice didn't belong to him, would not act in his service. Perhaps, he thought, it is some awful drug. A taste of blood was there and it made him want to be ill. Mostly it was the surprise that hurt, the rudeness. That contact could be so focussed, and as such set against someone unknown. He knew he was crying and there was nothing he could do about it. Suddenness was not the word. It wasn't how he imagined pain to be.

David found him later with his arm twisted and stuck in a broken pot of sand. There was vomit all over the clothing. Niall was struggling with messages broadcast on the subway trains. They ran through his head like mantras, *Please step back for a while. You can transfer to Y... or C...; this train is for K...* Contact repeated. Legs hit home regularly, solidly. He was running. People moved his legs and he could feel them. Something of his abdomen hurt insanely. He was sweating and running. The train signals and broadcasts came regularly. What feet can do. Sounds trembling in the ear. Fingernails gouging out a brief furrow of flesh. Hands swaddled him. There had been the Ethiopians amputated for their broken legs by those Russians, sawn up and then sewed up with trash bandaging inside. He had sat in one of those hospitals and seen the victims, and he feared the insides of strange hospitals. He feared Hospital taking him like it had Andrea and swallowing what was left of him. Nor did he want the swilly washing of language to be disinfected by. Knowing what the matter was, was all he cared for. People were around. David eased them off, prevented their phoning the police. Voices were everywhere in different languages. People, detaching themselves from the vein of the unusual, moved off. David did not have to pay at the bar. He helped Niall to an already hustled taxi.

At Niall's home, David smoothed out Niall's bedding after clearing a trench through the dusty books, clothing well strewn about and the plates and crumples of toilet paper. It was an odious job, but foreigners, he knew, were known for this kind of living. Someday it would make an entertaining story. How did they cover the world with their dealings and influence and be so dirty?

The visit to the hospital had been swifter than expected. Three stitches were put in behind Niall's ear. His eye was swabbed out and dressed. The ribs were not broken, merely bruised. The severity of the wounds was less impressive to the staff than to Niall, though the glasses would have to be replaced. In silence, he and David had taken another taxi back to the basement apartment. After preparing everything as best possible, David went home.

Niall showered himself favouring his injured arm. He looked closely in the anaemic mirror at his swollen and well-hooded eye. He saw the lines and fissures developing around the socket of the other, the grey in his hair, that coming down as sideburns long, thin and not looking very healthy. The skin around his cheeks was no longer tight. He pinched a portion and held it like that. He considered the whole. There was heaviness all over his bones, softness and puffiness. He saw the grimace on his lips. But, it was not his fault, the incident, insofar as being in a place and failing to avoid certain senses of them, making particular choices, having events meet with other events, as things happen, are not the fault of anything. Nonetheless he had once again failed to protect himself from danger and handled himself badly. The world of his father was still in the ascendant.

The two days his boss let him take off work he spent wondering who he could write a letter to. Distractedly, he read back issue magazine articles but did not get up to call MH.

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Unhappy, MH came back from the fortune teller's premises on the far side of the city and tried to go to sleep. She didn't want to call Niall and she didn't want to eat anything. She felt sick.

University of Cape Town

Thirty-nine

That's what I've come to think. I don't know when it was, twenty, thirty years ago, I read an article in some journal about what America should be doing about its Negro problem - forget that that kind of language makes us cringe now, that it's all become translated into a language problem and forgotten about - it was probably Time magazine, and it's some guy from Sweden! How many blacks are there in Sweden? About 4000? Is that cutting it too much? This Swedish boy was probably sitting around in his college with a couple of buddies from Nigeria who're on scholarships and figuring it all out. So, as I was saying, if you don't go away from your own country for at least a couple of years, you don't know nothin' about nothin', and even then you don't know enough to make any sense when you open your mouth. But look here: I've had to put on the gas range again - it's getting colder now - and see how badly gas burns. I never thought about that before. Those tiles I can't reach up to clean. It's too high up there. But see the colour? And when I wiped across here with a cloth the other day, it was just filthy. So, I'm busy killing myself quietly in here. That's what's happening.

University of Cape Town

Forty

Denigration. A failure to indulge the puffing breath, the pacing, the elaborate gestures. These things were on his mind when Niall awoke. Through the pain in his body he refought lost battles, a museum of them in his memory. It is the morning of his visit to his mother, the second-to-last one. He looks towards the silent, dying Andrea who is made to observe, having the best seat in the house: a sponge egg-box cushion on the sofa. The father's chin is raised heavenward for inspiration in the chase. Huntsman. The father's exquisite pain, lips pursed into a purple, scowling flower. He is the pensioned-off boardroom chieftain, the controller of all space in the dead living room. Niall is sure only of not wanting to respond to this parade of his magnanimity but he is throttled by his own tongue. Andrea's cold hand is fast between Niall's pair of fists. He feels only the deathly coldness and it is the only thing he concentrates on: it refrigerates. The father paces, a squat, agitated cat in heat, heaving with the importance of his mission.

- Well. The voice pauses though Niall is no longer looking. Well, I just want to say, you see, I was approached by Jennifer Whatshername from the Hospice. And the gist of it is this: she suggested that I tell you this: so here I am. I'm sorry for trying to crunch you. There. She said I should tell you, apologise to you for trying to crunch you. I'm sorry. So let's shake on it.

Niall hears the elaborately rolled 'r's', a part of the performance, and it has all been done too fast. The master of the boardroom has left no room for questions from the ones assembled. And besides, there have been so many oily words in the past, a sump of them, and an appetite for big manly handshakes made out with a left foot forward and left fist planted squarely on the hip - the father is no lover of the limp wrist or fishy fingers, real man stuff it needs to be for agreement. Niall thinks this has something to do with Masonic mumbo jumbo. Though he has never been invited to join the brotherhood, his experience of such fatherly doings and commotions since childhood has made him think ill of men's societies. Niall does not want the words, has long since lost faith in those grand gestures, all those epaulettes of gold and the silver stars and ribbon badges the Masonic talkers enjoy being anointed with. Perhaps that is the way thwarted men experience a kind of true love, the thrill of being an initiate; and it is only the initiates who get the lamb's blood smeared on their doors: the rest, the torn wives and abused daughters and misfit sons, must flounder along with the fellaheen. Yet, too many odd bits have been passed over.

- I said I'm sorry. What more do you want? I'm the one who gave you everything, I paid for it. If it wasn't for me.

Niall doesn't want anything more of this type. What he craves, he thinks, is of a different order. So many years have passed but what Niall knows is that his father's articulations in this case are consistently weird compared to those of the past. They seem sincere, no doubt, but their authenticity is in question. It has always been a problem. What is said has one value but what is meant owns many. These in the past tended to vary depending on the day, time, level of intoxication, nearness to payday: other

realities. Things said have always had a payback clause of indeterminable transparency. Would an honest man in this type of situation know simply to leave well alone and have the courage to do so? But in the father's industry there always existed a structure of fear: better to ride on the backs of those below lest be ridden from above. Those structures were so portable.

- I'm leaving now and I don't want to hear anything more.

- You, you ... sick you little bastard. It comes outside Andrea's vision as sibilant hiss, a plosive pop.

Yes.

He kisses, places the cold hand next to the cooling body of his mother, passes out of the dead room, through the unquiet door, the forbidding gate, the neighbourhood of eternal Sunday afternoons.

Just talk to him: a dying woman's wish. Andrea's. Now there is no end, Niall thinks. That is where the emptying canvas comes from and stays. And diminishes as do we the afflicted. Don't explain; don't be sorry. Some explanations require the humility of a shut mouth.

*

Niall lay on his sleeping mat on the floor and listened to the banter of the friends. He heard the washing of his dishes, the sound of the cooking, the easiness in their efforts. David came to him and poured some beer into a paper cup, then held it out for him. There were too many hiking club members in the room but some had come a long way. Their presents lay on the floor and cards were stacked on the little table. Niall lay back and imagined. Everyone was having a pleasant time.

- We's never have housewarm the apartment. So is good time. Thank you your fighting! Now we can to enjoy. And everyone laughed.

David poured the beer and spirits for all.

- Cheersh.

- Cheers. Is MH coming tonight?

- MH cannot come now. She's going come later. She say she wanna take you present but she very busy at right now. She have her friend birthday party. Don't worry. I already explain her how she can to get here your house.

There was a knock at the booming metal door. One of the newer members entered and waved a bottle of red wine, something expensive, imported. And Niall's sleeping gear was quickly cleared away. They set newspaper out in the middle of the floor, then the ones who had cooked brought the food through. Chinese noodles that had been delivered by motorcycle and other sidedishes were set out as well. In a short time everyone was eating with noisy gusto.

One umbrella was left behind so Niall waited up for whomever would come to collect it. They had all been in a hurry to catch the last subway. Since he had no drying towels, the dishes had been left standing. He very much wanted to shower to rinse off his head. He started as the door shut to with a bang and it was MH. She locked it with the snib.

- So I want know, why is you don't call me, don't tell me. Hwang say you fighting. Hey, your eye no good. I going bring egg, next time. For you, for your eye. Egg very good, you know that? Put on is going blue colour. Taking died old blood out.

- How does it do that?

- I don't know. That's how we do. Egg go blue colour. I don't know why.

She shook rain from her umbrella and the Team Mickey jacket onto his kitchen floor.

- We were disappointed that you didn't come earlier. What happened? He tried to cover himself with the sarong.

- I wait theirs leaving. I want for you give special present. I'm want bring you CD but I very sadness you don't calling me. I can't understand about that. I'm bring you CD. I want be some happy see you again, then you don't call me.

- I'm very happy to see you again. Really I am.

He smelled the alcohol on her breath. The jacket fell to the floor and she grabbed him by the arms. And is some stupid dogs wait your gate outside, she said. Very wet dogs, no brain. I am very scary. She held his chest in her hands.

They lay together, she twisting his nipples in her fingers. She was very rough; it hurt him. He did not say anything. She thought in tugs of sadness of her father. And of a lover in Canada, a time long ago and still very fresh.

- I want say you something.

He thought of other women who had hurt him under the misconception that they were providing pleasure or emphasis. The clumsy lips, the teethmark bruises left behind when all else failed. The cigars were finished, that was a fact. He did not want to get up.

She had her legs straddling one of his and was snug like that. She was at play, someone else's daughter. Niall felt his thievery creeping out. Enjoyments curdled awkwardly. Again he found himself thinking of mountains, of spaces with nobody in evidence. A great silliness. Who can tell what the hermit's relation to stone really is? There was the sound of the refrigerator, its migratory wings whirring.

- What's that?

- Hwang, David, he want be my fiancee, you know that?

- Fiancee? You're not serious! Niall was very attentive. He looked over at her.

- Yes. He want marriage. He planning. I am very surprising.

- When did this happen?

- Soon. He think.
- No, when did you and he first talk about this?
- Maybe one weeks ago. I don't remember.
- Why didn't ... I don't understand. Why are you ...? You don't remember?
- Can't explain you. I cannot marry. I cannot marriage him. He's good man, but I cannot do that.

My sister want my marriage. Sometimes I think. I want marry. But is. It's mean nothing. In my mind. I worried babies. Our country man is want baby, he's want baby, specially even boy baby. That's right. I don't want do that - too small. Doctor say me: no good chance. Is big problem. I am scary. My body, very uncapable. My body, is some problem. He say, we stay she family house. By she's mother. But I don't want that. I cannot live him's mother house. Clean the house to David mother. Can you understand me?

- Look, I'm sorry, I don't understand what all this is about. Nobody has told me anything about this. Do you want advice from me? Are you asking my opinion?

She let go of him, let her hand slip to her side, and stared at the ceiling.

MH thought about the Canadian. The memory of French that had once touched her curiosities slides a needle into her mind. All of this was not the first time for her - the failure to be understood as meant, the result of people having different gravities of feeling, finding herself compromised between the pincers of a man's selfishness and his limited notions of desire - but it would surely come as a shock to David. And he she did not want to hurt.

The fortune teller had said that it was a foreigner, her present lover, that he would be wealthy in the future, suffer an immense accident of the emotions - something to do with a child, a family member, perhaps, that could not be helped, that it would happen soon, about which only the support of friendship could be offered - and be unstable until the age of 42. It was a very expensive hour. Yet she could not admit to herself and be content that one man was as good as any other.

And the Canadian had not let her occupy his life. He was the one with the ring on his finger. On a summer afternoon of his unexplained absence the fly's lone madness in his perfect room finally bursts her. His wine starts it, then things get torn up - paper, gifts - and after his return, a sticky Montreal late afternoon, she begins her recriminations in hot tears and unreliable French. He is the one who has organised her and made her learn her body, which for him is gift enough. She realises bitterly that their depth perceptions differ. After the violence, value to each recedes; things however much hoped for become irretrievable. At the final parting he is very quiet. She keeps to the limits imposed by his courteous help, keeps extra caution with his offers, the sincerity. She contests nothing. His final kiss and promise is warm and friendly. Relief, at last, perhaps, that it is ended, that it has ended. Their end. She thinks of his daughter, whose daddy's calm and skin and smell are all she ever wants to be part of and clothed in; his wine and the long, lonely fingers that touch her still. Even my name he would not remember now, she

thinks. For a long time after that experience she had wanted every part of her flesh touched by even the slightest tap of a man's finger to be excised and destroyed.

*

Niall's eyes were wet, he knew that. He knew that he cannot be sure whether he remembers Judith truly or has made her up after the events.

Does she really exist like that? Strong-willed, secretive, vegetarian, a liar. When was there any wisdom to it all? Something he is or does makes her love curdle. The silences prolong, her absences from the apartment at agreed times. She is often at Heidi's where he resents having to call to speak to her. Heidi merely says, *Es ist fuer dich* - It's for you - and another silence settles in before Judith's defensiveness is audible. She becomes more brittle and testy. On the day she returns from the clinic to say that she has just been confirmed pregnant, six weeks more or less, but has dispensed with it, she is defiant and accusing. From their early, innocent games - during a snowball fight or because of the lost concert tickets - in which she raises one slim wrist in concert with a teasing frown to say, *Blutwiesen?* - Would you like a meadow of blood for this? - to post-abortion acrimony spat out at him in foreign syllables. And all he does is look at her, helpless, unable even to conceive of what he has almost been part of. They have stretched beyond a healthy limit all the familiar tendons that once bound them together, the bone and muscle of their love. What is there but the damage that intimacy and ingrown emotional toenails can do. Things - the desire for understanding and guidance, the quiet confidence that these can entrain - once confidently banished by Niall, the familial self-exile, are found to be wanting when they are truly needed. Or is it that the once-banished returns unwanted and as a matter for crippling embarrassment for all to see, for both of them? It is the crispness and finality in her parting that dry-ices him. She refuses to countenance him or anything he might say by way of hopefulness or apology: the words he has used against her apply to himself foremost.

And Niall, castaway in no place like that Vienna, seized up in his soul with apprehension.

*

In My Opinion

Foreign men, Local women

When I see local girls seeking the company of Western males at bars and clubs, I feel sure that they seek anonymous excitement without the risk of being known as a 'cheap' woman.

And some Western men seem to have no standards in choosing a partner. They may be decent enough, if naive, but the local women they partner are unattractive or look like sluts to the typical local man. Perhaps Western men are simply flattered to have someone indiscriminately make advances on them. Don't they know lies when they hear them?

Our sisters, however, throw themselves at the white men's feet as if they are trying to make a statement. Perhaps they feel repressed here. Maybe they want to ditch their country.

But what is most disgusting is that the women usually cannot say more than, 'I love you' and 'Hello honey' in English. Even worse is when the male has no interest in learning our language.

Marriage or any kind of relationship should be based on the exchange of ideas and feelings through the concrete use of clear verbal expressions, not just emotional body language. Clear communication paves the way for better understanding and mutual respect.

University of Cape Town

Forty-one

The light's tawny dementia. The witching of the souls had started. The restaurant was hung with fishnets among tackle and boat gear, twisted into green webs of seaweed at the bottom. Niall looked wanly over it all. He felt seated amid the mossy-skinned corpses of the lost at sea. The lightless castaways. Their ruin.

- So she's no come today, because of the new job she have. But I talking her telephone a lot before. I'm very happy about that. She and me's talking about the marriage situation. Because she has no the so youngfulness already. Is very time she to get the marriage. And, is my opinion, she very beautiful woman. So I'm attacked, I'm attracting her a lot, really a lot. But I don't know how is can man to manage this situation. I never knowed about that, My brother no did have the responsibility job like me. As I told you, my father's was died some long time ago so I's have whole all responsibility my family. I don't know how can I manage my heart. And I have big depression. I am so busy nowadays, my boss crazy, and MH phoning me saying, Why don't you come now, I need talking you! But already I am so busy. And I phoning her, when I'm have time, but she's no to her home, she busy, she have appointment. I think she's don't want traditional style, maybe she's don't want the marriage even at all. I say her, is no problem, we can live ourselves five maybe ten year, then living my mother together. We had better do that. It's our custom. But she don't want that, she's refuse. But that is how our custom. I don't know something another way.

- Do you know her well?

- Something well, I don't know. Maybe six month, we have the closeness time together. Visit, eating, movie, something like that. From time to time.

- Do you know her family?

- I meet her sister, I think one time. Her father also was died. But he very busy so we can't talking long time. But I have the something strange feeling about he. Maybe he don't like me. She. Maybe she think I don't have the powers, money, something like that. Sometimes sister have that kind way.

- Only her sister?

- Yes, she's live her sister. Mother is to some country place, maybe small town. To south. But also, I feel the not good feeling, but I don't care about that. I have the love to my heart. I want trying my best make a marriage to her. I can do it. Is my believe.

- Is she rich?

- No, almost not.

- Does she like money?

- All the womans wants the money, maybe. So I give her that money sometimes. David laughed. Niall liked to see him laugh. He laughed as well. But also me, I'm not the rich man. She know about that. I think, only I think, she's sister don't like that situation.

- What else do you know about her? Have any of your friends met her?

University of Cape Town

Forty-two

Niall looked up at the spat marks of former mosquitoes that shotted the ceiling.

- This you dirty room, old clothes. Easy I like so much. Is paradise. Why you no say boss make all window woods pink colour? Only one pink; another one brown. Is no good. You can't see that things. Sock is hole, you lingerie is hole having, everything is disaster. You don't care. Sound you voice, make me happy. I love that. You foreigner white skin people, I love. Is make good sleep to me. I sleep, dream that colour. Kiss that you whole body.

He rolled over to her. He had been scored by the hands of occasional others over the years, some with fingers like caltrops, some responding to his own caltrops of the heart. The kind of attention she provided he knew he craved.

They walked past evening restaurants, were courted by the touts outside. There were kids playing in the chill evening air outside the comic book library. The pimps watched them pass. The man in the corner cafe watched them pass. So did the old dame who managed the house opposite the fish restaurant where the dogs always nosed about. Chairs that signalled private parking bays looked on, the poles, the garbage bags. All had eyes for them, none spoke.

She began to call on him often now. She brought an ironing board and an iron. She brought medicine for his cold. Very cheap, she said, and he could do nothing but nod and feel the cost bearing down on him. Often she was waiting at the top of his street in the shadows for him. And the nights were becoming chill.

Winter

What MH wanted to talk about was her deep soul, her country's deep soul, in her own language. This made Niall difficult. So she said, I very love you.

- Why do you say that?

- I love you. Is my feel. I feel that. You don't see me, my saying?

- Nobody knows ... enough. It's too early to say that, I mean, love.

- Don't you have feeling you heart? Is right? You very cold guy.

- We need to take more time. Are you in a hurry?

- What you saying? You say you don't want me. Is that you say? You want something, is not me?

You have some another woman? Is right?

- That's not it, MH. It's not that. Those kinds of questions ... I don't know.

What Niall wanted to talk about was the problem of another woman and other relics, a child. To explain the myths was the difficulty, and the very present advents in his head of a form of himself that he could not hold, was not permitted to hold. He most wanted to avoid questions about whether he had survived rather than some other. He didn't want to think, 'Oh well', to the discovery in the mornings that he was indeed alive.

- Why don't you say me before you no have love? Why this every something?

- We've only seen each other a few times. You never asked anything about me.

- Already some month! How much times you need? You no ask my family, father, mother, who is they. At mountains hiking you ask questions to me. Now, is nothing. You don't question.

- You didn't tell me you were seeing David, that he wanted to marry you. He didn't say anything to me. A lot of things have happened.

- So probable you go leaving here, go another country, is right? You want going have your cold sickness to some another country. I think so. She made a noose of her hands and practiced throttling him with a low growl in her throat.

- I want to stay, maybe I will. I don't know. Maybe I will go somewhere else. Sometimes I think I should go. I need to think about some things.

- You no have chance for think here?

- It's too recent. Maybe you should marry David. He can give you a life you know, things you would like. I can't do that. I have no money for a family. I don't know about children. Maybe a doctor can help you. You know?

- You don't understand, I don't want money, don't want your money. Know love, is enough to me. Family is not ... important. Maybe to David is yes. But is problem, you understand? Is only mind, thinking. My father is die, maybe for 10 year. 11 year. David, I can't say him that story. I cannot say he's true. Not possible. My father communist, go live Osaka before long times. My mother's live here to alone many year. Because I borned his daughter but my father want son. Very dangerous to that time. So he's go, he's marriage Osaka womans, getting his son to there. For ancestors very important. My father's drink many alcohol; Niall, don't drink so enoughly. My father very sickness, cancer, is my sister go him, go Osaka, take caring his sickness. Because father son very bad guy. She help for father. Then she marriage to there, one guy, divorce. Is big problem. I can't explain. My mother marriage some another guy, not here. She don't say about me to husband. She don't say: so I'm secret. Sometimes I phone to mother, but I cannot to love her. Also my father. If he love childrens, his childrens, that boy, girl, no matter, maybe I feel him something, I touch him his going die. But there is no feeling to him. Sometimes I'm telephone to mother, but I don't love her. Also my father grave, I'm never visit.

- But I thought you lived with your sister.

- Not sister. Same like sister. Come on, Niall. I say you my heart. Is last time. After, if no good, is nothing, no more. I will alone, I think. I tired very, very too much.

Forty-three

Sympathy. Father's talent for failure. Failed everyone around. So many useful ideas garbage because of packaging. A lot of plasma and the carmine colour. Dogs at the dump of money. But come back to need in time. Clawing and kicking and refusing. Even Romans must have thought. Impossible. Like stars out there, in red. Our way of living. Couldn't ever even possibly.

Such a skin you wear, like cooling milk. Niall is afraid of his mother's voice. The voice of god and of the unfinished, of one who has no sabbath, because the words seem not to be hers, only the voice: the one voice he knows. *Yes. Shed one, new one comes back. I was a happy child, I imagine: I believed those photographs. What it is to be the owner of a face like that? When was the bell cast with me inside it?*

Well, you're struggling for nothing now; you can stop it.

It's not about instances. It's all that empty space. Can't be named, counted. Not even about acceptance, denial. Skin after all those milky applications very sallow now, the bones have holes. Things not obvious or even knowable.

Just try to talk.

Things have moved on since then. And there were fine things found; they count for something, too. Whole people miss things like that. It's not as ugly as they make out. There are so many languages, so many ways to say a thing, even in silence.

Just try to listen.

You're not the translator.

And not for you either. It's all over now, all of this. Her voice creaks as before, on the last day. A rusted weather vane in winter wondering its lack of wind. *It's peace we need.*

- Don't sleeping, Niall. I have go soon. MH sat before him. Niall shook his head and looked dimly at her in the near darkness. He tried to dislodge himself from the resting place that his mother had been on before him, looking out through the window to sites for dead rose bushes.

Forty-four

Things began to scare Niall. It might have been encroaching madness such as the kind that made them burn the beds in Britain, the little holes in the brain made by the beef they ate. No, but what he had discovered, to starts of horror upon awakening in the mornings dirty with cold, were big slugs of gob that had dribbled from his lips during the night. And his writing was increasingly aberrant. A word on the whiteboard surprised by being intended as one thing and coming out as another. The students alerted him. He thought about diet and circulations of the blood. Odd off-colour snails of snot worked their way out like bits of glass from his body and caught him unguarded. There were pains in his chest or heart that were not because of comic book love; pins and needles grew in his legs that had little to do with sitting.

University of Cape Town

Forty-five

She emerged from the crumpled little bathroom, a nook made by the wall curving around in a strange quarter-circle. She was wearing his day's underwear and looking down to observe the effect. Carrier of culture, Niall thought. It gave back to him things recovered from the wastes, the garbage tales. A reopening of himself, himself reclothed. As it happens when stepping into a phone booth, stepping into the leftover skin of someone else's gin and Chanel and living there for a few moments, out of sight of a conversation recently passed through. Visiting histories. The living on flesh of someone else's flesh. Who can stay upright on top of that kind of apprehension? Only vanishing trains. Not more. Empty platforms, only the signalman for comfort and he oblivious on his way to a cup of coffee.

In her eyes he kept seeing the quest for a date, a time, an ultimatum unspoken. Marriage as an escape route. She looked away in discomfort. She was becoming frantic.

- I can't. You know I can't.

- Why no?

- I haven't any money?

- Why money?

- Please don't ask for this, not now.

- You like hermit. Hermit usually go to loneliness place. Like you: you come here, same hermit.

You have no the family, no you own people, specially, you no have your own something, where is your own place. Usual job to hermit is make something from the stone. So peoples is your stone. You make peoples same like stones. Like me. I your stone. You make me stone.

- Why are you saying this to me?

- What?

- What you say, is it to be critical of me? Do you want to criticise me?

- I just sex lover to you. But in my case, I want, I love you only. And you case, you want to be freedom. We different thinking, no same. You know my name? My name, MH. Peoples ask about that. What meaning my original name? Chinese book inside can find that name. Is mean, 'Petting Girl'. My father, original my father, looking long time that name. From book, he's looking. Is my name. How about that? You, foreigner people, treat me my name. Sometimes I feel knife. Your words talking me.

He looked not at her but at the Team Mickey polyester jacket that had arrived about her instead of underwear. The cheap glistening shoes were over by the door, the baubly umbrella there too. Of scruffy suds of shampoo mashed with days of city grime in her hair, sticky as rice, she smelled. Unrinsed oils in her skin, too. With his forefinger he had traced closely the meanders made by the fat river of scar that ran down her belly, the student-time injury. He felt the words drop to the ground heavily, not able to sustain their own usefulness. Talk between them was not producing glass, merely more sand.

*

Attempt Retracted

Between us nothing has changed. If you are offered a little finger, you take the whole hand. I wanted to draw a line under our past, not be mewed over by you or swept into the Prater. Go and take possession of someone else, I am not available. I have had enough of you. Go and attend to your own low mind and leave me in peace forever. I am not your possession. Whatever you think, I was never your possession. There was never any baby.

Judith

*

- I going now. I can't anymore.

Stay, a short time longer, he thought. Everything can be explained, posed as a question. Past complications: what is it for a factory worker to imagine a child? With a member of the well-heeled set? How much is one life worth? But he cannot tear himself from a looming certainty that Judith's sense of self, her selfishness, is different from his own only in degree but not in kind. That much they have in common.

He watched from the sleeping mat as MH pulled the jacket around her small body. He knew she was waiting for a touch, but he could do nothing about it. For a word or movement. Anything at all. Then the cheap, shiny shoes. A slap or a scream from him would at least acknowledge her. He could not bring himself to move. She stood with that pigeon-toed stance. The room was an impacted gum.

- Goodbye, Niall. No, no. Don't getting up. Stay at there. Her voice was not harsh.

It slammed. Cold iron on the doorframe. After some time, he got up. It was a warehouse he was living in. He leaned on the bathroom jamb. Yellow light from the ceiling bulb fell out through the window to somewhere in the dark. The reverse flow of the previous day's freezing light that had crept in like a feeding time cat. He noticed and touched the cold lines, the rough cement trenches between the bricks. They seemed to him as the evidence of claws, some tender and some not. And that was all. And the light was on his skin, too. Like a yellow lineament it rubbed.

She waited, only a moment. It was long enough to hope. The movies had told that part so well that all the world knew what should happen. On the steps her feet screamed. The sounds were the most shameful she had ever heard.

In the morning he found her note hanging inside a black plastic bag on his door handle. She must have come back in the early hours while he was sleeping. He hurried up to the street and looked for her down in the highway culvert, across by the basketball courts, and back again in the direction of the restaurants.

*

Niall, I'm MH

I can't be just your friend. I don't want be jealous of you. And I don't want to be lonely. Is very simple and irony. We know each other long time but you don't know my place number, where I live. I was lonely so long time. But I can't hate you. Maybe I already hurt to you long long ago my ex-life. We sometimes think like that way. I don't wanna meet you talk you again. Is my problem. I don't have power to this situation. Good-bye Niall, be happy.

*

When she reached the corner, where the road crossed over the slimes made by the fish restaurant and bent sharply to the left, and was seen by the pimps in their group in the street outside the nightclub, she started to hurry. One of them, followed by his mate, blocked her way.

- So why you always walk with the foreigner, hey? Speak to me, I'm talking to you, bitch. You disgusting Yankee slut, you fuck the foreigner, don't you? You suck the foreign trash's asshole, you suck that trash in the ass. Speak to me, bitch. Speak, you bitch. Then he started by cracking her in the face with his fist.

University of Cape Town

Forty-six

- That folks story is for teach some difficult situation our society to that time. Because sometimes is different realities. Different situations. People need some things: for endure and keep they vision. Not everyone can to understand about that. So we don't know real situation to Miss Shim-chung, but that story is can give people the hope. Maybe Miss Shim-chung story have taboo thema, some kind of taboo thema. For example: stealing, incests, accept the laws. Folk stories. You understand? So maybe, is possible, Miss Shim-chung give father whole love, even her body. She don't know any some another way. Because very simple society. But local people is know about what is she doing. So she are blamed very ... much by whole the peoples, big shames for her, her family. So she must to go away. Maybe she killed, maybe suicide, maybe go some another place. Later, is possible she come back. Come back that society, maybe some separation to that community, we don't know. So some people, their heart and mind hopes she can come back because they know. They know she really good daughter in her heart. Or, more possible, she escape that society and maybe deaths from that people, but she come back after going another country. Finish the exile and learn some new life. She maybe marry with big king, is rich man, power man. Then she come back, new again, some queen princess to that old society. They see: Ah, is Miss Shim-chung. She have success to her life. Is something happen. She love her father, is very importantly. The love. People want understand about that; teach their childrens. So ancestors make some special story for the children. Change something, story which cannot be shame to social. No disgracefuls for whole people. Main point only is the sacrifice. So is make succession and we likes that story. We can only assume.

Forty-seven

A skirted woman, bent over at the open doorway of her car in the forecourt of the gas station, was on Niall's mind when David's message came through on the pager. The woman edged deeper into the throat of the car. Her hemline slid up a bit. Niall picked the pager up off the ground: it had a hairline crack in the plastic hull. Then a bag beside him dropped and groceries spilled out. He helped refill the bag, then looked at the owner. She looked at him. When he stood up again, the car in the forecourt was gone.

There was winter tousled breeze outside; yeasty air inside the coffee shop starchy his nostrils. A black tongue brushed back and forth his heart, cold cuffs wringing the work of his veins. His face, he felt, was still safe, but the flesh had petrified on his body, become the stone of the lives of trees of people passed on the mountain.

- Is this going to be public? Who else knows?

- Police, maybe her family ... I don't know exactly. Her sister, some kind of sister. I don't know.

She did planned go the Osaka City. That news we learn about now, first time. Everything is something confusion ... I don't know, nobody knows that. She didn't say any something, only go out. We don't know.

The serving women called out their greetings as the doors once again swung open, in cheer.

That's what pain and money have in common, he thought. People can't stop making enough of it - for the self and at least somebody else.

- But I saw her recently, not long ago.

- Really?

- Yes.

- Maybe police you have explain about that.

Niall could no longer glance outside. He could feel the sweat in his fists below the table.

When Niall got back to the room the signs of her were everywhere. He had not noticed it like that before. Apples going rotten in the refrigerator, cake in the freezer, hardly eaten and frozen to death. The awful artificial rose with its frilly plastic icing. Her CD player and all the discs; her hairband, a scarf. First he cleaned out the waste baskets, flushed all the toilet paper deposits away, then took a bag of all her little, obvious things and carried it under the bridge, some distance beyond the highway, up the street by the apartment complexes. There he fingered the new glasses she had helped him choose and threw everything else away.

Forty-eight

David insisted the club go to the mountains as usual, a full weekend trip. We must show our brave, he sent by email, is necessary for Heart Inside.

At the Excellent Express Bus Terminal Waiting Room, they gathered in waiting for the night bus. Everyone noticed the drunk man who was sleeping on the Excellent Lounge seats with his shoes on.

At the top of the mountain they huddled in their thick jackets, beat gloves together, and wished it to be finished. Wind whipped, the silver birch bark shone bleakly upon the peeled winter slopes far below them; there was no longer any sound of the river. Only voices that called and howled. Some hikers gobbled down a frigid meal. There was debris all over the place.

At the condominium, after everyone had showered and eaten dinner, Niall sat outside and smoked a cigarette with David. They stared at the night sky in silence. It began to swell with buds of rain, and it felt good to sit with cigarette smoke and the rain. The whole day was a type of silence; even the river, which had cut through the rock alone, running to extinction, was a kind of silence, a long drawn-out sigh.

They clambered to the top of prime granite slabs that were uncannily and wondrously perched, ready at a breath, egging themselves on, to fall into space, down into forest and earth, and there to bruise and be swallowed up by all future growing. On the slabs they watched a few temples sunning themselves in the mid-morning light, thawing out their chilled blood of winter. After the rain the air was clean and sharp. The temples shuffled amid fallen brown, still falling, leaves. When David found a suitable course of water, he had everyone remove their shoes so as to stroll among the stones in bare feet. They all hopped and gasped. For a short time Niall endured, his pale toes lying limply in the talking currents, the things whispered to him.

What more could he have wanted? Grasses. The brushing of grasses moved on light breeze, to seek him out with their touching. To be entirely a twitching nerve for them. He wanted to see that greenness growing, and the leaves - all things connected up by the one message for her - a bird triggered into the sky, a dog's lope touched, his tail shaking farewells, an aeroplane taking itself up higher and into the distance. He wanted his nerves connected to movements in the world, currents to include him, for himself to melt and his cells and vessels be a translator for all those signals.

- That's what we believe. Is no the easy thing explain you. Is from the Buddhism. Some bad people talking so much about that: *Een-yong*. It's mean, before long times ago maybe we meet. Long times, maybe in forest. Maybe I am the bear, you is fox. Before long time ago, we passing each one another, to one another. Going past, going on. Is never stop, that connection. Is recognition. Also moving

is never stop. Is connection, you understand? Is connection one another. Maybe only one time we can to meeting, but that's enough. So, you must to do good, why? Because of *Een-yong*: you can to meeting again. For example, MH, I want marriage her. Why is we cannot that action? Is because of *Een-yong*. Maybe we must be together, but now is time is not ours time. We must wait about that. But nowadays woman only think about the money. Is big headache. Little twists of light through the trees, the make-up of the words, glittered cruelly. The river rushed back at them noisily, calamitous.

On the downward trail, they came upon a temple where, placed before a huge overhanging rock, sat hundreds of figurines with ladies' faces. In the teaspoons of light sprinkled through the branches of trees overhead they all began to smile for Niall at once. Their lichen-on-granite skins, peeled smooth, their welcome and knowing, opened him up from inside.

University of Cape Town

Forty-nine

That's it. Finally I am out of here, and it took nearly a year. It's amazing how a simple thing can get so screwed up. First there was some snag with the bank that took this place over, and then the whole insurance issue got into trouble. They're going to demolish it, is what I heard. I don't care. I got the confirmation from my friend back in Canada - at least she's okay. The bank has waived whatever she still owes on it. I'll probably go and stay with my friend at least until I can find a new place. Looking for a new place is something I hate, but it'll come up. I think I'm one of the most optimistic people I know. Moving at least throws any bureaucracy off my trail for a while. And they never did find out what was the story about that woman in the back there.

*

And Niall has decided to break his contract and move on. Under the circumstances everyone understands. A few small, carefully arranged parties are held and then on a Sunday morning before the first snows fall David accompanies him by bus to the airport.

They drink coffee, make promises to each other and shake hands for a long time. Niall finally goes through the check-in and past the inspection team and on into the lounge for departures, at last alone, so he thinks.

He looks at the screen, touches his glasses; he sees reflections of the bank card he has failed to cancel, the tax digits, the people that have gone uninformed of his leaving. It makes no real difference, not at this point, he imagines. Panic stabs him closely. The crazy fear for the alarm clock's wakening crow, the memory of past flights, the alcohol he has drunk recently, the failure to be at his mother's grave and to pray. All fizzles in his blood and makes him feel a bit crazy. And the way the flights are being registered: a dare; callous humours. He looks again. One to Vienna, one to Osaka. One below the other and then his own. He struggles for his boarding pass, checks that it is indeed his, feels again for the passport, knows by the bent corner that it has his name inside, and that his money is still safe. Then, still looking at the screen, he stands in the line for his turn.

Reflections on Ohneland

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In the industrial and industrialising world, most people live in cities. No doubt, before moving there from the countryside they believe that more opportunity exists in terms of wealth and excitement, and the style these can offer. Other people move for reasons of security. Asylum seekers from foreign countries are incomers of this kind to the city. Loosely termed, fear and greed may be considered as the drives at the heart of such types of migration. What could these drives entrain that might, over time, become inducted into the form that any city takes? In other words, how does the city as context reflect the struggles of the people who helped make it and, in some ways, exacerbate the struggles of the ones who arrive later? There is evidence that environments have had marked effects on the cultures they sustained through the course of human evolution¹. How then does the environment of the modern city shape the individual and communal cultures that take root within it? One premise in Ohneland is that the scope of both cultures is reduced or minimised in comparison to that of the city. However gigantic the city, the indweller's real concerns lie at the level of the immediate. Everyday examples include church, family, soccer team, workplace, lover(s). As the ever growing expanse of the city becomes harder to comprehend, so the immediacy of the close at hand becomes more imperative². The communal is therefore essential to the well-being of the individual. But if, for whatever reason, the communal culture is deficient or absent, what might then be the condition of the individual one? A type of local barbarity is one possibility. The tragedy that results is not so much in who is maimed or destroyed in the process but in how little such incidents of loss are recognised or recalled. Anonymity, which is provided most easily in cities, can in certain situations be very useful to those seeking escape from fears and improvements to the condition of life. Cities may be good in the cause of earning money, but over the longer term their generally more congested, polluted, hostile and, despite or because of the density factor, less communal nature are perhaps unseemly places for ordinary individuals

¹ Jared Diamond, Guns, Germs, and Steel.

² It is often wondered how 60 000 English(men) held an India of 600 million under colonial control for 200 years. It might also be wondered how great the gravity of the modern city over the imagination of the citizenry is.

to live in. Ohneland³ is the story of a city and the survival attempts that take place in it. As a city, its most salient feature is its foreignness and its capacity as a motor for the foreignness experienced and exhibited by the indwellers. The city is something of a maze and the construction of the novel is meant to realise this strange and estranging effect.

Ohneland is also an attempt to delve into the worlds of communication and its fitness. I have lived in cities and in the countryside in different parts of the world and probably experience the same advantages and disadvantages to each type of space as most any average person. What is surprising is how issues of fashion matter so much to those who live in cities. A bumpkin is easily spotted, as is a foreigner, by the appearance first, an unvocalised communication. It is in the city that the love of electric-blue shirts and red ties, a craze among businessmen in the West for a while, has its niche. Yet, of some necessity, that fashion and the statement of power communicated by it will have changed by the following season. These self-evident standards could easily be reversed: why isn't the simple, unpretentious style of the country commoner held in esteem? There is nothing wrong, of course, in having simple tastes, so why are they ridiculed in the city? Why is naiveté so worthy of disregard? A possible answer to this, hinted at in the example of businessmen's attire, is that conformity (and perhaps fear) is so much more dearly held in the city, sometimes at any cost. People whom one imagines ought to know better by virtue of their education and salaries, as two possible measures, are constantly capable of making decisions that astonish. The 'dot.com' economic bubble of recent times may qualify as an example of this lemmingdom. What I believe is sustained in all this is that failures to communicate, or even to be comprehended when trying to do so, constitute the actual practice of life in the city. Also, the practice of urban life is habit-forming and basically unfair. These three points are of interest in the writing, and hopefully the reading, of Ohneland.

The dependencies people create for themselves in city living imply that it is easier to ignore the ones who fall out of the system, which inevitably means the poor, the foolish, the unlucky and the elderly, not necessarily in that order. Cities are zones for a large number of losers and a few spectacularly over-reported winners. In this sense they resemble living lotteries. They also resemble religious institutions, churches to be exact. There is usually enough space to accommodate any comer but the seating is all indiscriminately uncomfortable over long stretches (that reserved for the folk at the front may be an exception). A central concern in this novel is thus with the kinds of characters who, for one reason or another, are mulch for the continuation and continuity of city life. In part it is a fault of their own decision-making. But they are also characters with limps that have been conditioned by their respective environments.

³ The title is that of an unpublished German poem by Eric Roesser, a friend. 'Ohne' means without, lacking. A translation of the whole word to include 'land', country, is difficult. A place without or without-

The synopsis that follows is divided into two parts. One is a broad overview of the novel, the second deals with problem areas and considers various influences and sources in more detail.

Overview

In unreliable English a voice tells a fairy tale in which the name of the main character seems to be just as unreliable. A man alights from a bus at an airport ready, apparently, to leave some undisclosed place. A different, first language voice invites the reader, or so it seems, to the continuation of a monologue in his apartment. These, roughly, are the three main identities that will sustain the story. And thus the novel begins.

The development of the city takes place from the foot of Niall's bed, a place he awakens to neither with relish nor much orientation. He is busy contending with his own dreams, a past he has left behind. The city is, in short, a difficulty lying somewhere outside. By turns it grows in chapter one to include a passage way that is jammed with a troublesome object, possible noises and at least one other character's occasional erotic desire: an unordered mix of things that impede. The garish showers have a tiled but filthy floor, a first indication that whatever appearances the city takes on they are likely to be undercut by its less visible but rather nasty structures.

The following cuts take Niall to the streets and a rapid burst of growth of the city from its embryonic earlier state. Various features are registered, its trapped inhabitants noticed. These bit part characters serve a sense that there is no time for human interaction, something that will be challenged later by some simple but principle Buddhist notions. Before long, Niall's latent desires are wryly but somewhat comically thwarted⁴ and he lands up a castaway in a different 'island' of the city and caves in on his own confusion. He doesn't know what he is looking for. Like many people in modern times, he is simply marking time. The things that might offer security are rather remote. We know from his dream while sleeping that this could have something to do with family. A sense of coldness is all apparent, thus that avenue is perhaps frigidly jammed in some undisclosed way.

The mini universe Niall has been plotting out for himself bends inwards with his return home from confusion to gloom. From the rooftop a note of the economy and culture of the place becomes clearer. This is further seen in the dimensions of the home itself. The easy-going lodgers are displaced by the owner's concerns for profit and deference to the longer term residents; the building squeezes all kinds of economic

place might be a good approximation. The word is meaningless or, happily for this story, without existence.

⁴ The humour here owes something to Italo Svevo's character, Zeno Cosini, in Confessions of Zeno.

activity, some odious at best, into its space and excretes the waste. Human interaction certainly suffers. The minimal pleasures of the inmates, eating, drinking, chatting after work late into the night, are prohibited. It seems that individuality and the desire to leave well alone are most suited to survival in this house. Niall does not feel comfortable in such a situation but he has no wherewithal to change matters. This relates to a search after his own community on a broader plane.

Following chapters introduce financial constraints related to the evident culture, some in terms of farcical satire, such as the editing work Niall is asked to do. The energies of the place, its powers of persuasion, are about money. Niall is not immune to this infection. He makes do, keeps going but is not particularly at ease. He has no special talent for gaining wealth and so he is in an odd spot. He most easily identifies with those who have lost out in the struggle: the poor or dispossessed, and there are many of these faces in his city. But he is too timid or self-absorbed to help and excuses himself with the knowledge that he is outside the language of the loser set. He is also busy with the search for his own past, which he finds in bits and pieces in places like the museum. Between chapters eight and nine the connections between lost love past and fresh amours to be found, with a link to David Hwang and barbarism principally self-inflicted (at least at a superficial level), are established.

The Spring interchapter invokes newsprint (which will become more important later as whole clips stake out their own importance like tattoos on the skin of the city) with reports about current decease among citizens. Niall visits a museum that tells a tale of the nation's history of struggle and death in war. An inversion is in place: the nation's own people are its present enemies, the citizens appear to be the undesired of the city, and there are casualties in this kind of conflict too. Niall's personal warfare is conducted through memory with his failures in the past to obtain that which might subdue his familial history. He is at one with the spirit of the losers in these times though in a manner he cannot articulate.

The following sections involve interpersonal ventures. Both Jim and Niall share a weak reluctance to be intimately involved with the respective characters they encounter, but Niall is rescued only by virtue of the fact that he dreams his after having supplied the girl, Hae-suk, with a note of mere encouragement, whereas Jim falls into the seduction he has prepared for himself by pecuniary motive. Neither is more likable than the other, neither particularly honest or brave. What distinguishes the two in terms of their actual relationships? We know that Yun-hee tries always to get back to Jim and is rebuffed and abused. On the other hand, Niall is never disgusted by MH. He sees her cheap clothing and unwashed hair partly because this is one level at which he can be comfortable with her, but he doesn't know how to reach out to her given his inner paralysis, and she does not come back. This is a new node for his understanding, a point never reached by Jim.

What follows is the most important part of the story as far as it relates to Niall. His incipient efforts to locate and relocate memories connecting him to Judith are interrupted by the news of his mother's death and he is swept away in a messy emotional storm held together by the seams, it would appear, of a student's written submission about spirit and place. Bereavement is an important consideration in this novel. Modern existence, especially in the advanced countries, is relatively safe, convenient and predictable, apart from the magnification of stresses to take the place that wars used to exert on a nation's call to duty. In the convenience category, painful death by natural causes will soon be done away with in the way that cars and escalators have done away with lower forms of transportation. The ease of pain is certainly a desirable goal and one that sensible societies should be trying to achieve on behalf of living things. Yet, there is a cost to this aim as well that is hard to evaluate. Before eradicating pain, if at first only for humans as a species-specific cause, we would need to know what pain means. It is arguable, and an objective of Ohneland is to show this, that pain suffered is a teacher and a decidedly human(e) one. Certain elegances that are absent in the healthy human organism are given their fertility and flowering only under adverse circumstances. Similarly, the desert cactus blooms in a day in splendour and is done. The plant is not served by the surgical elimination of its power to produce that flower and thus survive in the form of the next generation. It has to be asked what will be foregone in any compulsive rush to absolve the world of the protracted ugliness of dying. So Niall's experience of his mother is made significant by seeing Andrea in her suffering and he gains a courage he has needed to know he is part of. Questions of mercy, sympathy and commiseration probably have little meaning in the absence of actual pain, rather than the televised kind. Niall is able to appreciate pain both as received and borne.

Of some significance in the hospital sequence following Andrea's stroke, is the way her language in effect becomes ESL. The avenues of miscommunication, missed uptake and entire newness or strangeness are critical moments in the novel because they suggest that once language slips, if even only for a short spell, real attitudes, energies, antipathies emerge. Later, once she has recovered her speech, Andrea is meek and non-confrontational. This helps to create the idea that conscious communication is often busy with the formulation of carefully wrought lies or at least a canned appearance for the outside world's benefit. The difference between the lapses when such consciousness cannot be controlled and the gamut of ESL learning proper is only a matter of degree rather than kind.

This section also raises a critical set of sights at the mechanics of hospital business. In part the idea comes from Russell Hoban's novel Kleinzeit in which the hospital is personified by way of a proper noun as 'Hospital' and Kleinzeit, the nominal hero, fears its power under the auspices of the staff to do him in. Such a paranoia occupies Niall, particularly after his beating.

The chapters that lead on until the Summer interchapter detail by way of memory Niall's several visits over consecutive days to see Andrea at her home. It is disruptive to read because the days are not related

chronologically. In part this is because Niall is affected by particular visits more than others depending on his situation and immediate context in the faraway city. This section was difficult to write not least because the tone had to be reeled in. It tended to tell rather than show in a WWF verbal slugfest style. That kind of problem may not have been entirely dealt with. In addition, the whole began to overwhelm life in and of the city itself; this resulted in it being drastically cut and broken up into two distinct portions, the second of which occurs nearer the end of the novel.

At this point in Ohneland, just as Niall is about to show signs of rehabilitation by taking part in a group hike up a mountain, for example, he hears the story of civil conflict that appears to have taken place in the recent past. It is decidedly harsh and this is underscored by the ESL terms used to relate it. We also learn of a man who has cut off his own feet for money, and products that are made badly but which look good in order to garner profits. This is established to indicate a connection between the power of the state within and beyond the power of the city to subdue at all costs, a subset character of production funded on lies, and a barbarism, even at the personal level, underwriting the culture that the city continues earning its livelihood on. Niall, at this point, should be preparing for a knock-down.

A number of events begin happening at more or less the same time. Niall meets MH on the mountain and gets closer in his memory to possible emancipation from Judith, if only on the terms of being able to enter at last the life they once shared. As a kind of hanging on it may also be a way of learning how to relinquish. Additionally, he experiences a violent fear of assault while in the sauna but he has no idea what inspires it. He experiences a number of these dread moments and must, through the course of the story, learn how to live within the measures they dole out to him about his situation in place and time. At last the troubled environment begins to bear down upon him, though in this rather primitive way. He also readies to leave the 'submarine' accommodation (in a wreath of farce) but his limited means doesn't leave him any choice for a new home except the kind of place that served as a charnel house for the corpse in Jim's building.

At this stage a diversion is created in Niall's maze. He is contacted by MH, experiences in his dreams a clear view of his predicament and, blended with a newspaper article⁵ that manages despite itself to outline how primitive the sex life of the city is, a tentatively homosexual adventure that turns out to be somewhat limp. Niall, in general, is on a wobbly keel and the city acts as the power to which he is in thrall, one that looks on without sympathy. He has a view through a bathroom window of lurid neon crosses on churches that look unpleasantly ready to invade his existence.

The relation between Niall's dream world and the one he is in when awake needs closer consideration. It seems clear that his world is most vivid as he sleeps. If he experiences truth or the

glimmer of truth in his dreams it seems he nevertheless fails to wake up to it. It is possible (Ch. 1, p. 4) that he dreams of his mother the day she actually dies but he presses her and her condition out of his conscious mind until, after receipt of the fax, he must concede her end and is then beset by memories of his own past losses. Elsewhere in the novel, he dreams the city as a mix of some of the planet's landmarks (Ch. 22, p. 51), the small and the great, and they are corrupted. He goes to work the morning after. Where Niall is ready to respond in familiarity to the Buddhist principles told to him by others, he does not attend to the notions at work within his own mind. This is one of his drawbacks. But of particular importance in the same dream, he experiences his own annihilation under steel rails, the true meaning of his name as a fate to be corrected for degrees of fault. Not conscious of this connection, he is ready at any rate, as established at the beginning of Ohneland, to change his name - the name given rather than that assumed or taken - and thence set a new course⁶. But first he needs to deal with the matter of place.

It is the unromantic and somewhat absurd invitation of MH to a park downtown that manages to bring home to him the need for a place in which to make his own existence. As much in the elderly as in the unemployed younger characters inhabiting the park he sees a sign of his own end. His sense of being reduced by such imperatives is a notion from the Ithaca chapter of Ulysses in which Bloom (in a newspaper article elsewhere in that novel he is described as L. Boom) is rewritten, in effect, by a methodical elimination of his supporting qualities to the "[n]adir of misery: the aged impotent disenfranchised ratesupported moribund lunatic pauper"⁷. Despite the evident lack of self-pity Niall sees on the faces of the people and their contentment to some degree to be out of doors and with fellows, Niall is struck by a basic unfairness. He does not want to have this prospect as his own end. This fluttering of a will is sprung alongside the arcane seduction MH enacts.

It is important here that the sexual intercourse that develops between Niall and MH coincides with the reminiscent love-making between he and Judith. The two cities, Vienna and Niall's city of residence, are tied in some sort of (connubial, perhaps) knot, one the space for sensitive, sensuous experience; the other is a den for something far less savoury. Gratuitous though it seems, the point here, continuing with a principle thread, is that environment conditions attitude, response, action and reaction. The city is a place for barbarism (and Niall's Vienna is not exempt, though in markedly different ways). When Jim declares that it is well nigh impossible for Swedes to prognosticate on other people's problems, he is making a point about the way environment influences arrangements among individuals as it does between groups of people.

Does this mean that the characters in Ohneland are not responsible for their own actions, that these actions are thereby tolerable? To answer this we need to separate the presence of causes from the

⁵ The style is meant as parody of the kind of non-vernacular journalism found in Asia.

⁶ At times when Niall is conscious of a thing or a thing done, something is owed to the style of Peter Handke in The afternoon of a writer.

desirability of outcomes. Without understanding it is impossible to expect or hope for better outcomes, in which case prayer might be an apt solution. So the answer, emphatically is no. But we can argue for the need to understand in order to really see the lives of the estranged or misfit, in the way that a doctor tries to understand illness as a way to help the sick. It is also possible to argue that time is a poorly understood principle at work in any movement towards consciousness. We might feel impatience with Niall for lacking immediate will to change his situation, treat those around him with more dignity and attention and grow out of his slack emotional state. However, a rush to judgement is precisely what this novel would like to stay. Niall thinks of himself as “an aging, flagging learner” and this is not only in relation to his immediate work at his institute. That he is busy learning, however difficult this is for him, is important. As supporting evidence, albeit of a devious kind, it has taken in some cases hundreds of years for human beings to produce cities (ones remaining undestroyed by outsiders) that are steeped in rot, that do not serve the best qualities of human companionship and community, and yet these spaces for our incremental poverty in cultural terms are tolerated and found tolerable day by day without much second thought. The craziness of what passes in the real world for sympathy and the attempt to understand is made out by Jim in his decrying televised tragedies.

Though Niall is relatively at peace, the city is in a lull readying to get the better of him. He learns about what the rejected women of his city seek in places like Osaka. Down at the river, even as he is remedying his bestial habit from the insane period in the dormitory by placing money in a tramp’s underwear, MH’s urgencies are beginning to affix themselves to the varnish of calm and pleasure that has not yet hardened for them both. It is as though Niall needs to absorb more of the tranquillity in his attempts at growth; it is too early for him to appreciate MH’s own needs, that she at one level has an ongoing conflict in her emotions with David Hwang and wants clarification. The knock-down Niall has failed to anticipate befalls him at this time: it occurs both as a beating by strangers and a re-beating of himself by his memory of paternal conflict. And the truth about the crisis with Judith emerges, what might have been an unwanted pregnancy, a matter he has not had courage to face in clear detail previously, a lack, in part, because he cannot bear to allow the thought that the uncarried child is the cause of their crisis, however tempting that premise may be.

The period of relative calm is perhaps the high water mark of the novel or at least the eye of the storm for Niall. Although he is capable of finding odd instances of beauty no matter how awkward or nasty the situation he is in, he cannot control the rushing of waters that culminates in the disappearance of MH, either to Osaka or to a grim fate at the hands of gangsters. The attack on her is a parallel to the attack on him except that she has no recourse to help, rather like the dead woman in Jim’s apartment. Whatever has

⁷ p. 855.

happened, it snaps Niall of his lethargy and he is able to leave. He knows the destination, but this remains as much a mystery as the forthcoming new name he is planning for.

Reflections

An immediate experience in a reading of Ohneland is its unconventional development. This arrangement stems in part from a personal lack of experience in writing sustained narrative. Instead, having written letters since childhood, I am familiar with truncation and delay in the relay of events, especially prior to the e-mail era. As it turns out, the time between any particular exchange of letters is ripe for things to happen that go unrecorded, that add to delays and complications in the uptake. Memory, history, culture and the nature of place lend themselves greatly to a correspondence and the problems undergone in trying to keep it alive. And a letter that goes missing only adds to a whole structure of incoherence, or potential incoherence, subtending this form of communication. These matters are of interest to me and they sustain the novel to some extent.

A second thread is a desire for experimentation. People have told stories for millennia and will continue to do so in ways that, in general, are easy to use and follow and adapt. This has become more complex in modernity because of a basic mix (and mix-up) of the simple and the bewildering. With the advent of television, the presentation of stories has taken up residence in the home, restaurant and office, and audiences are easily satisfied with different models built on a standard chassis, as in the case of the soap opera. But audiences also handle the switching from one type of presentation to another, talk show to advert to news, for example, often at staggering speed, without protest. So audiences like certain types of clarity and yet have become inured to forms of (con)fusion. In this era, art forms like mime have struggled. They require more effort on the part of the audience. Likewise in the outside urban world, the bicycle has lost out to the motor car. It is less convenient, requires too much struggle, is open to the elements, is too hazardous. Yet such disadvantages are part of the beauty and experience of motion, its most vivid character, I believe. So, the experimental nature of this novel owes something to what seems open to observation and to personal, old-fashioned interests. By the latter I need also to point back to Eliot, Joyce and Brian O' Nolan to explain that the difficulties created for the reader in Ohneland are not novel. I will attend to some writerly influences later, but the latter author is important for two things: his odd mixtures of farce and critique, and his love of name changes⁸. In Ohneland this occurs regularly at the levels of mispronunciation, uptake, omission and local adaptation - realities reflected in the world of second language usage.

even a mention of what passed between them. Are inter-personal problems of Jim's shared, developed or inherited by Niall? This is difficult to determine, but we do know that a state of confusion between Niall and David Hwang, both would-be lovers of the same MH, does not result in acrimony and estrangement. Perhaps Niall has learnt something, unbeknown to him, though he clearly remains in the dark regarding his indebtedness.

Another flow is that between the national aspect, the civil and the inter-personal as developed from Chapter 9 (the Spring interchapter, p. 16). Niall visits the war museum ignorant of what has inspired him to do so beyond, perhaps, a bland desire to do some tourism. He reflects on all wars being lost⁹ and remembered or recreated as victories. Unaware of the irony, he is busy in his memories doing quite the same, though vaguely noticing that nothing really substantial is achieved - his father is simply supplanted by "Judith the Father" - since renovating is in one sense akin to hanging on and thus being cut down perpetually. However, we also have a local tale of civil strife (Ch. 17, p. 41) in which fellow nationals are described as foreigners for their horrifying brutality. What a culture that celebrates a history of violence then must learn is its impotence to resist turning violence on its own citizens once the foreigners are done away with. This echo can be seen in the park episode (Ch. 34, p. 68) as the bronze heroes of emancipation overlook those urban refugees, the indigent elderly, that the modern society has neglected. The sign that violence is edging closer to home is not recognised by Niall and he suffers an attack by fellow foreigners while out drinking (Ch. 38, p. 77). In effect, the discrete narrative packets act as precursors of future narrative activity and elements in a wave form for the novel, beginning with an arrival and ending in a departure. What remains impermeable despite all the human activity is the place, the city.

That the city is unnamed is fundamental to the novel, as indeed the novel is perhaps more about a city than it can be about the travails of Niall. For this city to have a name in fact can be likened to presenting an audience with a screening of the drama series, "Dallas". Its production may be alien but enough is known (by whatever sources) to provide an immediately assimilable context and an assumption of various values. In the interests of a mimetic, I would prefer to avoid this type of offering. Alienation experienced by the characters only does not serve enough of a purpose in this case. In part, as explained above, most people handle experiences of alienation daily and are, consciously or otherwise, well-adjusted to it. The proposition then is of the degree of alienation rather than it as a distinct kind. Could it have served to supply *Ohneland*'s city with a fictional name? Perhaps, but degree zero is as useful a starting point as one or two above. It is bad or good enough that the general location, the Far East, the middle passage in the history of human migration, is made known from the outset. In any event, most big Asian cities with the exception of Hanoi are similar in appearance and organisation, having been rebuilt in political and material terms since 1945, and so Niall's base camp can, in a way, serve the entire region.

⁹ This relates to an experience of Angola in the 1980's and Stephen Dedalus's thoughts in the 'Nestor' chapter of *Ulysses*.

Although Niall has a name for the duration of the story, it is known from the first page that he intends this to change. He might be seen as one who exists between names. The one he has is wrongly spelt by Hae-suk at the 'submarine', indicating that its pronunciation is under question; its lack of a capital letter might also show how it is received in the new territory. Does it say anything about him except that he doesn't really belong, is easy to reduce and be reduced? Does the city's namelessness say anything but that it doesn't belong to the indwellers any more than they all belong to it? As Jim says early on, comings and goings are the only constants and that there must be people all over the city, unobserved and rendered negligible, living in nasty little cubby-holes. Over time, everything about place will change: farmland becomes factory zone becomes residential property, then blight before ultimately becoming a new battlefield. The city, though it affects those held within its attractions, can be seen as a cancer suffocating the life within it, suffocating itself as it does. And for this purpose, Andrea's immigration, motherhood and dying has significance for Niall's relation to place in the story, though he himself does not appear to notice this.

In principle, the life of the city is crucial to this story, and it is quite diseased. The buildings are cracked, the highways don't subscribe to the rules of geomancy (*Pung-su*, Ch. 14), its systems are either congested or badly utilised. Of its citizen lifeblood, the old suffer neglect, the young cannot find employment. Or, if work exists it can be found suited, for example, to trashing old couches rather than building something that will last. This is the lot of the ordinary people as it reflects the vision of the ones with power. The significance is that the system as a whole cannot hold. It is not important when or by what single factor the give will happen, city life as it stands, heralded for long enough as the high point of modern material civilisation, produces more problems than it solves and the clock is ticking. The novel works at one level as a tool plunged into a sack of produce - modern urban life - to extract a sample of what constitutes this product of gradual dissolution in situ. Does Niall know this as he departs? Probably not, but he is getting closer to an understanding by virtue of prime factors such as the homes he lived in and the loss of MH.

In several places body organs are used to describe the city and, in their way, substitute for the city's name: lungs, pancreas, intestine (p. 9; 53). The subway lines operate as a type of bloodstream. This maintains the idea of a system but also indicates its state of health. The lungs are made up by extractor fans busy transferring waste air to other parts of the city as body. The pancreas, the area where Niall works, is a place in which some people are digested as payers of tuition and receive in return the juice of a somewhat education squirted over them. These seem unpleasant but as functions of a city's processes they are there to be seen, rather in the way different visitors to a zoo see its different aspects: encager of wildlife or saviour from extinction.

At this point it is useful to explain that one inspiration for the composition of this city derives from Dziga Vertov's 1920's film-making of Moscow and Joyce's *Ulysses*. In the former, a great many cut shots, spliced together, often repeated or linked to similar forms (intermittently a fan, a train's wheels and cogs turning give the idea of energy and force in revolution) are used to establish the hurly-burly of the times. The most obvious Joycean effect, drawn from the Aeolus chapter, is the way a citizen or student's ideas about 'Pung-su' (Ch. 14) theory are cut into the days following Niall's bereavement. To some readers this may be a fault with *Ohneland*. As defense, the use of montage in trying to create an idea of an incomprehensible (Niall reflects on it while still in the aeroplane as an 'impenetrable' city: Ch. 14, p. 24) space is perhaps the best way. The simplest and most helpful definition I have found for this technique in the use of film, and it has informed the writing of this novel, is David Mamet's¹⁰. He suggests that rather than following the protagonist around, the method of representation should be "a succession of images juxtaposed so that the contrast between these images moves the story forward in the mind of the audience". It does at least leave the reader with the job of using the imagination to fill in the gaps, to relate the idea of the city to individual experience.

Originally, the novel was composed of a number of sections, each of which dealt with a different aspect of living or perceiving in the city. Greed, violence, architecture, food, art, war, for example. This composition was then smashed, as in a physics experiment, to use a loud simile, to see what fusions might occur. No doubt this may have added to the complexity of the whole but elements are still recognisable. Chapter 8 is structured around economics and money in the city, for example; Chapter 19 is concerned with food and its relation to desire or antipathy. In support of this loose structure, the tense system is fairly stable: present simple predominantly works in favour of Niall's memory, simple past expresses present narrative action. Jim's portions are always in direct monologue to an anonymous listener, while the ESL¹¹ voices are usually monologues situated in a classroom or other established context.

One might argue that this system, in its regularity, does not suggest the way of life of the city at all, that it falls down as reportage. This might be most apparent in the sections that actually do appear as newspaper clippings¹². Admittedly, this was a difficult concern to deal with and I opted to push on with the intention that splices and placing, along with a variety of ESL voices, might help to create an effect of range, diversity and surprise in the encounters (these are not intended to be the formalities that a prayer or business meeting or cocktail party, for example, become over time) that both characters and reader experience. The splicing of the different voices, set out as exempla in the beginning, prior to the first chapter¹³, is a key to the city and the predicaments of the characters. Niall, without realising it, must strive not to fall into the trap Jim has laid for himself in which an end far less of excitement and growth awaits.

¹⁰ "On directing film" in *A Whore's Profession*, p. 347.

¹¹ English as a Second Language.

¹² They are adapted from stories related in conversation and forms of journalism widespread in the region.

His leaving the city, whereas Jim at the end is not planning to, is a suggestion that he has graduated one particular hurdle.

What the variety of voices does achieve is a set of contributions or tributaries towards a flowing stream¹⁴, the conclusion to which, as an emptying out into an ocean, is the departure of Niall for some other undisclosed destination. These tributaries may be seen also as avenues onto a highway. In this sense, they are complicit in the truncations¹⁵. In the real world it might be argued that traffic jams power a city and are in many ways its life. People sit in jams because the locus of the jams is also the larger venue for the jobs. So Ohneland's truncations are an engine to its narrative movement. Certain elements of the whole, like Niall's memories, can skirt the narrative congestion the way moped scooters or bicycles do in rush hour traffic. This is akin to the more modest or invisible aspects of a person or character's life taking on special significance, even pre-dominance, and in this way Niall's personal history stakes a claim to a central portion of the story. It affects his relationships, interferes with his ability to get to terms with his work and the daily round in the city. Such displacement of priorities can be readily identified with in normal urban experience and hence chapter 14 is rather eclectic. It includes different and unannounced states of being, motivation, place and time.

Displacement should be indicated here as a principle theme. Examples accumulate throughout. The pre-occupying memory sections squeeze out those relating to Niall and MH, the interchapter Summer impinges on Autumn and Winter sandwiches it from the other side of time. When David presses Niall to go drinking in the entertainment district (Ch. 38, p. 77) it affects Niall's will for his own use of time; he is reluctant to heed his own sense of ill-ease; the give or displacement under these tensions is supplied by assault and battery. This latter example lends itself somewhat to strains of fatalism that occur also in other parts of the novel and, thus, an underwriting of pessimism. These need to be dealt with together.

While not a major development in Ohneland, quiet notions of Buddhism are at work throughout. These can be seen as working at cross purposes to thrusts of potential pessimism (another aspect of jamming, as it were). The references to *Khi*, *Pung-su*, *Een-yong* and the personifications Niall seems to see in the rocks and trees while he is on the mountain (Ch. 19, p. 43) are Buddhist concepts that do have relevance to life in the city. This is because the citizen's lives in general are not well ordered and will not likely become so under constant or increasing urban constraints. Though it may seem hopeless to resist the pull and force of city demands - the engine of pessimism, as, of course, Niall feels his father and hometown living room to be when in his memory he revisits the dying Andrea: a locus for many things he cannot control - there is

¹³ This arrangement derives from Joan Didion's Play It Like It Lays.

¹⁴ This theme and arrangement owes something to John Berger's To the Wedding.

¹⁵ This idea comes from having watched the meeting of the waters, the Rio Negro and the Rio Amazon near the city of Manaus, Brazil. The coagulated black waters did not at first mix freely with the muddy brown, instead patches, like icebergs, floated in a brown sea. The river already passed by was the one truly mixed.

the steady presence of other options at hand. These he must learn about and come to see how they fit in with some of his own vital and uncultivated experiences (his childhood love of grass; his having drunk goats milk in a village someplace a long time before; his feeling for hair and its contrast with skin). There is, in other words, a core to him that is safe from the trials he has experienced and he is learning how connected up he is in a world of such potential experience. So, although Niall probably does not see the need to shave his head, smile all the time and eat vegetables, the notions told to him do not seem to occur as something unfamiliar. It is as though packets of nerve cells have retained memories of instances, conscious ones from his own lifetime (and apparently others), and they serve as true communication, an antidote to the city and a source of quiet confidence. Similarly, when Niall leaves the city at the end he is visited by an image on the destinations board of the two places that have come to prick his orientation and exert gravitations of differing kinds, Osaka and Vienna. Both are both practically imaginary, Osaka a forward-looking one, Vienna from a viewpoint looking backwards, yet the conjunction of the two, while distinctly noted by Niall, is not a matter for real surprise. He continues fairly smoothly in his actions in some knowledge that he is *still* very much connected to the two absent persons those places connote and to the places those characters represent. In other words, in the broad scale of human migrations Niall is making contact with his various antecedents. Such connections, though unsatisfactory or unwell, are the beginnings of the future community that Niall feels he is lacking and which he wants to create afresh, having left the fascies of his father's relation to place and people behind. In this respect the novel is promising but inconclusive. Large experiences for most people take time to exercise their real effects.

Community is clearly a specific factor Niall finds missing in his life in the city and it is a burden he has brought with him. In the city where community can be found it is despite the congregation of masses of people rather than because of it. And it is often of questionable health. Niall's predecessors in the basement apartment leave it in a mess because they do not feel connected in any way to those that come after. One of the ESL speakers tells of his desire to marry only to have been rejected, humiliated and lied to by his partner's family. What is achievable comes at a price that seems difficult under any reasonable circumstances to pay. This can also be seen by the fact that daughters who become prostitutes to help support the family are simply abandoned to the fathers of other girls, in all probability, who make use of them. Community, though in the case of Niall remaining an absence or hope, is in need of scrutiny in the space of the city. This helps make Niall's instinct to go it alone, at least in the interim, a more formidable proposition.

The question of community is at a national level also doubtful given the brutality of civil conflict and the lowly status the elderly impoverished appear to suffer. Where community can be seen to flourish, organically as it were, is in groups like the hiking club, though this is offset by it as a locus for the desire of some for others (David for MH) and the invisible conflicts this seems to create. Niall experiences his

happiest moments when out of the city limits he is together with the group or when they are gathered in his home for a belated housewarming/commiseration party. The novel thus speaks much in quiet terms of the simple pleasures that have been part of human evolution from the beginning: feasting and conversing in gatherings in which differences are relaxed and jest or parody are acceptable. The location, Niall's grim room, is necessarily ironic. Although at the end Niall is not headed towards any discernible community, it may be safe to say he knows what to look for.

A charge against this novel that would seem easy to make is that it dispenses with women out of hand. They exist as consumables, are imagined, dreamt or used as such and then when the novel needs to end they are trashed - MH's gifts and belongings that Niall throws out once she has disappeared (he is prepared to walk some distance to be rid of her things but will not move a muscle to aid or calm her) simply personify. And Niall, by default, has done to her what his father did to Andrea.

My focus in this case as in the gist of the novel is to consider causes of aberrant behaviour and to understand the violences that result. Throughout Ohneland the context for such violences, whether on the national or the individual scale, the living space, is not simply a proximal factor but a prime mover, the engine for the types of understandings (or failures to understand) that take place. In one of the stories told to Niall, women are said to mutilate themselves for the sake of beauty. In Niall's mind this conjures up a fusion of images from pop culture and abortion to factory production (Ch. 9). Women are hence involved in making profitable predominantly male-run industries. The important point here is that environment does shape desire as Diamond argues it has for all of human evolution. And in the novel this explains the lengths characters such as MH, Jim and David will go to subscribe to accepted standards of desirability. Niall, it would appear, is a refuser. This comes from the entrained environment he has brought to the city: Andrea's house with its "dead" living room, the hard bed Niall sat upon after the kitchen struggle with his father and the avocados in the swimming pool all conjure up a distressed environment. It is a likely place for the kinds of mayhem that seem to have constituted Niall's upbringing. It is also safe to say that the best way of surviving harsh conditions is to escape them in the first place. So Niall's avoidance behaviours are part of a strategy that has, for better or worse, kept him afloat.

And his leaving Ohneland's city, carrying with him certain new knowledges of how, at least according to one kind of belief explained to Niall by David, even the vaguest contacts have remained alive and available to shared understanding throughout the evolution of the species, is also a way of keeping his keel. If this is similar to other 'blokes on the road' novels how different is its emphasis on urban context, the masculinity thereof and the potential for a kind of malevolence bestowed by it? It is difficult to romanticise this city as it might be with the Paris or Prague of other writers. Also, what appears as straightforward pessimism - 'we do not communicate in practice in city life' - is quite as easily a tribute to the castaways in the life of a city for it points to their stoicism in making do despite not being able to get

what they want when they express their desires truly. In the city, definitively, the objects of desire and the means used to explain both desires and objects, shift irrevocably, like fashions.

In conclusion, is Ohneland a longish diatribe on modernity? The city is a place of soullessness and struggle, when not of actual suffering. The characters in some respects lack much thereof and they do not seem to develop, not at least in easily recognisable ways: the fault, it would seem of a repressive and oppressive focal environment, one that is immutable without the intervention of war or natural calamity. Communication doesn't really communicate and love is lacking in most dimensions except brevity. In response, certainly there exist phenomena in everyday life to be observed and then to be understood and then again to be managed if that should be one's lot. This story is an attempt to show how harmful environments, those spaces not built up by individuals but by communities, hurt ordinary life. And it is an attempt to understand the responses that ordinary individuals might make in trying to make sense of their environments past, present and future. It is in the bearing that some beauty can be realised, even in the failings that are part of such struggle, rather than in the notions of an ideal settlement. But, serious matters set aside, I sometimes imagine an authentic prodigality taking the wayward son away from the paternal embrace of the city and back, with overwhelming joy, to the isolated pig sty in the country. The smell of farm manure is at least a communication that the nose can make sense of.

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