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**Let Her Go: Reinventing black characters in crime fiction.**

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**Volume I: The Novel pages 2-214**

**Volume 2: Critical-reflective thesis pages 215-301**

## **Volume 1: The Novel**

**Let Her Go**

### **St James Infirmary Blues**

I went down to St. James Infirmary  
Seen my baby there;  
She's stretched out on a long, white table  
She's so sweet, so cold, so fair.

## **Preface**

My daughter died. This is the chronicle of events that occurred when I tried to unravel what happened to her. I could never have guessed then the journeys it would take me on, the situations I'd find myself in. Some things included here – documents, reports, recordings – I discovered outside of those journeys I made, but most of this story is written straight from memory of that time. Looking back, I suppose it could be said I was a fool travelling towards wisdom. Am I now wise? Perhaps wiser. Yet my quest continues. This journey hasn't ended.

**Miscellaneous Unreleased Materials Relating to The Death of Ms Tishana Hanley**

Freedom of Information Decision Pending

**(Coroner's Office)**

**Manchester, UK. Southern Cemetery.**

Arriving early. The river gorged, curling large, sweeping the high banks with menace.

Dumped silt. Spilt seed. Here bent thistle bush, swamped wort, grass slime. Now flattened reed stalks. The bloom of leaf rot. Across, flashes brim and rows of stone. Faces up, six below. The ground water high, the soil a bog curing skin flesh bone memories.

Crossing municipal grass they parade. Glossed shoes. Sky sliding from foot to foot licked with mud, roots. These guys. Musked, preened. Bracelets. Gold chains. Veils. *Let it go. Let the dogs hear the bell.* Now the leg train. The box. The songs. The words. The heaped-up spoil pointing proud. Everything poured up into the sky and down into this earth.

To the brim now. The ground yielding too easily underfoot. Pooling water six feet down.

Boards cast aside. The box lowering. Song. *Trampling out the vintage.* Tish.

– But she'll drown! She'll drown!

Yasmina.

Murmurs. Clocks. The ropes playing out, taking the weight of Tish. The gleaming pine.

– She'll dr... !

The sky jiggling. Thisfuckedup day. Dying a second death before my first. Tish. Now she comes to me, easy in her skin. Ha. The flick of it. In her teens, beat-boxing over a lyric, doing those fly rapper twists with her arms:

*We got it lit. Even if life's shit got us in the end.*

*We got it lit. Fade the beat. Press Send.*

She's nestled in brown water. The ropes hauling off.

*fuckedupthisday.*

### **Pakistan. Landings.**

I heaved at the pile of buckled metal. Bleached rubber. Chewed plastic. Leaking petrol. As the hairy-armed idiot of a driver turned the ignition again. And again. And again. Nothing. Nada. Zilch. Fuck all.

– Once more, Saul!

The foolfuck. Calling out from his upholstered seat as my shoes slipped on the road. The grease of a thousand maxed-out engines. Lorries went past, cars, mopeds steered by hooligans. I was a gnat's breadth from splatting my arse onto the airport highway, a spark from a fireball. I set my cheek against the Toyota's bumper, bit down, pushed against the slope. That scent of eucalyptus coming off the trees in the central reservation. Cough sweets. I'd push-started cars for pennies as a kid and lived to tell the tale. But now. As soon as we got the engine ticking over, I was going to kill that horse-brained fuck of a friend in the driver's seat. Daalat. He'd promised to pick me up from Islamabad airport, save me a taxi fare. Instead this.

The engine never caught. We got the thing onto the verge. Daalat bounced out of the driver's seat and slapped me between the shoulder blades as I clutched for breath.

– Sun's shining. Welcome to Islamabad!

He was a punch away. I found myself nodding. Wheezing.

– Good job man but looks like we need a garage. When you're ready. I'll give you a hand.

We rolled it down a dirt road off the highway and in three turns arrived at a car breaking zone – a square mile of oil slick and car parts. Electric looms dangling like nerve endings out of chassis after stripped down chassis. Oozing coolant. Buckled up panels. Shattered starter motors. Gouged headlight holdings. The stench of it. Everything being beaten and welded to death or back to life. *Whatthefuck*. Daalat laughed at my face. I had to laugh too. This was a filthed-up, ear-hammering welcome to the land of the pure.

*My thumbs forcing their way down. His face mottling.*

Mechanics came at us. I dragged my bags, still with their clingfilm wrapping, out of the car while Daalat talked money. Shouts, mock arm wrestles and walk offs folded into a handshake. The mechanics pushed the vehicle away.

– Come on, amigo, let's eat.

– Don't talk to me.

– You hungry?

I let him take only the larger of my two bags and we were soon seated in a food shack in the middle of it all. A server spoke in Punjabi, looked at me then back at Daalat.

– You want dahl?

– Yes.

– Roti?

– Two. Don't talk to me.

– How about...

I held up my hand.

Daalat shrugged and ordered. The shack was pallet-wood, a floating island stuffed full of hungry men with deep-stained and scarred arms and hair as black as the oil they handled.

The sun poured down through the pallets making oblong hot spots. Ninety seconds later we too were feasting from plastic bowls.

– Desi. Not your Manchester Curry Mile stuff.

I didn't reply. I hadn't eaten on the plane. I finished mine. Daalat watching.

– What? I was the one at the back end of that donkey of yours. Pushing. Not steering. By rights I should have your bowl as well.

I mimed his minor efforts with the wheel up at the donkey's front end.

– Always complaining. This is a sight.

Time shifted. The hammering and drilling and beating were constant, varying from high to low pitch, like unstable tinnitus. There were occasional blue flashes, spark showers from welders. One of the bargaining mechanics approached. Daalat wedged a fold of rupee notes under the roti plate and the two of them headed off. I pulled my bags out from under the table.

*How did I land here?*

A woman in orange with a baby on her arm called out to me. Her eyebrows flicked upwards and her nose twitched making her gold nose stud glitter in the sun. I looked over to her. She smoothed the left shoulder of her shalwar then approached, hand outstretched. I put down my bag to find change.

– What are you doing?

Daalat had returned, trapping my hand. He barked at the woman. She spoke back politely and rapidly. Daalat replied in kind. The conversation between them went to and fro till



Daalat's face broke out into a flummoxed smile. The woman scoffed and turned on her heels.

– What?

– I said why are you picking on him? She said he's obviously foreign. I said, how can you tell? You know what she said? She didn't mention your Rasta dreads. Or your skin. Or your English way of walking. You know what she said?

She having spoken purely in Punjabi, obviously I didn't know what she said. I fed him the line he wanted anyway.

– What did she say?

– She said because of your bags! Because of your bags!

Daalat's eyes were wet with amusement.

– And this is funny because?

– She was being polite. The beggar woman was being PC! She didn't mention the obvious, your hair, your skin. She mentioned your bags instead!

– OK, I get it.

It was hardly going to bring the house down at the Brixton Albany on a Friday night, but I took his point. In her eyes I was a Rasta in Islamabad and I stuck out, she had been polite about it.

– Why couldn't I give her something?

– If you gave even one rupee, every beggar here would be round you before you could blink.

I was unconvinced.

– Daalat.

– What?

– I have something with me.

– A headache?

– No.

– What then?

– Never mind. Can you get me to this place now. Will this piece of junk make it?

I handed him the address. He had it already. He glanced at it.

– It's not far. You still set on this?

I nodded.

Someone blared a horn at us. We were blocking the exit road. I hauled my bags into the boot again and we got in the car. The unburnt petrol smell had gone, replaced by a pall of freshly spilt engine oil. I strapped myself into the passenger seat. Daalat turned the ignition. The engine caught first time. We slithered up the dirt track incline onto the highway.

We went over our story for when we reached, Daalat with more enthusiasm than me, then something stirred in Daalat, his eyes brightened, and he started a running commentary.

– On this side, a bit over there is a large park, often used by local workers and it has a vast variety of different birds and a lake where people go to lie down in the shade of the lush trees there, all of Islamabad is full of green.

– Daalat, it's OK.

– What?

– I'm not a tourist, you don't need do the guided tour thing.

– Please yourself.

He hit the radio button and someone was getting excited about something, probably advertising. I let it wash over me. We were on a dual carriageway in the scruffiest car on the road. Government buildings flicked by, a hospital, what looked like a couple of museums. We drove through a strong smell of fish at one point, then out of it into the general smog of urban, clean-burned petrol.

## **Pakistan. Burraq Freight.**

Mochi Mora Plaza, Green Area, Islamabad, was home to Burraq Movers and Freight Forwarders. The Plaza was in the middle of an enterprise zone where five storey glass and steel buildings nodded to one another. Daalat came off the slip road and parked in the only spot left under the sole tree the developers had allowed to remain. We got out. Light bounced off the glass of the cluster of buildings, glinted off stones in the tarmac, shimmered off the windows of the hundreds of parked cars, flashed off Daalat's gold ring as he pulsed the door locks on the car. I checked the boot was secure, made a token attempt to straighten out my shirt and chinos, then knelt to pull the shoe laces of my shoes tighter. Daalat stood, loosened his tie, dripping in the heat.

–That's the building?

– Yes.

– You see the grooves along the window frames and the channelling all the way up?

Daalat studied them.

– Saul, I got a better idea. Let's just go in through the front door like normal people.

Reception turned our sweat into chill. As Receptions went it was at the upper end. The potted foliage was real not plastic, the horseshoe counter topped with a black marble, behind the counter two uniformed staff working the phones before a burnished steel display board listing the resident companies. Most of them had Freight or Shipping in the title. Daalat did the talking. There was some serious nodding, a phone picked up, another conversation, the phone again and with a graceful waft of a hand we were invited to try out the white lacquered, padded tub chairs around a glass table. I flicked at packaging magazines. We had no sooner sat down than we got the wave to go up.

Six flights led to a landing with tinted views of the car park through sealed unit glazing and two corridors beyond that, each with a series of pine doors. Daalat took the left corridor and went confidently through the door marked 5 without knocking. I followed him in. The man there was on the phone.

He had a tufty black moustache, clean jaw and thinning, shoe-shine black hair. His cuff-linked beige shirt was well filled and set off an immaculate red and white barred tie.

Everything about him said business in the Pakistani, more-Western-than-the-West way.

Only the black banker's sleeve band riding just above the soft bicep of his left arm defied the

code, upping the sartorial ante. He ended his call and gave a vigorous handshake to us both, nodding to the customer chairs, which we took.

– I'm Mohammad Sarwar, how can I help you?

His English had a slight American buzz to it.

Daalat looked to me. Suddenly all our rehearsals fell away and my tongue stayed resolutely in the pit of my mouth. Mr Sarwar offered me and then Daalat, a glass of water, pouring each glass himself.

– This is a very dry air.

A sip and I managed to get something out.

– I'm looking to export from here to Nigeria and wanted to know if if...

Daalat took over.

– This is Saul Hanley and I'm Daalat Ali. We're from UK and he has relatives in Nigeria. His family are traders, Import-Export. Recently his father has died and he has been asked to take over the family business so he's come here to make connections, widen his network of business associates. They do a lot of trades.

Mr Sarwar nodded at me, slid the sleeve band downwards, took it off. His phone rang three times then stopped.

– I understand. I am sorry for your loss. My own father started this business not far from here with three donkeys and a cart. He had a saying that is our motto here. *Further. Faster. Better. Safer.* A little long, but it keeps us focused. What is it you want to export to Nigeria?

– Rice.

The mouth glue again. Strange. I had always considered myself a fluent liar, yet here I was stumbling. I wasn't sure what I had been expecting to find. Mounds of heroin in a pile? The CEO injecting as I walked in? It was the correct address though. And every illegal trade had a legitimate cover business.

– You've come to the right place then. My father was known as the rice king. We send rice across the world on behalf of numerous clients. We can source it for you here, arrange the paperwork. Do you intend to fly it or ship it by sea freight?

– By sea.

– To which port will that be, Lagos or Port Harcourt?

– Port Harcourt.

– I see.

He looked doubtful suddenly.

– Do you have letters of credit?

I looked at Daalat.

– Not at this moment, I'm not sure he needs.

– A cash buyer is always good. You will need the usual permits, personal accreditation.

Certificates of quality, export licence. And perhaps depending on your understanding of the port activities at destination you might need also insurance cover against loss. Rice is easy to arrange. Do you have any other products in mind?

I weighed him.

– What other product would you say gets shipped to Nigeria from Pakistan?

He laughed, tugging at his sleeve.

– Yes, rice and drugs, most people will say. However, we do not ship the latter.

– That so?

– Yes. And I don't think you, Sir, are looking to export that, you don't look the kind. And you would be unwise to discuss such a thing in public like this.

– We can talk in private?

– There is nothing to say. Burraq are a legal, legitimate business. I think this conversation is over.

He turned to Daalat.

– Mr Ali, is your friend well?

– Um, he's not been so good recently. His conversation gets tangled. He only wants to do legitimate business with people of the highest credentials, that's why I've taken him to you, but of course he has heard rumours and he wants to eliminate those types. It's very damaging to Pakistan's reputation, and unfair on people such as yourselves. But he is earnest and his family business is important to him. Call it due diligence.

– Yes. The waters of business are infested with crocodiles. One of my mother's sayings.

– You have wise parents. Thank you for seeing us, and we'll be in touch.

– Of course.

He rose from his seat to show us the door, shook hands at the door with the same handshake as he gave us on entry, but the face had changed. It said he wanted nothing more to do with us.

Night fell behind the Islamabad hotel curtain drapes. We'd driven there in only fifteen minutes, the traffic easy. Daalat was still chewing my ear.

– If you're going to announce your arrival, that's how to do it.

– *He's not been well.* You sold me down the river.

– I rescued you.

– You think he's clean?

– Yes. He doesn't need the money. I looked them up and I told you several times. They make millions from trade. You start illegal and then go legal. That's the path of most business, from the Queen of England downwards. Maybe his father was a gangster, but he has no need. Someone ships stuff using his services, doesn't mean he's involved.

– That façade though. The grooves. The hand holds.

– You want to try as a cat burglar here? The night guards have rifles with sights. They don't mess about in Pakistan.

– ...You sure he's legit?

– Saul, did he come across as a desperado to you? Somebody's tucked it into a consignment. Happens all the time.

I drank the hotel tea. It was milky and sweet. He was doing the same, though he had swirled some into a saucer to cool it. He slurped then asked:

– So, what's next on this wild goose chase of yours?

– We've got to follow the trail. It came to here. So where did it come to here from?

– And we discover that how, Sherlock?

– This.

I pulled out the washbag, then the toothpaste tube out of that.

– Toothpaste? Dental hygiene is important.

– It's the H.

– The what?

– The heroin. Inside the tube, in clingfilm. For testing. You said it could be done here.

– You took that through Customs?

– You said the labs here could do it.

– *Theoretically* I said. They could do it theoretically. You didn't tell me you'd bring it.

He looked at me hard. Then slurped another saucer of tea.

– You're the first person I know who's smuggled this stuff into Pakistan instead of out.

– Well?

He did a big sigh.

– Nothing moves without money.

– I've got it.

– How much?

– Not much. All I have.

I took another wash bag out of the bag and spread the contents on the bed. Six thousand in pristine US dollars.

– It's not counterfeit?

– Real as it comes.

He held it to the light, felt it, started to count it.

– You want to go to the lab in person?

– It's not I don't trust you.

– It's your money.

He cut a small pile from the bundle of dollars.

– I'll have to call a few people tonight, explain. We can't turn up on spec.

– How does the lab trace it?

Daalat wrinkled his nose.

– I don't know for sure but as I understand it, there's chemicals and machinery and things that goes into the extraction and purification process and that leaves markers that they can hone in on. Then the poppy plants themselves they pick up something, strontium, I think.

It's new science just being done. The strontium is detectable and its different for each geographical area so you can tell what areas the stuff has been grown in from those markers.

– That's your scientific explanation?

– I never said I was Stephen Hawking.

– He's an astrophysicist not a chemist.

– You want blood? I'm telling you the labs can tell where it comes from, that's all. The science you can go research yourself. This should be enough. I'll have to get busy tonight.

He'd picked up the pile of the dollars he'd cut from the main bundle.

– It's a hornets' nest though.

– What are you talking about?

– You go testing heroin, think about it. If what’s in this toothpaste tube is heroin. Who’s testing heroin generally?

– Law enforcement?

– Correct. Now, who’s going to be interested in that?

– Whoever’s moving the stuff – to see if the cops are coming for them?

– Another ten points. Now connect the two.

– They are sometimes one and the same?

– So we get this tested, people are suddenly going to get curious about us. Like I said, hornet’s nest.

– If they aren’t already interested in us after our visit to Mr Sarwar.

– Mr Sarwar will be the least of our problems.

I liked the *our*. He could have said *your*. There again, he was riffling through the dollars and in the low lumens light of the hotel’s upside-down lily eco bulb his eyes had turned dollar green.

– Do you want to know what I think?

– Do I get to hear it anyway?

– You got a death wish, Saul. You need counselling. Come on, let’s go eat. Everything looks better after you’ve eaten.

The hotel food was hotel food. Daalat took off with the split of my money to do some calls and I wandered around the hotel for a while. It was soulless in a strangely satisfying way. A foyer with Italian coffee and those little biscuits in silver foil. Signage to concierge services, laundry, a swimming pool. A fire point containing a red hydrant behind glass, a bucket of sand below. Occasional bursts of raucous laughter above the low hum of conversation between business associates. I took the gold-tinted mirror lift to my floor, found my room, slid the card key till the little diode blipped green, and closed the door on it all.



**Manchester. Luna considers Tish's death.**

Yasmina is at the house door, holding back tears, waving, blowing kisses, love *you, see you soon* to Luna. Luna has a half-zipped backpack lashed to her, containing spare clothes, an ice-cream box filled with nibbles, a colouring book. I zip it fully, take it off her as she blows kisses back to her mum with both hands. She gets in the car, a teddy bear dangling from one hand. I strap her in.

– Play the CD, Daddy.

She likes being in the car. I slide in her favourite nursery rhyme CD. A woman I imagine as a benevolent banshee with a voice that could shatter glass doing *The Wheels On The Bus Go Round And Round*. In the rearview mirror, I see Luna in the child seat, at first bopping up and down to the rhythm, then slowly she retreats into herself, a vague pain on her face. She watches out of the off-side window as things fly past. We're into the third verse. Neither of us is talking and I know it's my job as a parent to find words, but I struggle for any that can make sense of what's happened. This weird, lurching, queasy thought that Luna's my only daughter now. I had two, I now have one.

On the sofa at my apartment, she's demolished both a plate of scrambled eggs and a bowl of microwaved Weetabix. She holds the teddy around its waist in one hand, my hand in her other. She asks:

– What happened to Tish, Daddy? What happened to my sister?

It's the question I've dreaded, and yet needed.

– She died, Luna.

I squeeze her hand, pull her closer to me. She looks up into my face with those killing, clear eyes of hers.

– Mummy says she's not coming back. She's gone to sleep somewhere.

– Yes. Because she died.

– What does that mean?

– It means her body is dead. It's not working any more.

– What about her arms and legs and head. Are they alive?

– No, I mean all of her body. The arms and legs and head too. All of her body is dead.

– I went and saw her at the dead people's house. She looked sad. She wasn't smiling. Does she not like us anymore? Is that why she's gone to lie down in the soil?

- She always liked us. She wasn't smiling because her body can't move now.
- Won't she get hungry down there?
- Her body's stopped working, her heart doesn't beat, and her eyes don't open or close. It's all stopped so she doesn't need to eat or drink.

Luna scowls.

- She can't feel anything so there's no pain.
- No. She'll be cold. They put her in a box and sent her into the soil and now she'll be freezing.

I hug her close to me, breathe in the scent of her skin, hoping I can find words before I choke.

- No, Luna, she won't feel cold. A dead body can't feel anything.

She lashes an arm around my waist and with her other hand explores my face, feeling the bristles, sliding her fingers through my tears.

- I said goodbye to her and I promised to look after her teddy.

- That's good of you. You need to look after her teddy now that Tish can't.

- If I tidy my room will she come back?

- No. It's good that you tidy your room, but that won't bring her back. Nothing will bring her back.

- She owes me money.

- How much?

- Big money. This big. At least two coins!

She has jumped off me and is standing with her arms out wide. I smile.

- That's a lot.

She jumps into my lap again.

- Will she pay me back?

- What do you think?

- She's not coming back is she? So she can't pay me back.

- That's right.

- Daddy, what made her dead?

- I don't know, honey. I'm trying to find out.

- Teddy is sad.

She's stroking the teddy bear's worn, furry brown head. Tish's favourite, and later, only, teddy.

– We're all sad.

Suddenly she jumps up. The teddy flies to the floor.

– Let's play on the swing outside! You can push me, Daddy!

At the patch of children's playground beyond the football pitches I fling her high into the blue-seared sky till she's had enough. She sits on the plastic swing chair, rocking slowly. Her white shoes are scuffed green from running around, the soles muddy. Leaves blow around us.

– Luna?

– Yes?

– Any questions you have about Tish, you can ask. At any time.

She looks back at me blankly. Then jumps off the swing towards the wobbly see-saw.

– Catch me, Daddy!

## **Pakistan. Chlorofluo CHCLF2.**

I took the rear hotel staircase and then a tight turn through the squeezed kitchen and out into a yard area. I didn't put it past Daalat to have tipped someone on the hotel staff to keep tabs on me. I waited. Listened. The gurgle of pipes. No following footsteps. No one around. The bolt on the yard gate lock slid back with a grind of rust. I skirted the yellow cabs on the street outside, looping back and round. A simple plastic black bag contained all I needed. I walked two blocks then took a Qing Ji. I paid the driver off outside a café and waited till his tail lights faded.

Traffic was light at this hour. A few cabs slowed as they passed me, before speeding away again. I kept a brisk pace, hugging shadows till the Plaza came into view. Burraq Shipping glowed green and gold in Hollywood Hills neon against the night sky. The glass box of the building below the sign was dark and rippled with reflected clouds and the silhouette shapes of its cousin buildings. I was on the public street, head low, in stretch jeans and a dark blue wind cheater. I walked round to the rear of the Plaza. Its wall was a three-handhold vault – regular brick columns anchoring vertical railings that were too narrow to slide through. I tied the black bag to my waist, waited till the last pedestrian was turned then it was a simple hold hold, foot brace, foot brace, weight shift, push off and roll.

Landing on the balls of my feet on tree needles, I shifted a few yards to hunker down under the tree, my back to its trunk, knees tight in my chest and waited. I was a blown garbage bag. The shadow of a shrub. The tree was a cypress, I knew from the smell. I looked up and saw its trim, feathery black branches motionless. The car park was in darkness, and empty bar two cars, both close to the main pedestrian walkway. One was parked pointing towards the building, with search light rigging on its roof. I watched the security guards' movements, waiting for a pattern. It took two hours to emerge.

Meanwhile, diode blinks in the foyer panel said the building's entrance alarm was armed. Unlike in UK, where you couldn't move without being recorded from three angles, I could see no camera pods, no perches, no glass baubles stuck to surfaces, no motorised lenses on poles. I studied the glazing units through the night vision binoculars, checking once more the recess of the windows, the estimated grip the steel unit frames offered, then slipped on my climb shoes and gloves. I watched patiently. Daalat had been wrong but not by much. The guard at the lodge that controlled the access road had got the cushy number and was close to prostrate. The other two mobile guards carried not rifles but pistols. They drove in 5mph

circuit patrols, one clockwise, the other anticlockwise, headlights off, meeting up every half hour for a two-minute conversation out of their cars. It was this the third meetup I was watching: green ghosts, facing each other, leaning on the searchlight car bonnet. A flare then small glow. One of them had lit a cigarette. Another, larger glow. A mobile phone, the smoker with his arm extended, showing something on it to his colleague. They set off on their patrol again. Now.

Crossing the car park, staying low, thinking, for sure there was risk here. Luna had lost her sister already. If her Daddy got himself locked away or shot dead in some far-away place what kind of useless father was that? Even Yasmina, notwithstanding cancelled Child Support payments, would prefer me alive.

Crags, bluffs, boulders. Nature always brought its irregularities, part of the battle of the climb. Buildings on the other hand were more like climbing walls. Actually simpler than climbing walls, once you worked out the grips, the holds. Then the only danger was in your own fear. Take away the height and the climb was simple.

It was wedge right foot, left foot, pinch hold left hand, full grimp right hand for the side of the aluminium frame bevel, push off the right foot and shift quickly to the left then finger curl, adjust and the first panel was done. I was on the lip of the second, twin pinch grip to the sides. Repeat. Brace pressure. Like the old folk tale of the two men stuck at the bottom of a well who individually couldn't climb out, but when they worked together they could do it easily by going back to back and pushing against each other, their legs doing a synchronised climb up the side of the well. The rhythm was different here, but the brace technique similar, the difference only the drop, the extra adhesion needed, the calf ache, the slight wind and the awkward curling clamber for the initial foothold on each ledge. And the pistols below.

Half way up I was settled enough to turn and look across at the city. Two blocks East, an advertising hoarding was lit up, halo-ing a pristine white family in 1980's studio poses. Mum and Dad with white teeth the size of buses, Mum leaning into Dad, the kids clinging to the faux parents' sides, regulation one boy, one girl, great teeth again, each with one lilywhite hand out, reaching for something obscured by the building in front.

Another in the repeat sequence of holds and in a series of five patterns, the climb was done. I clawed my way over the brim and glanced briefly below at the building perimeter. Nothing. Then the car park grounds. No one. I stepped back from the edge, kneeled and let the

Islamabad night sky rise into view. It was beautiful in that banal way all cities are beautiful when viewed from a high enough vantage point at night. The pinks, moody yellows, aquamarines of urban lights patterned like circuit boards, or a tortoiseshell grid or a box of red diamond back snakes, or the tip of a fibre optic cable or crumbs off a star-eating giant's table, or some Viking pre-invasion seaboard, or a fluorescent centipede disco, or Amsterdam cycle lanes, or Ikoyi night fishers' floats. Amid the diodes, a napkin of bright white light with the four lit, flame-shaped turrets of a mosque. Tilt higher and you caught the humming, royal blue, starless sky and a sliver of now-you-see-it-now-you-don't moon. A set design for once-upon-a-city.

The torch was an option, but I left it unused because the cabin guard might just catch its light if he slid a little further down in his chair. I headed for the murky steel frame that formed the apex of the stairs column. There would be a door there. I made out a corps of six industrial air conditioners, central. They would have been on full grunt in daytime but were now mute, pools of water beneath them, old wolfhound guard dogs taking a slobbered rest. A plastic chair and a paperback. Somebody came onto this roof to relax. Security taking a breather? Staff wanting time to think? I listened. Drips. A long-standing spill from a stop cock was rusting the lower lip of a HD ready satellite dish. A ghost white cable spliced – with dark tape covering the splice – into a black cable, running from it. A narrow, aluminium chimney flue fluted up from the roof ending in a whirling bird guard. At my feet now an industrial plastic container, empty, with the manufacturer's information printed across it. *Chlorofluo CHCLF2 Non flammable liquified gas Non refillable, non reusable.* Then the door. It came free without much resistance. I worked my way down the stairs, flight by flight, listening at each flight, my climb shoes quiet on the vinyl coated steel staircase. I found Level 2, retraced the corridor in darkness. A quick wiggle of the screwdriver and the office lock gave. Inside.

Mr Sarwar kept a tidy office. His files were contained in the built-in drawer of the wall. Quickly I pulled it open. Three horizontal trays holding A4 binders. UK. Imports and exports. The UK file was huge. I flicked through looking for Liverpool in any bill of lading, any memorandum of agreement, any confirmation of shipping. The paperwork was scant. Only one sheet telling me anything and what it told me I knew already. Container to Liverpool. Stuffed toys routed via container that called at Mumbai, Karachi, Ho Chi Minh, Dubai,

Bodrum, Liverpool. The shipping company name. Everything and nothing. This was a dead end. I tried the PC on Mr Sarwar's desk, but it was passworded. What now?

I slumped to the floor and listened. I could see the car park through the glass and the line of cypress trees, the sky.

*And then Tish.* It's the middle of the night in Manchester, she's leaning to pick up a milk carton from the fridge, looking straight up at me in the fridge light. *It's not here, Dad, you're looking in the wrong place. There's nothing here, Dad. Nothing. Leave.*

Retracing my steps to the roof. Side-stepping the Chlorofluo. The inert air conditioners. Waiting to read where in their cycle the two patrols were. When they parted I went over the edge, took my time with each hold, watched my feet and worked them quietly, not only measuring but looking for each foothold, the danger now being carelessness. I deliberately went slower than I could. I was onto the tarmac, and, crouching, through the car park for the tree line. Another pause. Catch breath. Then over the railings.

I walked two blocks before hailing a Qing Ji to the hotel zone. Retracing. Through the kitchen. Then the gummed flights of the hotel back stairs again. Into the room, lights off, the stuffy heat. Looking through the hotel window, down, to see a taxi driver looking back up in my direction. I sank into the hotel bed.

*Tish.*

## **Manchester. Tombstoning.**

Summer, the rabid sun. The shanking heat. Windows all flung open. I'm your minder and in the living room you're fanning yourself with a one battery two-inch plastic fan, painting trails of sweat on your forearm. The sulk glance sulk. Barbecues exploding across the estate, bludgeoning sound systems. Everywhere oozing. Pressure. Your mum at work, Luna not yet born. You're sixteen and being confined is against your human rights. Slamming doors. Cooking me my special spaghetti carbonara. Squeezing my neck. Every trick till you got what you wanted: permission to go swimming at what you called the Blue Lagoon and what I called the disused quarry. Conditions applied: I came too. You plead your friends will be there. The embarrassment. Dad it will not be cool. Blue lagoon. *Like the Mediterranean*. Cha. Some freak chemical leaching from the limestone that made it skin-peelingly, toxic blue. *Yada yada yada*. Fine. And so the journey. You, sour-faced and distant in the rearview, already peeling off layers, on your phone, laughter. I arc us out of Manchester in a sling shot of motorway, breeze up the slip road, sail under the Dinting viaduct, its triumphant, water-bearing, red brick, Victorian arches the height of surrounding hills. Zig along the valley's breeze block zones. Then grassed brown sites until, like cousins of Ozymandias heaving up out of sand, Glossop's fallen mills amidst bracken: Albion. Bottom Lodge. Chew Wood. Charlestown. Howard Town. Old Paper. Crumpled brick glories, sighing back into soil. Do the locals look upon them and despair? *Dad, you drive too slow, stop looking at stuff*. Roads Liable To Flood. Squeezing through cart lanes, the promise of those Derbyshire climbers' hills pulling close. We scissor along a ridge, dip then twist into the broad flank. A tuft of green and the trees unfold unfold unfold. To this. Your Nirvana. Glittering between branches. Bathed in sun and ruffled by breeze, the Blue Lagoon. I apply the handbrake, pocket the keys and as you lead we stumble-walk through improvised paths; you're saying not a word, determined in your sulk mood, yet I see the excitement creeping into your eye, the quickening steps. You call out. *It's me!* Shouts back. A rush of feet. Your sulk forgotten as you tumble into the arms of friends. *This is my dad*. They nod courteously. You do your *couldn't shake him off* face and then to me your *don't say a word* face. They smile at me courteously, then pityingly at you.

I wander far enough away to be suitably pretend-invisible as you and your squad head to the jump zone, shed clothes and footwear against the backdrop of sawed sedimentary rock, cut so neatly it rivals an indoor climb for smoothness. Tuffa and steel blue, an easy abseil



but the ascent would be hard fought - worked bolt by bolt, foot hold over foot hold, finger grips to the overhang where it roofs close to horizontal, the quit point for me, the jump point for the youth standing on it. There you are, with the others, all bare-footed and swim-suited on the limestone plinth. There must be eight of you, you the only one in a swim cap – to block the bleach from your Afro hair. Your skin an oiled, onyx black among their lime white, Henry Moore shapes. You hold hands, fool around. The jumps start. Cartoon kicking in the air. Yelps, flailing knees, elbows. I watch you smack the wet blue with a jump buddy. Come up fast. Shimmer of water as you both surface simultaneously then race each other out. Climbing back up, your laughter as you near, turn, dripping, glance across. I don't wave but I smile, and you walk on, ignoring. The woman you've become, restless of curfews, house rules, homework, this surveillance. Endless impositions. You stretch your arms out and the sun drinks you. You drink it back. To be free.

I'm reading Ascent Monthly on my phone, half watching as teenage jests turn to dares. Everyone going full swag off the rock into comic book tombstone jumps. Who can fall straightest, hold longest. The brave or foolish go first. I'm impressed. Each fall how a time-served scaffolder lands a board upright to his mate on the flatbed below - bolt straight. The slap of bare feet into water, the water swallowing hips, chest, head. The pause, then a head surfaces. One emerges from the deep in a dead float. Bursts of laughter. Finally, she shakes her head, takes a stroke, turns, thumbs-up. Your turn. Sun beating down. They cheer you on in your run and you perfect plank. Rush of air falling. Smack. Toes knees hips chest piling through the water. Face. You're gone. Now the wait. Disturbance of ripples. Whitening blue. Then up again. Arms float out. Face down, like the clown before you, but looser. I count off the seconds. She lasted five. Your head is still down at six, the cap gone. Hair mopped out. At eight I know something's wrong. I'm running. Sandals shed on the limestone footings. Underwater rocks scraping. Dive. Lung quiver. Surge. Chop through the shallows. Clear into deep sick blue. Kick. Cleave. I see you still. Head down. Arms drifting. Surge on. Splutter. Sludge. Bile. Murk. Up. A smudge of black that is your head. Shadow. On eight stroke turn for air. Cleave again. Three metres. Claw. Thrust. Cloy. Stretch. Lunge. Turn. Only the tip. Blotch. Your head pixelating. The sky gyroscoping. My eyes beaded with three worlds. None of them you. The water plain and deadly smooth. I thrash. Haul water. *Tish!* Gone. A tug at my foot. Riptides. Slither. Only. Must. Her. Her. Heave down into the black. Eyeballs straining in the bleach. A blotch. Must. Must. Grasp. Wax. Slip. Skin. Bone.

Neck. Head. Hook the shoulder. Haul. Fight. Fight for air. Fight. Fight. *I will not let you go.*  
She comes. Up. Come up. The weight of water dragging, reluctant to release her. *Even if I  
have to die I won't let go.* Haul. Haul. Move. *Come on, Tish, up.* Surge. The cobalt grave  
turning turquoise. Shimmering blue. White. Smack of air. I have you. I have you. You're  
lifeless but I have you. Hook your neck. Kick. Call. Kick. Rush. Claw. I have you.

Out of the water, swaying with fear. *Help me. Help.* They foam over the rocks. Mouths the  
shape of screams though I hear nothing. The world mute. Hands haul you to a stone plinth. I  
feel no lurch of chest. Your lips cold. Eyes milked. Lifeless. Dead cold. *No no no.* I force my  
arms round your waist and fist upwards to your stomach. Remembering. *Please. Don't  
leave. Don't.* Seal my mouth over yours and blow. Nothing. *Come back. Seal. Come on, Tish.  
Come back.* Screaming. The eyebrow. A twitch. Eyelid flickers. An ear to your chest. It beats.  
A breath. She's here. In splutters. She's here. Sobs. Wailing. *Tish.* You see me. Woke now.  
Panicked. Slaughtering into my arms where I hold you. *Don't let go. Don't let go.* Your bicep  
crushing the back of my neck. Holding you. *I have you. I have you.*

A breath. Easing. The release. I kiss your forehead. Frightened eyes. Bloodied lips in chaos.  
Then you gain some focus. Look about. Grinning. *Fooled you all you, fooled you.* Hurl of salt  
water. Blood streaming from your legs. Chest fluttering. Crying. Your friends collapsing into  
hugs. Screams of joy.

Driving home, *Dad, you spoil everything, I was fine, I was fine.* Tissues. Weaving your story at  
the kitchen table, strand by strand, how you needed no help, how I was rash, spoiled the  
fun.

Hands clean as a waterfall. The generator chugging.

Tish.

The quarry water bubbling black, coming for you again. Its heavy haul clawing at you. It  
wants you, it won't let you go, the dark sucking. Gurgle of drowning lungs. Your scream.  
Mine.

Wake. Startle.

Slurred pianola melodies. A wail. Bracken. The bloat of blue water. Ooze. Face puckered as  
orange peel. Water knows how much of itself to drown you with. There. The syringe's black  
rubber plunger head, blackened remnants of blood. Fluid gunk around it. The box. Lights.  
Fuses. Flash. The rearview. Tish's face, staring right at mine. Wake. Wake. Woke.



## **Pakistan. The Lab.**

The lab was in the thick of Islamabad, a universe away from the clean swept plazas where the boutiques and jewellers and banks and international branded goods franchises traded, with their crystal glass cabinets. Here, the overhead cabling got more ragged, the streets more peopled and the people less manicured. Businesses were run out of low concrete boxes: service centres for appliances, hair salons, crumblier cinema complexes, downbeat shopping malls, pest control, private health services of all varieties. The businesses were surrounded by walls, fencing, barriers, an outpost for a security guard.

Daalat whacked the horn and it tooted. There was a red pole barrier across the address we were calling at and a guard dozing in a steel cabin with a propped-up steel window shield at the right-side pole end. The English language of the sign read *Alpha DNA Testing Service. Discreet and Accurate Results*. The guard roused himself. Holding his rifle by its strap, he walked unhurriedly towards us. He was a short, slight man, wearing prescription sunglasses, proud of his guard uniform or his job, and nonchalant of his gun. As he walked, a pair of courier scooters shot across him, zipping through the gap between the boom end and mesh fencing of the next lot, then speeding on. The guard was unperturbed. He had a clipboard and noted down the number-plate of Daalat's car, then wrote a chit of some sort and handed it to Daalat who paid, and the guard strolled back to his post and pressed a button or worked a lever somewhere. The boom rose.

We parked at the front but then walked along the dusty concrete to an entrance at the rear. There was a phalanx of courier mopeds clustered around the door, one with driver, the others on their stands, helmets adorning the handlebars. Seven people jostled in a four metre by four metre reception desk behind which was a white tunic'd, immaculately eyebrowed young administrator who sat stroking her chin behind a screen, as she spoke with a distressed mother of two small children. The woman jabbed at the back of the screen, as if it contained some property that was hers. She was the queue. The other six, alternately standing and sitting were all waiting for information, appointments or paperwork. Five of them couriers, going by their helmet-dishevelled hair, impatient tics and sweat sheened faces.

A machine in the corner wheezed slightly cooler air into the room but still it was sweltering. I attracted some long glances at first, but the heat pushed them all back into their own

thoughts and patches of sweat. Daalat called out over the complaining woman's voice and the admin woman acknowledged him and squeezed from left her desk. Daalat turned to me.

– Give it me now.

I passed him a white envelope containing a clingfilmed ball of H. He shoved it in his jacket pocket.

The administrator was back and signalled that we should follow her to the door through which she had disappeared. I stood but Daalat turned to me.

– You'd best wait here now. It will look mob-handed for two of us to go in and, well, I'll explain this to them better than you. Trust me.

I remembered my encounter with Mr Sarwar, took the appraisal on the chin, and eased back down. The reception door opened, and a courier burst in and dropped something on the desk then went out, in all of three seconds. The snatch of open door brought the smell of smouldering grass, something sweet like molasses and the sustained yelp of a moped springing to life. Somewhere in an inside room, Daalat was spinning a web. I wondered what he would come up with. Last night, I'd argued for the truth. He'd laughed at that.

Somebody's phone rang. I recognised the ringtone: *Tish*.

*Tish*, calling me on her Uni mobile. I'm sorting ropes ready to head out to the heights, bundles of them already coiled in the back of the van, boxes of equipment ticked off. We don't have a relationship where she calls me every day and we chat away, she does that with her mum. I put her on speaker while I pack the last coil. She sounds carefree, excited.

– Hiya Dad.

– Hi honey, what's happening?

She tells it me in pretty much one take.

– Let me get this right. You want me to drive up next Saturday to watch you abseil off some University building?

– That's right.

– Next week?

– Yup. Can you do it?

– And you expect they will allow me to belay even though they don't know me from Adam?

– Just come Dad. I want you there. Oh, and bring cash. It's a sponsored thing. For Gaza.

– I laugh at the cash factor. Nothing changes.

A week later I've made my excuses to my climb buddies and I'm doing an early morning down the M6 obeying its Escher-like roadwork chicanes and speed restrictions. I escape those at Stoke, surge along the sumptuous straight arrow A500 then sink down again onto the M1, drop off on the A50 and arrive in Leicester on time. I did a midnight journey with a fully loaded car and tears and upset when she started Uni. Now she's twenty, opted to stay on campus over the summer and my only struggle driving is the tiredness from the Palace Theatre setup I did the night before.

I find the campus building and she guides me by phone to its lift. On the roof, eight students wait quietly, nervously, as a fully roped, harnessed abseil instructor steps goes over the side without fuss. Testing, I presume. I watch the rope coil play on the ledge edge a moment.

Then Tish is by my side, whispering.

– They're nearly all Geology students, Dad, except me.

– So they know the ropes?

– Good Dad joke, Dad.

She hugs me quickly then goes back to her friends. Her eyes have told me *minimum fuss*. I lean against the lift shaft's concrete apex and watch the air conditioning units churn. Two Abseil Company staff by the ropes watch me warily, an attitude I fully appreciate.

She's wearing flimsy Converse All Star shoes, the gloves she's pulled on are Poundland gardening gloves with weak-ass blanket stitching. But none of it matters. There are so many failsafes in the climb equipment mechanisms that there's more risk crossing a Leicester car park than abseiling here. The weakest link is not the climb gear but the scaffolding overhang that is rigged around the lift shaft block to take the weight. Has anybody tested that rigging?

It looks good. I glance over it. The yellow safety caps on the clamp bolts sit tight. The building they're dropping down is twelve stories of brick without external cladding and the drop stretch they've chosen is windowless. The tester hauls himself back over the wall.

After a bit of kerfuffle, he asks who's first. Tish's hand shoots up. It seems it's an agreed thing between them. I watch them rig her. When they're done she waves me to come over. She doesn't say a word, but her eyes say, *check this stuff*. I look it over, tapping and tugging as I go.

– Helmet's good. Screw carabiner's good. Harness good. Ropes good. Knots. Belays. Gloves. Footwear. You're sound. Keep it simple. Cool mind. Focus.

She nods. I want to hug her but keep my distance so she can't say I spoilt her cool in front of her friends. She surprises me by leaning in and kissing me on the cheek. Then she dismisses me:

– Wait for me at the bottom.

The abseil guy laughs:

– You'll be down before he gets to the base!

I skip down the stairs and when I make it out she's up there, on the crown of the building. I give her a double thumbs up. She's high enough to make out my arm movements if not my thumbs. She begins.

The human body is all wrong for climbing. The legs are over-engineered, the arms and hands under-engineered. Humans are also missing a minimum two limbs shooting laterally from the waist for swings and traverses. Abseiling works though. It makes demands of the legs more than the arms, and asks for no lateral strength or skill. Watching Tish descend, she's fine. Before a serious climb she would need hanging leg lifts, knee raise planks, finger hangs, arm curls, but she's fine. I stand near the belayer more to keep my promise to Tish than to watch over him. He lets her down smoothly. Her legs spring off the brick then freefall down punctuated by short pushes of her Converse. A text book descent. All those climbing walls. Her shoes hit the ground and she unclips herself. I nod *well done* and a big grin rips across her face. Nobody smiles like Tish. She closes the gap to me in a strut and we move away so as not to distract the belayer from the next descent which has already started. I think we're going to huddle and talk but instead she turns and begins calling out to her mates on the wall.

– Go Jess!

– Push out. Fine. You've got it.

– You're ace-ing it!

– You go, girl!

– You got it, Marty!

– Push out, Saquib. Good. And again!

Saquib freezes half way down and Tish looks to me. I shrug. It happens. He's shivering but it's not the cold, he's got Disco Leg from the freeze, thinking he has to keep his leg clamped there or fall to his death.

– Tell him to get his breathing right. It all follows from that.

She picks it up.

– Breathe, Saq, breathe in, then push out!

Saquib gets moving again. Hits the paving slabs with a loud sigh. She hugs him.

– You were fine, you were great.

He breaks into a sheepish smile. He's the last one. They do a group hug.

Driving away, I appreciate the young woman I just saw. Cool headed, resourceful, full of skill, energy and support for others. She asked me to drive up for her, but the Tish I saw there, doesn't need me anymore.

*Only she did. Only she did.*

– Saul, let's go.

An impossible throng of people had joined us in the DNA Testing reception room. Someone was sitting on the edge of my chair. He was holding me up with his shoulder. My holdall was in my lap. There wasn't enough air so when I stood I almost toppled. Three arms steadied me. I stumbled out into the heat. The courier bikes had all gone. Showing no mercy, Daalat set a brisk pace.

– Two days. We have to wait two days for the results.

He drove us away and had me pack and switch hotels.

– The thing is in this business you have to keep moving.

– What business is that?

– The security business.

– What is it that you actually do, Daalat? I've known you from school and I still don't understand.

– I've done it all. Fire Safety Installation, Emergency Procedures Training, Translation Bureau, Persian Rug Sales, Security Levels One and Two, Customer Care, Costa Brava Time Share sales, Logistics, Close Protection, Uber taxi driver and zero hours delivery driver. But mostly I do projects management.

– What kind of projects?

– Any kind of projects. The kind of projects that pay. I'm a fixer. That's what I do, I fix things.

– You don't have a particular skill?

– Answering daft questions is my particular skill. Satisfied?



I was about to ask him what story had he told the lab, but dropped it. We drove away out of the city centre in a velvet silence, jet lag smothering me. The next hotel was on the outskirts of Islamabad, and more downbeat. He did the paperwork and paid, it was a friend's place, he said, special rates. The room was smaller and the bed lumpier, the heat higher. The view from beyond the first floor, speckled yellow hotel curtains was of a row of yellow Suzuki taxis.

I had a dreamless sleep and woke in the afternoon. I dressed then sat in a chair on the hotel veranda and watched a man in a dusty blue uniform chase an itinerant food seller out of the facing public square. The caretaker had a black cap hat and a bushy long beard. He talked comfortably with two other food sellers, so I presumed the one he chased with a stick was unlicensed and he was the authority on these matters. The twin stalls of the two approved sellers had a big yellow bucket of something, a big red bucket of something else and scuffed white buckets containing close to three hundred eggs each. The traders used a ladle to stir huge steel pots that sat on big burners. It was soup. I tried some, eating it at one of the rickety tables there. It was served in blue and white Chinese bowls. That night, I tried the hotel offer which was stuffed leaves and rice. In between, I whiled away the time gazing into the unsettled sky and warding off thoughts.

When Daalat returned early next morning he was certain.

– We have to go West. If you want to see it, it came from up and west. North West Frontier.

– Let's do it then.

– It's a long drive.

– And?

– They won't like us up there, but it's your call. The lab have done their job, but like I said, you've woken a nest. Questions. Questions.

– What did you tell them?

– I didn't. I let the money talk. But chances are they'll want to continue the conversation.

– Let's get going then.

I packed, and he got the car moving. He was happy to see the back of Islamabad. As he drove, his favourite qawaali singer, Abida Parveen warbled a song of shimmering sadness over the hiss, mangle and burp of the antique cassette player as it tugged through some mauled section of tape. I settled back in my seat and let the music knead my jet lag. Daalat began singing along, which was mildly pleasant. Traffic eased and the cityscape of

apartment blocks and municipal buildings, of high white walls and railings, began to thin. We had the front car windows rolled down and I was in shirt sleeves, but it still felt hot. I thought about how it would likely be raining in Manchester. The tape self-ejected and then there was just the sound of rubber on road. With Daalat prompting, I practised some words. Chabli: Key. Do: Two. Tre: Three. Char: Tea. Licko: How much. Rani: queen. Raja: King. Pani: water. Qingji: three-wheel scooter. I day-dreamed of driving up in a Qingji and knocking on a palace door, very thirsty and with three gold coins in my pocket, needing the key to the local well. Traffic slowed as the road funnelled from two lanes to one due to roadworks. A town came into sight. The decibels ramped. We cranked the windows to block the fumes of the lorry directly ahead of us.

Drowsiness mashed and mingled my senses, memories. A jackdaw in tree foliage. A blue water tank resting on side-on bricks, dusty hills beyond. A pair of red trousers hanging over a cement block wall. Shock absorbers crunching. A man climbing a feather leafed tree, short-headed axe in hand. Someone high up in a crane, whistling. A woman in a carrot-orange shawl balancing a bundle of firewood on her head. Bunches of green leaves. Two beggar boys sneaking a ride on the back of a Qingji. The Qingji. That same ramshackle ride that took me to Lekki Beach, Lagos, Nigeria where a makeshift mesh fence funnels us to a gate to be frisked by fidgety guys in white security shirts who also take our naira beach fee. Sand so hot I can't understand why it isn't blown to glass. I unfurl a blanket, lie on it, watch as a barbecue smokes, couples fool, a half-hearted volleyball game is played. The sun blazes and the Atlantic rolls its waves imperiously. A man in rags approaches. We decline his wares. He will be back later, I see in his eyes. I tell my friend wait here with our stuff and I dip into the green. When I haul myself out, I see through soaked eyelashes the beggar again. I slump down into sand. High Life. An ocean roar. Kuti's charging, funky, fufu strings. The ocean abruptly stops.

In the car, Daalat's tape had snagged again. Only the clunk of the wheels on the road. I eased up in the seat and looked around. No rain, no scent of rain. Yet smog clung to the hills. Afternoon prayers echoing. The sun slid into a yellow wall. I did an inventory. Of the two bags in the boot, the large one had no meaning: clothes. wash bag. tourist guides. In the other one, the holdall, Tish's stuff, Michael's notebook, snatched mail. The holdall's slap of papers weighed hardly anything yet was heavy as church lead.

The engine drummed for a long time before we pulled over at a roadside cafe. Most of the queuers were formal as they eyed me, but a pretty woman ahead turned and gave me a bold, broad smile, said something. I smiled back. She winked.

While Daalat nipped to the roadside toilet hut, I rolled the last cube of chicken into the roti. It was at that moment my admirer went past. She had a large Adam's apple and the most graceful walk. Once again, we exchanged smiles, and she gave me a coy backwards glance. Then Daalat was at my side, nudging.

– You think you're a hit here?

– You either got it or not.

– She's a hijra.

– A what?

– Transvestite. Working as a prostitute.

– Jealousy, Daalat. You have to control it.

He laughed.

By the time we were ready to pull out again it was dusk and Daalat's eyes were no longer good. I took the driver's seat, flipped the headlights on and rolled Corolla forward onto the highway. Three of the its four wing mirrors were cracked to useless and the brakes were sponges, but I'd driven worse. I got it pointed in the right direction and took it up a gear.

– Easy on that clutch!

– C'mon, it's not exactly a Rolls.

After fifteen minutes, Daalat was snoring. I nudged him, telling him to keep me awake. He struggled upright and in a voice that ranged from keen to zonked, he worked through stories of womanising artists who came to sticky ends, degenerate red bearded politicians, corrupt mullahs, the craziness of colonial railway building projects, family land disputes that rumbled for hundreds of years, the brilliance of Joomla as a coding platform, the impossibility of permanence, the Inevitable Decline of the West, his short spell as a Greek wrestler named Samu the Strong, how to clean a donkey's teeth, the correct way to eat a mango. It did the job, I stayed awake. Still the heat riddled my mind.

### **Manchester. Next of kin.**

The knock on the door is not Etta's soft knuckle rap, delay, then hesitant follow-up. And nobody ever knocked that door but Etta. I haul myself up. It isn't Etta. Neither her face nor the smudge of her cragged finger fill the spy lens and she isn't off down the corridor calling Ralph. Instead a police uniform. The dark chest, shrunken two-tone skull and Lilliputian booted feet of a woman with steady, incurious eyes and empty hands. Bar her, the lens' 220 degrees sucks in nothing but corridor. Her chest radio squawks and she looks briefly down at it. From the flicker of my shadow in the viewfinder, I know she now knows I am here. With my free hand I wipe the last of the pasta sauce from the corner of my mouth then turn the lock tumbler and swing the door. She does a church thing, a momentary look down at entwined hands, like a prayer, then she's steady on me again.

– Hi. Can I help?

– Are you Mr Saul Hanley?

– Yes.

– Are you with anybody?

– Why?

– May I come in?

Her voice has the backlift of officialdom, yet, within that, some emotion. Which is not good. Not good. She waits. A hand gesture, fingers spreading out from her chin indicating it is my call - she can come back after I've finished eating if I wish.

I let her in and when I turn she's looking round. It's night-time and a fizzing pink sunset catches her, a party in the sky. It always looks good this high up, even rain looks good from this height. I'm bare-foot and the bowl of pasta is still in my hand. She fixes on the sofa.

– Would you like to sit down?

She winces as she speaks. I put the pasta down.

– It's about your daughter.

– Has she been in an accident?

– I'm sorry. She ... she has died. We were called to an address and found her ... next of kin ... identify the body .. her mother ... and she suggested you ... driving licence ... a formality ... only when you're ready, if you're ready. Is there anyone you would like me to call for you?

– Yasmina knows?

She flounders.

– My ex-wife? The child’s mother? Does she know?

– Yes. And she said you would do this. You’d be the one at this time ...

– OK.

I find socks, shoes, turn off the radio and shut down the cooker fan. My mind trying to side-line the screams. Pasta sauce congealing on the cooker, I should wipe it. I pull on my coat, hook the car keys. Then the lift down, its familiar shake, the uselessness of the Close Door button when every lift door closes automatically. The eternal drop. The dank air and our breathing. The lift’s dull steel mirrors bouncing images of a man chewing a toothpick. She stops me as I head to the car park depths. *We should take her car. It is a plain car and standard procedure. In the circumstances. For the next of kin.*

*Next of kin.* The world’s ugliest phrase. I take the back seat off-side, but she must be long - legged, her seat leaves little knee room and I shuffle over to the near side. Blown air in the cockpit warms the glass taking off the lace doily of damp and the blower’s reverb lower than the murmurs that don’t stop until I click the seatbelt into its housing and finally there is nothing from her only the engine and its electronics as she goes through the gears, lets the tower block gates open, lets the sweep of lights guide her out.

I have questions but I’m not ready for the answers because my preferred answer to all my questions is *mistaken identity, you can go back to your life*, and so when the cop tries to talk some more I wave a hand into her rearview mirror to stop her, not now.

I let it all flick by. Orange burn, faze and halo, trees feathering, the molten black of road, the engine’s hum hum through light traffic, the chassis’ roll and yaw, the twin wishbones flexing, then the car gulling an easy straight-line speed. A sudden flare of blue as an ambulance races in the opposite direction to us. The road paint spinning silk lines, the cocoon elongating. I settle into dread, close my eyes.

Time slips, doubles back on itself as the hauling dread of the monster slashes through the freeze I’ve locked onto. Yet. It could be mistaken identity. Who knows what tricks they get up to at that age? False IDs. Role play. Switching IDs faster than you could swipe left or click Like. Yet a marauding fear is loose in my bloodstream, battering around, charging, crashing through. Flying through woods and up there in the unreachable treetops the unbidden is arranging its little twigs into a nest. She’d have picked up by now, for her mum if not me. She’d have called. Registered her pulse somewhere in the system – crashed into

somebody's screen with a *hi guys, fooled you!* Maybe kidnaping in which case the call would be, *Dad they won't let me go unless you give them money.* Bucket flight. *It was dead cheap, we're in Srebrenica – yay!* Elopement. *I fell in love, dad, you won't understand but he means everything to me and we've tied the knot and we couldn't tell you before because I didn't want to argue with you or Mum.* Silence is not Tish's style. Something doesn't stack.

A scud of rain blasts the chassis. Entering the hospital zone, the blaze of lights approaches white-out. Swerving white cubes of ambulances piling up at A&E. I close my eyes to it all. Time can slow. It can be like the petals of a flower unfolding with the grace of origami it can be a gravity-free floating. Some things are not real. They exist by some flaw in space-time, some unwanted enervation, they are the ghost fire of a buried shock, a phantom fear or the afterglow of a half-remembered gut scream, a slide of cut ropes. Some things are not real. Those things deserve only derision. Phantoms of the mind.

The door opens for me. The same police officer there, beckoning. I step out into the bath of white light, match my footsteps to hers, will Time to make this as slow as possible. And as I walk I have words with God, the words mainly *fuck right off, this shit idea of Yours is hereby cancelled.*

A sputter of expiring fluorescent chargers above.

I keep pace through the corridors lurid with bleeping wheeled beds, catatonic waifs in grandad dressing gowns, the half torso of a man buried in a floor. Unlit signs. A slew of arrows. Trails of multi-coloured lines blocking a tennis court for the insane. Through two receptions double doors marked Private a security guard dozing as a horse in a field then a high, enclosed bridge in Hospital Land Level 3, lit by a speedball run of fluorescents, the bridge windows blinded by the slap of night. The pace slowing. An old African man sliding a floor buffer slowly side to side, the gleam before him, brighter gleam behind. A battered service lift with huge buttons. The lights recessed spots. Bauble ear rings on the porter with a lab results box. Stepping out onto rubber floor tiles swimming in a sudden gloom that scurries along with us. A temperature switch. I'm by a seven-hinge double door that swings back automatically and the woman in blues passes me to her colleague in whites.

The sponge of the rubberised floor again thub thub along to plastic baffle doors a cold air flow. Lungs uncertain, nostrils baulking at the cleaning fluid. An abandoned oxygen tank. Ghosts in green masks. Inhaling. The corridor tapering to a square of light.

My escort now a youth with the easy insouciance of the nocturnal-loving. A tousle of hair, radiant quick smile, good teeth. He tells me his name as if that is important, and am I ready. More footsteps. The blown filing cabinets in serried ranks. Middle draw. The boy starts out the tray. Rasp of metal on metal. A startle of mechanism in the insides as some internal lock bolts into place. The haul. Stand to one side, please. In position. Hauling of breath. The lights dazzling. Bleaching. Blinding. *Don't look up, look down, look down now.* Toes first. Hers. The long slither of white cloth pure unstained. He takes a corner and moves it away as precisely as a baker plaiting dough. Not this not now. Down.

Her face serene, the waxed mask of it, the frosted lips. Away. *No. Look.* Her eyes closed, the eyebrows painted not the angry quiver, not the oblong of indifference. Only the broad brushstroke of mildly happy.

*It's not the eyes that are the windows of the soul, Dad, it's the eyebrows. At least mine.*

Her face calls to be touched. I place a finger on her brow. She's cold. So cold. She never liked the cold. At a mountain shelter:

– Hug me Dad, I'm cold.

– You warm now?

She laughs into my chest.

– Keep holding me. Hold me forever.

The skin parchment, eyes muted, buttoned lips pursed inscrutable. *Talk to me, Tish, talk to me.* Fooling in the car doing the slo mo fade hands, the mid gesture freeze game. Jinks. *It's over now, Tish, game over, wake up. So you can sit right up on that steel ironing board.*

*Planking! Fooled you!* Monarch butterflies flutter from your mouth and purple fish swim round your shoulders. *C'mon, stop fooling.* At fourteen, you sneaked up on me as I was waiting for you outside the school gates, slid behind me, pressed your fingers over my eyes and said *guess who* and of course the whole thing a joke because who else and besides the smell of you. And at the reveal all your friends were around us laughing and we walk away to the car into those teen bizarre teen code goodbye waves ... and me just happy that you have friends who clearly see you, love you.

– Will you...

That new Year's Eve dance, you're eighteen and news of my father's death pinged into my phone and you hold me in your arms, make me dance to the jaunty jig wanting me to lose myself, pulling me from memory, from pain, your hand at the small of my back the other at

my shoulder, and it's the most beautiful thing a daughter could do, to hold her father like this in this moment:

– It's OK, Dad, it's OK.

Tears on my face, a flow on yours. How does this work now, this dancing thing? Jump back to the night of equations that resolutely failed to simplify for you and you slumped over the book and I carry you to bed, tack a piece of paper with the quadratic solutions and a kiss in your homework book defying the school edict not to do your child's homework for them because otherwise how will they learn. Sometimes she needs to be carried. Now she needs to be carried.

– You can't pick her up. If you try I have to call Security.

– But she...

– Is this your daughter?

The scar by the left ear from the rock fall in the Lakes. when climbing. Watching her scale up, feeding her the lines and her stretches, *sink into the feet, Tish, let your legs do the work not your hands. Find the holds, now push off and swing.* She misses the foothold and I take the rope strain as she dangles. Spins. Starts fooling again. Stars shapes, octopus. *C'mon, Tish, concentrate. Get back to it.* The faith the trust the sacrifice. I have her weight, easy because of the belay, yet never did an anchor point feel so tenuous than as she dangled. I rope her in. Ground her.

– Is this...?

She holds no smell. Not the toddling bonfire apple toffee. Not the blow smack sweet gawky teen gum. Not the sick, cigarettes and alcohol late night home swearing laughter. Not the flower cinnamon strawberry musk bloom belle of the ball. Not the two-mile jog sweat that sits underneath all of it and says this is me. There is no smell to my daughter. Therefore, this is not her body. QED.

– Is this?

You're not suited to this job, are you?

His lip bite deepens.

– I never find an easy way. Sign here.

You're kidding me? You want me to do paperwork?

– Here. Here. Here. It's confirmation of identity.

A beat.



– You can do it later I guess.

Breathe.

– Also, if you have some ID on you? She donated her organs. She carried a card.

Wan grey light. Brushed steel walls imperfectly mirroring an infinite series of panels. I find the car park. I have the key fob and click looking for the yellow pulse of indicators, listening for the clunk of locks. Try the car park levels 1. 2. 3. 4. The cop finds me wandering there. Drives me back. I slump onto a mattress and into a fitful sleep.

### **Nigeria: The compound koi.**

– Dad, you're dead.

– Don't bother me with these trivialities, I'm trying to tell you something.

We go through Dad's sliding patio doors into the rear of his compound.

– C'mon, Dad, how are you here?

– It's the Wagon Wheel effect. I'm not here, I'm back there, but slippages occur.

Asynchronous frame processing.

– Engineering talk.

We're by the pit now.

– I'm trying to tell you...

– ...that I can move here and live in your compound. This giant hole can be my home, the foundations can be poured in an afternoon then breeze block, windows, zinc and it's done. You've told me before. You'll build it there, where your koi carp pond – with no koi carp – sits.

– That is all correct but not what I'm trying to tell you.

We walk closer, peer. The pit is maybe three metres long, tops, by about four metres wide, and of unknown depth. It is full of stagnant run-off and rain water. We stare into it.

– Go ahead then.

– It's about my grand-daughter, your daughter, Tishana. The one who is visiting me soon. She is talking to me now.

– Whatever. Say what you've got to say.

– Are you paying attention? Keep your feet still.

– You don't have anything to say, do you?

– Who got out of bed the wrong side? Look. Look at the fish.

– There are none.

– Look again. Look hard.

It's a ludicrous idea. Koi carp swimming in this patch of urban concrete, rusting zinc, red dust, trampled red soil, off from the parked up battered tuk tuk, the abandoned 80's Columbo car and the broken pump mechanism for the non-functioning on-site bore-hole, by a straggly row of truculent English rose bushes. Koi carp. The concrete bowl full of water too murky even to see your hand if you thrust it in. A mud sludge. Years of leaf fall, debris blown off the compound, all made pretty by a bloom of lichen. Steep sides. A rusted

reinforcing mesh from abandoned scavenged roadworks forming a makeshift barrier against kids or drunks falling in. Koi carp are delicate, ornamental fish. Clean, aerated water fish. No koi carp could tolerate such murky water. Besides, the local dogs and starving cats would have them. Even the birds would fancy their chances against such captives.

And yet. Ludicrous though it might be. There. There they are now. And the water is clear as arctic melt. Elegant, flecked gold, fatted submarines. Silver moustachioed fish royalty, gleaming as if enamelled, in a constantly flickering, febrile school. Dad's pointing:

– Oxygen diffusion and nitrates levels are the two main regulators. See how they flow?

– Yes.

– Fish and blood have flow. They have that in common. They move according to the conditions, the push and pull of the flow, the blockages, the obstructions. Look into the surface of the water, all these movements leave their trace in the patterns of the water's surface. Blood, like any other fluid, obeys the laws of fluid dynamics. I place a filter valve here, so the fresh water arrives clean, if I want the valve to work I must fit it the right way round. It only works one way. Plumbers must know which way to turn their spanners.

Tighten a nut to seal a pipe to stop a flow. Valve mechanisms. Grip mechanisms.

Tightenings. Flows.

Dad's face is close to mine now. His arm resting on my shoulder pulling my face closer, urgently. His skin is peeling, as if scalded, his eyes bloodshot, the corneas clouded, little blood vessels pinking up from the yellowed sclera, leaking black blood that seeps to hairless bottom eyelids where it pools. The smell of putrefaction. His funeral.

A breath and he's back. Gleaming, face a healthy sheen, clear eyes confident, mouth confident:

– Watch the fish. The flow, if you want to know how Tish went.

He walks away, his gold and red dashiki shimmering in the sunlight, its threads flowing with life. The patio doors slide back and with a clunk of door lock he is gone through and back the other place. I look into the afterglow where he's disappeared. Reflected koi carp glitter in the patio door glass. I turn to watch them. There's only a mud pit.

## **Pakistan. The Valley.**

– Here, here. Pull over here.

Daalat was already out of the car. Basir, his cousin, was on the verge. The two of them embraced and we smoked a cigarette then I shuffled into the back and Basir drove. We were taking the road to the left of where we'd pulled over, where a track peeled off to his village. Like Daalat, Basir was a short-legged, big shouldered guy, with a broad wedge of neck that bulged out of the back of his black kurta. The two of them spoke with their hands as much as their throats in the car, Basir filling Daalat in on the latest village news, I guessed. I kept one eye open. All I could see of the outside was the wedge of jittery green that the headlights squeezed out of the enveloping dark. There was nothing either side: no moon, no stars, no house lights off in the distance, no trail of street lights, no distant cities. Tarmac gave way to stone and the road began to pothole and twist and the underside rattled as the tyres spewed up dirt and stones. I held fast to the car's shirt handle wondering why he didn't slow down. Somewhere in the back of my head there was the threat of headache, in my stomach a sickness that came close to overspill whenever I rested my eyes on the car interior, so I kept looking out into the jittery green. I drifted off.

The tree line careering. Nudge. Flare of brown. Daalat's head rocked back, laughing at his cousin. Nudge again. Daalat. I had to wake up, we would arrive soon. Forest. Out of nowhere a pig came running across, trailing four piglets. Basir swerved.

– We could spit roast one.

I'd called out over the engine whine.

– Yeah, though nobody would talk to me in the village ever again.

– Why not?

– Pig. Haram, remember?

Basir was chuckling. Daalat's shoulders rose too. Oops.

We'd slowed to under fifteen now, the road narrowing so it was hardly one car wide. A red warning light began flashing on the dash and the unburnt petrol smell was back. I pointed out the light. Last time, we ended up stranded.

Basir shifted gears.

– That service light always comes on with these cars. Mechanics call it the money light.

The cousins chuckled again.

– He's a mechanic.

Basir cleared phlegm from his throat, brought his serious face to the rearview mirror:

– We're nearly there.

The car's full beams swept round into a sandy clearing, a short stem off the track. Basir cut the engine and we eased out. There was one other car there, on the opposite side of the clearing, a local plate Audi with a silted windscreen. As we arrived, a motorbike with pillion passenger sped past and disappeared up a track.

We were in a valley. Black hills hemming us, blotched white here and there by the bulbs of I counted six houses. Water trickled close by. A dog growling to sleep. The air sweating foliage. Daalat lit a cigarette and passed it to me, sparked one for his cousin, himself. We leaned on the car. Daalat murmured.

– The first time a black man has been in this village in five hundred years.

I nodded.

Something about the dark and the car engine ticking down, made me mute. I had left my phone back in the UK, told nobody I was coming, I had no appointments, no hotel booking. I was an invisible man. Anybody and nobody.

Daalat's face was lit beetle red by his cigarette. The same red tinted the rim of his eyes, his scrawl of beard, the dishevelled hair. His cousin scanned the hills, unblinking in a shroud of cigarette smoke. I imagined someone looking down at us from one of the houses.

Smokes finished, we started up a footpath, Basir leading, then me.

I remembered falling into a low bed with a thin mattress and an orange travel blanket that had a horse head print on it. The horse reared up in a fire of cogs and fly wheels. Later, in deep night, I tracked a fitful snoring to some corner of the room.

**Manchester. Makkel.**

– Go back to bed.

– I need to know.

– None of your business.

– While you're living in my house, it is my business.

– It's not your house, it's Mum's. You don't even live here anymore.

Tish stands there, her hair held back by a hoodie. The top is a rough-cut design: straggles of cotton where the rest of the material would have been. This gap allows her emerald belly button jewel to display at her lean waist. Her Nike trainers are twisted together, school dinner queue style. Half woman, half girl.

– Tish.

– What?

– Who?

– Milk please.

I open the fridge door and pass it to her. Then the Paracetamol blister pack.

– You've not been eating properly, Dad.

– Your powers of observation are undimmed even at this hour. Who?

– A boy.

– Name.

– What does it matter?

– Because if you disappeared off the face of the earth, we'd need a name.

– ... Makkel.

– Makkel?

– Yes.

– What kind of name is that?

– African.

I watch her consider the sound of her lie, like it, decide to embellish it.

– He's from Ceylon.

– That country is not in Africa and doesn't exist anymore. Number plate KL7 3L. Last letter either M or N. The person whose hands came off the handlebars were yours.

– You've been stood at the window watching?

– And I already checked the plates for road tax.

– That’s creepy.

– You didn’t answer your phone.

– It’s Makkel’s bike and he was riding it. I just pretended to, after, when he’d stopped it.

She plays with her phone. I watch the familiar swipe pattern of her finger as she unlocks it.

– You don’t have a licence. Does Michael?

– Yes. He’s teaching me. I can ride it now.

– Not at 3am. Not without passing a test. Not without a helmet.

– You don’t need to pass, you just get L plates. Dad, you’re so boring. You bore me to death.

– I’d rather you died of boredom than on those roads. There’s ice out there.

This to her back. She’s kissed me on the cheek and walked off. I’m furious. And flummoxed.

I drink some milk, gulp the whole carton down as I listen to her knocking around upstairs. A call to my phone. Unknown number. I pick up.

– Mr Hanley, I’m Michael. I drove your daughter home. All the way. She was safe.

– Listen, you fuckwit, how can she be safe on the back of a bike if she’s drunk and no helmet even? Tell me that.

– Yeah, OK. Sorry. I drove slow. I swear she was safe.

– And if she’s drunk chances are, you are too.

– Nah.

– Nah? Is that all you can say?

I remember the way they kissed, coming off the bike, sucked each other’s faces off.

– And I don’t want my daughter pregnant.

His voice is baritone, deeper than mine, with a sadness that youth by rights should not yet have.

– ... You’re selling her short. She’s something special.

– Save that for her.

He exhales.

An echo of feet in a hallway, his end of the phone. Scattering of hollow heels. Girlish laughter.

He laughs. Embarrassment disguised as a clearing of the throat.

– OK. Good night, Mr Hanley.

The last sentence soft. I imagine he’s in a corridor, about to open his flat’s front door but not wanting to disturb someone in there.





**Pakistan. Brown coat button.**

I woke to clatter. Pans. A woman's voice, singing. Some kind of pop song. Kylie? I looked around. Plaster walls. The ceiling held wires ending in an unlit bulb. Another song. In Punjabi. Walnuts. The burn of hot oil came through. I dressed in the clothes I must have taken off at night. Daalat came with diced fried vegetables and chapatti. We ate.

– My village cred's sky high because of you.

– What've you told them?

– Nothing. Basir.

– Great.

After breakfast, I needed to get down to the car for my bags. So Daalat led, talking into his phone as we took paths hemmed in by boundary walls. We passed a house window that doubled as a grocers, a donkey in an outhouse with bundles of sticks on its back. A woman in plastic sandals who stood aside and gazed at me. Then the village mosque, set back, half way down the hill. Most of the village buildings were one storey. Daalat was talking to me and I only vaguely listened.

– ...follow me.

The early sun firing up. *The holdall*. We entered a copse. A kitten the colour of sand crept towards a crow that was bathing in sand. A dog squeezed through a thorn bush to join them, then veered off to snag the pelt of a fox with its teeth, dragging it three yards, before letting it go. The crow flew up. The fox's skin was teeming with flies. Daalat tugged me away. The dog started scratching itself.

It was a six-minute descent to the car. There, six intact car windows bounced morning sun.

– Nobody will rob you.

Daalat was massaging my shoulder as he said this. There were two further cars in the car park now, one with German plates. I gave Daalat the large bag and kept the holdall. Daalat looked at me, amused.

In daylight the view was green hills topped by blue. We had only started on the path back up when two figures came scrambling down. They knocked fists with Daalat, shook my hand. Cousins, Daalat explained, they'll carry the bags. The three of them led the way back in conversation that continued through the house. After dropping the bags, they surged back into the courtyard, leaving me in the room I'd been allocated.

I unzipped the large bag. It had clothes in rolls of threes. I thought about transferring them into the cupboard that was in the room, but had no idea how long we would stay here.

Meanwhile, Daalat was calling me. I restuffed the bag, then placed the holdall deep under the bed, sliding the large bag in front of it.

In the courtyard, the sun was high, and I took a chair close to a wall. Daalat said a few phone calls and maybe tomorrow was the best time for onwards, today most likely just chill, I could build my tan, an outside tap was leaking, we were waiting for a plumber. I notched my chair back. I was not in control of my timetable.

Visitors passed through, offering me their hands to touch or slapping my back, before pulling to Daalat. Nobody spoke English except *Hi*. Lunch came and went and then it was just me and Daalat and an old man in a bright orange turban and full grey beard who lay on a charpoy in the courtyard. He spoke rarely to Daalat but seemed comfortable. I nodded to him and from his horizontal position he gave me an opened handed, make-yourself-at-home wave before closing his eyes. Me and Daalat chatted. After a while, the man's dentures stopped whistling.

– Who owns this place then?

– Me. It was my dad's, but when he died... There were so many people looking after him by that time.

He sipped his tea, puzzled in his own thoughts. A beetle zigged along a crack in the concrete. Daalat had another go.

– His carer was here and she had two kids and she was looking after Dad twenty-four hours so her kids moved in. Then her husband because otherwise he wasn't seeing her. Then cousins because when the husband was gone she would be alone except for my dad.

He peered at the white courtyard walls like they held clues for this history.

– Of course, the cousins had kids... And so on and so forth.

He flicked at a midge on the back of his shoulder, then waved his hand. I kept silent.

– When my dad died nobody ever moved out.

Another flick. He thinned his lips.

– Nobody owns anything completely here in that English way but technically it's mine.

– And the guy with the whistling teeth?

– He's like, solves disputes, protects honour. From the village.

The old man's face was a mountain contour map of wrinkles. He was lying with his arms tucked into his sides. A fly rested at one corner of his eye and palped an eyelid.

– Is he breathing?

Daalat laughed.

– I think so. He just rests like that.

– Save people the trouble of arranging my body if I die.

The old man had spoken. In a strange 1950's English-Scottish accent. His eyes opened, and he brushed at the fly. Then, clearing his lungs, he tried raising himself to a sitting position.

Daalat got up and held an arm out so he could anchor himself with it on his final tilt.

– This is Saul, my friend from Manchester, England. Mr Virinder Kirpal Kaur, the uncle of my great aunt on my mother's side so, my senior cousin. He is ninety-three years old. The oldest guy in the village.

Mr Kaur bowed from the neck up, then coughed.

I shook his hand and nudged the glass of water on the table closer to him.

– Is there anybody in this village who's not your cousin?

– About half. Our clan are the interlopers. We came from over those hills about a thousand years ago.

Daalat's words had made Mr Kaur smile and he took another swig from the glass.

– And we are still not totally accepted. Our teeth whistle too much.

So he had heard me. He swatted my embarrassment.

– Och, my wife complains as well. Like a teapot, she says.

A man in sandals, hefting a huge spanner, arrived. Daalat went off with him, leaving me with Mr Kaur. He told me his story in wheezes, his voice part Scots soldier, part BBC newsreader, part Punjabi shepherd.

– I was in the army. The British army. While they were building the train tracks across that hill there.

He pointed to a brow.

– The trains no longer come but some track remains. They needed someone to translate.

Hence I perfected my English as the personal translator to a British Officer. He told me I spoke better English than the Queen. Tea?

A pot and two small glass cups had arrived, courtesy of the house staff. I poured, and he talked some more about when the British left, what they left, who they left.

Daalat grabbed me, whispering.

– They're in touch.

Mr Kaur eyed us. Daalat kept on.

– We need to drive to the market.

Mr Kaur grumbled. There was an exchange between them which ended with Daalat saying to him, in English, *Of course*. Daalat then hoiked him up.

It was a slow procession down this time, not only because of the old man's knees but because he spoke at length with every passer-by. Finally, we made the car park and levered him into the passenger seat.

Daalat drove. Mr Kaur was going to take one last look at his office, he had worked there for forty years doing Import-Export after the British left. *Then the heavens open and the woman who becomes my wife walks into that office one day. She is gone now upstairs, and I will be gone soon. She is reaching for me.*

Daalat manoeuvred us round a pothole.

*Once I am sitting in the office it will all come back to me, she will come back to me. She was a woman beyond compare...*

Music came out of the car speakers that sounded like a marriage song. The sun hammered the tin of the car roof and the stereo speakers rocked its insides. I sweltered. Mr Kaur snoozed.

We bounced off the carriageway into the car island made by a three storey H shaped block of offices. The journey had knocked the glue from Mr Kaur's joints and it took two of us to ease him out of his seat and lean him on the car.

Horse flies bothered me. The heat was a few notches down in the courtyard, but the drains stank. Birds dotted the sky. Mr Kaur pointed. His office was on the second floor.

People from the offices had gathered round us and they touched Mr Kaur's kameez with affection. Daalat spoke. There was some nodding. He turned to me.

– We're going to carry him up in teams. In a relay.

A wooden chair was produced. Mr Kaur sat on it and me and Daalat lifted, tilting it slightly back. We carried him up the first four flights of stairs, two others chaired him for another four, then we swapped again. We made it to a corridor, close to the office. A step away, Mr Kaur got out of the chair. He wanted to walk across the threshold, unaided.

*Chabli*. The door opened without problem. The room furniture was a desk, a swivel chair, a light bulb. Concrete dust swirled. Two men advanced and wiped the chair with their hands, then one tested it by bouncing up and down in it. Mr Kaur sat. *Pani*. Someone brought him a plastic bottle of water. He stared at the walls a moment, his wrinkles folding in on themselves. He sipped. Then he wept quietly until his eyelids silted up.

Daalat motioned and we made to slip away – the others were going to stay with him. But he woke as we reached the door and Daalat stepped back into the room. The old man talked a long time in Punjabi without interruption. In the middle of this, he beckoned me, took my hand and spoke fervently. I could only nod. His voice slowed. Daalat was smiling but sad. The plastic bottle slipped from his hand. His eyes closed. We made it all the way out this time.

– What was that?

We were by the car now.

– He says you're troubled, he can tell, you're like a new towel, they look very shiny but when you try them they don't absorb the water, so not good.

– What does that mean?

– It doesn't make sense in Punjabi either.

– It took him all that time to say that?

– The rest was you know, a jumble. His wife knew the prices of bolts of cloth, short cuts to the village, the timetable of love. Then something like beauty plus numbers equals incalculable. Random stuff. What he means is he loved his wife. He says it in the old-world language, like poetry. Everything he says winds back to her. He's in their office again, his heart is full of her.

– His wife's dead?

– A dozen years now. Most times he knows. But when she comes back to him he's happy so it's good. We'll be back before he wakes, otherwise they'll pop some headphones on him and pipe the old-time music in. He'll sit there happy as Larry.

### **Manchester. Visiting Mum.**

I'm in the frosty ante chamber, spinning rain out of the umbrella, watching it soak down the broolly's black gauze, slick along the silver tip to pool and slip into the cracks in the Edwardian tiled floor. A low watt eco bulb flickers and I look up at the ceiling plasterwork, its squares and triangles, dotted with stucco foliage, the pattern razored through with a smoke alarm and sprinkler pipe, though the sprinkler pipe head is a brass rosette, echoing the stucco.

There is one other visitor in this ante-room and we've met before. A butter-faced man, he's here in steam-pressed linen shirt, drainpipe trousers, five button waistcoat; a baronial blue, fleur de lys cravat splashes round his neck, and his blue velvet jacket fits snugly; his thinning silver hair is slicked. He nods to me, keeps pacing, fingers steeped. Beyond us, through the leaded glass of the deadlocked security doors, is the visiting room, with its pink, vinyl upholstered wing back chairs, glossy brown lino floor, winged furniture, stewed air, Music Hall blow-up, framed photos, and the old upright chestnut piano in the corner.

From inside, a cow bell dings and a woman in a thin plastic apron and pink Marigolds unlocks the doors then is swiftly gone. I enter; the heads in the chairs bob a little.

*Please be here this time. Just this once. For me.*

The piss smell and the stewed tea, both sitting below the floral disinfectant, a hand's grasp away from the butterflies of lost memories.

Mum's wearing ribbons in her hair. She hates ribbons, and her dress is someone else's. Apart from that she looks OK. I kiss her mottled cheek and wonder whether I should take out the ribbons, decide maybe it would distress her to know they'd placed them there, better to ignore them. Her eyes gleaming a greeting, her marbled hands in little shakes indicating I should sit down, facing her.

– You can flutter your eyelids as much as you like, young man, I'm not going unless you buy me a new dress.

The one staff member I recognise, Piotr, with the silver nurse's watch at his breast pocket and the burgundy Doc Marten shoes, bustles in with the tea trolley, his voice high for her:

– Playing hard to get is he, Mrs Hanley? Here's your milky brew.

Then lower to me, but as a formality, unkeen to give up more tea:

– Do you want tea as well?

I decline.

The bustle and clatter of crockery and the hiss-splash from the urn delight her.

– There is a tea room down the road that serves delightful Victoria sponge. We can go tomorrow afternoon.

Mum leans in and lifts eyebrows at me, whispers.

– Yet I shall not go without a new dress. Look at this one. Why in heavens am I...?

I take her outstretched hand, nod in conspiracy.

– It's me, Mum. It's your son, Saul.

Across the way, the three-pieced gentleman is stroking his wife's vacant face.

Mum leans back.

– So much traffic nowadays. We would need to get back early, I have letters to write.

Suddenly, horror installs on her face and she reels back.

– Who are you?

– Saul. Your son. Your son, Saul.

– Let me feel your face.

She pokes her fingers out and I lean in. She finds a cheek, shifts up and along the cheekbone, down onto the jaw, sweeps slowly along my neck, like an unplugged electric razor. She leans back.

– You need to shave. Where are we, Saul? I'm scared.

– Mum, I lost... I lost my daughter, Tishana. Do you remember Tishana? She's died. She... Mum's eyes have strayed up to butterflies. Or is it birds? Little sparrows flitting through the air. She's hearing them, her lips curling upwards. Then she's back.

– It happens, don't cry, Saul. She'll come back. Find a plaster from the box.

I'm happy she can't see my tears, yet wonder how she knew. She's whispering now.

– Where are we, Saul? And I want my...

– ...china windmill? I'm looking after it for you.

– But I want it back. It's mine.

Annoyance ruffles her face, reminding me of waves in the waters of the Derbyshire hills in winter. Someone shuffles across the floor. A piano key is hit repeatedly, the note, flat, disturbing the sparrows.

– I'll put it back. Don't fret, Mum.

– I'm not fretting. I am merely ... merely ... Is that... is that Larry?

She's right. His full name is Laurence Horatio Hargreaves and his retired concert pianist fingers are now playing a glissando. His wife is sitting in a wing back chair, right up at the

piano, as if she wants to climb inside it. Her slippered feet are tapping. Sunlight ripples through the leaded windows shifting the condensation there and the music pours into the room, bouncing off the floor and filling it to its stucco brim. Laurence goes rubato and the sun reacts, now pouring into the visitor room like an antique bath filling with warm water. Bones ease, hands flop, necks slip to perpendicular; even Piotr stops with his trolley pushing and wiping. And when I turn back, Mum's gone with them, off into some Music Hall. I kiss her forehead, and leave quietly. Only when I'm in the car again, hearing its wheels churn the gravel, do I sigh. Someone else's dress.

**Nigeria: sewing machine.** Me and dad are on a quiet street in the middle of Mushin, Lagos.

A sewing machinist goes by, his machine cradled on his shoulder. He sees us, hails Dad, sets the machine down and begins to work it. Dad, unable to resist, commentates:

– Look at the way this machine works. The machinist feeding the material through the aperture. Note the series of notches, each one securing itself to the fabric by means of ligature. It relies on timing and the correct tensioning. If the hook moves too slowly and the catch isn't made, the stitch is lost. The movement of parts requires timing and correct directions for the hooks and the notch to catch, to pull, to tighten. The simple sewing machine. With your daughter, Tishana, watch the ligature and follow the directions.

The machinist has finished. He has made a dress of splendid yellow and red thread.

– Here. Give your mum this dress. Say I'm sorry to her. Now, are you hungry?



## **Pakistan. Market.**

We had pulled up at the market. Signalling I should follow him, Daalat cut through stalls. I was dazed and suddenly weary. I blocked out all but the low notes and heard the clatter of grinders, the heft of sack cloth, the crunch of corn husks, the slap of sandals on soil, clobber of cloth pushing past. I sought greys, tracked only orange: on a fly's wing, a bangle, the gas tanks beneath the hot pans. Already my nose was shutting down and my sight blurring. Daalat urged me on. Shoulder dipping, sliding, zagging. He turned for me. *Take this.* Handing me a cloth for my eyes. *Tsk. I can't take you anywhere. Don't give money to beggars. Just wait here. Hold.* A tray of small bhajis floating on a plastic tray in mint yoghurt. *Stand there. Don't wander.*

Steam plumes. Smoke clouds.

Cries. Shouts.

An escaped cockerel.

Shadows fighting.

I narrowed myself into labels. *Toshiba. Hong Kong. Royal King. Koi. Gamma. Genuine American. Saville Tailors. Happiness Flavour. Label Of Graded Good Est 1993.*

In the dirt, a button.

Brown with four eyelets, of the size for a coat. Tish's coat from when she first ran away, three weeks before her sixteenth birthday. Disappeared in that coat below social media radar, below the network of ex-school friends, below even the musicians she'd hung with, run off because she'd wanted to be free, couldn't stand the arguing, and she was old enough anyway and what do you care and she should be able to live how she wanted to, without parents or other old people making rules. The police had just taken the brown coat photo for the Missing poster when she showed up again, strolled nonchalantly back into the house, sixteen now and what did she care, slammed her room door, dropped music that shook the walls, drowned out Yasmina sitting in the kitchen, crying. She'd come back in a different coat, her eyes changed. Brown pools. Sadder, some new edge of misery having joined the restlessness.

– *Saul.*

I turned. Daalat. At the shoulder of this kurta I was wearing.

– Let's go.

He had six bundles, including one of what looked to be sugar cane. He gave me two and we dog-legged through the crowd to where the car was parked, piled the bundles into the boot and got going, weaving through traffic as it weaved through us.

– How was it?

– Not plain sailing. It means more phone calls, but nothing happens like that.

He clicked his fingers. His cheek flicked away a grimace.

– In this country, you know, it's all done *apna* style. Possibly it will be tomorrow, but maybe the day after. It's being arranged. Then we load up with petrol and drive drive drive.

He concentrated on the road, slowing for the trucks coming head on, in full horn, their loads rocking.

– Things could end any time.

– I know.

– We could.

We closed on Mr Kaur's office.

Mr Kaur was reluctant to leave and said goodbyes so long that it was late afternoon before we made it back and we spilled into the house courtyard with the market bundles. I offered a couple of times to help but Daalat declined: I was as useless for the domestics of the house as the old man. We were both exiled to the courtyard.

– So, it's your daughter who troubles you?

Mr Kaur's hand was moist, the bracelet of his wristwatch cold. He was tapping my leg as I lay there in the chair. I shrugged.

– There's not much to say. She died last month. She was twenty-six.

– How did she die?

– They say she took her life.

– Suicide. And you are greedy for more time?

*What?* I tried to see through his wrinkles. He elaborated.

– If before she was born, God came to you and said, *here is a daughter, you can have this girl for twenty-six years, but twenty-six years only*, would you have accepted?

– Of course.

He held the palms of his hand to the sky.

– Tell me about her. What made her smile?

*The soil. The dark sky. Veering.*

I ignored him. Mr Kaur could go fuck himself.

The charpoy rope lines sighed. Presently I heard the slower breath of his sleep. What could I have told him anyway? Some of the unused lines I'd readied for her funeral perhaps?

*Played euphonium at 11 in a brass band.*

The tree in the courtyard anchored two washing lines that ran across to the courtyard wall. Red berries dangled in clumps from the tree. Daalat came out, went back in, Mr Kaur asleep throughout. I imagined him drifting into the days of raj and colonial trains and officer clubs.

*Could hopscotch blindfold.*

Tangerine sun splashed the courtyard. There were callers, some bustling, others hesitant, most wanting to wake the old man but Daalat wouldn't allow it. Burning vegetables wafted through. More callers. An ancient couple both with canes, and their even older friend, for Mr Kaur. The same response. The sun, dunked in red now, fire playing in the glasses of the man with the cane. They stayed half an hour on chairs by Mr Kaur's side during which he didn't wake, then left in the same stately pace.

We ate. I counted twelve in the courtyard for the meal including Mr Kaur, roused finally by the smells of cooking. There was a buzz of electricity on the cable overhead, a spark. Smoke. *Overheating, Daalat said, the cable gauge was too narrow.* He was unconcerned, cleaning his plate with roti. Voices murmured. Dishes were taken away. Across the valley, the road, the walls, the parked motorbike were all studies in grey.

Mr Kaur's head dropped, pushing his grey beard into his chest. He struggled up. *Til the mora.* He was going before it got pitch black, he told me. He opened the steel gate and closed it behind him. Afterwards, I felt bad about having ignored him earlier.

Another cousin came in, crossing the courtyard with a huge, empty plastic water bottle, repassing a short while later with the same bottle, full. I held the gate for him. There was a pen for goats just beyond the compound wall. He left the bottle at the pen, disappeared then re-emerged in a racket of hooves and billowing dust. A herd of goats chased the green leaves in his arms. He threw the bundle into the pen and the goats scrambled inside. He locked them in, poured water into a trough, strode off down the lane. He was back shortly with a kid and a leafy twig. The kid followed the twig into the courtyard. He sauntered five steps, threw the twig forwards, then dashed back, locking the kid in. The kid was going on the roof for the night, Daalat explained, to keep it from foxes. I spied the roof.

## **Pakistan. Plunge.**

I stood at the window as daylight faded, greying trees and spidering the grey skyline. The smell of roasting corn. Dust of sandy soil. In the other room Daalat's cell phone no-barred and he spoke hurriedly in three languages *Yes Hello* and *Bye bye bye*. Black ants examined peanut shells, nail clippings, an ancient spent bullet case. The kid's hooves tapped more hesitantly on the roof above me. The tip of a neighbour's twitching radio mast caught a last gasp of red from the sun. Female voices off sang something soporific. The first mosquito made its way through the mesh into the room.

I came away from the window and eased my frame onto the plastic rope bed, shifting from shoulder to shoulder, craving a cigarette, sleep, but nothing came. The kid criss-crossed the roof. My two days' beard had snared insects in its bristles and I felt them edging around. I pushed myself up again, swabbed under the bed and found the holdall, inside it the bag with her things. I looked through this smaller bag's jumble till I found the photograph. Palm sized. The reverse white. *Tishana Hanley*. A date. The Coroner's Office stamp over that. To turn it this time. I hadn't been able so far. A thousand miles now of anaesthetic. In a breath, I flipped it.

Black and white. Swaddled in a grey sweatshirt, two grey track suit bottoms. Black retro trainers. The coat hanger unremarkable. The outer track suit I knew to be peach. Bought from some No-Brand store one wintry afternoon with half a mind to jog those canal banks. A cell that split and multiplied off into a girl a school class a NI number a size a height a hug cries tantrums sliding joy

The floor tiled. The landlord had moved the kitchen into a cupboard so he could squeeze more footage, more money. It's all money, baby.

By your ankles one of those measuring rules to give scale. Somebody had moved around you, wondering when lunch break was, what was next on the docket, how much petrol it would take to get there.

Your teeth good, you'd looked after them. Your mouth parted. Your eyes askance, surprised.

*Why do this?*

The kid's whine on the roof.

An insect skittering on the tiles.

Your pose the aftermath of a collapsed lift. G forces. Surprise. Legs akimbo. The syringe still dangling. Strange pump.

A bead of water settled on my thumb.

The fourth left finger ring-less. You'd sworn you'd avoid marriage. That one time you'd worn one home, embarrassed at it. Next visit it had disappeared, no words said.

Scratchings on the roof.

Heroin toxicity.

They said you hadn't used for a while and the purity of the stuff you injected caught you.

They doubted you had intended to kill herself, despite the note.

*Enough.*

To the window. A motorbike with a hunkered down pillion passenger moved slowly along a far track, its exhaust rising into the smoke of distant smouldering grass, fading out of the edge of the window. A bird whistling an uneasy night chorus. A thick black wire dividing two grey squares of sky. A one-eyed Ford Bedford beetled along the dirt road, slowed by drain water, then on and in its wake another motorbike this time with no lights. A thin dog yawning its way into the courtyard.

The hills soon shrugged off the last of the light.

*The note this time.* I slid it out and weighed it, revolved it through my fingers, traced along its edges. Looked.

Sorry

A rough square of white cardboard torn from a Lidl box that had housed milk cartons, the actual box found crushed between the broken clothes dryer and the flip-top bin.

Sorry

The blue ink had snagged on lines three five and six of the brown corrugated undergirding of the white surface panel. Torn in a single sweep from a corner so two machine straight sides made a 90-degree angle at one corner while the other two sides ran ragged to a join. A crude place mat Sorry. Written in lower case, Tish's writing because at four years old she caught the class with the teacher who did the old-style cursives, the loop under the y, sealing into a circle under the line, the s's antique, looping lead line.

There was no full stop after the y.

A hanging, open mouthed

Sorry

A flip of cardboard, it had nestled on a green coffee table with a mug of milk tea, a plastic-backed hand mirror, a cornershop lighter, a syringe, a spattered spoon. Characterised as the typical paraphernalia of a drug user.

Around all this and now me, rolling off the body, the smell of death.

The police didn't see it as a suicide note. Too brief. It might even have been written weeks before, there was no pen anywhere in the flat and it could relate to something as trivial as having used up all the milk, or meant to be posted through the door of a friend she had borrowed money from and failed make a repayment in time: don't read too much into it.

Sorry.

She never rang. She never reached out, not even to her mother. She hadn't tidied up beforehand. Hadn't given away the last of her possessions. Hadn't mumbled anything to anybody that hinted of suicide. Hadn't Searched it.

Swaddled in a sweatshirt, two track suit bottoms, two pairs of socks. No money for the meter card.

At some point she must have realised the dose was too high. Fatal. At that point, who did she call out to?

There was no call. Her mobile phone nowhere near the body.

The police theory could be right, Sorry simply fitted into the game of signs within her flat.

Haha in the fridge second shelf. Three hearts in a row on an unused, unsigned birthday card on her bedroom's dresser. Hug and smiley face on a sheet of A4 pinned to the reverse of the flat entrance door.

H. Diacetylmorphine. Smack. Boy. White Girl. Horse. Brown Sugar. Black. Tar.

It mainlined euphoria. Who wouldn't want that?

Another bead onto the photo. A globe sliding across the flat of her knee.

The kid called out on the roof. insistent. then a flare, the mute torn off. the bleat now a wail - of a goat knowing its throat about to be cut. switch low. the rat's screech as the box lowered down on it. full on. the cry of skin as the needle stabs through. red. the flood that cued the chorus in. the church song storming down into the grave. through it all I am mute. dumb. prone. the kid on the roof.

It arrives again, lurching. Scatter of trainers.

Slow.

Around your neck, that gold locket on a chain, photo of your little sister, Luna, one side, other side a fine gold wire holding back a curl of black hair. Whose?

A puppet at rest, slowly pulling itself up. The shoes. Dancing. The stairs in black sky. Fingers strangely splayed. Arm outstretched. Sludge brown. Black waters. The rat scratching. Sky pouring its blue into your heart. Flash. Shadows. A knee raised. Skeleton hand. Bleached heart. Flickering outlines of a body. Pleated curtains. A white out.

The growling of a dog, slowly throttled. Hum of an unseen paddle swung at a head and missing, but close.

Shadow. Palp. Place a hand to my eyes.

Old photos. No longer than a millisecond. Tish. Straight to camera. Unsmiling.

Stone. Statuary. Mask. Fade to black.

## **12 Coroner's Report**

### **CORONER'S LEGAL POWERS REGULATION 28 REPORT TO PREVENT FUTURE DEATHS**

I make this report under paragraph 7, Schedule 5, of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009 and regulations 28 and 29 of the Coroners (Investigations) Regulations updated under Statutory Instrument 20--.

#### **RECIPIENTS**

- 1 The Chief Constable, Metropolitan Police (North)
- 2 Chief Executive Officer, Greater North County Council
3. Director of Public Health, Greater North.

#### **CORONER**

Eleanor C Oakes, coroner for the Greater North (West) area.

#### **INVESTIGATION and INQUEST**

On 2 August 2016 I commenced an investigation into the death of Trisha Hanley (aged 26) and I returned a conclusion that the death was a drug related death.

#### **CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE DEATH**

Tishana Hanley, aged just 26, was found dead in her flat on ---- Rd at approximately 3pm August 2013. She was found with a syringe in her hand and material believed to be heroin.

She died from heroin toxicity. The deceased died within three months of another occupant at the same property.

### **CORONER'S CONCERNS**

During the course of the inquest the evidence revealed matters giving rise to concern. In my opinion there is a risk that future deaths will occur unless action is taken. In the circumstances it is my statutory duty to report to you.

The **MATTERS OF CONCERN** are as follows. –

----- Rd appears to be a house of multiple occupancy, there being several bedsits in the property. The occupants clearly associate and are on speaking terms. It appears there is a history of drug abuse at this property. I am concerned that future inhabitants at this property may suffer a drug related death.

### **ACTION SHOULD BE TAKEN**

In my opinion action should be taken to prevent future deaths and I believe you have the power to take such action. I ask that you review the manner in which the property is occupied and consider what powers you have to prevent future deaths at that particular address. I ask that you advise me if I should write to any other organisation to alert them to my concerns.

### **YOUR RESPONSE**

You are under a duty to respond to this report within 56 days of the date of this report. I, the coroner, may extend the period.

Your response must contain details of action taken or proposed to be taken, setting out the timetable for action. Otherwise you must explain why no action is proposed.

### **COPIES and PUBLICATION**

I have sent a copy of my report to the Chief Coroner and to the following Interested Persons:

- the family of Tishana Hanley

I am also under a duty to send the Chief Coroner a copy of your response.



x September 20--

*Eleanor C. Oakes*

## **Pakistan. Fissure.**

A jumble of Tish stuff. Stuff scooped off floors. Stuff handed me. Stuff I demanded. Found. Stole. I lay it all out on the thin mattress, back room bed. A life compressed into a sweep of leaflets, taxi cards, hospital reports, printed out coroner's office emails. Missed Parcel Delivery slips. A glimmer of jewellery. The silver locket. I held the locket up and in the half-light its case reflected a blurred filigree sketch of me, or at least a me I once knew. I chucked it back on the bed, sat among the stuff. A buzzing at my ear. Swat. Blood on my hand. I smeared mosquito debris onto my knee. The floor jumping with shadows. The wind had got up a little and was pushing at the mesh making it click like a set of frenzied crickets as the air poured through and back and the tree branches flung themselves around and under that a sound that resembled mating grasshoppers. I stretched out on the bedsheets but I couldn't sleep, the night too lively with sounds, and heat.

The big bag held the night binoculars. I found them and took to the window. Two mosquitoes whining, wings frantic, bodies bouncing at the mesh. I switched on and focused the lenses. An underground pipe, its soft lime outline just visible, crossing to the middle of a field then disappearing. Ghost images of two squatting cats in what I knew to be fields. The two cats approached each other, merged. Earlier, Daalat with advice:

- The cats here are ratters so don't feed them. The dogs eat the weakest cats, so they stay healthy as a clan.
- The cats here are a clan?
- They go back long enough.

The bigger loom of a fox or some such, its image trailing as it moved across a tree line. The green arrow of a mouse under close grey bushes. The upright walk of people. Three of them, moving up the pathway, each an arm's length from the other, keeping step in the dark. The view didn't take in the gate but if I listened I'd know if they were late night callers. The walkers were unaware of the cat that slinked upwards to stare at them from a tree branch.

Every rooftop seemed to have a satellite dish. I'd been up and the roof above me was a scrapyard of rusting metals – aerials, satellite dishes among the abandoned air-con units and a maze of coaxial cable. And I knew above the entire village was an information shower of electromagnetic radiation: microwave phone data bursts, Internet torrents, FM radio - the airwaves full of jostling energy, simultaneous with the kinetic rubbing and thrashing of

the mosquitoes, grasshoppers, land insects. And the goat kid penned on the roof, shifting from one corner to another. Somewhere its mother, wondering.

I sat down, looked at my swollen feet. By my toes, an ant at work carrying a leaf. It encountered another ant going the other way. The leaf ant stopped, went around, was blocked by the returning ant. The two ants finally confronting each other.

I lay on my side, turned into the wall, and tried to sleep. Shadow patterns of the ruffled edges of leaves, swinging drunkenly. The screech of a cat dispute. Squeak of rusted hinges, rattle of ancient gate. Crickets doing their high-pitched signalling. Mosquitos held back by the mesh, strident. The dull knock of tree branches. Laughter. Fading. Clatter of waves reaching a shore. A sea of voices. The waters high. The voices crashing. The ants' jousting. More crashing. Shouts. Some rumpus.

I woke, pulled on clothes and stepped through the curtain then the door into light. Daalat and three others were stood there. All four suddenly quiet, yet a strain still on their faces, the oldest one as if he had just spat out some poison.

– Is it about me?

They looked away. Daalat's left eye blotched. A saucer on the floor broken. Some dirty, brown granulated powder spilt by the feet of the old man. His sandaled feet drumming the tiles. Daalat spoke.

– No. Go back to sleep.

## **Berlin, Germany.**

The spaniel running past me. Then the labrador. Shoes on the black tray. Through the arch. White gloves patting. Stewards' emergency routines. Flight steps. A departure board, but I'm arriving. Cool sun. The houses bouncing up from water. Street scene at night. Klieg lights. Klieg eyes from the arcs. Pats on the back. Pats around the groin. More flight steps. My Android screen jumps to colour as I toggle my phone out of airplane mode. The first message, Yasmina. Urgent. Tish has fallen outside a nightclub and injured her face. She's back home and OK but she wants to see you. It's night. I drive.

A roadworks Red when there's no traffic in the other direction. I run through it. The old house. Yasmina lets me in, glancing at me with that quick disapproval she's perfected over the months since we split.

– I can't decide whether you're inept, insensitive or just...

She places a tray with biscuits, tea, in my hands.

– Take it up. Knock first, then go in.

Tish. You're at your dressing table, applying a short bristly brush of black paste to one of your eyebrows. Your chin's bloodied, the left side of your face has half a black eye and two long scratches.

– Put it here, Dad.

I put the tray down. You take a wet wipe, then another, hand me one, wipe off your eyebrow with the other.

– You're killing me, Tish. You can't keep doing this. What the fuck's the matter?

You twirl the brush, lifting the target eyebrow up from watery eyes. I sit down on your dresser chair; my legs are too heavy to stand anymore. You shuffle over.

– Your nose hairs need trimming again, Dad.

You lift my chin up with a finger to get a better view of them. Go back to the eyebrow work for a few seconds. Then:

– I hate you because I love you.

– I love that you hate me because you love me, but I'd rather you just loved me.

She hits my shoulder with the bristle brush, then hands it me with a sigh.

– Do my eyebrows.

– Look straight ahead.

She gazes at me in the mirror as I do her a pair of wedge-shaped eyebrows, the latest fashion.

– OK?

She looks in the mirror, admiring.

– How did you get so good?

– Your dad has many skills.

You fold yourself into me and we're there on the dresser chair. I breathe in the congealed blood, the make-up and your hair. *Oh, God.* I'm sucked back into that day when you tapped me on the knee, shook your stiff pigtailed and announced out of the blue that you were going to push my wheelchair for me when I was too old to walk and needed to go shopping. I said that was sweet, you could do that, but not to worry I didn't think I'd need a wheelchair any time soon and we'd always find a way to walk together.

In the first week after the split, you plotted to leave your mum and move in with me, partition my apartment, even drew a diagram. Jump cut to three weeks on, I'm talking to a friend and I see you walking on the other side of the street. Instinctively, I wave. You blank me, turn abruptly and walk the other way. And I understand. Then your mum phoning me, all hours: where is our daughter? One time we had search parties trawling through the clubs and found you at 2am laughing in some over-aged boy friend's flat, drunk and high. You scowled at our arrival and days later closed that gap between boy and friend, defied everyone and moved in with him, though you split after a fortnight, went back home, if only temporarily.

– Your eyebrows are perfect. Will you come down?

– Why?

You come down anyway, to your mum's surprise, and we're all crammed in the room together. You promptly fall asleep, snoring, your bloodied lower lip fusing with the pink floral sofa cushion, my arm part hugging you, part keeping you from rolling full onto your face.

– You don't deserve her. Why she worships you I just don't get. You're a useless dad, you ignore her all the time. Off gallivanting.

I reply low key, too tired for argument.

– I pick up every time she rings.

– That’s not the same as phoning her. You should phone her every day. She needs you, stupid.

*Luna is the unspoken. Where is she? Yes, it’s not a Saturday and yes, it’s late, but still, am I not allowed to see her?* I leave it. Too tired. We sit there, confused how we’ve landed here, a family of strangers.

The TV is muted. Nodding heads. The clock racing. I carry you up to your bed, kiss you on the un-bruised side of your face.

It’s the last time I see Tish alive.

I go down.

Then Yasmina and me in the hallway. Silence.

*There are moments in life that you need to grab hold of, yet you don’t know when those moments are until they’re gone.*

The door closes.

I drive to my apartment, hit button 14, let the lift doors slide, key myself in, kick off my shoes, stuff the washing machine, slip my passport back in the cabinet, shower. Lying in the flickering dark. A shiver of falling leaves. Those Klieg arcs.

Light leaks away, grey thickening to black. A memory keeps spooling. Fades slowly back up. The screen turns to cloud, granite shadows thickening into a celluloid count-down from 10...

2. 1.

### **Manchester, UK. The funeral.**

It comes again and I surrender, curious even to spot its variation this time. The dirt around my shoes dry, stubs of grass shoots clawing out. Springy underfoot, whole shoe prints there and there on the trail, the box steady, feeling the torque from the two rear carriers as we turn off into a path. This box light beyond belief, nestled on my shoulder, the black cloud of the vicar ahead of us and ahead of him two grey groundsmen, signalling.

We tread though the earth, rough marble either side, mossed stone. A shopping list jumps in: orange juice, rice. Now the marble is shiny, the shuffling behind noisier, the vicar moving too quickly, trying to make up for an earlier delay when the boys played keepy-uppy in the car park till told off but it was cool with me. The ground goes softer underfoot, the land sloping, turning to bog. My legs stiff as the box. The rustle of blades of grass. The rub of trouser cloth. The rip of a plane across the sky. Tish at my shoulder, her head not a breath from mine behind the panel, and this urge to turn and kiss her. Then my feet unable to feel ground and the sun. They hold the coffin steady as I pick myself up, the shuffling movement resumes and she is light now, so light, and we are bound together in carrying this, and I catch breath. Catch breath. Catch breath.

Breathe. My tie slipping tighter around my neck. The sun. We jerk to a halt. I force my head up. In a fisheye I see the dug grave at my feet, the lurching pile of black soil, the petals of tomb slabs in the stone flower of the cemetery, the whole flamed by the point-of-focus sun. The scene rotates in a slow whorl. Coffin. Man. Stone. Soil. Sky. It's broken by the tinkling of an ice cream van pianola on the estate over the wall. I startle at someone nudging my waist to lower the box. My legs hinge, feet swivel, arms and chest embrace the pine as it slides from my shoulder. The others are ready. We lower her onto the plastic apron. The groundsmen check the straps' positions. All true. This is it. I stumble back. Under a tree. The man gets going. The one with all the trappings of a vicar: the white smock, the black shirt and trousers underneath, the regalia. Yet he is a man, trying his best to make some kind of sense of it all, on our behalf. And what might feel dull and obvious to the disinterested observer, makes absolute living sense to those of us gathered by the graveside. It makes sense. It has to make sense, and I absorb it.

His moon face looks up not down and his hand stirs the smudge of his black hair as he speaks, like he's new to the job, unsure.

– The pain is greatest when a young person is taken, when God calls to Him someone in the full vigour of youth. It tests our faith, we cannot understand it. *Take me instead*, we instinctively feel. Tishana was a delight to all who knew her. She was at the heart of her local netball team, she passed her Duke of Edinburgh Award with flying colours. She did well at school in the early years and was a dream to teach. She was always surrounded by friends and loving family....

I don't mind he knows nothing about Tisha and everything he is saying is what someone else has told him. He is a man making a go of a difficult job. I will myself to accept what he says.

– Putting the sad circumstances of her departure to one side, there can be no explanation, there can be only belief. Belief that there is a better place above than here on earth. Belief that Tishana has gone there. Yet she also lives on here. In those quiet moments of reflection, when she may come to us, remind us of the beautiful soul she was, a thought, a deed, a memory, an object we associate with her. We all contributed to the making of Tishana and she remains with us, even now.

The vicar's voice is a flute. There's no need to understand the words, the message is all in the cadences, the slopes, a sound as washed and pure as night waves breaking. The first row gathered by the graveside are time-served mourners, well positioned to organise the post-burial sandwiches, rattle tins for the upkeep of the church roof, front row spectators to the burial and completely ignorant about who Tisha was, how she has come to be numbering among the dead, her own plot, flowers, the works.

– Ashes...

The groundsmen lower the coffin, then stand back. Now I am scrabbling on that mound, shovelling soil, throwing it down into the hole. I want to fill the hole, smack the soil down with the spade, smooth it off. The spade slices into the mound, but the soil pile never decreases, at every spadeful shifted the mound reforms, I attack it again from a different angle, in a flurry of blows. I'm pulled back to the tree by a signet ring, someone else fixing on my shoes, the sun burning its reproach.

Now I'm watching. The young men and women are in their best dresses, smart suits, shoes, singing a lyric I've heard on the radio, a new American soul star, the girls clapping as they sing. They've said it was Tisha's favourite song. They throw flowers into the grave and, taking turns, the young men fill that hole I could not. The signet ring hand gleams in the sun, does most of the work. A wave of hatred shakes me. My hands clutch grass to stop me from



rising. Why not one of them to die, why should they live on to change the world, find their soul mates, have adventures, why should Tisha be the one to leave? I block my ears to the singing and shovelling, shift my eyes away to a millipede.

The crowd is moving, the song receding, leaving its wreckage behind. The vision fades down. At least this time there was not the fight over the grave, no whispered muttering from the massed church ranks. And in this version her mother is not there in the hat and veil, sucking in the mourners' sung acclaim while I'm the pauper, the mute interloper, behind a police line.

Now I'm in a car. The hand that held the spade, the signet ring, freeing my seat belt from under me, pulling it round. Trees go past, traffic. Vaguely, I know this is not how I arrived, not in this car, and not in this way.

**Manchester. Michael.**

Waking on a strange sofa, in my shoes, clothed. My guts eating themselves. Some guy far, whistling. White light specked with searing blue. The window. Outside dead centre a fir tree, its top lopped off. Middle a black phone wire with rain drops, the light spinning there. Shook off by a small bird landing on the wire. At right a central heating plume from the next flat along. Opposite, a Pakistani woman hollering at two small kids as she hangs washing on a balcony. Below her, leaning against a wall, two tall Somali men, hands on each other's shoulders in part embrace, part fight. An old white man walks round them and past in a Windrush hat. The whistling stops. Low ceiling of a box room. I move through the door, find a bathroom. Male toiletries. He lives alone. Out again, through a door. He's sitting at an easel.

The signet ring.

He nods. Take a seat gestured. Instead I glance around. Bare floorboards. By a wall, a hundred and eighty kilo of cast iron clustered around a weights bar. Canvases on thin frames propped against walls. A smoked-glass coffee table. Computer on mdf desk held up by trestles. Burgundy leather club chair in the middle of the room, centre stage. The seat I was meant to take.

– You want a drink?

I know the voice. *Makkel*. Michael. An eight-year gap but I know the voice. I invite him to play me.

– What connection did you have with Tish?

His paint hand hesitates.

– Boyfriend. Dealer. In that order.

– You gave her the shit that killed her?

– I warned her.

– Not enough though.

His painting already knocked over. The easel with it. Him.

We're on the floorboards. I apply the chokehold. He busts my wristlock.

– She didn't listen. Fuck you.

He kicks up his hips, locks my left leg, throws me off. Despite my bulk. Then helps me up. Suddenly I'm old. He has sweat on his brow, flicks his head in a way that tells. The weights. The rip. The amateur tattoo by his wrist. I put it together.

– She talked about you.

He rights the easel.

– While I painted her.

Now he's tumbling through the canvases, his back to me, pulls one out, places it at the front of the stack and moves away. His phone is ringing somewhere.

Tish. A big fleece top. The standard jeans. Her hair, released from ties, shaped strangely: like a makeshift star. She rarely showed me this hair, always tied it down. Her lips rising with the hair, gold in the eyes, drinking his admiration, floating in his burgundy chair. Appreciated.

Guarded but tender. Playful even. She must have liked him.

I look away. Tender with her drug dealer. *Gah*.

His phone rings again.

– Call me in fifteen.

He's back with me.

– What did she say?

– You never listened to her. Never had time for her. You had two heads.

– What?

– You know. A rant. I wanted her. The rest, you, her mum, flatmates, didn't matter. Will you sit?

– Why should I?

– I don't know.

– What do you mean wanted her?

– Attraction. Fascination. Fear.

He's starting to do those painters' measuring squints with eye and thumb. Daubing with a paint knife.

– She said I should start taking this – the paint – serious. She woke some hope in me, you know? Told me of a different me, that could be out of and beyond all this. And that's a dangerous thing, I start to think I'm Superman, gonna fly out of all this. You know what I'm saying?

All this meant Claremont and Alexander. The undercover cars ticking in the shadows, ready with their own madness for the lurches into madness when someone couldn't take one more eviction, one more sanction, one more twitch of the locum doctors' queue.

– She tried to help you and you dragged her down with you?

– No. She was getting a supply from elsewhere. I refused. She came back and sat for me. We smoked a blunt, we did lunch, the park, watched squirrels. I got her off the H. Showed her she didn't need it. Held her down when she stunk up, pouring with sweat, lashing out. Till she was free. *Me*. She thanked me. You should thank me.

A phone again. Different tone. The coffee table held two mobiles with a paper notebook and bookmakers' pen by the door to the stairs. Maisonette.

His phone face is engineering brick, lip curled, front upper teeth kissing air, gym torso, running legs in pjs, dome head, Malcolm X beard that is heading towards hipster. Something also in the creases round his eyes says jailtime. His voice is low, guarded. *Don't call back.*

*There is no credit.*

When he goes into the kitchen, I pocket his paper notebook then look at his start on me.

Hunkered. Heavy-set. Blue scrawled arms.

In the kitchen, whistling. He comes back with a teapot on a tray with Douilton cups. He smiles.

– My inheritance. I'll play mother.

He's 28, maybe 30 on a cold day.

– I don't think you said thank you.

– For killing my daughter?

Up close again.

He eases off.

– For the lift. You were gone. The madman with the spade. But I understood. These cups, this tray. I lost my mother. Couldn't even go to the funeral. It still winds me.

He should paint, I indicate.

– People end up in the boot of cars, dead.

– You've got a nice turn of phrase.

I flick at a fly.

– Tish?

His tongue moves at the pace of his brushstrokes.

– I get it. No dad wants his daughter dating anyone less than a Prince. She had plenty guys on her phone, with her looks, that's got to be. She chose me. I took her up into these hills with me once, you know. She drew my name and hers in the snow. It was neat, we took selfies. She freed me up to be there. The ramblers, you know, the average types, what's two black kids doing up in the countryside? Run it again if I'm without her. A lone black man in the hills in snow. Killer on the loose, right? I wanted to see the quality of light there.

He knifes on.

– I didn't sign up to be a black man and if I'd known the deal, I'd have chosen white or Chinese.

A measurement.

– I'm not blowing up planes or beheading soldiers.

Another squint.

– Maybe claiming back some territory. At least I'm good at it. Never took H myself. It's a business. The me she saw could paint. At first, I only knew comic books, but she nudged me, and I started getting library books. Michelangelo. Botticelli. Basquiat.

One of his phones again. I wonder how much business I'm losing him.

– I don't need tell you this.

I keep still.

– You know what I remember? When we slept, she'd take my hand, lock my fingers in hers and hold them at the top of her head as she slept. It was funny, you know, weird. Like we was Picasso'd, but I liked it.

I recognise. We always placed her teddy bear there when she was a baby in her cot. She'd reach for it, sleep like that.

– When she was mad at me, her left eyebrow would lift. Only the left. Quiver. Then you knew you'd better row back quick, before she grabbed something and flung it at you.

Breathe.

– Her right leg would twitch in the night. The right knee, up and down, half the night. She always moved around in the cot.

– She couldn't say pepperoni. She'd want it but always gave in and ordered Margarita instead.

He's stupid with tears now. Laughing.

– And resting her head on my chest, chucking peanuts at the radio.

I get up.

– Is it oil?

– Acrylic.

He's done me in browns, greens and whites, in short knife strokes, creased up, squatting, my head in my hands. I hadn't noticed. The shadow of a window frame comes through folds of a closed grey curtain. Further back, a white skeleton tree with a black crow, suspended wrong way, on a branch, snow behind, an eight-pointed star, with the letters ER in the middle. Further back, writing that I couldn't make out, hollowed into the snow.

– Set me up with your heroin supplier.

– Are you crazy?

– Maybe.

He considers it. Swaps his phones around in his hand like a gambler absorbing his playing cards.

– Most I can do is tell him I found a new buyer and too much for me so I was passing you on. You'd need two grand minimum.

I take the stairs down.

Back at my apartment I take up Michael's notebook again. It's a spiral bound, shorthand pad containing a hundred pages of rough-surfaced, unlined, ivory paper, the kind of paper that says Art, and keeps the non-artists like me away.

I flick through it. Line drawings, done quickly, with whatever tool came to his hand. Now smooth-flowing black ink. Now daubed blue felt tip. Blotchy laundry marker. Smudged grey pencil. Charcoal's dark sweep and smear. The drawings are fast sketches, the lines fluent, cornering sharp, often not more than a dozen strokes to capture a likeness, if likeness is the word. The sketched faces sit mostly full square in the middle of the page, one to a page, and around the edges of each, markings – at top, scalloped strokes that I take for blurts of sky or cloud, at middle hashes or stick forest. Below these, water, moving in curlicue waves that bulge right to left. Michael is left-handed. At the foot of each page *Edition Number:* and a long numeral. His little joke, I take it, dreaming of artworld success.

Tish. The fifth image. Something Manga in its flatness. A lopsided box Afro. Soft, lower case b of a nose, one looping line for the lips, skewed at left either working to a laugh or coming back from a snarl. She was charcoal, the weight of impression steady across the page excepting the pitch-black snag at her mouth's left. It worked. And I filled with respect that

he could channel her likeness in three sweeps of a burnt stick. He had her fine. And yet. Around her at top, the flutter of sky, a solitary twig tree, below that the river rolling wide. *Edition Number*: eleven numbers.

Something. *Nah*. I swat the thought as a piece of whimsy on his part.

Later, I go back to the book, find the page. Tish. Her squared hair. Was the nose bunching in disdain or turning upwards at the start of that flare that signals the beginnings of a guffaw?

*The thing was not to get sucked into the face. Ignore it. Ignore her.* The waters. Why draw the face in Manga style then have so much ornate fussiness going on for landscape? Why that landscape? Each sketch 'Editioned.' I flick back and forth. Each edition number different. Fine. Each one ending in a zero. Eleven numbers. Grouped like the spacing of Morse code. You could stare at a thing for too long. Sometimes you have to take a step back. Like when someone rode on your backseat and you looked at them in the rearview and they came to you there completely different, the face rearranged somehow, the rearview Rubik's Cube-ing the features so it was the same face yet shown new. I find my shaving mirror and bring it to the table, hold it the Tish portrait, work the angles.

There it is. At four centimetres distance, Tish suddenly jumps to life. A bizarre focal point trick. The three lines no longer Manga, they are almost photographic. And the name Tish emerges, hidden in those clouds. And bottom right, the row of numbers flips. I pull out my mobile and check. Obvious now. Tish's number. I flick through the pad, checking. Names. Numbers. The mirror trick works every time. I stare hard, go through his gallery.

**Faz.** Done as a series of horizontal bars of differing lengths, like a ghosting graphic equalizer screen or Morse code but all oblongs and skewed to the right and up the way an angler's hook twists a fish head. Each of Faz's eyes were spirals that moved outwards at you if you looked at them too long.

**S.** Leaf spring eyebrows, wind-up, chattering teeth, smudged dot nose, a flick of curling black for hair. The letter **S** was the only thing that was coming out of the clouds, and even that could be an illusion, my mind creating patterns where there were none.

**Rochelle.** A contour map. The elevations beginning at the page's edge, joining her thin-lined jawline and noodle hair, then working inwards along bold cheek bones, bulky eye bags zipping sharply up to a tilted nose; ending at two saw-teeth eyes.

**Sana.** A sandstorm of small black circles that bunched and spread and bunched and somehow between the bunching and spreading if you looked long enough and your eye muscles tired a face emerged of a black-haired woman with heavy lidded eyes, sour lips and fuck-off eyes. Fear, pride and defiance filled the white spaces between the ink.

**Noah.** Ballpoint blue skimming the page, a dabbed moustache, two wobble lines rolling into owl eyes, a pipe neck covered by a long cravat. Background the ghosts of a steel frame of some midrise car park, gas holder or water tower; then a hookah-pipe gauze, or bong trap.

**Roxy.** A tress of hair, a teardrop ear ring, a single broad smudge for lips, one feathered eyelash.

**Roy.** Curtains hair falling to razor thin lips, a three-prong crown askew above the head. One eyeball in its socket, the other eyeball dangling.

The landscape circling the images is too consistent to hold anything other than a cryptic meaning. Unlike the faces, the landscape style never changes. Twiddling my mirror throws no light on the code. It has to be more brute than subtle or optical. The details are of varying quantity. The solution is simple. The landscape's three textures are tallies. Either money owed, or drugs purchased, or both.

There are others. Dozens of portraits hiding names, numbers. All callers to Michael's flat, I assume. I look out of my apartment window at the sheet rain. It rakes the windows and roars across the Manchester bowl, racing from hill to hill. What joins these portraits is the little plastic ziplock bags with Marley motifs, Be Happy logo, yellow suns, the polythene self-seals that zip warmth inside bodies momentarily. Little folds of paper with chemical crumbs inside. I wonder how it works, the constant night callers. Do the neighbours get pissed off with car doors banging, 2 am staggerings? Or does it fit into the general chaos of the area, busy already with nightlife taxis dieseling up and down, call doctors speeding by, clubbers bursting by in revs and beats, the weary steps of office cleaners, nurses, night porters, junior medics. Mix in the random night strollers seeking solace in the outside air from the press of final demands or overseas calls that lead to wails down phones as another mother hugs herself and lets fall a photo. Add the man rueing the blown headlight bulb that led to the police stop that forced the detention that thwarted the job interview that brought on the sanctions that fed the sour milk to the son now throwing up into his Uncle's soaked lap.

Night. A thousand silent oaths thrown into the starless sky, falling as sheet rain.





## Liverpool, UK. The Docks.

He's been expecting my call. *You'll find me at the docks.* His voice a gruff monotone as he gives me a satnav code.

I drive steady on the M62 West to Liverpool, middle lane, into a pocked sun. I'd rigged shows at the Everyman and the Unity, wired the Creamfest festival. The familiar ripples under the wheels where I imagined the motorway surface had been laid in a gale. Chevrons bunching then spacing. I shake though the maw at the motorway end choke-point and onto an A road. Hapag Lloyd. Mesert. China Shipping. Echoing Nigeria: *All Is God's Favour. Horn Before Overtaking. Food Is Ready. Mr Buyer This House Is Not For Sale. Beware.*

The sign for the turnoff. Sensors let me through the gates. I follow the markings, swing past H30, take the gap between D and F, park up.

It's a Portacabin. He steps out and shakes my hand. Broad as a fattening wrestler, his proffered hand meaty, face weathered, faded blue eyes recessed in its folds. He gives me a pink hi-viz bib. Above us, an automatic crane jib jerks to life. The containers six high around us. All cued up. A tunnel effect. Steel runs. There's no wind.

He waves to someone I'm not seeing, then scratches his shadow beard and leads the way. Walking, he's agile, though he lifts his right leg with a disguised effort. The doorframe is narrow. Between us we fill all the spare cabin space.

– Do you mind if I pat you down? They bring someone up from London occasionally.

– I sound like London?

– Can I see your phone?

I let him frisk me then he takes my phone, flips the cover off then the battery, hands me it back without the battery. Satisfied, he sits in the office chair at the desk, indicates the plastic garden chair for myself, playing with my battery in his hands. His desk has a screen and a paper calendar advertising packaging. A beige landline with big black dial buttons. A walkie talkie next to his mobile phone.

– You thinking of building yourself a little business then?

I smile.

– Luvvies mostly.

– It's all musicals nowadays. Sometimes you want some Shakespeare to get your misery on.

*All you find's Hooray! It's a holiday!! Jazz hands!*

He doesn't do the hands. I wait for him to finish, my small talk is low. He reads me well.

– You want the tickets to the show, you must pay Box Office.

I take money out of my wallet and hand it to him. He unfolds and counts, placing the Queen's head up and to the right for each note. He's happy.

– Red fifties. I'll take the risk. Let me find your tickets to the musical.

He fishes in his desk draw and comes out with a Saxo salt cellar. Within that a white powder, wrapped in clingfilm.

– Try it now. You'll need to cut it. Always try the merchandise. I told Michael.

*Tish. Beatboxing.*

– *We was fucking good, Dad.*

*Puppet arms. The syringe dangling.*

– This stuff killed my daughter.

His eyes flitting.

– Again?

– You killed my daughter.

He's braced now.

– That's a stretch.

The vowels strangulated, head lowering. Eyes casting around.

– You shipped this in and this is what killed her.

Brow low. The monotone again.

– I don't know.

He's weighing the walkie-talkie as a weapon, considering how fast he can be out of his chair, smash it into my skull, versus how fast am I. I let him weigh. There's inches between us. I can smell him. Slowly:

– Everything that moves, comes through here. That's how the world works. Sun beds.

Pringles. Chapatti ovens. Heroin.

The shoulder down. On some Plan B. A slight turn, looking at his screen, clicking. I think about ripping the screen from his desk. He turns back.

– There's cameras...

Another intake of breath.

– I have a daughter myself.

Eyes flitting to his desk, finding something.

– Is she... has she passed away?

*Stuff the H in his mouth, make him swallow it.*

The hood of his left eye twitches.

I would be on him before his thumb hit the alarm button on his desk underside. My squeeze would beat his. Turn. The pulse where cheek becomes eye-socket. He comes to the same conclusion, his voice higher now as he gestures around.

– I'm just small fry, if it's not me, it's someone else. This here is minimum wage. You're looking the wrong place, pal. What would you have done? My mother was going blind and the NHS couldn't help so I had to send her private. They saved her sight, but she has to have top-ups. Injections into her eyeball. I only get a ton per consignment.

– How do they pay you?

– Cash. Couriered. No names.

– How do you know which container?

– One sec.

He says it like it's an idea. Maybe he isn't the brightest.

– This.

He brings something up on screen, turns the screen to me. An invoice. Bill of lading in the name of Imperial Package Sea Containers. There's an address in Liverpool L3. A date. Close to the time of Tish's death.

I clock it. It's then he rushes me. Arms pull at my waist. Clamping hard. The squeeze of my ribs. High pain. The air gone. He's misjudged me. Over-estimated himself. I shift. Roll. Chop down, hands locked together. A bone cracks. Gasp. A hand comes up from the floor. My knee takes him into the embossed steel floor then my thumbs sink into his neck folds and the yellowish skin of the face mottles pink.

Through the window, the sea of containers, swirling.

– Dad!

I see her. Tish.

I retract my thumbs.

I find myself on my knees, my body leaning on the cabin door.

Chest rise. He won't die. Maybe wake with a headache.

I see Tish once more, huddled under the table. She's looking at me quizzically.

– *Tish, I need to know. I can't just let you go.*

*Her mouth shapes a wince. Chin tucked into her bobbed pullover. She whispers:*

– *Leave.*

– *Why?*

– *They're coming.*

She fades.

I roll him, remove my phone battery from his fist, take back my money.

Outside, the sun has greyed out. I walk into stiffening air. The light is weak on the skyline and at first I mistake it for cloud. A screech of chains tells me *shift*. I fling myself into a container side.

Shards.

Flails.

Ricochet.

The concrete buckling underfoot. Heat. Shouts. Twenty centimetres between me and death. Curl my tongue low in the cage of my mouth. Duck round the fallen container. Walk centreline to my car. The world runs past me. I shed the hi-vis. Key into the satnav the address that was on the bill of lading. *You have 1.6 miles to reach your destination.*

Gold Coast House is by the quays. A white negro face topping a white pillar either side of a white stone entrance. White sandstone, channelled, Georgian frontage rising four floors. I slip into a parking space at ninety degrees and fifty metres and wait. If there were a call to the police at the quays, they'd be finding me round about now. The CCTV nests on poles high in the wind. A few small boulevard trees, not enough to obscure both plates if you were looking. If I smoked, I would smoke now. Office workers leave. Tourists. Ferry traffic builds then diminishes. Somewhere high, the gold liver birds. A Toyota security patrol moves from my rear to my front and on with no glance back, driver unaccompanied, head shifting side to side routinely. I get out and feed a parking meter. The ferry again. Another ten minutes and the same patrol, this time slower. I'm white-shirted. I hold my phone to my ear, mime a call. Drop the passenger window a centimetre to slow down the condensation.

Dark crawls in with the lapping tide. Street lights have long flicked on and now office lights are flicking off. Traffic builds then eases and shadows in the trees thicken. I count the windows per floor of Gold Coast House. I hear myself sighing.

The building's lights are full out now. Time to move. I'm gathering myself, working out the best way in when I notice a zombie force of black faces assembling outside the main entrance, by a white van. The van back doors open. I ease out of my car, leaving it locked but unarmed, so the lights don't flash. I lower my eyes, slow my feet, hunch, join them.

Someone thrusts a mop at me. We move in a slow-paced rhythm. Most haul off at the first floor. I keep going another four flights. Unit 2.8. I find it. The corridor is clear. On my third shouldering, the room's lock gives.

Inside, a movement detector's red diode flickers, lizard like. Probably a fake, but I wedge the door with the mop, step across to the window, calculate. In my younger days I could have made that scabble down to the street, eyes closed. Now? Maybe.

There's a desktop PC. The password is stuck on a Post It note, bottom left of the screen. I put in the date of arrival for the shipment, click Search. It comes up as a pdf file. *From Pakistan. A PO Box number.* An address. Footsteps in the corridor. I use my phone to take a screenshot. The mop falls. The door.

– Do you have permission to be here?

Neat beige trouser suit. Nested grey-black hair. Fearless, smoke-ringed eyes that flick to the broken door lock, answering her own question. I click the screen file closed, invent something.

– I was mopping. The phone went.

– Wait here, I need to call Security.

She's wrong. Security is behind her, ducking his head now, to enter the office. Quick and eager. Eritrean maybe - the hotep beard is on trend, their ends.

She points at me in a rattle of finger jewellery.

He's coming past the desk already. Nothing worse than eager Security. I step smart to the window, throw the sash open and watch his hand grab air. He's actually having a go.

Scrabbling out of the window. Fool. This is goat territory and he's a giraffe.

I thank the channelling. The gaps between blocks perfect for grip. And the years in the lakes with belays. In the Gods climbing across lighting rigs. I'm down onto the negro head in six shifts of grip, then jump. It isn't a neat landing but it's a landing. I roll and haul up.

The car starts first time. Calm. I drive past the Gold Coast entrance as a Security detail scatters down the steps. There's not enough ambient light for him to tell if in this car is me. Besides, the headlights have fogged his eyes. I left my prints if they are inclined to call the cops. But they will want to dodge questions themselves.

Twisting through Liverpool side roads. Parks left and right. Then residential. Mansions cut into flats. Nothing on my rear. Into the artery and rolling along, either side of me, the wrecking-ball fields of rubble, then supermarket sprawl, car dealerships. A trickle of corner and kebab shops. Shadows. The sky weltering, a dark blue rain falling that the wipers can't clear. Pain in my right wrist. Turns heavy going. Obeying all traffic signals. Finally the M62 unfurling. Then burning up into a purple-black night, tarmac giving way to concrete. Spinning, spooling, all the way.

### **Nigeria. Dog Pole.**

A dream. My okada is spinning low, inside a Wall of Death. The engine races out of control, the throttle stuck. A crowd is throwing shoes from a height at me. Shoes raining. Zip.

Weave. Zip. Weave. Then Dad's voice:

– Here. This way. Here.

Out of the fairground, Dad's walking in that splayed feet way only he does, and we pass along the road the edges of which convert from privet hedges to the block wall outside his compound, pass along this red-earth smeared, concrete road he knows well and that knows him. Single file we go as the roaring, jagged traffic hems us. Stitching us in to the verge's blurts of green, the splashes of grey, speckling us with gear change whines and brake hisses, At Engine Corner, the motorbike taxi crews are resting. One, in chinos and silver singlet is cutting the toenails of another using nail-shop clippers, and an oil rag to clear the mud from his friend's feet. A third joins them, puts the second in a soft headlock. Playfighting starts as the two wrestle, slipping choke holds, arm locks.

– No, not that. Not here. Keep on.

A raven has settled on Dad's shoulders and watches sideways as Dad walks on. He buys bananas from a market seller and she palms his change with slow eyes then hands him the weighted black polythene bag. He walks on. We reach a brown, single storey, detached office building with low, barred windows and a smell of frying shrimp, pass along its side and out the rear where suddenly there is a raised earth bank and beyond that as we climb it I see running grey water – some urban culvert, its concrete panel coverings thrown off. Down in the culvert is a dog, sandy-coloured and short-haired. A dingo. Bedraggled and snarling. Because with the same fierce eyes down there, is a bare-chested man, his shirt wrapped around his outstretched arm and a noose on a pole held by the hand of his free arm. Dog and man are in a stand-off except our presence breaks their concentration. The man's muscles are busy with feints and guile, but his eyes flick up towards us. The dog's head also turns and in the moment of that turn, which is the same nanosecond in which a struggling grey rat bursts up from the tin water in a fierce shake of mange-d fur and gulps the particulate air, in that moment, as the raven perched on dad's shoulder shutters its eyelids, the man lashes down with the pole and noose. The pole catches the dog's face, whacks its nose, sweeps down across its neck. The noose twists over and down to the shoulders. The pole rams hard, down. The dog's forelegs buck. It bursts forwards snarling, its leg muscles



bunched, forelocks poised to leap in fury. The man holds the pole with both hands and braces against the dog's hurl. The dog launches but this only works the pole's slip-knot tighter, the pressure ratcheting with each jolt, and the dog, clawing the mud-strewn bank, finally whimpers, shakes with hypoxia, curls down and gives up its ghost.

– Did you see?

Dad is earnest, instructive. The culvert is covered again by its concrete panels. The raven settled back on Dad's shoulders.

– I saw a dog in mortal combat with a man who had a pole. The man won.

– An interesting pole, no? With the noose mechanism.

– A dog catcher's pole.

– It tightens one way.

The concrete panels have dissolved again, and the dog's body is being boarded by rats. The dog catcher unlooses the noose and climbs out of the culvert. He acknowledges us. The dog's body sinks under the weight of rats. Dad smiles grimly.

– Let it sink in. Let it sink in. The tightening. Look at the tightening. Are you hungry?

I stumble and when I pick myself up I'm standing on the spoil of Tish's fresh-dug grave. No gravestone till the subsidence finishes, they've said, meaning until her flesh all leaks away leaving only bones and protein-rich soil. The graveyard wind surges in a grand rustle of leaves and I look up. Lime tree leaves, their indifferent shimmer, the delicate fronds of their leaves shifting in the winds. Beyond that, a municipal sign. By Order for Manchester Cemeteries Authority: No sleeping overnight. No dogs.

## **Pakistan. Surge.**

Fronds of morning light unfurled on the floor. I eased myself out of the bed. An insect was making its way across tiles, its two raised black feeler cones palpating the air as it crabbed along. In the breeze through the mesh, sweating vegetables. Daalat entered with a bucket of water.

– For your shower.

I felt my wrist twinge.

– You want me to throw it over you?

– I'll manage.

The toilet room had a small drain, centre of its concrete floor. I planted my feet either side and sloshed water over my head so it ran through my dreads, along my back. I soaped then poured the rest of the bucket.

The wrist pain subsiding. A burn of sunrays. Somebody laughing. Oil being fried at high heat. My head was sore, my mind fogged with half-sleep and now dazed with sun. Daalat stomped back in with a bowl of fried vegetables, a pile of roti which he slapped down on the table. We sat on the bed and ate from the bowl.

– I feel cold.

– Saul, you were ranting last night, delirious. Clouds. Angels. Couldn't find a piano.

He did the semaphore thing that plane marshals do.

– You called out *Tish. Tish.*

– And?

– In the end I got Aunti-jee to find her Beyoncé CD.

Another crawler's path was blocked by Daalat's boot. Daalat's voice softer, pity leaking in:

– You told me they played it at her funeral.

– Something went on here last night. You were there. There was an argument.

Daalat chewed his food, picked at a diced vegetable and put it to one side on his plate, carried on chewing.

– You still have the bruise under your eye. Daalat, don't lie to me.

He gave in.

– It was the village wanting us to leave. Islamabad has hotlines to here. People getting jumpy. I told you it wouldn't be easy.

I pushed away a half-eaten roti. He went out and returned with a CD player, popped out the disc, span it on a finger. Beyoncé. I ignored him: what was the point he was proving?

*Saul.*

From outside, my name was being called.

I went out. The place was already filling up. Mr Kaur among them. He offered his hand, and, retaining mine in his, guided me through the courtyard throng. By the washing line hook at the far wall, a woman approached. She had a baby in her arms that she held out to me. Its feet kicked in its baby-gro, gurgling. Instinctively I took hold of the bundle, cradled it in my arms. I was in some play not of my devising. Chekhov maybe. The baby looked up at me, blowing invisible bubbles.

*Tish, new born, swaddled in pastel blue check hospital sheets, reaching a hand to my lips. I blow on the hand.*

I nodded, *thank you* to the mother, handed the baby back. She slid it onto her hip, joined the whorl of courtyard conversation. Mr Kaur took me by an elbow.

– I'm sorry. Yesterday...

– No. I should be the one to apologise.

– I was insensitive. My wife often chastised me. The pain you must feel to lose a daughter. Daalat came through the crowd, still on his phone, his brusque tones breaking the spell. He grabbed me.

– No more delay. We take the car.

Forging a way through to the gates. Waving Mr Kaur firmly away this time. I matched Daalat as he leapt down the stone path steps, one hand to his ear. He came off his phone only as we reached the car park. Hesitating.

– What?

– I want to get the last of my oranges. The kids will rob them if I don't.

He turned, and I turned with him. It was what saved us.

No sound at first. The ground a burst of yellow. Sky flipping to tumbling clods. Clawing.

Silver handle of a car door floating up. Blast of glass cubes. Sine wave of cubed sun.

Only then the boom.

Screams.

An alarm.

Cubes of car glass, spinning.

Tish is on a stage as a character in a play going repeatedly through the ordeal of burial: some warped, Samuel Beckett variant. Each time, she survives, neck deep in a tub of water, bowing at the neck only, to faint applause. Murky yellows, xenon bulb blues, ice whites. The auditorium empties, becomes a dirt-blasted road, a bush fire. Cars headlights flare. A rumble of horses' hooves.

– Get up.

Daalat.

I was on the side of the hill. The Corolla burning softly before us. My left forearm bandaged. Wearing someone else's shirt. Daalat's forehead dotted with blood.

– What?

He pointed.

Three cars wrecked. The one we had arrived in and the two cars either side.

Daalat tugging me to the Audi. Nobody was on the hill. Or anywhere. It was just us three now. Basir sloshed water on the Audi's windscreen, got in the driver's seat and turned the ignition over till it sparked. He put his foot down so the engine raced. Out again, the engine left running.

– Go now.

Daalat asked a question in Punjabi. Basir nodded. They hugged.

I clambered into the passenger seat. It smelt of sheep. Daalat drove, the wipers taking the screen from mud to blur. It kept threatening to stall. He cursed. *Come on, fucksake come on.*

I understood not to speak.

The track was long and twisting, with never more than a five-metre view front or behind. A car swiping close. Swerving for a street trader making her way to the main road, a plastic load of slider shoes on her head. Then onto a highway and into the anonymity of traffic. The engine smoothing itself out.

– After this we're even.

I'd saved him from drowning once. We'd scrambled a ridge ascent by Great Gable then lined down. It had been blazing and he'd thought the pool would be warm. It was shock more than anything, that had him flounder. I'd thrown a rope, hauled him out. The mad bastard had laughed as he shivered at the rocky edge of the pool. His thigh leaking blood thinned by water. No treachery deeper or more common than water.

- Sure.
- If there is an after, after this.
- You think it was something? I smelt petrol earlier.
- Two white men arrived in the village next door last night. The mayor said he should open a tourist office. A Rasta and now two white men.
- And?
- They left this morning. Like ghosts. Our car gets totalled. Join the dots.

I chewed it but said nothing. He was leaving out the argument last night. Was that connected? Either it all connected or none of it did.

- I set this up, then you're on your own.
- Who do you think it was?
- They've razed whole villages if it's them.
- Who?

He didn't answer.

The pin pricks of blood on his face had congealed and darkened.

He looked across at me.

- That shirt looks better on my cousin.

A smile. We breathed.

The car trundled on and as the adrenalin worked its way out of my system, the rhythm of the car wheels had a soporific effect. The landscape sloped and bounced into mauves, ochres, flush greens, a long glide of hard yellow. Finally, I slept. When I woke, Daalat was nudging the rearview.

- Take the bandage off.

I did. Pain hammered the back of my eyes. Briefly the world span.

- Now push your hair under your collar.

- What's wrong?

- See the motorbike?

Through the spider-lines of his cracked off-side wing mirror, I looked. A police motorbike was moving up to us through traffic.

- We could outrun it.

- Not the bullet.

The bike overtook in an easy burst of acceleration and flapped us over.

– Say nothing, I'll talk.

The rider took off his helmet and carried it by the chin. Youngish, clean shaven. Confident. His free hand close to his gun holster, but casual with it.

They spoke in Punjabi. It sounded civil. Routine infraction. Then he formally noticed me. He leaned into the car, across Daalat.

– Good afternoon, Sir.

I nodded.

– Are you enjoying the glorious Punjab?

Daalat spoke again. Some kind of needle. The cop asked him to step out of the car. They dropped into a blind spot. I adjusted the rearview mirror and picked them up. Money changing hands. The cop pointing at me.

Daalat got back in, got us moving. He didn't speak till the motorbike was out of view. Then he said:

– There's a bounty on your head.

– How much?

– I paid to keep us on the road. He'll probably radio ahead though. We have to get off the highway. You still want to do this?

– Yes.

For me, nothing had changed.

– Where you're heading, even the army hesitate.

Daalat knew my feelings. I had nothing to add.

The Audi had no air-con button.

– I'll find somewhere for tonight. A friend of friend's place. We'll reach it late.

He said something in Arabic which sounded like a prayer, then spoke on his phone for a long time. The drive took us to the edge of a conurbation then back into greenery. I tried to stay alert, but faded into the dry heat.

Nigeria: The caterwaul of a 4 by 4 pickup sharp-braking by the compound gates, spraying up red dust. Dad's coffin sliding out of the back, hefted on the shoulders of six white-suited dancers, the brass trio in the same sharp suits strike up a jaunt. The pall-bearers make left, go right. Raise, drop the coffin, scoop, spin, foot catch, drop, catch, call out. *Dash it!*

I throw money at my father's coffin. In a slick foot shift, the lead bearer flips the notes up, stuffs them away in his lapel pocket. The sun sweating high. A girl singer sweets the air. The choir pumps hallelujah. Old men drop whisky. Cue the women processing past the coffin, straining to weep, the men pass, stony faced. Dad's looking younger now in the box: death and wax have dropped thirty years from him. The preachers elevate, syncopate. The crisp-shirted gravediggers leap into the hole and guide the corners. The coffin is true, the oldest man in the village confirms. But this man cannot be buried. *Wails of why? He never came to the village,* the old man replies, *so we cannot recognise him, we cannot identify him. The funeral must wait until the spirits tell us who this man is.* Pandemonium around the old man. His own face waxed with indifference to all the petitioners' protests. The protesters swirl and swirl, faster and faster around the old man. A goat wails, its neck ready to be cut. Cubes of soil thrown up, spinning. Sods from a big-mouthed grave. The air deoxygenated, cloying. A horn player staggering to an end note. The soft, insistent cosh of sleep. Death stalking me, soft-shoed, switching continents. Tish's room in Dunes North: airless. Outside it, a swollen river, licking the high banks with menace. Black mud. Patent black shoes. Ravelling ropes taking the coffin down into mud. She'll drown!

Woke.

The road gone. Trees. Movement. Daalat slid the car onto a soft soil track. The car switched, like a sapling branch in wind, though brush, then escarpment, punching into a valley of small leafed trees. Two left turns and the route was hardly navigable, but he pushed it through. A dwelling with a wide door and sealed windows. Branches clawed the sides of the car as he squeezed us under the lean-to. The barn's key was under a steel plate at the rear that also concealed a water well. Daalat turned the key and pushed. The door shuddered inwards. There was a flash of animal - dog - cat - fox - I couldn't tell, but it went out into the wild and Daalat, hunched, kept on into the kitchen. Soon there was the chug of a generator and a weak yellow light flitting down. He kicked through the spaces and we chose a room each. – Brush first for spiders.

He went back out to the well and I heard him pull away the shutters from my window outside. I only had the holdall now and the clothes I was wearing. The bed had a thin foam cover. The wobble in my stomach. Hunger. Fear. Tiredness. My arm throbbing. I peeled off the bandage and looked at the cut. A mess of blood had congealed around the gash. I'd seen

worse, climbing. I found a bowl, hauled up some water from the well, washed the wound then the bandage, lay the bandage out to dry, eased back on the foam, let the pain ebb. The night sky was clear, and the stars evenly spread across the sky. I wondered if I was pushing Daalat too far. I could hear him muttering *petrol* and *fuck* in the other room as the generator sputtered.

The constellations gyrated. He came in and wanted to check my wound. I let him smear antiseptic on. Presently, he spoke:

– Do you think this will deliver you?

– What?

– This won't bring her back.

– Please. Not now.

He turned back to say something else, changed his mind, continued out.

Night air lapped my skin. Heat. Trees rubbing. Two birds startled off the roof. Drifting. The acacia scent blooming. Mosquitoes humming against the mesh. The frogs. A swag of nectar flowing in. If a storm should blow, the branches would hit this barn like the tines of a thresher. Under the generator's reverb, I could pick out the fading tick of the car engine, cooling. The whoosh of blood spinning past my ear drums. My rib cage lifting. I slowed my breathing. The stars reminded me of night traffic in a Manchester rush hour autumn. From high enough, all night-time cityscapes became sky: sweeps of headlights and streetlights became bands of stars. And there it was. A star. Falling through a cave-black Pakistan sky.



## UK. Snake Pass.

I'm in Saturday Dad mode and I've taken Luna to the Blue John Mines but, four hewn-stone flights down, she doesn't like it.

This was a special treat for her, the caverns. I remembered them from a Sunday school outing in my own childhood. The long paths that lead down into a low-roofed cave, then the sudden opening like the wing of a bird unfurling, to reveal cathedral spaces. And high up there, milky stalactites, the udders of a lost herd, formed over thousands of years, my first glittering glimpse of millennial time. Luna loves all things that glitter. She will love the Blue John Mines.

– Daddy, I'm scared. I want to go.

Sitting on an underground step, tourists flowing round her, some consoling, some frowning. I give in.

– Alright, let's go someplace else.

There's a *tea shoppe* in the village, its window displaying a cake stand, teddy bears sitting in doll's house chairs around the cakes. The ladies bustle to serve us, pull up an extra chair so a teddy can sit next to Luna. Their joy when finally she smiles hits my sternum. *The kindness of strangers*. Luna feeds the teddy bear herself, crumbs and cream trickling all over, then sugary orange. I plough through a plate of bacon sandwiches, downed with tea, and muse through a fog of tiredness. I stayed up late rigging at a theatre, so I could be free this day. Maybe the cavern's darkness appeals to me more than her: mountaineering in reverse. We find ducks in a canal. She throws grass to them. The ducks, expecting food, drift away. By the time we leave Derbyshire, she's tired, whingeing. The Sat Nav lady is directing us home: *Turn left, then in one hundred metres, turn right. Woodhead Pass or Snake Pass?* the Sat Nav lady asks. I press shortest route. Luna wants music. She fixes on an inane pop song which has as its chorus *Two! Three! Five! On Five!* Luna thrusts both hands out in the air. The first few times it's funny and I high five with her. Then I zone out, wary of the road. We're on a plateau, grass either side of the tarmac, beyond that, stave-wood fencing with a wire-mesh screen pinned to it to keep the sheep off the road. Our side is the side that's good for overtaking. Lorries coast, test their brakes, readying for the descent. Hatchbacks and big-engined saloons fly past us.

– I want to hold your hand, Daddy.

– You can't, I'm driving.

Mist is hitting the screen, I set the wipers on 1. A car screams in the overtake lane, brakes sharply and snucks in front of me just in time to avoid a lorry careering out of the murk, deep horn blaring. A heroic manoeuvre. I back off the James Bond and settle. This stretch ends all heroics. Hemmed by cliff edge to one side, sheer rock face to the other. Steep downhill. No passing. *No Ladders, only Snake.*

– *Two Three ... Five!*

We're moving at the speed of the lorry with the iffiest brakes somewhere three twists ahead. The hero ahead of me is twitching. At a sane distance behind in my rearview is a green Land Rover, its roof rack fully loaded with what could be canoes.

– *Two! Three! ...Five! Come on, Daddy, do it!*

– *Two! Three! ...Five!*

To please her, my left hand joins in for three loops of the song. I make a mental note to delete the track before I pick her up again. Day has faded, shrinking the visible down to road, the silver of the crash barrier, the red of rear lights in front, and, swiping past us, mist-muffled headlights. *Two! three...!*

She's asleep. I slide the volume down and when she does not react to this, off.

The soundtrack becomes the rush of lorries as they pass, my engine's gear grind, the occasional rattle under-wheel of stone broken off from the rock above, patter of rain on windscreen and roof, forward fling and back scrape of the wipers. I drive smoother now, to cradle her sleep.

*Nigeria: The butterfly-cracked mirror and spider's web windscreen of the taxi. Pinch point.*

*Police and hawkers swarming. Healeys' Miracles And Restoration. God Is Here.*

Luna's under-lip juts, the left hand frozen in a *Five!* her legs kicked out, her hips rocked forwards. The criss-crossing child car seat belts hold her. I take second gear up, work the turn, slip into third for the descent.

Then it happens. Lurching up. I ram the foot pedal into the floor but no reaction. Drop gear. Fishtailing. The hand brake. Hauling at it. Hammering the brake pedal. Wrench the hand brake hard. The road kicking. Locked wheels. The whine of engine and spew of rain. Veering. Wrench of metal. Catapult. The barrier buckling. Burst. The gap's jaws stretching to swallow us.

*Haul the handbrake brake again. It will hold us.*

*Judder. Whine.*

Tyre smoke.

*Must hold us.*

Milky stalactites. The tea shoppe. Burn of metal on metal. Asbestos. A moment. Then we tip into the chasm.

Slicing vegetation.

*Two! Three! ...Five!*

Airbags. Crashing through brush. The ice shatter. A thrust of tree, Wood splinters. The windshield blown. Glass lungs. Hanging with the deflated air bags. Fish gills. And we are hanging here.

Lean across. Pull the air bag from Luna's face. A splutter.

– Daddy, where are we?

– It's OK.

– I didn't want to go back to the cave.

I ease my foot off the brake pedal, turn off the engine.

*Two! Three! ...Five!*

– I don't like this song anymore, Daddy.

My phone ringing. I can't reach it in my trouser pocket. The tree. Itself clinging to the cliff face. Hanging on to us.

*I want Mummy. Mummymummymummy.*

– Don't cry, Luna, we'll be OK.

I look out at the tilt. The hemisphere. The earth. Turn off the headlights and turn on the cockpit light. This way Luna is seeing only us two in our bubble: not the cave, not the necklace of lights from cars up at the cliff ledge. The only disturbance of the illusion the scraping as the car shifts in the wind. And the thrust of green in the cockpit.

Our eyes adjust.

– There shouldn't be a tree in here, Daddy.

– It's OK.

– Hold my hand, Daddy.

I do. *Think*. I can't see a route out by either door or anything for us to cling to outside.

Branch bark splits. The cockpit creaks, the tree branch weakening somewhere outside.

We're poised before a tumbling death. A me veers up that I never knew existed till now, a me that considers this and shrugs. But Luna. She deserves life. But how? What?

The sky dilates with the slight rock of the car in the wind. Tiny blue dots inch along the red and white necklace above us. We wait the eternity. Luna finds my hand again. She's OK. Shocked but OK. I squeeze her hand.

– I'm hungry.

– We'll eat very soon.

Ropes clatter onto the rear gape of glass. Luna startles. The thump as they smack the tin roof. Slow thundering rumble. The off-side mirror still intact. A slash of torch light. The shadow abseiling down. Then *holla*, a little tap on her window, and Luna smiling back at him. He signals. Yes, the window control still works. Small whine of the motor as it drops the passenger side glass. The air fresh with crushed vegetation. He tells her he's Spiderman's cousin and she's in his movie now. He checks her hips for injuries too smartly for anyone but a doctor, unclips the seat straps and slips a harness onto her, lets her help him – their little adventure together. Checks. Tightens. Gives me the thumbs up. Impossible for her to fall, he's promised. He swings out, her body snug against his. *Whee*. Luna loving it.

They never had a kid so keen with ropes, they said after. They come for me, and I'm fine, I tell him, I can move, shift seats over to the passenger side. Still he checks me for bone breaks. Then I'm swung with him into the mist, twisting between branches. A lurch and scrape of metal, but the tree fingers holding the car. Twisting between boughs, bumped along earth, grass, flint, hauled clear of the canopy.

Damp thistle. The grass-sweet air of the void. Finally tarmac. Fumes of cars running engines. Chafe of the ropes. Luna's toffee breath – someone has given her a sweet and they've placed her in my arms, where she clings, shivering, Spiderman movie over. Somewhere close, high revs. Diesel smoke billowing from the engine of a tow-truck winding in steel cables that snake and rip the cliff edge, looping down into the car gash. Steel threads that slice at the crash barrier. The octave shift. Hydraulics wrenching a snagged payload. I step away.

– I love you, Daddy.

– I love you too.

We're clad in black coral sky.

Now the whoop of metal buckling, chewing rock. Splinter of tree limbs. Grinding. Moving away further. Fade. The piano of rain on my shoulder. Luna's clutched breathing. *Shh shh shhh It's all fine, we're fine.*

I kiss her cheek, hold onto her, her hands stick like suction caps to me, one on my neck, the other on my back. Like this, I carry her the long way to an ambulance, guided on all sides by paramedics, ambulance crew, fire brigade, police. A voice in the crowd:

– You’ve joined an elite club. You have your own Snake Pass Rescue Number.

– Thanks.

She unclasps my harness, and, with Luna still clinging, I step out of it and into the ambulance. It reverses a long length slowly, before manoeuvring forwards and off, siren blaring only for seconds. As we travel, for a moment they try pick glass out of our faces, Luna shivering, fighting them off, kicking, wailing with exhaustion and pain until they let her be.

A waif trailing through a forest.

A crow on a tree branch, upside down.

Bray of a donkey. Last sigh of the goat as its throat is slit.

Water tumbling through a weir, its cross currents.

A chainsaw firing, steel teeth chewing wood.

Sawdust.

Glass.

**Manchester, UK. Yasmina.**

*You mad fuck. Snake Pass? At night? In rain? In that wreck? With Luna? Isn't losing Tish enough?*

Yasmina. I love her rage. How sick is that? Her voice comes as text, guillotining old promises, laying in murderous new.

### **Hospital Report on Luna Hanley maxillofacial injuries**

Five pieces of glass were removed from the patient's face, none of which went deeper than subcutaneous fat and all these superficial wounds were adequately explored. The puncture wound distribution presented fairly evenly to the left side of the face consistent with glass impacting the face subsequent to passenger side window shattering. No puncture injuries were present to the front of the face although signs of air bag abrasion were present.

Immediate removal of polygonal glass fragments was undertaken to promote wound healing. Patient then underwent x ray and two further deeper wounds caused by embedded radiopaque glass were discovered inside left eyelid and along left eyebrow and on removal these were examined and found to be of a shape and form consistent with shattered car glass.

There is no observed nerve damage and no fractures were found. There were no signs of extradural haemorrhage and no signs of ocular or retinal damage. The patient was discharged and the mother informed to expect minor scarring, possibly keloid and if so, dermatologist referral. Both police and social work liaison informed as a matter of routine.

**Action:** clinic at three months. Check for remote chance of glass extrusions later as skin heals.

### **Pakistan. Threads.**

A tassel of blue threads had detached from the elbow of Daalat's drenched shirt as he set about unpeeling the bandage from the wound on my arm. He was chatting shit again as he did it. He could recite every poem of Ahmed Faraaz, was qualified to officiate at a Sunni Muslim marriage, could sing sweeter than the birds in any tree with a voice that improved with wine, had two bankruptcies and was heading towards a third. Held the patent for a new anti-mosquito device. None of this distracted me from the needle he'd produced and was now wielding. It was sterile, he assured me, and he'd done it before. He hitched the waistband of his pyjamas and showed me wayward stitches in his left calf, then wet the thread in his mouth to ensure it slid through without snagging and started at it. I looked away and shifted into memory.

When Tish had played the High School rounders game and the girl batting let fly, lost the bat and it flew into Tish's face. Wide eyed and gasping. The ridge of white bone under the curtain of red. The three neat stitches at the top of her forehead were why she always pulled her hair into a fringe.

When in my teens, I'd fished the Mersey with Daalat using rods found in an abandoned shed, casting off among the river rats and shopping trolleys. We flung lines for two hours before returning fishless to school, for afternoon registration.

Daalat's failing eyes. He was digging around in my skin with the needle. The stench of him. He sloshed water and lemon juice over the now exposed wound. The pain dug into my guts, lit my head. I would have screamed, but had no air in my lungs so could only manage a breathless curse:

– You fucking maniac. I'll push your nose through your face.

He stepped away.

– Had to be done. Don't clench your fist, you're increasing the pressure.

The pain in my forearm ebbed a fraction and Daalat moved close again with the needle, eagerly. He had hidden this sadistic streak from me, but now I remembered playground fights when we'd have to haul him off, he'd take such delight in battering the other kid, pummelling with his fists till there was no face left, only sheets of red. That Daalat.

– Here.



I threaded the needle for him. His hands were good for hauling sheep off ledges and engines off blocks, not for embroidery. His nails were filthed up too, but then so were mine. I nodded him to start stitching again.

– Look away.

– What goes around comes around.

That sadist's smile. I pressed my free hand into the front of his thigh as he started again.

Drilling the needle instead of sliding it, his digits groping and tugging. I hit his thigh when it was too much. Zoned out.

The mouth of a fish being pulled tight. The mysterious mechanisms of sewing machines.

How hospitals used staples now, not stitches.

– Almost done.

I wondered if maybe it was too late for this and the gash would stay as it was. He lost the needle in flesh and had to worry the sliver of steel through. It suddenly loosened and shot through into his thumb. I let go a soft volley of pent-up curses that ended in *fucking butcher*.

Daalat's dead eyes. Wanting to finish the job. A final forcing of needle through flesh.

– What d'you think?

He was looking at his handiwork like he'd just sewn the Bayeux Tapestry. Then the delight faded and only weariness on his face, the bloodied needle between his finger and thumb.

– It'll do. Thanks.

Outside, leaves in the trees were shushing and shurring. The toilet out there, where the mosquitoes had your arse.

*Bursts of yellow. Soil falling. Glass rain. Pocked skin.*

– Try not to lie on it ... What's the matter?

– The air's being sucked out of here. Is there a storm coming?

– Storms are all finished. It's normal after the monsoon rains, the air's moving because of heat from the earth.

*He hadn't collected his oranges.*

– Tomorrow we need petrol. I siphoned some out of the car for the generator, but I've left enough. We don't want to be pushing a car through this forest.

– You're kidding me?

– And Basir wants it back in one piece, it's a rare model, something like that. We leave at dawn, before we're noticed.

His phone rang. He took it out, swiped left. It stopped ringing. He looked over to me.

– You don't need to make any calls to UK?

I thought of Chloe. She probably didn't even remember me. There was no-one else.

– It's OK.

– Payment Centres? Debt Management lines?

– Always with the jokes.

I was hearing something not human. It had joined the murmur of leaves and the knocking of branches. Daalat listened with me a moment, then dismissed it.

– Frogs. There's water nearby. Try to sleep.

That bucket pond where we kept tadpoles as kids. How they dropped tails, became frogs, and we accommodated their metamorphosis by finding them house bricks for perches.

Shooting tongues. Rubbery hind legs sluicing windscreen glass. Downpour. The film rolling.

### **Manchester. Social Services interview.**

I have a 2.15 appointment with a Mrs Armitage of Northley Social Services Child Protection Team. Her office is on a Business Park. It rubs gutters with Al Murad wallpaper Suppliers, FastGo Couriers, DynoRod AutoGlass. I pull up at 26, an oblong of four, stacked cabins, take the sloping disabled access ramp, push the lever on the PVC door and find myself in a narrow, glass-windowed entrance space. Welcome to Early Intervention, says the internal sign above the locked door, in standard municipal font.

Crumpled rubber mats. Informational posters lining the walls. Crimeline. Childline. Terrorism Reporting Line. Photos in the posters of bound women and sunken children. More leaflets on a small table at my feet advertising an Anti-Violence project. A poster for Chippendale's Circus, almost too large for the table, buried under the leaflets. The entire woe of the North has slid off a ledge and landed in this foyer. But there is always the circus. *Please Ring To Enter* is written in biro on a label stuck above a white, plastic-cased, black buttoned bell. I ring. There is no click of a lock mechanism retracting. I wait. This tightrope. She comes to the door, offers no handshake but a professional smile that mixes weariness, scepticism, caution all in one half-upturn of a lip and semi-nod of her head. Her thick knit jumper is one shade darker than her hair, and a thin, gold crucifix floats at the neckline. She ushers me into a narrow, internal corridor then hard left, crossing a threshold. She's expeditious, shows me with a practiced shape of her hand which chair I am supposed to take, apologises for the cold. It is a clutter-less interview room. Empty shelving, table, two chairs. She's wearing bifocals and thumbing through a salmon Manila file, looking for something. *One moment.* She finds it, reads.

Her hair falls over her face. We're on identical blue plastic community hall chairs but with the office upgrade of beige pad in the seat. The thin wood circle table is between us at just below knee height, holding only an opened box of tissues, one white tissue fluttering upwards at the box's mouth. A glass wall is behind her and other staff are beyond that, looking busy at keyboards but occasionally flicking eyes at us. I stifle a cough in case Mrs Armitage interprets it as a sign of impatience.

The fluorescents hum and there are dead flies in their casings. The building. The room. The proceedings. A Big Top of misery. A shuffle of papers. She's ready. She says my name. Smiles the smile again.

– I understand you're here to talk about arranging access to your child, Luna, who's... how old is she?

She leafs through the notes.

– Three.

I correct myself.

– Sorry, four.

She doesn't look up.

– And in your email, you say you've always been a very involved dad and have the child's interests at heart.

– Yes. Not in those words. But yes.

Now she looks up.

– Not to put too fine a point on it, I did say access might be difficult, Mr Hanley. With you driving her off a cliff edge.

I'm not sure if she is trying to shock me with bluntness, or rile me to see what happens.

She thumbs through the folder, finds her page, a micro-second of delight. Pride in thoroughness.

– Yes. It's hardly the kind of incident that would inspire confidence in your parenting, is it? Her face stone. Mine too.

– Would you like to take us though the incident?

There is a brusqueness to her words. I have no thoughts, only this gut of anger. When I don't speak, her voice becomes almost sing-song:

– Are you OK? Do you want a tissue?

The smile is glazed to her face but she's asking what did I come for, if I was not going to speak?

– It's ludicrous. How can I be blamed for an accident that even the insurers accept was no fault of my own?

– I see, I see.

She scribbles. When she speaks again, her voice is flatter, more uninterested, her eyes staying on the folder.

– You didn't try to get Luna out of the car? Even though there was a path in the hill right by the car and you both could have found safety there?

For God's sake.

She looks up.

– Pardon?

– How would I see the path in the pitch dark? Who is to say moving anywhere would not have unbalanced the car?

Her left hand comes down from the crucifix, meets the right hand on her lap. She leans forward slightly. Sotto:

– Do you love your daughter, Mr Hanley?

– Of course I do.

I can hear a delivery truck pulling up outside. Mrs Armitage purses her lips a second. Then her voice comes again, lower than ever.

– Many men come here to talk about their child and they're in tears. They take a tissue, wipe their face and talk about the pain of not being with their kid, and it's all I can do not to give them a hug. Your reaction, Mr Hanley, is unusual, you've been unemotional, completely unmoved.

Her sentence ends with that tilt implying a question. I'm too tired for this. I lean back.

– Forgive me for not being emotional.

She wants more. Her grey eyes genuinely curious.

– Besides, as a black man, getting emotional is easily written up as threatening.

– I wouldn't worry about that, Mr Hanley, I've interviewed murderers, rapists and child abusers for over ten years, I'm immune to threats.

There's a beat.

– Let's get back on track.

– Let's.

– I'm to write up your view of the incident as a case of misfortune, or at most bad driving?

– Yes.

– Were you scared that day, Mr Hanley, when it happened?

I watch the flick flack of her pen as she waits. The glint of the necklace in the diffused light.

The fluorescent up there buzzing.

– Of course.

Her head drops so her chin brushes the gold chain. She addresses me but talks to herself too, almost in reverie.

– Mr Hanley, you know what gets me about these cases? Everyone says the child is precious. But so is the man. When you drove that car off the edge, you were in as much risk as your child.

She lifts her chin now and her eyes stare straight at me.

– I can see signs in you, Saul.

Pool sin the lower eyelids. She swallows, straightens her back and takes a tissue, dabs. A thumb and forefinger slide the crucifix along its thin, gold chain. Her words stumble into one another in their concern:

– You need to reach out, Saul, can you do that, can you?

The staff through the window have paused. She follows my line of sight, glances to them, clears her throat. The voice back to official.

– Let’s be realistic. You’ve no chance of seeing Luna at this moment in time. I’ll write a report and even then...

There is something going on in her own life, I surmise. Or the pressure of this job is finally getting to her. I consider all the grief she must suck up here, crammed into this tiny cube. She’s still talking and I watch her lips moving and the crucifix glinting away at her neck, the slight vibration in the light fitting animating the dead flies in the fluorescent casing. When next I tune in, she’s saying something earnest, imploring me, as much as a social worker can ever implore someone they’re assessing while a handful of colleagues watch their back:

– Mr Hanley, please. Don’t become another statistic.

I nod.

– Thanks for your concern.

I say this to calm her. Then take a tissue because it is what she wants.

The door. Someone enters to check on us. They exit again.

Her professional voice now, the salmon folder closing:

– So we’ll be in touch in due course. If a place comes available at a Contact Centre, we’ll let you know.

The shaped hand showing the door, the fixed smile.

She releases me into the tiny reception. The rubber mats. The Camptown races.

Driving off, I skirt around a lorry unloading pallets, then drop the driver’s side window to let in the cold mind that selects the gears, scans the road ahead, wondering why this social worker office is located on a Business Park. Maybe this is the overflow.

Joining A road traffic, I struggle to make sense of Mrs Armitage and the interview. The gold chain round her neck. Her barely suppressed emotion. *I can see signs in you*, she said, and used my first name. The tone she used. In another era, she'd have been one of those palm readers, foretelling my death. Was that what her barely-suppressed tears were about? Or were the tears for herself, some private burden she was carrying while trying to do her 9 to 5? As I drive, instead of hitting the radio, a couple of jumbled verses from *St James Infirmary* come into my mind, wrapped in tape hiss, distortion and bottleneck guitar slides. The verses coil into one another, warping, intercutting:

*I went down to the St James Infirmary  
Put a twenty-dollar gold charm in my neck chain  
She's stretched out on a long, white table  
Let me die, let me die, please bury me  
So sweet, so cold, so fair*

## **Pakistan. Mosquitoes.**

The sky fathomless. Stars pulsing. I turned away from the window. An afterglow faded down to whispers across the ceiling. A slap on my leg.

– The fuckers. You must have the blood they like. Try this onion.

I sat up. The window mesh crawling with mosquitoes. Daalat had brought onions with corn in oil, and herbs he must have pulled from the forest. Daalat's hard chewing face. He talked about hanging on, letting go, life being vacuums, Luna was still alive and needed me, the Chinese didn't like coriander, you can patch mosquito mesh with cloth, this scent in the air was from the acacia trees, the mind plays tricks, his flaring mobile, to try sleep well because tomorrow will be gruelling.

– Any news on who blew up the car?

– Give me your arm.

He looked at his stitching, smeared more cream over it, pulling off the crust of old pain. The fresh pain rasped through my arm and into the bone. I took short breaths, waiting for the clawing edge to ride through me, peak out into numbness. Our heads were close. I asked him again, without asking.

– Erm, they didn't like us.

This was either all he was telling me or else all he knew.

– What did the cop say?

– You've got a European Arrest Warrant in your name.

– I'm honoured. What did I do?

– You should've paid those parking tickets back in Manchester.

The shared smile. His jut of lip, meaning, *fuck them, whoever they are*. It was how we'd always been.

– It's good.

He was admiring his stitch work, waiting for another compliment.

None came from my lips. He slapped me on the shoulder then let me alone. I lay on the bed, listless, watching sky.

An insect inspected a stitch and I blew it off. Daalat outside, messing. The generator shut down. Dead of an insect night. The holdall for a pillow. Bed foam harbouring a synthetic odour. My clothes sticking. I listened to the drift of wind as the temperature dropped; the mosquito orchestra packed up so there was only the soft clapping of tiny slats, some insect



clicking its wings or strumming its body, the steady tuk of a heavy seconds hand in next room's clock. *I am in forest, where the drama of hunted and hunter takes place.* I listened for engines – cars, motorbikes. We were far from any road and all lights out. Yet. Who would blow up a car? Who sent police? I trusted Daalat, he'd promised, and he was loyal like that. If I needed to know more he'd have told me.

Flickering. The breeze was sweet, but the bed frame rustled every time I shifted weight and my arm was throbbing again. I held it up so as not to rip the stitches but in this way I offered a blood banquet to the mosquitos, who were back again, their wings buzzing like miniature motors at the mesh. I knew I had to sleep.

## **Manchester. Arrows.**

Rain hammering. A bird flies into the apartment glass, collides, veers downwards. Awake. Sweat sluicing. Tish is dead. I dread sleep because it hammers my ribs. Numbness coats my skin. I sweep up my coat, float down in the lift and take a taxi into the city, find my stool at my bar, order my drink, the vile, house whisky. This bar. I love all the drunk, deluded fuckers around me on a mission to annihilate themselves in drink and take as many friends down with them as they can. I love their scratchy, vexing, language-switching, glass-emptying, strutting, hugging, yawning rages.

The bar soon shifts backdrops and becomes the Supreme Court of a Land Indeterminate where the eagle is replaced with the parrot, where Decrees are refined, read out. As of tomorrow, the racial order of all organisations in this land is to be inverted by the following simple expedients: the highest paid shall henceforth be the lowest and the lowest paid the highest. All white folk shall audition for roles in Cakewalk, Happy-Face and Proficiency in Jazz. No shop till shall be allowed to close the moment Johnny Bemba reaches it. No pregnant woman shall be turned away at A&E and told to come back with papers to prove she is not a failed asylum case. For every Kwame Mohammad Katanga who dies in police custody, five police officers shall die in the same cells. For every veil ripped off a Muslim woman in the street, a nun shall be flogged. The England flag shall be repainted red and black.

These guys. Office cleaners and Presidents In Waiting. It starts with their taunting of the call centre tribe. They know each other. The whites work the phones, the blacks sweep and vac beneath their feet. I listen to the cleaners lob their barbs with admiration. Who has not wanted at some point to take temporary revenge? There is no fun in blaming a system, an organisation, a Government policy. I raise my glass to them, some probably making more money than the office workers they're flaming. The Congolese contingent switch their insults between English and French. The fucking bastards white people. The phone workers hear worse every day while trying to sell PPI, Car accident claims, fake lottery wins. They send the cleaners two pitchers of lager and tell them to keep it up, they enjoy a good tongue-lashing, *so long as you keep our desks clean and floors spanking you can curse us all your like, comrades.*

It's only when both tribes run out of money that the owner nods to the door staff.

I count five. In flying bird formation, the squattest one the arrow tip. Short sleeved black shirts. Their fluorescent yellow *door staff* squares exaggerating their biceps. Only one with hair, as bald means less to grip (there is a manual somewhere). They shift past me with barely a flicker – I'm the house nigger – their target the Congo boys. Arrowhead calls it:  
– Drink up. There's no need for the insults.

The office workers protest, *leave them be*.

– They're taking the piss.

Mr Arrowhead says this to the office crew, then turns and says to the Congolese, as if a translation:

– You're taking the piss.

– We've drunk our own piss for too long!

Gales of laughter roll around their table, bursting off in firecrackers of French.

Mr Arrowhead likes it, holds his ground. Things are going his way.

– You're being disorderly.

– You built a whole empire on Disorderly!

They roll again with their own joke, hands slapping, tables drummed, on fire.

– C'mon, let's take this outside, lads.

The Cleaner Boyz are happy to oblige.

In the brawl that follows there is an element of consent. The same way a pilot needs air miles, door staff need fights. As for the cleaners, they are up for a tussle. Like having a go at the fairground hammer attraction, see if you can ring the bell, knock over a bouncer, folklore in the making. I acquit myself fine. Only the Polish doorman avoids my hooks – he's too tall and round to reach. They ram me into a taxi with the cleaners. The Boyz lick blood, knock fists, laugh and push me out around the corner. A solid evening's entertainment.

When I get back, I piss in the car park flowerbeds then settle on the tarmac.

*There isn't anything to hold onto to any more. It's all gone, it's all water.* Get yourself to the doctor. Get Loratadine, diazepam, mirtazapine. Get yourself zonked. Blunt the edge. Bloat. Else you will sink. The social worker murmuring in the waters: *save yourself, Saul, save yourself...*

Etta appears and tuts me off the tarmac into the lift, into my apartment. She eases me onto my sofa, takes off my shoes, kisses me on the forehead. Tiptoes out.

I eye the sliver of moon, listen to the blood oozing from cuts, look up at the sheer side of the opposite apartment block, see ropes, the window-cleaning cradle. A wood-propped trench hole. The grave. Tish lowering. My ribs hammering. The radio. A lugubrious late-night talk-show host obsessed with water in her advice to callers. *You are in a river. The river is fast, you are in it deep. The waters swirl viciously. The undertow is tugging you down. You have low buoyancy. If you go under, you'll not likely to make it back up, you'll become river.* Her fatalistic calm has a mariner quality, she has lived on the river all her life, knows its tugs, its snarls. *Look up, she tells me. You see that bright burst of light? It's moon, so sky. You have not drowned. I got you. We got you. Hey, the river's fast, and yes, it's strong, but there's a bend coming, so at the right moment, sink a hand into the water, then you can steer yourself onto the sandbank at the bend. Not yet. Don't rush. Relax, marvel at the river's power, marvel at the koi carp silvering through. Laugh at the mad charge, the weight of water that you're swept up in, we are all river eventually.* The river flows on. I wake and fall again, thrash. The talk-show host intones on, casting her net at the woes of a nation. The man who gambled away his house and relationship. The woman who had sex with her boss and feels trapped. The youth framed on firearms charges, not knowing where to turn. The old lady who has outlived all her friends and what now is the point? The son who killed his own father. The girl whose mother has beaten her every day for years and whose father beats her mother. They all call in, flailing in the river, the host's voice the sound of pain taken up in a chalice, transmuted there, gold dredged from silt. *Here's the river's bend, let your hand drag. Good. You're at the sandbank now. Drop your legs. Feel the grit under your feet. Press down into it and push with your knees. Haul yourself up. You are no longer river, it's over.* Vicious waves tug me deep.

### **Pakistan. Puncture.**

Wanting to stick a blunt needle into the back of my brain, pick stuff out. Slowly the pain ebbed. Tendrils, coiled tight around my arm, slowly unwinding. Eucalyptus. Acacias. The green glow of cats. Then in this dead green of night, suddenly Tish at the window, face grey, hair matted, hands pressed into the mosquito mesh. She's clean-scrubbed, snarling stitches across her chest where the coroner has sewn her. The stitches lift off, migrate to my mouth. A gloved hand appears and one by one sews further stitches into my ribs, pulling the thread taut until I can no longer haul breath.

Startle-wake. Tree branches banging the barn side. Tish. *The holdall*. I got up off the bed, soaked with sweat and find the holdall, drag it out from under. Shook the contents out. Rummaged. Papers. Papers. Then a glimmer. The pendant Tish made me in Ceramics class. The pendant was still there. Its clay back cool. The lime lustre of the smooth, fired glass front. I held it in a hand and fell back to sleep.

For breakfast, Daalat made fried cubes of a bitter root vegetable. In an unplugged fridge, I found a row of eggs, tiny white feathers and grey muck still clinging to them. I brought them as a drink but Daalat balked. I told him about Tish's face in the mesh last night, her chest stitches.

– It's not good to remember her like that, don't torment yourself.

He was inspecting his needlework. He smoothed gunk over it lightly this time, keen not to waste any as the tube was flattening. The pain welled and deleted any other thought than itself. It dulled more quickly this time though, then blossomed into something close to relief, some chemical in the gunk kicking in.

He found fresh clothes for me. I did the bucket, bowl, shower thing, careful to protect my arm, then eased clothes on. Brown trousers and a matching kameez. An inch short at the leg and sleeve. The thin cotton was good – he said it was going to be sweltering. We packed and stepped out. He dragged the well cover back into place, topped up the car radiator, chucked the rest of the bucket water over the front windscreen then we got in the car. It was still dark.

– You watch the temperature gauge, I'll watch petrol.

He used only sidelights as we bumped along track. We overtook a woman in a shawl carrying a short axe in one hand and a wire-handled bucket of plants in the other, her gait steady as we squeezed past. We drove a good three minutes before we came across somebody else – an early-rising street trader taking short quick strides with a folding table of some kind on his head and a nylon bag on top of that. The temp gauge nudged up a bar. Overnight storms had exposed rocks and roots and swept mud and leaf into sodden piles. The driving choice was either ride in the ruts and allow the underside to be hammered or take the raised platform between the ruts and run one side of the four wheels on the track's crumbling border. Daalat switched strategy according to some code I couldn't work out and the car thrashed through. After a while he flicked the headlights onto full beam and they

bleached up greenery. Branches slashed at the windscreen launching water spatter. We drove a long time like this.

Dawn crept in and the canopy thinned allowing in more wind. Jolts. Bushes slashing at the sides, car wash style. Daalat cut the lights. The view mottled into a camouflage brown; there was no rear view, only muck. We rumbled on. The jolts became rhythmic. I could hear the big road now, through the thick of forest - a rumble of processional vehicles. Just in time. The forest track smoothed and hardened. The car's rear jolt didn't smooth out. The car engine stuttered, then seized.

– That's it.

Daalat smacked the steering wheel with the heel of a palm and rested his head on it. We were on the curve that bled onto the main road, a line of backed-up cars edging around us.

– Petrol.

– And we've got a flat.

Daalat looked at me.

– Those jolts from way back in the forest. Driver's side, rear.

– Fuck. Why didn't you say?

– Thought we'd best clear the forest first.

We got out. The tyre's exterior side wall was clean ripped.

Wordlessly, two passers-by helped us push the thing onto the main road, facing into traffic.

– Is it carrying a spare?

Daalat flung around in the boot and hauled a wheel out. The spare was as flat as the ripped one. He was upbeat though.

– Probably it just needs air.

– What now?

– We lift the bonnet and wait.

The sun turned up its dial and the wind eased. Cars sped past. I wasn't keen on standing in plain sight on the major road where not twenty miles previously we'd been pulled over and when not twenty-four hours previously we'd been blown up by person or persons unknown. Daalat though, was in reflective mood.

– You know how, according to classical economics, the only thing free in Capitalist societies is air?

– And?

– They're wrong.

– What you talking about?

He pointed. Out of the haze, a blur in blue shorts and a red shirt came clumping towards us, against the grain of traffic. The blur shouted a greeting, morphed into a boy in red shorts, streaming with sweat, hauling a metal petrol can almost as big as himself, and tools.

He stopped three metres from Daalat, suddenly cagey. Daalat shouted a greeting back.

They went into negotiations. Now and then the boy looked at me, scratching his head and grinning.

Daalat produced some banknotes which the boy pocketed, then he set at the car with a jack.

He was maybe twelve. His bony frame expertly tugged away the punctured wheel and

Daalat flung it in the boot. The boy flipped the spare up, span it round till he found the valve, latched the foot pump nozzle to it and began inflating. Daalat started over to the petrol can, but the boy protested. Cursing him, Daalat swapped places. The boy poured the

petrol into the car like it was liquid gold, as Daalat worked the foot pump. They eyed each other. After half a minute the boy tapped the petrol can and listened. He stopped pouring.

Daalat called up some expletive and reluctantly the boy raised the can to the Audi's throat again. As he did, he looked across at me and an idea fell into his mind.

– One love, Rasta!

I laughed. Daalat laughed. This seemed to give him confidence.

– Bob Marley!

He mimicked Bob Marley holding his headphones to his ears while singing into a mic and the way he waved his hand through a smoke-filled haze he'd either seen the interview videos or the *Keep On Skanking* album cover. I nodded. Very accurate. Daalat was done pumping.

– Is the tyre good?

– Yeah, it just needed air.

I was leaning on the car, looking into traffic for police. So far so good.

– You give me rupee?

Daalat hissed at him.

The boy slung the petrol tank down and screwed on the cap. Daalat slid the tyre onto the stud bolts and started tightening the lug nuts with a wrench.

The boy was tugging at my wrist, his fingers round the wristband I was wearing. Braided red and gold string. I slipped it off for him. He scooped up his equipment, then he and Daalat set about negotiating again. I scanned traffic.

Daalat calling.

– Get in, get in!

The engine was running.

– That boy'll be a millionaire in a week at this rate.

– What?

– He charged us close to ten pounds for five litres. Five litres!

– Plus the tyre pumping.

– Yeh, air. He wanted to wash the car as well, said it's better that way if we want it to be less noticeable.

– He could do that?

– Easy. He pulls out his phone and five water boys would show up before the spare's bolted on.

I reran what Daalat had said through my mind.

– 'Noticeable'? How does he know our business?

Daalat didn't answer.

During this conversation, we'd been found by the area hawkers. Daalat bought fruit, a packet of biscuits, peanuts, water bottles and a pair of scissors in quick succession. Then he rolled the windows up and we merged with traffic in a manoeuvre that tested the Audi horn and the hawkers' reflexes. We picked up speed.

– You think they're still looking for us?

– Certain. But if we get enough distance today...

Short trees with white blossom flitted past us. We cracked peanut shells as the car burnt petrol, Daalat on his phone again while driving. I thought back to the explosion. Was Daalat the target? I was due to step into the car first while he went to get his oranges – he'd insisted I wait by the car. Why? He came off the phone a moment, smiled at me meaninglessly, went back on it. I had no way of knowing who he was talking to, let alone what he was saying. Finally his call ended.

– What news?



– The Mayor has stopped issuing visas. He says it'll be another four hundred years before they allow another black man to visit. And my car is now shade for goats. And Mr Kaur says hello.

Another call came in and I wondered if anybody could they be following us by tracing his phone signal? We were on the run. Fugitives. Was that a step up or down from the person of interest I'd probably been declared somewhere in UK police files after the small problem at the docks and Imperial Package offices? I zoned out, let Daalat jabber. There was a queue of people knocking on my door.

### **Manchester. Brake hoses.**

The knock is from an avatar: *The last three months was a coding error. We messed up your dreamscape so you imagined your daughter dead when all along she's been fine. Please accept our apologies.* The knock is from Climb club: *Your certificate for fastest boulderer has arrived.* The knock is from the devil: *It's time we got to know each other.* The knock persists, changes tone. Breaks into hammer mode.

I haul myself to the door and peer through the spy hole. My head is fuzzed. He has big cheeks, and a hang dog expression that doesn't belong on someone so young. I open. The flick. I'm becoming expert at police IDs.

- Which station are you from?
- Longsight. C.I.D.
- How many spaces they have in the car park there?
- About thirty. You got parking problems?
- Who do you work under?
- Chief Inspector Dale.
- If I put a call in, they'd recognise the name?
- Go ahead.

I don't phone, but I don't move aside to let him in. He can say his piece at the door. I listen with difficulty:

– Someone tampered with the brake hoses on your car ... loss of hydraulic force ... No brakes ... lucky star ... may try again. Luna.

– What about Luna?

I'm awake now.

– They must have known your daughter, Luna, was in the car with you. Which means they are ruthless. Consider this your warning to be on your guard. We're still trawling CCTV, but we think it was done at the Blue John Mines and there are no cameras there. Rest assured we won't rest until we find who did it.

Then the 2am kicker:

– Do you have any enemies? Any associates who would want to kill you?

All the while, he's still got his, may-I-come-in? vibe going. *What is it in there that you're hiding from me?* I look at him with dead eyes.

The door next but one opens even though it's silly o'clock. Etta comes onto the landing in her Hilton logo'd, latte-brown, terry dressing gown.

– Have you seen Ralph, Saul? He's late again.

– Not seen him, Etta but if he shows you'll be the first to know.

– Thank you, Saul.

Etta gives a cold stare to the plain clothes cop. Then back to me:

– Anything wrong?

– No. He was delivering me a parcel. He's on his way.

The CID hands me his card, backs off. I close my door and slide into the sofa. A chill has got into me. The sky is like a broken two-bar halogen fire, spluttering reds and yellows. My skin itchy. Wanting to climb up to somewhere blue and cold, wanting to tremble on some edge, just me, the rocks, the wind. *Do I have anybody who wants to kill me?* I lost Tish. And someone who apparently cut my brakes almost lost me Luna. I chew it. The cops' mistake is that cutting brake hoses is a clumsy way of killing. A simple shooting is the more usual means, these parts. I read the runes of that.

**Threats to Life Osman v UK Warning Letter addressed to Saul Haley. Partially redacted.**

**Unsent.**

**To:** Saul Hanley, 48 Artillery Court, Manchester

You are not under arrest. You are not under caution. You are free to leave if you wish.

We are in possession of intelligence which suggests your life is in danger if you continue to drive vehicles in your possession which are not securely guarded.

You have already been warned by ..... of ..... Police at ..... today about a threat to you. That threat remains and we believe it has grown with the passage of time. Therefore a serious threat to your life remains. *We are unaware at this point in time of the identity of the person/s who tampered with your car braking system but our investigations suggest this was done recently and as a deliberate act.*

The police have a duty to inform you of this threat. You may be in a position to give us further information that might corroborate the above. Should this be the case, the Police could be in a position to discuss active steps that could be taken by to safeguard your security. This could include family members who you may regard as also being at risk.

I therefore advise you to consider the following measures: upgraded car alarm, always carry a mobile phone, change of daily routine, always walk with an associate, install a domestic CCTV alarm system, increase apartment security measures e.g. bolts and locks.

This document has been drawn up as a reference in accordance with North Police procedures where such threats have been identified or alleged.

Detective Inspector .....

Date ..... Time .....

The above to be printed off and handed or sent to the intended recipient.

**For Official Use:**

**Threat Grade:** Medium Risk – conditional on other factors.

**Ownership of Information:** Intel Team

## **Pakistan. Aversions.**

Daalat drove on and talked on. How his wife and kids had settled well in Islamabad and the apartment was fine it was only the Manchester garden she missed though she couldn't understand *why are you driving this guy, why couldn't he book a proper tour guide* and anyway she herself hadn't seen the sights of even Islamabad. If they did two hours they'd need petrol again, young people heal so fast sometimes an open wound vanished in five days, the English had no name for some Pakistani fruits, it was all marketing why asparagus got popular even though it makes your piss smell, they called a fish *basa* instead of *cobbler* and sales tripled because you knew you weren't eating old leather. The value of land in the border area was set to soar, they were building a solar farm, there, the Army would own it because the army owned half the economy and in turn the Americans owned them. In his village, the school still used bricks for chairs and it was all stick no carrot, but knowledge doesn't put petrol in your tank.

As Daalat talked, the sun set about melting the car plastics. My bandage was fraying, and I was sure the heat was making the wound fester. The pain there was ramping a headache that had started as a minor throb.

Daalat jumped four lorries in a row on a hill-climb. He driving style was he tended to stray to the mid line of the road for tactical reasons: the road seller stall on wheels doing a sudden U turn. A dead taxi carcass. Unswerveable pot holes. We dropped our windows.

I thought back to the kid and his Bob Marley impersonation. Mr Marley had made it across a continent, a language, and a music tradition. His *Babylon By Bus* came to mind, how, when I was a boy, the album kicked around our house from room to room, until mysteriously disappearing, everyone denying theft until the sound leaked from under my brother's bedroom door and my older sister repossessed it. I closed my eyes. Funny how, no matter how far you travel and by whatever vehicle, if you closed your eyes you were instantly back with yourself. That Marley line: *You running away, but you can't run away from yourself.* Right now, eyes closed, what told me I was in Pakistan, not the UK? The nose was the most accurate sensor. The warm, moist, slightly salted air, the different bite in the diesel fumes that mingled with the dustings of Pakistan trees, bushes and burnings. The way the heat lifted the hairs on the body as the skin juiced and the perspiration beaded up. It was that salt lick and how air moved around in these clothes. Then the charge of the traffic – the backfires and toots - setting down a rhythm you could slide into, a febrile syncopation to

rival any of Rita and Bob's. I forced my eyes back open. I was on lookout. We did over two hours before we pulled over for a refuel.

Merely to rest my hand on the table of the petrol station forecourt was to plug into Rawalpindi vibrations. Except the stitches became showers of needles jabbing the flesh, searching for the deep nerve that would trigger deeper pain. I reached for a cigarette from Daalat's pack. I'd given him the rest of the money. Money meant little to me now. He'd need to pay for the car that was wrecked in the village. I looked across at him. Here was a man who had shaved in a raging storm, drunk, on a fishing boat. He shoved a wrap of cooked vegetables and diced chicken towards me:

– What?

I gave him a shrug from my repertoire of shrugs, the one approximating, something *funny on my mind, but not so funny I'd waste my breath or your ears telling it.*

He motioned to the sandwich.

– It's not food that will win an award. Petrol station grub. Eat.

He chomped through his, then started shelling and eating roasted peanuts. His face cuts were healed now, he'd been further from the blast than me. I was trying to gauge the level of his weariness from the length of his stares. They'd been getting longer. He was beginning to doubt my sanity or the sanity of my objectives. Such doubt was natural. He had business to conduct (whatever that was since it changed with each description of it). Maybe that explained all the phone calls and texting. Some billboard we'd passed somewhere boasted your office is now your phone, you never need stick to the same chair in the same room in the same city in a world of sameness. Your office is now as beautiful a location as you choose to visit. I looked around. A service station was stretching the beauty analogy.

– You're dozing.

– What?

– Your hand was slipping off your chin. Take this.

He'd gone and come back. It was a new, plastic-sealed, roll of bandage.

It made sense. Accidents would be a good source of custom for shops on these roads.

Bandages. Breakdown kits. Torches. Painkillers. All as essential as petrol and oil. The petrol station companies probably paid someone to dig pot holes periodically. Daalat forced me to drink two bottles of water and a further can of a stimulant drink, then told me he'd had a few back spasms this morning and I should try driving now if my arm could take it.

The way he eased himself into the passenger seat, I had a flash of Mr Kaur in his office. *Pani*. He reclined the seat as far as it would go and took a bottle of water to his lips. I got us going, made the gear changes smooth as I could. The sun beat on. I got through a litre bottle of water quickly, plus the stimulant drink.

The engine was a 1.6 and fine with the gradients. Changing gears required a flexing of arm muscles that sent splinters into my shoulder. I learned to leave the car in gear till it was close to stalling then shift with an open palm: a boy-racer style shove on the gear stick. Still, I lost my shoulder in the first five miles. The foot pedals meanwhile were inflaming my swollen left ankle, so I tried for a constant speed. I felt awake enough to admire in a touristic way the cavalcade of vehicles to my right and jiggling in my mirrors. In turn, I won a stare here and there from overtakers, those puzzled or amused at the sight of me behind the wheel of a car on this road, but most passing drivers were too busy piloting their own loads to concern themselves with looking at me, and that was how I preferred it.

I kept us moving. The spotlight sun didn't allow any reflection other than its own – bouncing off panels, glass, mirrors, plastic. Yet the lull of the drive, its harmonic repetition teased feelings to the surface in the way, on a day free of churn, you could sometimes glimpse the bottom of a river, through the running water. Sand, sharing so many of the properties of glass but eroded, ground down into a fine silica substance that could fill timers, make beaches.

Nigeria: Calabar. Sand banks. The hulks of ships. The hollered accusation: *This man is stealing from me! He pick my pocket!* Hemmed by bodies. Abeg. You cannot pick the pocket of a man who has nothing. *No oyibo has nothing*. The okada's sewing machine engine.

Nodding my thanks to the nameless woman who lucked me from the crowd. Speeding off. I was driving one handed. Daalat was crumpled in the passenger seat, the seat belt curving over his belly and rubbing his cheek. The windows were up and we sweltered. A cocktail of earth smells, acrid sweat, fragranced with peanut husk bloom, the sickly sweetness of the consumed can of stimulant, the softening interior plastics. This was how it was when men travelled distances together. I dropped the driver's side window a centimetre.

At first, I mistook it for a fly inside of the car, buzzing the rearview mirror. Then I understood it was outside. Its overtakes were risky. Light bouncing from its chrome. The shell of a white helmet. I knew those helmets. Still far enough away, but gaining.



No mistaking it now. I let one dirt track go, the angle too soft, our departure too visible, nowhere to hide. I shifted to the outside lane. Daalat still asleep. Picking up speed. More junctions then a mid-size gap. Beyond it a sprawl of roads, a housing development, traffic: places to disappear. The white helmet was rushing up. I dropped a gear. Daalat grunted. No time to wake him.

The hawker drinks stall to left. The meat stall, dripping blood, other side. Lorry oncoming at four seconds impact. It had to be now. I hauled the wheel with both hands and threaded us. An empty water bottle flew across the cockpit. Horning grille. Dust cloud. Curse. The pot hole's smash at the turn. Daalat airborne into the car's roof.

Then slide. Brake.

The bottle wedged under the brake pedal.

Kicked out. Trundling. Brake.

I'd taken us in a fling of dust on a ninety degree turn, across the dip, onto the dust road. We straightened out, despite the engine whine. I took us round, then sharply down into the driveway of a low apartment block. The road just visible from here. Chickens flapping. Our car hugging the block's concrete wall. The heat from it. Partial shade my side. Daalat groaning in the passenger foot well. I kept us snucked tight against the wall and waited.

Seconds ticked by. Daalat speaking in a whispered curse:

– You fucking brainless donkey bollocks. Are you fucking insane?

The cut on his head was neat: a side-slicing can opener job.

*Quiet.* I stopped his breath with a finger to my mouth and held my own. I pointed. *There.*

Above, on the road, the police motorbike flew past, the white-helmeted rider standing high, searching. The bike swept along the road, in a burst of sand and dust.

*Breathe.*

Now there was only the man approaching on foot with a triple rivet meat cleaver in hand to deal with. I sweated and sank, trying to hold the cleaver man in the frame, but the head pain was too much and everything fractalized, tessellated, faded.

## Manchester. Fractals.

I'm queued on the Child Maintenance line.

If you are the parent with care press 1

If you are the parent without care press 2

If you are calling about an existing case press 1

If you are calling about a new case press 2

I wander across theatre land, but news has got about: *Saul crashed his car, nearly killed his little daughter in it.* It piles on top of the news of Tish's death. Conclusion: *He's high risk.*

Doors close. Phones unanswered. *You need to take a break, Saul.* Since when does a freelancer take a break? The theatres and convention rigging teams are all apologetic. It's a circus. I tell them it's cool. A long day of nothing.

I'm at Bite Club and we play so many hands nobody knows the score. In between the hands, advice. Get a dog. Take up Zumba. Play FIFA Online. Join the church. Go to the tarot card reader. Come to the bookies. The newcomer says she's bored. Chloe is a biologist. We end up, by a series of bars, at her place. She explains her rare frogs, the different positions they adopt and croaks they make, her version of taking work home. I glance over the apartment. Gloss ivory furniture, large dried flowers springing from elongated vases, a bookcase, spilling with hardbacks and journals. On the walls, prints of angular women stroking flowing brown or red hair, while half-minded to step out of ponds and baths, usually catching your gaze straight on. There is a balcony that overlooks the river. It's too cold to go there now, but in summer the sun floods in, she tells me. The tucked, diffused uplighters of the lounge flow into soft, multicolour dimmers as we cross into the bedroom. We make a valiant attempt at mating before dropping to sleep. In the morning, she rattles pans.

I'm at the gym. Old Ray is leading the late afternoon circuit. Work up a sweat, shadow boxing. Jab. Move. Slide. Pivot. Right cross. Slip back. High low. Feint. Slide. Medicine ball. Scissors. Head rolls. Neck aches. Switch. Bag work with the quarter foam bags and fingerless leather gloves. Switch bags for body work. Aim for the kidneys. The way to the head is through the body. The body slowed, the head falls. Dig under. Body swerve. Now close in. Pummel. Speed. Heft. Partner off. Jab and move. Jab and move. Circle. Feint. Jab. Circle. Feint. Jab. Jab. Hand high. Too low, Saul. Lads. Easy. Saul. High hands. Shift Shift Move. One One Two. Jab Jab Hook. Easy. On the pads. Centre. Focus. Switch. On the bench in sweat,

Ray pulling off my gloves. *Timing, Saul, you still got it, came up on his down swing on the four five, caught him. Laid him cold. Punch could have taken out a Pamplona bull. He's a good lad, he'll let it go, don't worry. I heard you been through things, shit happens.* Ray has massaged my hands and is now behind me digging expert thumbs into my shoulders, his tremors gone. *These shoulders are locking though. Can't carry this tension into the ring. Saul, skip the sessions. Boom. You caught him good.* The bell again. I'm laid out. Fingers in my face. Counting numbers. *Get up. Hands high. Chin tucked. Clinch. Find the ropes. That's my boy. Get out there.* Sweaty fear scrambled with animal pleasure. Glove smacks. Rope rolls. Canvas burns. Up. Punching through. The red glaze. Nothing better than to tear into a head. Sick with exultation. Blood lust. Ray sees me all the way to the front door, his ivory hands pressed into my shoulders. He doesn't want anything going off, says he's ringing my friend, that *Dalaat chap, to take you home, you shouldn't be wandering out there alone, mate.* The day is done. I lie back on my bed and know I've learned a lesson, even if that lesson is futility, the chopped up, salami-sliced, dead end of it all.

### **Pakistan. Meat cleaver.**

Daalat still hadn't seen the cleaver. Curses fell off his tongue the way he shelled peanuts – all over the place and without effort. *Crazy fucker* and *fuckin*g seemed to be his punctuation.

– *Share a car with you? Crazy fucker. Yes now I believe you crashed your car off a fucking cliff with your kid in it like a dumb idiot you fucking could of killed me not to mention half the population fucking manoeuvre ... Can't drive a fucking shopping trolley something wrong with you crazy bastard. Kill your daughter. Me. The whole fucking population of Rawalpindi. What fucking is wrong with you? In there? You need treatment!*

As he ranted, he alternately tapped his temple to signify my madness and dabbed his forehead with a hand to mop blood. Then, noticing the blood on his hands, he let off another torrent that slipped between English and Punjabi. His fists sometimes came up in all this, but I could see he was too concussed to aim them at me.

Meanwhile, the man with the cleaver was looming on Daalat's side. I squinted my eyes and watched the baggy chino shirt with short collar step closer. His watch was the slim, matt-black, digital type. He wrenched at Daalat's door.

Daalat, completely ignoring the man and his weaponry, tumbled out and placed his hand on his haunches to ease the pain in his back, the total effect as if he was offering his neck to the cleaver. I tried to alert him, but no words came. The cleaver man feinted a few times, but, getting no reaction from Daalat, seemed flummoxed, and instead motioned for me to climb out of the car too. The driver's side door was tight against the building wall, so I shuffled across and out the passenger side. I saw him clock my arm. I looked down at it myself. The bandage was off again. The stitches had held OK, but the wound itself looked not unlike the wound of a man familiar with machete and cleaver blows. I raised my hands above my head and conjured as much non-threat as I could muster, while shouting to Daalat:

– Talk to him, before he starts using that.

Only then did Daalat appear to see him. He cocked his head up and spoke in monotone Punjabi, still on his haunches. The man took a few steps back, then went away.

– What did you say?

Before Daalat answered, the man was back with a chair. Daalat sat on it and began a long sentence that had the word sorry in it a few times. Much of the explanation consisted of

waving his hand in my direction while tapping his temples. Eventually the man was placated sufficiently that he lowered the cleaver.

As these acts of communication took place, I was watching the traffic on the road above us at the end of the drive. A parade of pedestrians, cars, motorbikes. We were in plain view. I listened for signature revs of a police motorbike. If it doubled back, he might yet see us.

Daalat tugged my side.

– I said you’ve gone crazy since your daughter died and this is the path of your madness.

– Thanks.

– He replied everyone drinks from their own pot of sorrow. He’s the caretaker for the apartments.

The man spoke to me, smiling.

– What?

– He’s never heard a black man speak London English before. He finds your accent funny.

– OK. Should I talk some more?

I smiled to the man. For all the new-found cordiality, he hadn’t relinquished his cleaver.

My ears pricked. A cry up at the top of the road. Someone jumped out of a three-wheel taxi. A road seller calling out. Below these notes, the chug and grind of engines. A backfire. More shouts. *There*. A deep throated rumble through the cacophony. I picked it up. A motorbike with the right engine size and muffler. I watched it hove into view. It was being driven by a market woman. I nudged Daalat.

– Ask him can we move the car a little further out of sight.

Five hours later and we were sipping tea, watching the sun slip away. The caretaker’s name was Hamid and he was joined after a time by his wife, and her presence changed his manner. The *guard* look still crossed his face when entrants to the apartment block moved along the access road, but his voice became lighter, his shoulders looser and the movement of his hands more expansive.

A chicken appeared before me and we studied each other a moment before it moved off, pecking dust. Daalat had shifted the car to the rear. We were at the other side of the house, mostly out of view, the plan being that we wait for the light to fully fade, then press on.

Hamid’s wife came over to me at one point and stroked my cheek. I asked Daalat why, but he didn’t explain. He spoke very little to me, as if he were tired of English. I smelt burning

meat. I felt tired and alone as the sky shook off the last remnants of a sparking sun and smoke from a fire somewhere blew across the block.

## **Manchester. The pyre.**

Autumn. Halloween creeping past. Sparks. Smoke. Pranksters' season. Masks. Bangers. Catherine Wheels. Paper-stuffed Guy Fawkes effigies burning. Fire brigade up and down. A dog trapped in a yard, howling. Cats locked in rooms. The air pregnant with mischief, peppered with gunpowder. Your main complaint is boredom and eventually by a series of phone calls, and various detonations in your room, out you come in purple DM's, jeans freshly ripped at the knees and thighs, daffodil-yellow puffa jacket zipped to a snorkel front, a cobweb sketched on your face, and fake blood smearing your lips and cheeks. There's going to be a bonfire. In the field behind us. *A burning, Tish, not a bonfire*, I correct the snorkel since I cannot see your face, *because a bonfire is organised*. *Yeh, dad, whatever*. From the upstairs windows, I've seen assorted fly-tippers chuck pallets in a heap. Then the local, bored youth threw in a sofa. Overnight came garden gates, broken bed frames. Couple mattresses. The remains of a bisected caravan. Somebody's floorboards. Now all stacked and ready to be lit. This, you claim, in argument one, is the new gathering point for your maths homework group; and in argument two, what everyone's doing.

– Fine, OK.

– Seriously?

– Seriously.

And so they gather, you, the daffodil nymph-fly among them, steaming in the cold. I hang by our yard gate, to keep it from being dragged onto the pyre and to keep an eye you and the ruck of puffa'd youth who are toting cans, tins, boxes, crates. Some to sit on, some to burn, some to drink. They spin, laughing, flopping in the dark. Jumping on and over one another. Keep an eye.

It kicks off with a ladder. The bonfire pile at this point, unlit; a breeze picks up and someone drags a ladder and lays it up on the pile. They invent a game of bravado: who can shin up the ladder to the top of the bonfire fastest and, the best bit, slide down, firefighter style, feet railing along the outside of the ladder. Cheers. Timing issues. A winner is declared but the losers are unaccepting, a quarrel flares, the race convened again. Tish joins the competitors' line this time. The quiet one does it. I only notice after, playing it back in my mind. The two-litre, plastic milk bottle, filled with yellow. Quietly poured at the base of the pyre as the others scramble up and down the ladder as only youth can. Gales of laughter. The wind increasing. Timings shouted and disputed. The shadow boy lights it now. I see the

ignition. A match not a lighter. Tossed casually. Who knows why? Some score to settle from earlier? Shame? Embarrassment at losing the game? Bad day at school? Being bullied? A little blur like a humming bird flitting around fast. The fire catches evenly. The blue light of a kitchen gas ring on full at the base. The youths still doing their fun screams, not their fear screams. They see the flames yet continue, the flames are not leaping yet, still blue. A dare doubled. The burn slow. It's your turn. *Tish! No!* You don't hear me or don't listen. And you chase up rungs for the tip of the pyre, outracing the orchestra of flames that kicks up now. Flares into a sparking rage. Waves of plasma heat. Your scream. I'm running. Through timber. Leaf mush. Slip. Grass. The blister pop of exploding wood. Seethe of burning. Scatter of feet. The timber falling. The pyre contracting, eating itself. The ladder's jangle and sway. I reach halfway. You're clinging up there. Your face splintering. Arms shielding it. My boots hit rungs. Hands burning. *Tilt.* The ladder. Steady. The flames race me. *Tilt.* The ladder holding. Holding. My hands at your feet. Your DMs melting at the base. I shift higher. Cover you now. The melting hot. You cling to me. *I got you.* Flames singing. No route except down. *Listen. On three.* I grab the scruff of your coat. Thrust a hand into your jean's waist and grip. *On three* I throw you. In one long wail, you go. The flames leap for you. They want you. Claim you. Your fall a ball of yellow. But its coat. Daffodil. Coat. I see you roll. Your gang smother you, gather you up.

The pile has shifted lower. Me and the ladder slipping. Flames have my legs. Burning flesh. The ladder sinking under my weight. I ease into fire. The tunnel of acceptance. To die by fire. I feel my skin breaking free. A hiss of gas. Raging pallets. Buckling caravan panels. Explosion. A whorl of planks. Sparks. Debris. Droplets. Rain. Torrential rain. Heavy, thudding, hosing rain. The fire brigade. Yasmina there now, yelling, cursing, crying, directing them. *I'm good, I'm good.* I'm burnt and soaked but I'm good. Then Tish. Slaughtering into my arms. I hold you. *Don't let go, Dad. Don't let go.*

Wake. Startle. Sweat at my neck. Gurgling. Shift. Pipes in concrete walls. A mosquito's solitary whine. Flames licking me still. I grasp at the buzzing blackness.

### **Pakistan. Into North West Territories.**

– Wake up, we've got to move.

Daalat thrust a plastic cup at me. Coffee. Half cold. I sank it in one gulp and took up the car keys he'd left on the floor. Darkness. Outside, the silence blanketing. The car started first time, in a racket of pistons. I moved it up the access road, spewing dirt. Daalat muttered a



curse as the underside scraped at the ditch, but we were over it easily enough. I turned on the headlights.

Traffic was light on the arterial road, ten car lengths between us and the next car, a gap that stretched as the black thickened. I listened to the high snare of Daalat's nasal breathing, the eight beat of the rear wheel we had fitted earlier as some bolt-nut misalignment worked itself out, the crackle of the empty water bottles in the back, the deep clunk of the unopened ones. A lorry bellowed as it sped past the other way, its flare of lights and unsteady roll reminding me of a Channel ferry in a night storm. I tried to talk down the pulse at my temples. The air smelt of Pakistani sweat, Russian cigarettes, Chinese aftershave and nutmeg – the rice Hamid had served us had been fragranced. I dropped my window and road air leapt in, a blend of toasted petrol fumes, cooling tar, concrete dust, warm rubber, grass.

The tyre tone switched down a note as the road surfaces changed from asphalt to concrete. Another truck leapt at us. Daalat slept on. I pulled up at a petrol station and refuelled. The roads began to narrow further. We made good headway. My fear of roadblocks and police motorbikes left.

The air was cool now. Sweet kiss of the empty water bottles. Burst of brittle fibre as I popped a peanut from its husk and ground it to paste between my molars. A four-winged fly stuck to the screen. Daalat fumbled into awareness when the roads roughened and began directing me onto ever smaller roads. We drove through two villages as noisy interlopers. Despite his eyes, Daalat took over. In the passenger seat, I stretched my calf muscle that ached from the clutch work, then poured water on my bandage hoping it would ease the sting. It had no effect, so I took Daalat's advice and drank the water instead.

– We're closing now. Anything starts, just follow my instructions.

Daalat was checking his mirrors in a twitch. The stars were out in that way only possible in deep countryside: spray-gunned into the sky.

– It took a lot of explaining getting them to allow us. It may not be what you expect. Nothing happens how you expect here.

The black spots of blood had fallen from his face, leaving pinky-brown pits where new skin was forming. I checked my own face in the passenger mirror. A Number Two beard looked back at me, straggly over the lips, neater at the chin. He saw me looking.

– Not beauty contest material.

I smiled. Trees trunks flicked by in the headlights, then low fields either side. Daalat kept a hazy line along the roads, his eyes straining. The mountains were out there, I knew, and we were climbing into them, but they were lost for now, swallowed by the dark. A small speck of light on a long curve was approaching us. I pointed it to Daalat. The road was wide enough, just, for two cars to pass.

– Probably nothing. Slip low in your seat and pull your hair together.

I did as asked. The one flare fast separated out into two, then four in a rectangular array. Headlights. I could see the vehicle now, a wagon not a car, riding fast, jagged, middle of the half-made road. Daalat nudged us into the verge, dipped his lights. They were upon us in seconds. A driver, eyes locked on the road, front passenger, four figures clinging to the open top rear, tense, at least one with a rifle. They were gone in a second. One of the rear figures had waved at us. To do something? Continue? Turn around? Pull over? For the first time, I saw Daalat hesitate. He stopped and stared at his rearview mirror.

– You see that?

I twisted round. A red haze momentarily. Pink flutterings in the low sky of their trail. Then just the swallow of black.

– What?

I thought I'd seen something but wasn't sure.

– They threw something up. Did you see it?

Whatever it was, it was gone. I tried to make light of it.

– You think they'll come back on us?

– Don't know.

He grunted, nudged the car back onto the road, hesitated, looking back again. I watched but didn't see anything behind, only degrees of dark and the leak of red from our own tail lights. Ahead there was the faint, twinkling glow of what could be a distant farm house. Either side, deeper pitches of black that I imagined to be hollows in fields. We shifted into motion slowly. The dirt road started to twist, making the chassis protest. Who was in the truck and what they were running from, was the silent question. We hadn't got fifty metres when Daalat slowed even further. He asked, and I reached back and passed him some water. He eased the car to a stop.

– Look. Do you see?

Again his eyesight.

– Where?

– In the sky.

I followed the line of his finger but saw nothing but a scatter of stars. Daalat edged the car forwards, stopped again in a jolt. Finally, I saw it.

It was far closer than I'd been looking. A grey blur, faded to nothing by the backdrop of stars. It had been moving, but had now stopped. The thing shifted a fraction closer. He cut the engine. We could hear the thing's motor.

– Get out! Run!

Whistling. Thud. I saw the road leaping up. Stars rolling. I heard the tear of my arm socket. A scream. Mine? Daalat's? A quake of earth. Fire. Stone. Landing. The thud of stuff on top of me. A trickle of fluid. Heat. *Please bury me. I want death now.* Slowly the shrinking of pain's acid wave. I tried to send the signal that would force an eyelid open, lift the skin I knew was there, over the eyeball, but I couldn't do it and slumped back into the mud of pain, wanting a nesting place that was least hurtful. My breathing steady. The base of my stomach. Something was split. To move was to drag myself across rocks. A nail shot through my shoulder bone, tethering me flat, any shift a scream. I wasn't feeling my legs and didn't know if they were still attached. I tried moving a hand to check, but the forearm was gone on the one limb, and the other arm was impossibly weighted. I asked them why. My eyelids didn't answer. And anyway, what did I want to see? I was buried.

Nigeria. A club. Indoors, below ground. After midnight. Horns brightening. Someone pulls me up from my chair: *come dance*. The low feet flat, slow turn moves. *Just synch with mine*. They do my high shuffle, then spin away, laughing, back into their own groove. The strings pick up. A woman takes the mic, rips a keening sound. Dredging for bodies at the bottom of a river. Fish escaping from nets. The spatter of water into hot oil. The whistle of a gravedigger. My father's flickering ghost in the band, drumming, sweat pouring from him. I ask the musicians, what does it mean, the song she sings? The lead dancer wipes the sheen from his forehead, tells me:

All is one, joy and sorrow,

We live today, give God tomorrow.

Brass of the wing nuts that bolt down the coffin. The phalanx of horns riding up, playing down.



### **Manchester. The funeral: third visitation.**

*Wake now, my lovely.* Arriving late afternoon. Municipal railings. The boarded-up gatehouse in a patch of grass, a signboard planted in front, enclosing a guide to cemetery wildlife.

Behind the gatehouse, a narrow-gauge mechanical digger pulling into a secured yard, its tracks clatter as it shifts from grass onto stone. The weather laces up the remains of the day, winding itself around me and the sky, strangling light. A plane crosses above, its tail lights blinking.

Take the tarmac to the crematorium. Rain. The thunder boards shaking in the wings. Off onto grass, turf, its evenness. So many dead laid out in battalions. Their subterranean coordinates. Tish's body released by the coroner but where the grave? I follow the river bank.

A straggle of wild flowers, feathered, blue-star heads. Then rhododendron bushes, deep green and waxed, their acid-loving roots happy. The rain obscuring paths, greying out the dogwood shrub and the grid of graves. Suddenly I'm at the rear of a stone angel, grey-white wings soaring along her back, ripping up to the sky. I circle it. Left hand pointed up, right hand broken off. Greek. Rippled robe frozen. Lichen-mottled, bare feet. And at those feet effaced chisellings in capitalised Romanesque font. I look across. Everything dimmed by the spitting sky. Tish has no gravestone yet, the rules stating the ground first be allowed to settle before any stone laid. I stumble. Tilt. Whipped sea. Rock slides. Stone wings.

Slithering. Hauling. Upright again. My hands raw. I shove them into my jacket pockets, among the car keys, cemetery parking ticket, chewing gum box. Walk. Stone scripts shift to Arabic. *From Allah we come, to Allah we return.* Black granite.

I sight a soil mound. Three duck boards mask a six-foot-deep trench. I must be close. No. The stone angel again. I stop. What use is this search? The soil under my feet is indifferent, the flowers not clues from God, only flowers. She belongs now to the chemistry of decomposition. Choose any pile of soil, kneel, weep, curse from whatever position in this cemetery you want, it's all the same. This trick called life, this jump from atoms to sentience.

I pause among miniature, white trellis fences, solar powered tea lights, helium balloons, plastic cups, leaf mould. Raindrops on a leaf like a row of discarded contact lenses. The dark crowding in. She is here. Fuck science. Fuck nature. Fuck the trees. Fuck the river. Fuck the balloons. Fuck rain. Fuck this. She is here. Somewhere.

I hear it then. Like the back hum of a low church bell. He is singing. He stands in a dark topcoat, his head thrown back. I'm in trees, behind. I lean on a lichened pine trunk on the slope where shadows proliferate. The last of the light is flying off with the birds. A line of the song comes through:

*Let's live today. Give God tomorrow*

Michael. He's racing through the notes, rivalling the rain for rage as it spatters him. The wind snatching the voice, dragging it through tree branches, the melody burred. Faltering, picking it up again, an octave lower. There's an appeal in how he sings now, exhausted, supplicatory, summoning. The squeezed essence of some old song.

*Let's live today and give God tomorrow*

*This hand is yours, through high and low*

And it works. Because now they come. The clouds pull away, letting light stream and with light, the chorus, revealed. Shadows, spread in a scattergram on the slope, turned towards him, shepherding his voice, burnishing, thickening it. And the beauty of the chorus is you do not falter, you cannot falter, they do not let you falter: the chorus sweeps you up, they carry you home:

*Let's live today and give God tomorrow.*

*This hand is yours, through high and low*

*Wake up, my lovely, throw off this sorrow*

The last, low note held, then fading. Shadows thickening. He's done. And like a stadium roof closing, like the lights on a platform stage dimming, the clouds slide over and the chorus is gone. He drops something. His chest hauls. Silence. One of his phones rings. His hand goes into his coat pocket and the head lowers. Turning away from her grave, his feet pick a way through mud.

I stay still, stiff, not by dint of the wind, but frozen in hatred. What is he doing at her grave? Sourness invades my mouth. He moves forward without deflection, maybe hasn't seen me. My fists ache in my jacket. I have the high ground. Yards away, his gait heavy, feet ploughing their way upwards, free hand holding his sides. His eyes flick up and he seems to take me in, unsurprised. If I am to strike him, it is now. Head lowering, he passes. The pine air between us stirring, no scent on him, only the signet, and the glint of his tears.

Yet I am immune to them. Everyone has access to tears, the guilty and the innocent alike. He will cry, mope, and after a decent interval, pick another girl. The pain of a father is

different. No amount of cut flowers can decorate the wilderness a father bears on the death of his child. The boy likes to sing. Big deal.

I loosen my fists, the car keys hot in my hand. I meant to tell him something, but he's gone now, and I can't remember what. I walk forward to the bulge of soil where she lies. Glance to see what it was he threw down. A rose, grey like the wilding sky.

Smoke. Cigs. Cinder. Scrape. Burn. The blackness of it. Fumes. Flint. The lungs yearning to open. Sprockets. My head heavy, taped down. Gathering chest arm hands fingers. To move. The hand. The head tape thickened. Skin spike. Mouth. Throat. Tongue. Throb. Pulse. Swelling lips. To speak. Red fleas, multiplying. Ghost dancers.

Waking. A trembling black scraping the eyelashes of my left eye. Grinding. Longitudinal waves compressing in a blurred flow of yellow white yellow. Floaters. A ship. Red soil. A hand. Not mine. Gloved. A breath. Betel leaf. Tug of skin. Heaved to smudge. Shapes. *No. Fuckfuckfuck. Please no. Let me wake. Let me wake.* The battalions charging. Threading. The pain. The pain. Stumbling. The eye of a red flea. *Relax. This one will take you deep.*

### **Manchester. The quest.**

Michael's Book. **Jimmy**: teeth clamped on a book, Viking topknot hair, shot blue eyes, tripping fingers, a Paisley shirt, bin-lid headphones. **Asim**. In green ballpoint. One arm slung over opposite shoulder, ear buds, one in an ear, the other trailing, his tongue stuck fully out showing off a long-tailed stud piercing. **Gurmej**. *No wahaala* in a speech bubble out of her mouth. Pure joy in paint-splat eyes. Fingers spread over those eyes. See no evil? **Amelia**. A unibrow, wobble-line Caucasian lips, one ballpoint lick of a guitar body, three mid-air frets, a middle finger. No edition number. **Courtney**. A griddle forehead, leaking pear eyes, the line of a rain mac rising to collars up, blunted cigarette held in bared, popped-out teeth.

I have to work my way through Michael's deal book, number by number, squiggle by squiggle. Shabazz's line is disconnected. The name next to it is Noah. His number goes to answer-machine where a recorded message informs me of his death and that if I was seeking advice to contact one of his councillor colleagues. It takes only a couple of searches to throw up his obituary. Noah Thorncliffe has two column inches in the Obituary section of the local newspaper. This informs that following a heart attack, he died in the arms of his wife at a hotel close to the Conference Centre where he had been due to deliver the keynote speech at a symposium on urban regeneration. Friends, colleagues and political opponents recalled a generous man who lived a simple life devoted to public service. Instead of flowers, donations could be made to Cancer Relief. His son would be standing for election in his Ward.

Then comes a single initial. S. S. picks up and agrees to see me. The restaurant he's working at is in Dunes. I make my way. Come down the squeezed lane through the skitter of cars, past the vast hole dug by the man who dreamt of coining it from an underground car park plus flats above but who only got to dig the hole before going bust. I ignore the balloon sellers, the horn flare of motorists, the addled skateboarders, skittering cyclists, the parked-up police van, the jewellery shop alarm – press though all this. Turn down laptops, open palms, beckoning arms. It's there, on the corner, between the falooda ice cream stand and the Lal Qila kebab house. Shahenshah.

The food service is indoors, the shisha business on the terrace where it's sheltered on three sides against rain by car wash plastic sheeting. Among this sheeting, at two dozen latticework tables, men smoke and waiters ferry hot coals in small steel buckets. Someone waves me from by the Falouda counter. We shake hands in the Western style, thumb at



twelve, hard and quick. In all this Middle Eastern, he's pallid. The S stands for Sean.

Someone brings me an espresso. I try to pay but it's on the house.

– You ever see Tish outside of Michael's?

He shakes his head:

– Seeing a drug dealer's girlfriend is always gonna end in tears. Good luck finding her.

He seems earnest. The creases round his steady eyes. Diesel, shisha and keema are the micro-climate. The car horns' fanfare punctured here by shouts, there by laughter. The cinema of a thousand shop signs weaving round.

– You know she's dead?

– Pardon?

– Of an overdose?

– OK. Damn. Sorry...

I let it sink in, watch him settle.

– What can you tell me about her and Michael?

I've tried to keep my voice casual. He speaks softly and doesn't look at me.

– I dunno. She was into him but I'm not sure the other way round. Michael was a care home kid and with them nothing lasts – money, relationships, jobs – you name it, they don't care. A girlfriend's no different.

Behind him someone is buying an ice cream. Plastic filters the light, smearing the neons.

– Did you get any bad drugs from him?

He doesn't miss a beat:

– Sometimes it was cut a little weak. I didn't call him on it though.

– You bought H?

– Your daughter, she OD'd, right?

I nod.

– I heard sometimes a bad batch comes round, but I didn't hear of anybody else ODing about that time.

– Maybe the others tested it first?

– You always knew what you were getting with Michael.

– You could trust him?

– Mikey took pride in doing things right. Anyway, why kill your customers? It doesn't make sense.

*Mikey.* Sean's hand goes to his face. His fingers strum his bottom lip.

– Do you know if anyone else supplied her?

– Like I say, we hardly spoke.

His hands begin rubbing his temples, the head shaking slightly.

– It was a shit time in my life, I'm really sorry. You want another coffee?

His boss is hovering. There are queues.

– I'm good.

I get up. We don't shake hands. Sean starts lifting plates. I walk off, duck the sheeting where my face warps into a melting gargoyle, swerve the balloon seller and his helium grin, slip the cars, the leafletters, the bucket shakers, the bikes, the police van.

It's the free coffee that got me. I am the dad searching for his daughter, object of pity. I kick my eyes up. Endless night. I take the notebook out again and phone Faz who is confused, asks me to deliver in person and gives his address. It's twelfth floor of a high rise with a busted downstairs entrance door. I knock, and the flat door opens inwards. I enter. He takes one look and rams the door into me. I keep on anyway.

*Splinter.*

– I'll stick you.

*Flip. Swing.* He lunges. I stick my knee into his groin and he falls into his carpet of shite as the syringe spins past my jaw and impales in one of his shitty, blood-specked walls. My hands shake.

– Muhfuckin.

I have followed him down and press his cheek into the pus and pill and bloods hardboard floor. The bones of his back crunch.

– I don't have it. Eddie spent it. Fuck you.

– I'm here about Tish.

– I never laid a finger.

– Look.

I retrieve the photo from my back pocket and hold it near his pinned face.

– Recognise?

– Haha. Choirgirl!

I rub his face into the floorboards till a brown envelope splits open at his eyebrow, then make space in his ribs for my knee. He isn't so difficult after this, his energy all expired like a

cheap battery. I haul him up and sit him on a sofa. It's sour and every hem holds paraphernalia. Behind him, between mottled curtains, a pink sky.

– Don't move. What do you mean, choirgirl?

– Singing. At Michaels'.

He did the holy face, but no sound.

– I'm her dad.

– You look similar, bro.

We look at each other. His breathing regularises. After a while, he is able to contemplate me, and I contemplate him back. No words. Somewhere under the ferret beard, the crinkled face, the mendacious eyes, the scum-smoked skin, to one side of the sores, rashes, runs, punctures, the reeking wool socks under caved in Doc Martens, in the half-light of this no electric hovel - somewhere in this assemblage - is somebody's son. Alive, unlike my daughter.

His smell is that fourteen days of not showering stench. A pus smell underneath that. *Don't move* was a sanitation point.

– She's dead?

– Right. Of an overdose.

A nod somewhere behind the beard. A breath. Unconcerned.

– Who supplied her?

– Michael.

– Anyone else?

He's not listening. I lean closer.

– Can you think of anyone else?

I press his kidneys. It jolts him into a litany:

– Richard. Baz. Roman. Connor. Grease-Stick. Harley. Gino's mum. Guy on the junction of Hyde and Whitchurch. Bellamy. The cigarette seller at Scots. The shoe shop lady.

He shrugs.

– She was in with Michael though. Mates' rates. Why score elsewhere? She's dead?

– Yes.

– I'm sorry for your loss.

Inside this body shot to fuck with drugs, there is a man somewhere. The Drugline Advisory Card I flick him falls into the rest of the debris around the sofa.

Frustrated, I hit more numbers. Laila picks up. Another broken conversation. She agrees to meet though I must go to her, she's way out. I drive. Mock Tudor fronts. Street lamps in Victorian black. A country park. Mobile phone mast. Small flickers. *Tish and car journeys*. Chucking hair grips into the glove box. Rocking the headrest back. When she stuck her foot on the dashboard as she kicked her hips up, rummaging in her jeans pockets for a guitar pick. Suddenly the sun's blazing and she's there, complaining: why can't I drive her straight to her guitar mate's house, *why do you have to go pay the gas bill first, you could do it online duh, I need to rehearse, else we'll die on stage and it will be all your fault*. I laugh. She looks up puzzled, *why are you laughing, I'm serious*. The sun in my mirrors. Too much glare. I pull over. Breathe. Look across. She's gone.

I switch the wipers on. The SatNav advises we're off course. Rain shimmers. Winding through wide roads, mature trees, regularly spaced. I see them laced into traffic light furniture and a mess of white lines: four leafletters, huddled. One of them approaches as I park up in the bus stop stand. Laila?

She nods, learns I have no job offer. Confusion. She is Tish's age, short, with swept black hair, Middle Eastern skin tones, booted feet that plant firmly in front of me. She slaps leaflets in my hands from her bag, says if I deliver them with her, she'll talk, else no. The leaflet is pizza.

– Why would these rich people want that?

– We put in Arab herbs they can't find anywhere else. Now no more chat. Move your lazy ass.

The first drive is shingle that sucks at my feet. Coming back up, I hear a dog bark from across the way. Laila's running, slams round. I swing the high gate behind her. A Doberman body checks. She's trembling. *Fucking Bastards*. We skip a house before she'll speak.

She says her pockets are empty for me, she never knew Tisha, glimpsed her once heading upstairs at Michael's, as she entered. The girl was rude, didn't say hello, then no goodbye.

Why do I want to know?

I explain she was my daughter and she died.

She takes the photo I scavenged from an old wallet. A graduation shot. Scratched up but you can still make out the gown, the hat, the fake scroll in her hands. I have no casual photos of her.

– She's pretty here, with nice eyes.

– Thank you.

We finish the next three streets. It takes an hour. She has a whole territory still to do but we rest on a wall. She's an asylum seeker from Afghanistan, though the fucking government don't want to know and are trying to kill me, there's no dignity. The heroin was a stupid idea, to kill the pain inside, she nearly died, even the tiny amount Michael gave her to try but she was not going to join the zombies of Kabul, no, better she would get petrol, set herself on fire outside Dallas Court, maybe they would grant her dead body asylum. She was sorry for my daughter. She wouldn't dare have a child as such pain would kill her. Her own father joked and laughed on Skype, but she could see him fading, she had to go back yet there was no way to go back, this was how fucking bastard life was. She was sorry I lost my daughter, but she hardly knew her.

I ask her to tell me what little she knew. She shrugs.

– There is one girl she laughed with at Michael's. She has a brown face, a big lady with high spring hair, and blah blah blah talking to your daughter and their chat has many bars, long battery life.

I laugh with her, I know what she means.

– These two are like sisters. She will know everything.

She gives me a name. Rochelle. It's enough.

The line picks up and *Hello?* It's Rochelle. She says she wanted to go to Tish's funeral, but Michael said the family were church and wouldn't allow it. We arrange to meet up at her place.

Not long after, I'm sitting in a downstairs room of the bedsit house in Dunes North. Where Tish lived. I had avoided it so far after that first visit. Now, by a different route, I'm here, within walls that still retain the echoes of her voice. Across from me is Teresa, her silver head down in a furl of knitting. Yukia is fingering the back of her phone and sitting cross-legged on the corduroy sofa with Rochelle, whose hair is bound by black hair grips. The lampshade wobbles as a lorry goes by. A cat twitching by the skirting board. I'm too late to see her room again, Teresa explains, as her needles click:

– The new tenant's gone out and there's nothing for you to see anyway, same as any of these rooms, mine's same as yours, innit, Yuk? Anyway, she slept on my sofa half the time.

Yukia nods but stays in her phone. I look around. Unwashed laundry spilling out of black plastic bags, beat-up, stripey carpet square, laden coffee table. The whole wrapped in net curtain yellow and cat pee.

– Was she happy here?

Teresa's needles don't stop.

– She had ups and downs. The downs though. Like that day you started screaming, Yukia, when you found her in her room.

Yukia comes out of her phone at the prompt:

– We dragged her into a cold bath.

– What did the doctor say it was?

– Toxic shock from -

Teresa cuts her.

Yukia and Rochelle recoil. I ask.

– From what? H?

Teresa cusses Yukia's disclosure, starts again, softly, for me:

– No. Tampons. It happens.

There's a beat of no one talking. Then Teresa softly.

– She had so many admirers, had to swap sim cards every month. A two-sim phone. She liked bad boys.

Rochelle, who has been wiping her eyes, speaks for the first time:

– How do you mean?

– Flash cars. Jewellery. Gold teeth.

– My guy has a gold tooth, they're caps. It's a fashion, that's all.

Yukia interrupts them.

– The taxi driver, the one who propositioned her. That was bad, wasn't it, T?

– You mean the one who tried to rape her. Bastard. Anyway, Tish got paintbrush cleaner from under her sink and my lighter. Whoosh! Shit his pants. Hit two cars spinning out of the way.

All three laugh. I ask again:

– Did any of you know she was using heroin?

The younger ones look to Teresa for permission, which means I have the answer already.

Rochelle, rolling a spliff, sighs:

- She started to like it.
- Need it.
- When your dealer becomes your boyfriend.

Another correction from Teresa:

- Fuck buddy.

Rochelle insists:

- Boyfriend.

Yukia joins in, on Rochelle's side. I'm sitting next to her and she taps my knee.

- Michael wasn't bad. He loved your daughter to bits. This one night he came delivering pizza for her, singing at the door and a black rose and the way they kissed right here in this room by the door. Even my mum on Skype said that girl's going to be... tonight.

They all laugh. I guess the missing word. Teresa concedes:

- Michael never beat her, never two-timed her and never pimped her.

I'm thinking, the bar is that low?

- We slept together often.

– Yukia!

- But it's true.

Teresa leans towards me, her knitting stilled a moment.

- I know how you're feeling. To lose a child tears something you can't fix, no matter what.

Something here.

She taps her rib cage by the heart, leans back again.

- It's funny, you calling round though.

– Why's that?

- No disrespect but she said she didn't get on with her father.

My heart contracts.

- She say why?

Teresa is reluctant. Finally, it comes.

- What hurt her more than anything was the lack of communication.

– I always picked up.

The hands slow.

- She asked me to sit with her once while she phoned you. Scared you'd miss the call. She wanted for you to say you still loved her no matter what.

I remembered two calls from her that I didn't pick up. Two calls.

– Things happened, things that only a woman can know. And the pain never went away from Tish. People used her. Often I'd have to give her a big, long hug. That's what she wanted from you. But she feared judgement, that you'd judge her instead.

Nobody wants to speak. What is it they're not telling me?

– And that's why she overdosed?

Yukia's voice drops.

– She was having this guy call round we hadn't seen before, they were happy enough together, but sometimes she sat in the chair afterwards for hours without moving, or talking. I asked her, what's up?

– And she wanted to talk to me about his guy?

Teresa nods:

– Next day, I found her in the park, rocking.

The silence again. Rochelle working up a spliff.

What was the 'sorry'?

– Huh?

Yukia looks up. I explain.

– She left a note. It said, 'Sorry'.

Teresa answers:

– Maybe it was for Michael. She kills herself and says sorry to him. That sounds like Tish.

Rochelle has sat through the conversation, smoking, holding her head low. Occasionally she's choked a sob, wiped her eyes. Her smoking is taking her further and further away from us, so I ask her:

– Did you take any of the same stuff as Tish that night?

Rochelle shakes her head.

– I saw her a week before she passed, at Michael's, asking him to give her some. She got mad at him when he refused, so I rolled her a spliff. Then I had to leave to pick up my kids from school. It wasn't Michael gave her the stuff.

Teresa is unconvinced.

– A pusher pushes.

Rochelle is either used to Teresa's provocation or has been zoned out by her smoking. She continues, not looking Teresa's way, but not backing down either:



– I don't think he gave it her. She'd done cold turkey for three months. After Tish's funeral, he came looking for me, to blame me, but it was bullshit. I told him I didn't have time for it – getting the kids to school, chasing down the Job Centre to stop them from sanctioning me, making sure my mum's OK, I didn't have time for H. But being a man, if I didn't smile the instant I see them, he calls me dopey, says I'm using. Like I say, after the funeral, he came looking for me. At the GPs he came. Bastard threw me to the ground, blaming me. He should look at hisself, I told him. He didn't like it.

Rochelle turns to look at me, her eyes blown wide by the skunk.

– Mr Hanley, your daughter was doing fine till she ran into him, it's true. She was considering Teacher Training. Number of times she wept in my arms over what Michael had said or done. T's right. Never fall in love with your drug dealer. It's a rule. She broke the rule. But he didn't give her anything that night. I'll swear on my mum's life to that.

There's a lull. Yukia hugs Rochelle, then takes the spliff from her. Rochelle leaves the room.

Teresa's voice comes softly over knitting clicks.

– The last few weeks, she was thinning out. She only ate soups.

– She'd eat pizza.

– Then throw it up in the bathroom. I did her laundry and cleaned her room sometimes, best I could.

– The note?

– Everyone has regrets.

Yukia is remembering:

– Remember when she had that screaming orgasm with Michael in her room, and the embarrassed smile on her face after?

Teresa whips her head up and hisses.

– He doesn't want to hear that.

Yukia's gone, she doesn't care anymore. She's crying and laughing.

– And when we got the rat trapped in the bathroom and she went in with a hair brush and clubbed it to death. *It was me or him!* Held it by its tail and showed us.

Teresa puts down her knitting, leans and takes the spliff off Yukia. She takes a toke, then passes it to me. I refuse but she insists, takes my hand. Rochelle returns. She's thrown water on her face. She looks at me smoking and smiles.

– That sister could dance. Your daughter could beat box, did you know?

I shrug.

– Yeh, she'd be like...

Rochelle starts beatboxing. Yukia joins in. They play off each other, shoulder rolling. Get into it. Rochelle popping a little.

– Let's go!

They go faster.

And so it happens.

Tish arrives.

She's squashed in among Rochelle and Yukia.

I look across to Teresa. Teresa sees Tish too, but shushes me with, *let it happen. Let it happen.*

Rochelle is up, tugging Tish to her feet:

– C'mon, let's do this.

Tish's voice is bright, wondrous, the voice I know, as she replies:

– Yeh, let's go!

And she's away, this Tish I've hardly seen. The happy-flowing, girl-woman in the moment.

The same girl-woman who was in the park staring into space, who could kill a rat but couldn't stare down a syringe, the one who throws every trouble she's acquired into a corner of her room, and sits among it all, in tears. That Tish is now wrapping beats round her, turning this room into a recording studio, a California swimming pool, a haunted gym.

Rochelle styling it out, Yukia slicing the air with hand chops. The three crash the stage, Tish jumping up in her baggy sweater, doing heart bumps with a fist, stabbing the mic out. Sweat showering from her as they get to it. Teresa puts her knitting down, grins, throws off a little hand jive. Tish's arm raises to her beat-boxing lips. Rochelle and she duet, leaning into each other, arms linked. Sliding, letting it flow, they bump hips, lock arms, glide.

Teresa's eyes have closed. Rochelle's gone. Yukia and Tish are alone, the sound muted, speaking in half whispers, sending up blue coils that wreath them, Yukia resting her head in Tish's lap, looking up at her. They're mid-conversation:

– It was beautiful.

Tish ignores her, asks:

– You think it changed anything?

The smoke coils stop. There's a sound like a drummer boy's snare coming from one of the walls. The table slants, though none of the debris – cups, Rizlas, place mats – slide off.

Another Tish shakes herself out from the sitting Tish's body, walks across the room, pops the table straight, looks momentarily out of the window into the night, then comes back, slides into her own body again, replies:

– We did something that night.

Yukia is sombre:

– Like you said, we can't be quiet. If we be quiet we're complicit. Wearing white was good. But it was dark, it needed something.

Tish places the spliff on Yukia's lips.

– Holding up our phones was the something.

Teresa's elbow slips and her ball of wool falls to the floor. Tish and Yukia glance over at her, unbothered. The house cat slinks out from under the sofa and starts pawing the ball. A smoke cloud skims Yukia's brow as she sucks in more smoke. Her smoke-veiled, insolent eyes flick up and her tongue licks her top, inside gum. Tish waits, amused. Yukia keeps the spliff, speaks:

– The one who did the fist thing, what was his name? He got picked up after. Affray.

– Deji? Cops always find these bullshit charges.

– They let him go about three a.m. that night. Bailed for three months.

– They'll fuck him around. They always do.

Yukia's eyes brimming again, recalling:

– You got the party started, Tish. 'Justice is trapped in the cellar of ignorance while the house burns down. The fire won't spare any of us if we don't do something!' Something like that.

A glint comes into Tish's eyes. Pride.

– Something like that.

Yukia blows smoke:

– Security broke it up when you said the word *fire*.

Tish smiles slowly:

– *Buildings matter but Black lives don't?* is what I said.

Yukia passes the spliff to Tish, nudges closer into her:

– The phones was cool. You got so angry.

– Some things you need to get angry about.

Yukia likes this thought. She turns in Tish's arms:

– Will you be going to the London demo?

The drummer boy starts in the walls. The ceiling slowly rights itself. More whispers. Yukia:

– I see you as the petal of an African marigold, gently unfurling in the sunlight of tenderness.

Tish laughs.

– Pass what you've got in your hand, Yuk.

Yukia talks some more, talking for Tish now because she knows Tish enjoys the sound of her voice.

– We know each other only where we touch. The rest we can't know, we let slip away.

Smoke.

A car door banging.

A phone's mini SD card pressed into my palm.

Fading beatbox.

The snare slipping low. Sleep twisting around me.

Nigeria: Woof of the low drum, whiplash rattle of the two snares thrust into sky by the white-clad, pall-bearers. The coffin on its path to the elders under the whisky light.

Pounding. Drumming. The last blood blast. This beat. This last juck of elbow and knees.

Lights fading. My father pointing behind me, into the dark, but I can't see.

I'm on the floor of my apartment, my phone vibrating under my pillow.

### **Pakistan. North West Territories.**

Soft laughter. I strained my neck to lift my head but the ceiling span away. The one who had told the joke was standing close enough that I could smell him. Burnt coffee grounds. Sweat. Betel leaf. I'd heard two others. One spoke quietly and evenly. The other was far away. I was on a flat, hard surface.

My eyes clearing. Rays of a sun splintering through closed blinds. A motionless gold ceiling fan strung to a light fitting. An engine. Stone on metal. The noise from outside too great for a village. Air trickled across, lifting from the floor the smell of blood, sick, urine and disinfectant. I struggled again and this time they helped me sit. I was in pyjamas on a single, metal bed in the middle of a room. The neck of a water bottle to my lips. My lips burned. On the room door there was a sign in red lettering that blurred out. Hospital. Else hotel.

– Where?

– Mr Hanley, you need to sleep.

– Daalat?

– You don't need to be worrying about him. It's us you need worry about.

The laughter again. They conferred. A phone, its screen lit, in my face. The man with the slow voice spoke from further away.

– Daalat is his cousin on his father's side. He's OK. Look if you want to see him. Open both eyes.

I stared at the phone screen but could see nothing but ghost outlines. Slowly, the focus pricked. Daalat, his purpled face held in a white plastic neck brace. Tubes into his nose. But his eyes open and alive.

– They're keeping him in. Concussion.

This told me that I myself was not in hospital. So, where was I?

– Tell him I'll pay.

– He had a message for you.

The betel chewing lined-face man spoke and they all laughed again. He turned to me, translating.

– He's never getting in a car with you again as long as he lives.

They handed me my holdall.

The second voice again. More translation.

– We had to prise this from your hands. You wouldn't let go.

– A bank robber with his loot!

In a surge of pain, the numbness began leaving my legs. I swallowed tablets that at first they said were Paracetamol.

– It's to help you sleep. You will have a good rest. A long time.

Luna. A recorded message sent from her mother's landline: *Hiya Dad, Happy New Year. Love you.* I play it on a loop. *Hiya Dad, Happy New Year. Love you.* Jingle bells. *Hiya Dad, Happy New Year. Love you.* Jingle bells. *Hiya Dad, Happy New Year. Love you.* Jingle bells.

I'm rigging Aladdin because it's Panto season. I work fast, life simplified to this clasp, this beam, this trip switch. Finishing ahead of schedule at the Palladium, I help a tech crew with their Fairy Godmother wires. They hook me in and zip me up into the Gods, testing laterals and diagonals. It's like abseiling, only slower and without the view. They want to hear whether it restricts my rib cage.

– Can you say ho ho ho?

– Ho fucking ho.

Chloe again. Phones me out of the blue with two tickets to Cirque Du Soleil. Not a date, a visit. We arrive late and wriggle through the turnstiles. The Big Top tannoy is playing *The Kempton Races Doo Dah Doo Dah*. Clowns in suits run around springing briefcases of jack-in-the-boxes. The host finally leaps on and trapeze artists take their positions in the tableau. At the interval, between hot dog bites, Chloe asks me what I'm thinking about and I say I have no idea. But I'm thinking about Tish. The tone switch of how Tish used to say, *anyway*. How she rammed her blue Kangol hat on her head before leaving the house.

– Try to get up now.

Hassan's explanations came in dribs and drabs, sometimes working back on themselves.

Riaz, Tariq and Hassan were area boys and they worked the gaps between factions. Mainly they left me with Hassan because the other two had day jobs.

– Try to get up.

Hassan with sweet tea and details sketched patiently. We'd been hit by a drone. From what he was hearing, the truck that charged past us had been the drone's prey, but the truck had thrown some material out that confused the drone, some kind of chaff. The drone lost track of that vehicle and instead locked onto ours. Again, some fault with the drone. Its missile missed the car I was in by twenty metres, which explained why I was still alive. The car was half-buried but could probably be recovered and patched up though they would not try yet because the drones might be watching for activity around the wreckage, then strike again. Lightning often struck twice here.

Hassan's mood rarely lifted above the sanguine. He forced me to move, stretch my leg muscles, did callisthenic exercises with me. He ate with me at each meal time. We took the same table close to the kitchen swing door of the motel where I was booked in. Opposite the motel, on the opposite side of the road, was an army barracks, the source the heavy engine grind and the shouts. Hiding in plain sight. Soldiers never ate in the motel.

I wanted to visit Daalat, but Hassan said he was hidden and the risks outweighed any sentiment, they would update me on his recovery.

After two days I was able to move about without assistance though only for short walks across the room, or the length of the veranda. This pleased Hassan who warned me to stay in my room as much as possible and above all, never go beyond the motel grounds. Those grounds were pleasant to view in the moments when I risked the window. Bushes of bougainvillea dropped pink leaves onto the singed lawn, where they mottled. Mostly I slept. The dreams in this period made no sense.

Soft fade of an engine growl slinking down. *Tish*. She is earthed, dimming, disappearing. Sycamore seeds helicoptering down, wind scooping them up briefly only for them to sink down again in a last flutter. The soil mound gone, the digger's steel plough turned up into a mouth and the props, the ropes, the boards thrown into that steel jaw. Another burst and the digger is gone and two gravediggers use spades to shape the soil, make for the grave its four-sided crown. *Tish*. Slipping away. *She'll drown!* I slide down with her into soil.

*Tish* in the kitchen. Teenage scowl that precedes a blazing row between us.

– If you're getting milk, Dad, get me some cigs at the same time.

She pushes out a fist, wanting to palm me coins.

– You know I won't.

– Why not?

– Do we need go through this again?

She shakes the closed hand in front of me.

– Here. The money.

– I will not help you kill yourself.

Her eyes blur, even as she looks at mine.

– That's your view?

– Yes.

Chin out, squaring off.

– But you smoke.

– Occasionally.

– I only smoke occasionally.

A slight smile. A little bunch of an eyebrow, nodding, inviting me to agree. She's so good at this. I turn away.

– Just no, Tish. I won't do it.

She's turned with me, into me again.

– Here. Just ask Hettie for two cigarettes.

Two coins in her palm.

– How many ways do I have to say no?

Front to front. A staring contest. This time she backs off, but in flouncing steps.

– God, what a hypocrite. You are fucking impossible!

Shouting now. Getting at it.

– Don't talk to me like that.

– I'll talk to you how I like.

– No you won't.

Leaning on a kitchen unit, face down, making herself small.

– Get me the cigarettes then I'll de-stress, that's what the cigs are for. I've got problems.

– What problems, Tish?

– Get me the cigarettes and I'll tell you.

I shake my head.



– Forget it. Sheesh! I'll get them myself!

To her back.

– Will you get the milk if you're going, too?

– Ha fucking ha, Dad.

Door slam. Second door slam. She doesn't come back that night.

I replay the conversation. Did I go about it wrong?:

*What problems, Tish?*

*Get me the cigarettes and I'll tell you.*

Was it just a manoeuvre, some light thing thrown off to get the cigs, or had she been serious, and I should have folded?

The grey-green tail fan of a pigeon. The flies are persistent. Nigerian green bodies and iridescent wings.

Nigeria: We are walking, Dad and me. We amble past a sign boasting *five-star hotel under construction*, all steel rebars, bamboo scaffolding, trusses, planks, buckets and piles of sand. The bill posters have been busy on lamp posts. *Need a home teacher? Contact us today. No trading no waiting no loitering. Water treatment? Phone us first. Steel works? 50% off older rods this week.* I'm carrying a book. Dad notices.

– What are you reading there?

– *Speak Gigantular*, by Irenosen Okojie.

– What's it about?

– How everything is doubled, has an ordinary life and a spirit life.

– Forget that. This is what you need to be reading.

I look at the book he was holding out to me. *Nigeria: Lessons From the Kainji Dam 1968.*

– Why the hell would that interest me?

– You know they send underwater welders to fix the turbines at Kainji Dam, working in the pitch black?

– And?

– The book says unpredictable flow reduced the twelve turbines to eight as a target. I don't know if I believe that. They switched from reciprocating Kalgan turbines to Francis turbines to increase megawattages. The Niger River is like an arm. The dam its tourniquet. Of course, there are topological effects. You can't stem a flow without making waves elsewhere at the

location and its environs. The pattern of that disturbance will tell you what is operational, from what power source stems the movement of fluids, who has controlled the flow's apparatus, whether it is an essentially endogenous activity or whether zero technological transfer has occurred. This reduces the subject to a vassal state. Think who did it? Think Dam. Damn. Dam.

– You're not making sense, Dad.

– Common sense is over-rated. Apply the science of observation. Follow that wherever it takes you. However insufferable.

– Saying it slowly doesn't make it make more sense.

– When Nigerians light up, it is this dam that gives us light. NEPA takes this power to make the light. Sixty villages were flooded. When you create a dam, other areas are affected. You can tell things about the dam. The lake is a fishing industry too. It serves the dam, but go fish. Fish. Whose hand on the floodgates?

– Dad. You're still not making sense?

– Don't you understand? I can't leave this scene. Here around me, this water, this lake, these twelve turbines becoming eight, this Nigerian body. Dive to understand. Look around. Who made this dam? Who? Nigerians? Who designed it? Agency. Think. Who did it? Who controlled the flow of Tishana?

I sigh.

– Even though you are diving into misery, you must keep your eyes open.

We stop to watch a traffic policeman berating a truck driver who has smashed into the concrete median of a highway's central reservation.

– Are you hungry?

## **Pakistan. Interrogation 1.**

– Up!

Shouts. Uniforms. Hands tearing my upper arms. Kneeling. *Run*. Hauled. Sockets popping. Dragged through dust. Blur. Swelter. Skin folds between the eyes. A mole on the chin, its dark aureole. My lower body inert, legs bare, socks trailing. Round a corner.

Heaved into a vehicle, its engine running. Others crowded in. Salt. Stale smoke. Paraffin. Rot-stink. Charred meat. Dust of chapatti flour. uniforms. Soldiers. Rapid disagreement.

Shouts from the front passenger seat. All the voices still. The truck bucking. Then a length of smooth surface and a light rumble. Someone's phone went off in a jarring tone. I was crushed between them. My dead arm. I forced it forward. Struggled to raise my hands.

Cuffs. Someone tugged at them and they bit deep. Pain dulled my eyesight. The arm wound glinting fresh red, the bandage a mess. That rotting stink was me.

My throat sandpaper. The hard metal into my thigh. A grunt then a whorl of spit into the wind. There were no sides on this truck. I threw myself over. Waiting for the smack of hard ground, the plan to roll then run. *Roll*. I couldn't figure why it hadn't happened. Pain - crazy now like a strangling. Then laughter. Eyeballs. I was still in the truck, on my knees. They threw me back on the bench. A roll as the truck slipped, corrected, slipped, corrected, corrected. Now came rain. Brittle flakes of mercy from the sky. Sluicing. Caw of a bird as it trembled in flight. The road ravelling. Stones slewing into the underplating. The engine gunning on.

Concrete slabs, angled and high as the truck. Jerking through. A chain fence soaring, ending in razors. Halt. A squat, barracks building. The clatter of boots. High revs.

Tug of an Afro comb through knotted hair. Coconut oil. Bleeds in the back of the eyes. The red of blood trickling along padded gauze. Boulders on my chest. Thrashing. To force open an eye. My hands' slaughter. Thunder. A high-pitched ringing. Someone talking in hushed tones.

– The sedative will wear off and you will wake soon. You are with police.

A hand at my forehead, another against my wrist. My eyelids springing open. Blinding white. Slow shedding. Filtering.

I was numb and awake. Tiled flooring and the light falling on those tiles pallid. Tremors racing along my arms. I felt the floor and saw my hands. I was no longer handcuffed. I tested this by raising my arms and moving them apart. I looked over myself, then further,

into the room. I was wearing clothes but no shoes, and I was in a room with one chair. A guard was at the door with a rifle useless for close quarters. My dead arm throbbed back into life.

The door opened. Another guard. Words exchanged then a nod, the first guard signalling I was to stand. He pushed me forward. My feet padded along a warm, blank corridor. Three left. One right. The building had a hexagonal layout. No windows at any passageway. A catacomb. Another left. The guard prodded me to move faster.

Through one door, across a short walkway into a portable cabin. The heat stifling. Two swollen officers in brown uniforms. Ahead of me in a queue a gaunt young man with a startled expression wearing old jeans and a powder blue short sleeved shirt. He held paperwork in front-cuffed, inked hands and moved with a bristling truculence, his prompt for this movement being a short yank of his cuffs by his guard. He and his guard exited via a rear door that lay just beyond a steel-bladed fan that roared in its mauled cowling, blowing ripples into clothes, papers, wall charts and heavily oiled hair. So far nobody had spoken to me except:

Stand

Walk

Forwards

Turn

Stop

A flow of Punjabi. The fingerprints guy remonstrating at my uncuffed hands. Among the response, I heard *British Passport* from the guard. The first man bent and straightened the fingers of one hand at me rapidly, Pakistani Traffic Officer style, indicating I should step forward and be finger-printed. The guard prodded me. It was a manual system so probably ineffective. Ink everywhere. On the table was a square sheet of paper with a line drawing of two hands for the fingerprints. Instructions in English were scattered about it. He rolled squid black ink onto my right hand. Took each inked digit and pressed it into its appointed square. Sweat threatened to bead on my finger pads despite the fan. He wore a gold wedding ring, and I saw that the skin underneath it, which was revealed as he pressed my hand, was two shades lighter. I noticed, for the first time, the red welts on my wrists where the cuffs had been, and that the forearm's stitched wound was wetting up. Finished with my

fingers, the fingerprint man wrote something on the chart then handed it to a man behind him who had crept into the room by the door. This man checked the piece of paper briefly, then left with it.

With my guard prodding, I was manoeuvred across the blast from the fan to a door. It opened into a quadrangle hemmed by the walls of what looked like offices, except all blinds were down. A large-leafed, squat tree stood in the middle of this quadrangle and, built into the wall to the left was a stainless-steel basin, matt black with smears. Above it, a dripping tap plumbed straight out of the wall, and below that a hand sink in which nestled a bar of black soap. I smeared ink around my hands using the soap and rinsed to no effect, then I was nudged back into the building, three lefts, one right and another room with another chair though this time also a desk that looked as if it was used daily, and on top, a computer screen.

I didn't know if it was the last of the sedative, heat waves or the ripples of pain, but the room alternately blurred into patches of light and shade and shot into focus. Two pens, a USB cable. A line of ants across the floor each third ant carrying something. Trickle. Swelter. Boxy shadows across the window blind. The ink lifting off the ridges of my fingertips, the tips' valleys cosh black. Gunpowder of the ink. Daubs on glass. The door opening and closing, altering the air flow in the room, so it shuffled. Machine heat. Wall heat. Tile heat. My head heavy. The arches of my feet moist.

At some point I had been brought a blanket because I found it over my shoulders. The man before me signalled a plate of food. I ate. When I woke again my arm had a fresh bandage and my hands were clean and I was in yet another room. This time, the whirr of air conditioning, mid-height to my left, a fridge-sized machine, waves of crisp air. This room was bigger. Bare walls.

– Good morning, Mr Hanley. Are you enjoying your stay in the land of the pure?

A desk. A brown face. An eyebrow riding up.

– Where am I?

– At Divisional Police Headquarters. Are you surprised to be here?

– Who are you?

– My name is Ahmad. I'm with the inter-services intelligence agency. I'm also a psychiatrist.

Through my feet I saw the boot of a guard in uniform at the door. I turned, saw his holstered gun. I lifted my head back to the light.

– I take it I'm being detained?

– We must decide if you are bad or mad. Or something else.

– That's where your twin expertise comes in?

An open hand response. Unruffled. Mid-thirties, trim, shaved. Civilian dressed. He settled deeper into his chair and sipped from a glass, put the glass down.

– You've burnt quite a trail through our country.

The burn bit was accurate.

– We're intrigued. Rumours have been flying around about a Rasta heading this way from Rawalpindi. That you are with the CIA. Or after the CIA. You're trying to join Daesh but following the wrong map. You work for MI5. You're on the run from MI6. India has sent you. You're a mule for Al Qaeda. An engineer with Al-Shabaab who's blown up two buildings in Kenya. The ghost of the shoe bomber. One of the four Horsemen of the Apocalypse about to join up with the other three. You are Kali, goddess of destruction in disguise. You're a controller of drones but the drones have turned on you and are now hunting you.

– Very scifi. Very poetic.

He pulled a cuff on his blue suit though it fit fine.

– We are a poetic country.

– That was a big list.

– There's more. Should I go on?

The ceiling tiles quivered. Suddenly a sound like twelve men on a concrete roof breaking rocks. The sound stopped as suddenly as it started. Ahmad was unbothered.

– The question is, who are you, Mr Hanley?

– I often ask myself that.

There was no clock on any wall.

– And what are you doing in our country?

He picked up a pen and held it in a way that told me he was used to signing off papers. He didn't attempt to open any of the drawers or glance at the keyboard, so I was in a holding room. He looked across at me. I looked down, past the numbness of my arm to the floor. Two blonde hairs that looked too weightless to be human hairs, too weighted to be cat or dog hairs. They had a crimped pattern running along them. Threads from the hem of someone's dragging kameez. The hairs rested on a tile and I noticed the floor tiles were a murky brown, and the grouting matched this.

– We put in some calls and insofar as this information can be trusted, you’re not with the Americans or the English or the Chinese or the Israelis. Leaving the Indians and the Turks or Daesh or one of their affiliates.

– I’m not with anybody.

He allowed that thought to air for a while, then said:

– That’s rare but possible.

The hairs tumbling again. Shift of the guard’s feet.

– Why don’t you tell me your story?

– I have a story?

– Everybody has a story. Don’t worry, you can change it tomorrow. Everyone does. You might even find it useful to bare your soul, so to speak.

The guard shifted again. I was aware of the rise of my lungs. Pain filling up from somewhere. Right now, it would be a heave even to stand.

– Let me put it another way. Your bag, the one you fought for, gave us its story. It would be good to hear yours.

– Where is it?

– We can return it. Your story?

*Why not?* I told it him as well as I knew it. It took the rest of the morning and well into the afternoon to even scratch the surface. Ahmad mostly sat and listened. Once, he got up to stretch his legs and stood in the zone behind his desk, turning his back on me as if looking out through the blinds, though the blinds were closed. The guard became more alert when he did this. In between my chapters, they fed me. At one point someone entered and changed the bandage on my arm.

I carried on. The circumstances of Tish’s death. The boyfriend. The flat. The note. The docks. The invoice with the Pakistani address and the clues from there. Burraq. Its dead end. The car exploding. Etta. Climbing. Tish. *Sorry*. Michael. I was not sure I told everything in this order, or if it made any sense, I simply told. The wane of sunlight was sufficient as a clock. At one point a two-man mop crew bustled in. There wasn’t much to mop except the two hairs and my sweat off the tiles. The air-con had cut out. The mop crew were waved away by the guard who seemed indefatigable, weight evenly distributed, slight shift from left foot to right and back every fifteen minutes.

Ahmad slew off his suit jacket. He was the only one I'd seen out of uniform here and that in itself had to be something. He sat, turned half away from me. Now and then he got up and walked a few steps behind his desk. His shirt had Boateng style, cream stripes, and his shoes were black Cuban heels. I was uncertain from the sound he made across the tiles when he walked whether there wasn't another level below this ground floor – sometimes I heard a slight fade, or at least some form of harmonics off the floor, mostly to the left side, but it might simply be my ears – since the drone I'd been hearing odd sounds, including an intermittent high-pitched ringing.

I became aware of a small black CCTV lens in the top corner to my right, the size and shape of a movement detector. At one point, Ahmad leaned on the window wall, sliding his hands into his trousers until the bezel of his gold watch snagged on a pocket edge. He gazed at me in benign silence and I wondered if this was something recommended in an interrogation manual somewhere or in a book on diagnosing madness.

– I'm listening, keep on.

Going through this stuff had become incantatory. I heard the hum of my own voice, felt my story flow and circle the room, winding its way into the corners. Gradually he introduced questions. How had I arrived. Who I'd met. My mother's maiden name. If I'd bought the tickets myself. How much cash I'd been carrying. In which currencies. Every question an invitation to another story. Sometimes I felt he was repeating himself. Or I was. His phone rang. He answered with a tension in his voice he hadn't shown me. The guard slipped away, replaced by another in the same olive uniform, same standard issue gun.

The sun had arrived left and was now exiting right. My chair was one of those dentists' reception area things with boxy sides and its shadows stretched all the way to the guard. I checked, and my lips were no longer moving. It appeared I had finished.

For the first time Ahmad laughed. It changed the shape of his face and I could see he might once have been handsome, the waves in his hair, the curl of lines round his eyes offsetting the scars. He spoke to the guard and the guard took out a phone and spoke briefly with someone else and then nodded to Ahmad.

– Thankyou. Excuse me.

Ahmad slipped away.

I turned. This new guard had a finger wedged in his ear and was digging there. I stood. His hand dropped to his waist. *Let him shoot me if he wanted to, I was stretching my legs.* As I



moved, he tensed. I had the advantage of weight. First move. Momentum. What then? There were eight doors, three corridors and two sentries before an exit point. Shorting the lights, I'd buy time. *To go down fighting*. Was it that moment? A thick click. The safety. The guard's thumb. Blank eyes on me. Sniffle. He looked like he'd shot a few people in the past. I shrugged, measured my strides. He eased the forearm of his gun hand higher. He had a sniffle. A sweep of headlights beyond the blind cut the room in half.

In the ballet of this criss-cross, it was *now*. A sudden roof noise threw me. Both his hands on the drawn gun. Pointing it at me. I shook my head to him. He smiled slyly. I wagged an index finger, withdrew further into the room. He kept the gun un-holstered, safety off, but lowered it.

I settled on the mid zone between the desk and him, and circled, anticlockwise, saw a blur at the foot of the door that steadied. Another guard outside.

After a while, I took my seat again.

Darkness fanned. The roof noise again, brutal and short this time and I thought I heard a cry among the hammering. The guard didn't flicker. Trucks moving outside. Night air creeping into the room. My imagination freeing itself from the room. A bare tree in silhouette. A robin up there, chirping. Snow drift humming down a winter hill, kicking up like a monastery choir in a blizzard of unravelling white. Then someone wearing cologne in my face deep, before I had my senses. Hum of air, then a whack to my left temple. I fell and I had no senses.

**Manchester. The grave: fourth visitation.**

*Tish.* Iridescent, grey-brown dragon flies buzzing the grave. A grave is never quiet. The dead body below buzzes with bacteria, hatching grubs, worms slowly gnawing through soaked wood sides, the weight of earth pressing, parts of the box being colonised by ants to breed, the wood crossed also by beetles, other interlopers, the body a seethe of activity till the entire coffin slips, disturbing pooled liquids; it crumbles, collapses, gases seeping slowly up. The body ebbs. And as the body ebbs so do memories. One day I won't remember the shape of her hand, the tilt of her nose, the lattice of fine hairs on her forearm, the skin tuck at the fold of the nostrils, her cover-all sigh, her *and that* when tired, the sly middle finger in her *that's your view, is it?* how she slid along banquette seating like an octopus on manoeuvres, evenings on the sofa, dreamy-eyed over some boy, silent texting, smirks, eyebrow raises, the dance of her silent lips.

## **Pakistan. Interrogation 2.**

– You are hooded and your hands and feet are cuffed. This is for your protection and mine. You don't need fear anything.

The voice was Home Counties, perfunctory, low.

– Who are you?

– I'm here helping the Pakistanis. You've raised some red flags and we need to find out a little more about you. You can cooperate, but it isn't necessary, one way or another we will obtain the information we need. But you could speed the process up, you'd like that, wouldn't you, Saul?

I kept my own counsel. The voice sang on.

– You can opt not to answer, Saul. Or you can indicate with a nod or shake of your head your position on questions I ask you. I'm here doing a job. Any discomfort or disorientation you feel is not willed on my part, it's simply necessary based on current understanding of the intelligence we possess at this point on the time line. I'm experienced, and my success rate is a maybe a little above the average. You are one assignment among many. You can help me, and I can help you. I have influence.

A step closer. Whispered into my ear:

– What are you really doing here, Mr Hanley?

– I've already said.

– But I'm not so gullible.

– Take off the hood.

– There are worse restrictions, Saul. Water. Concussive stuff. Electricity. Sexual assault. The hood is mild. To help you forget faces. If you get out. Who knows you are here? Think about it. People – friends, family, colleagues – will have noted your absence, but you were behaving erratically before you flew here, weren't you? The break-in? The kerfuffle at your daughter's funeral? Those trips down to the banks of the river at night? The fights in the city centre? Free-climbing risky ledges? All signs of a suicidal personality.

The closeness again. The whisper.

– I know you are here, you know you are here. It's a little circle of two. If I denied your presence, nobody would contradict that. Not now, not at any point in the future. You would simply have disappeared, presumed dead. So...

Three steps away. A turn.

– What are you doing here?

I followed his breathing, waiting for the micro blast of air that preceded his duck to my ear. Instead, a step away again, turn. He was behind me now.

– As you wish. Shortly I will remove your hood. Look only forwards. You will see I have prepared your statement, a full explanation of events. How you became radicalised, your role within an Isis unit, confirmation of a few telling facts. All I need from you is a little colour, a favourite phrase, something that can personalise the text, if you like. Maybe a few words to your mother in the nursing home in case she regains lucidity? Or to you brother, Luke, who is currently in jail, correct? Luke. How about you leave a note for Luke?

I left at *Luke*.

## **UK. Balaclava.**

I'm driving on a motorway. Trees seething in the wind. I don't understand how or why but I've failed my brother. I always did. Mum's to my left in the passenger seat, talking about him, I can see her in my peripheral vision, excited again, her hands fluttering. *Luke's getting out soon, did you know, Saul?* To call it straight, Luke is her favourite and through time that has never changed: bringing him things cooked, baked, sewn, wrapped, even though they tell her repeatedly this is not permissible.

*Why don't you ever come in with me, I have two passes, you know how much it costs Luke to get two passes? When you see him, say nice things, remember good times you had when you played together.* Remembering good times takes effort, choosing from him stabbing me quiet about breaking into the hairdressers for the tip box, him strangling me over the drunk's wallet, or I could go watching him drown the boy in the lake and his explanation after that *it was him or me, simple as that*; they fished the boy out, but he was never the same after. Against this list, set on the other side of the line the yellow Matchbox Lamborghini he gave me for my eleventh birthday, the one act I genuinely thanked him for. Dabbing her eyes with Otrivine, this big-haired, old lady, heady from La Scala perfume, starched up with mirtazapine, hauling herself along the railed ramp to stand in line and be frisked, scanned, unpackaged.

And what didn't get through, as an afterthought, would be, *do you want this, Saul?* But with dead eyes, a total flip from her Luke face. I didn't like her going there. I drove her, but I refused to step foot inside.

Driving. The irony of that last drive. Solo. At the end stretch of the A road, the trees lean in and the wind gets up and lorries huddle together. The emptiness of the passenger seat makes the car light, Mum not sitting here now to say *get out of the outside lane, Saul, that's where all the crashes happen.* Doing this journey that was only ever supposed to be made with her in the next seat, gossipping *Jonah and the whale, Hallelujah.*

*It's the heart that matters, his heart is in the right place* is the way she absolved him from the sins of his hands, his feet and his dick. *You boys,* she'd say. As a counterbalance, I took the long road, including reburied her twin sister in a closer cemetery so she could kneel and curse her every Sunday instead of having to head to Scotland monthly for that. Her begging me to look after Luke when he got out, *I'd do it myself, but it looks like I'm going gaga, Saul.*

The turns now tightening. For a moment a bird flies parallel with the car, before it hauls off in a spread of wings. Light rain comes and goes. I can't tell if the ache in my stomach is hunger or something else. I've done the route enough times to tick off the step-changes from concrete into brownfields, then scrublands, then storm grass. The prison complex heaves up like a steel promontory. I slow and start casting my eyes around. My little victory over them both, I'm still not setting foot inside.

Luke is at the kerbside, fifty metres down from the main gate. I don't know whether it's the landscape, but he seems shrunken. He's with someone. I pull up and he clasps me in his arms and holds me and he isn't sobbing, it's more a gurgle. He holds on and in the end I lock my hands around him and squeeze him with all my strength. Fifteen years. His palms move to my shoulder blades, cupping my back. He gazes at me, shaking his head with disbelief and admiration. *Little brother.* Then, *this is Harlan,* he says. Harlan nods. *Pleased to meet you,* says Harlan. *Nice wheels,* says my brother, *let's get moving.* They throw their two black bags of stuff into the boot and we're in the car.

– So Harlan. No disrespect. Where am I dropping him?

– He's with me. I'll sort him a place by the end of the week.

– What's his parole officer say?

– He's not on licence.

– Done my time. A fully rehabilitated citizen.

– The casual flick of his eyes to Luke tells me Harlan has done serious time.

– Bro, c'mon. Start the car.

I'd have preferred him in the front passenger seat where I can fully see him. Instead Luke is there, and I notice it now, how Luke is dressed like someone off a game show - faint blue suit with wide jacket lapels, spank blue shirt, purple tie the shape of a flat fish. Luke sees me looking.

– Nice threads.

He snuffles away a smile.

– Jokes isn't it? I promised her I'd wear them the day I got out. A promise is a promise. That right, Harlan?

– Right. Promise is a promise.

Harlan is looking out of the window rapt, as billboard after rolling billboard slides past. He has a hand in his trousers. They're jeans, and his top is a short-sleeved polo shirt. Harlan has no mother to please. I go back to Luke.

– She won't notice now.

– Still...

– She's gone.

Luke stiffens.

– Best drop it drop it drop it. What town is this?

I tell Harlan the town's name and we drive in silence though Harlan is wrong because what is welling in Luke is not anger but grief – a grief that has had nowhere to run: that is the bunching at the back of his neck and the hauling of his chest, and the tightened lips. I know my brother.

The wipers flick on automatically an event which startles him, then he's lulled by their swishing and soon I can see him letting the tiredness sink deep. Harlan remains pressed to glass. I guess the view beats the view from the high windows of the vans.

– How does it look?

– Sweet, very sweet.

The air-con starts playing heat over the screen that curls around the cockpit and the road's concrete sectioning makes the chassis *thunk* softly like a cot being rocked and the car gliding easily through the downpour.

– Why are we stopping?

Luke has come to, alert.

There's a police car behind us, but don't worry about it.

Harlan is awake too now, nudged so by Luke. They are at the door locks.

– What the...?

– They lock automatically when the car's in motion.

Now they're reaching in the pockets of the seats. Stuff falls out. A soft toy, hair ties, coconut lotion I had for when Luna's skin got dry.

– Listen, you just got out, right? What can they have on you? The car's clean. Let me deal with it.

I pull over. The cop waits a while, probably getting information back on the plates. Then he comes in a slow stride, both his hands empty, his left hand tracing a line along the car body, head dipping as he goes past the rear seats, then up to me. I roll the window.

– How can I help you, Officer?

He speaks to me, but his eyes are around the car interior. Luke stares straight ahead. Harlan in his own sealed-off world too.

– Driving a little erratically. Can you turn the engine off please and remove the key.

– I press the Stop button on the fob.

– Yes?

– Do you have your driving licence with you?

I slide it out of my wallet and pass it to him. He glances at it and hands it back.

– And your passengers?

– They're my passengers. Unless you're arresting them, I don't believe they're obliged to tell you anything.

He leans into the window close enough so I smell smoked cigarette in his short moustache.

He is a muscle-faced, tight-lipped guy, cheeks marbled pink with small veins. Blue lights wash his forehead. He looks across at Luke who is staring into the windscreen.

– Nice threads. You just got out of...? He says the prison's name.

Luke answers with a small smile.

– Like ten minutes ago.

Luke turns now and looks at him, and his eyes are the way they were when he was drowning that boy.

– And you're heading?

– They're stopping at mine. If you run my plates, you'll know where that is.

– We have a tradition in these parts, when prisoners are released, we encourage them to keep right on. It's a nice clean town and we like to keep the crime rate down.

I tap the dashcam to signal it is picking all this up, and he sees this. I close the conversation:

– Are we done?

– Nice car.

– We're done?

– Drive safely.



The cop walks back through the rain. For a moment I follow him, then his shadow catches in the skyline, and I think I understand the cop because the prison has written itself into that skyline. It carries you across from the McDonalds sign to the Premier Inn to the civic building by the multi storey. These all build and flow along and up to the prison's full stop, its circling wall like an ancient fort or an old city wall except instead of keeping people out, like a city wall, it keeps people in, and there is no beauty in the prison stop, only ugliness.

The road pushes on. We do twenty miles of continuous car travel. Harlan is snoring in two distinct notes, which amuses me.

– He's diabetic and that's a symptom. Watch this though.

Luke calls out, *Harlan Gomes!*

Harlan's arm shoots out sideways, even as his snore sails on.

– See that? He can do roll call in his sleep. We need to buy clothes. I wore this for Mum. But now I got to blend in and conform. I can't conform in the wrong clothes, can I?

We're at a service station, coffees in our hands, knees under a plastic table.

– It can't wait?

Luke's brow thickens. It isn't the people going past, they all have that service station, emotions-in-neutral look. It was the smirk of the teenage cashier as he took Luke's order. I was impressed how Luke absorbed it, kept his *thank you* even, took the tray and sat down without a backward glance.

– Is that a thing now?

– What?

– Putting metal in your mouth?

– I don't know. I guess so.

Harlan is admiring the cardboard reinforcing around his Mocha.

– To tell the truth this is a clown suit though, isn't it? Harlan said.

Luke coughs into his drink with sudden laughter. Harlan punches his shoulder. I relent.

– OK, we can do it.

I take the next slip road off and find a shopping mall between a petrol station and an out-of-town DIY store. We crawl around the car park, find a space.

Luke and Harlan walk in shoulder to shoulder. It's a brand name remainder store, last year's fashions being sold off at reduced pieces. Lingerie and women's clothes are up front for aisle

after aisle. They dawdle until I give them the steer to the men's section at the back by Shoes. Their eyes keep shifting up at the ceiling, so I tell them.

– Forget cameras. This stuff is all tagged. The alarm goes off if you take it past the doors without paying.

I tell Harlan to put down the balaclava. For the first time, Harlan speaks a full sentence.

– You're getting yourself all upset about nothing, bro. This outside is getting me chill blains.

Luke takes it off him because me and Luke have history with balaclavas, my having had to burn a set and also the matching ski goggles, left in my loft one summer and found when I climbed up to get Tish's sled. Prior to that, I almost believed what he told Mum, how he was on the straight and narrow, and job-hunting these parts. *You boys.*

– How much we good for, bro?

– Fifty.

– Fifty each?

– Fifty.

He has chisels in his hands.

– I need these because I make furniture. I'm in the carpentry industry. So I need these. I'm a carpenter. I've always been a carpenter. I made that chess set, remember? Mum loved it. You know that, Saul, I've always carved.

*Trees, chess sets, faces.* I reject the chisels, help him into a charcoal suit. I pay and we leave.

In the car, Luke preens in the vanity mirror, checking the collars, the three neat, marbled black buttons on each cuff, the pop of the matching dress shirt cuffs. He's into cuffs. Luke's always been a dresser.

– Thanks.

He takes my left hand in his and kisses my knuckles. I'm driving with only my right hand now.

– What are you doing?

– I'm saying thank you. My little brother bought me a suit and I'm thanking him. I'll pay him back soon.

– No need.

Now he's rubbing my shoulder, the way we did when we were gangly kids and hung on walls, watching cars and girls. He has charm. At school he was never without admirers. How

he marries this with utter viciousness I never get my head round. Still kneading my shoulder, he goes soft-voiced.

– You know, I told my son, don't be like me, don't try copy me. I've got insight, see? I know I fucked my life up. No, don't try be me. Be Saul, be my brother, Saul. You seen him? I'd give my life to him. He's been a real stand-up guy for me. Be Saul. He's got a house and a wife and a car and a job and he's all educated. Read books like him, grow like him. Be like Saul. We're weaving through Birmingham's toll-free motorway route when Harlan gets in Luke's ear. Luke says we have to take a rest stop. We stop and Harlan takes off fast.

– It's his condition. Sometimes he needs sugar. When it's bad he gets cramps. We've wandered off a stone's throw from the car, by a field where three horses behind a wooden fence wait for something, maybe food. Luke starts stroking one of the horse's heads and it allows him. The rain has let up.

– Tell me something, Saul. What happened to the house? Mum used to say...

– It's true, she was keeping it for you. Wouldn't let me paint the walls or fix the ceilings.

*Luke's going to do that when he gets out.*

– Yep?

– Yeh. Your room exactly as you left it, all your clothes in place, ironed, folded everything.

– Nice. I always told her I'll be out soon, that I have an appeal going through and things.

– No, you did right.

– So, what happened?

When they took her into the care home, that needed paying and the money just drained out. In the end, they sold the house and there was little left. And now there's none. It's all gone.

– All of it?

– Right.

Luke stares out across the field.

– I put a few things of hers in storage for you. Photos of you when you were small that she'd kept. That clock of Mum's you liked? The one with the ducks?

He's still staring.

– Saul, I need you to do something.

When I say no, he refuses to get back into the car. Next time I hear from him, it's on HMP stationery.



### **Pakistan. Interrogation 3.**

– Take this.

It was Ahmad. Holding out a tablet and a glass of clear liquid. I refused. Darkness radiating inside me. The hood gone, but its un-anchoring effect still affecting my mind.

– Who was that before you?

– He’s gone now.

Ahmad walked to his desk and sat on the edge there. I had shoes on. The guard was gone. The door ajar and no guard outside either. My arm fluffed white. Did they change the bandage and I sleep through it? My wrists uncuffed. No sign of the other guy. Ahmad, easy in his skin, flicking a fly from his collar. Light flooding in behind him, making my eyes hurt.

– Your friend, Daalat disappearing didn’t help, Saul. The fact you hid next to a military base didn’t help. Many things didn’t help. But we’re through that, you understand? Please. Sit down again, I have good news.

I had stood up. I felt in my beard, to remove something and to tell how many days. A smudged ant. Maybe three. I sat.

– You have a habit of making important people nervous, Mr Hanley. At the Liverpool docks. In your friend’s village. Here. It’s a miracle you survived the drone strike. Apparently, they had ghosting problems with the infra-red.

– Right.

– It’s fixed now.

– I’m happy for them.

– You’re a lucky man to survive such a strike.

I held my tongue. I could describe myself as many things, but lucky wasn’t one of them.

– You must have wondered who was behind the attack?

There was something in the way he was cupping his neck with his hand as he sat on the desk, turned slightly to the window.

– There’s only one people in the drone game.

– But any number of their allies might commission services. Determining who those allies are from time to time is no easy game.

– You don’t know, then?

– Allegiances shift rapidly and without explanation. Lies are told.

His voice had an edge of bitterness that interested me. I looked straight at him:

– Tell me.

He leaned back, got off the desk and walked to behind it. A short smile.

– In the morning they're destroying crops in opposition to those who are buying. In the afternoon they're supporting the crops, attacking the buyers' enemies. Flip. Flop.

– You have no say?

– I'm not high enough in the food chain. The good news is, I asked through back channels and nobody wants you. Everyone has tossed you and found nothing of interest.

– There's my luck again.

– My concern is your onward travel. You're still set on it?

What he was saying didn't stack up. If he knew about the docks, then he'd know about the European arrest warrant.

– You'll let me go?

– Either that or certify you insane.

The air-con cut in. Its reverb filled the room a moment as it powered up. Then he continued.

– Maybe it will help you mourn your daughter. But such a road never ends.

That tone again.

– How so?

– I'm walking it myself. The Americans bombed my family home. It was a wedding. I lost my mother and a nephew.

He was with his back to me now, facing the blinds. His hands were fists. The hum inside my head joined the air-con blower whose baffles had begun their slow semaphore. Cold air rippling.

– I'm sorry.

– Give me some time, I'll see what I can arrange.

A guard took me to a room in the complex. When he closed the door, the clang shook the concrete floor. The room had green walls and a wet room at its rear. I sat on the only furniture – a bed. I assumed Ahmad was consulting his superiors, making certain some shift in an algorithm hadn't belatedly identified me as enemy. There was one light source in the room – a tempered-glass window, barred from the outside. I stood on my toes there. It gave a quarter view of the windowless upper corner of some poured concrete building, the other three-quarters was sky.

The trucks more distant in this room. The roof thuds remoter. A light switch that didn't function. The heat remained. I slid down the wall. At my feet, low in the crease between wall and floor, three white larvae, two inert, the middle one rocking gently in its diaphanous skin.

Boots along the corridor. I felt along the wound. Its pink edges browning. No pain there now, only tenderness. I moved to the bed. The grey blanket prickled.

Meals came and went with bandage changers. My holdall arrived with everything inside, but tidied. I slid it carefully under the bed.

Moonlight making the room emerald. I changed my mind, pulled the holdall out and spread its stuff out, seeking your bracelet. Its lace of sea-glass beads glimmering. I felt the beads one by one. Light swelled.

*Tish.* That time in your room when we swapped bracelets – yours white with one black bead, mine black with one white bead. Their click in our hands. *Dad, that's so sweet.* Tears slipping between my fingers. Jade shimmer. A roll of water becoming sea waves. The stony dark.

*Tish.* We're at Teresa's place again, your face lit, Yukia and Rochelle either side, six hands daisy-chaining in a dance wave. I notice now, the bracelet on your wrist as you pop. Black with a single white bead. My bracelet.

The three of you blurting beats. I let it happen.

*We did good, Dad.*

We did good.

You do your moves, synching. Your thin cotton T shirt, its looping V neck showing the pathologist's stitches at your chest, but you and Yukia and Rochelle don't notice. You knock fists, huddle under the window, laughing at some private joke. Finally, leaving your friends by the window, you turn and look at me.

*Sorry.*

Fade.

Gone.

I scatter the bag's contents. A clam-shaped hair grip, in smooth, tortoiseshell plastic. Entwined there one strand of your hair. Whispers. I tease out this snag of hair with my teeth and it uncoils, its shade an F-stop lighter than mine, I remember. Teasing it straight, it's as

long as my middle finger. *The Afro. Michael's painting.* Smell it. Almond. Cocoa butter. Jojoba oil. But also your scent is also there, and writing itself into the room atom by atom. *Tish.*

I slide down the wall. Across the room, sitting against the opposite wall and on the same level as myself, Tish is looking at me, surprise stained on her face. Maggots bursting to crawl through her skin, her eye whites still white, even as the photographic paper that holds her has begun to curl at its edges, shedding its story, releasing the photographer's tale, pushing her into sepia. I take the photograph up to my chest and lock hands across it.

The beat of my heart synching with the quiver of the middle grub in the floor as it stretched and contracted. Heat-swollen hands. I licked the air, tasted its malevolence. The strip of light at the door's base extinguished. A distant generator reverberated. Clouds shifted. A sudden burst of moon at the bars as outside, in some corner of this complex, a spotlight was triggered. On a fifteen count, it reset, wiping the room first to darkness then to the moon's ghost glow.

Stage lights. A boxing ring. Working up the sweat on three four. The trickle running onto the front mounds of my feet. Ray in my shoulders, kneading. *You got this, Champ.*

Fade.

I watched the sky. How light dimmed into the folds of pin-pricked hills. Death if it came to me now, would not be cold but the warm hug of an evening Pakistan, hard against a wall that was radiating heat.

*Tish.* Which box of fear did I open? Which whack-a-mole of regret? That I could have said or done something that would have made her last days happier? That I had had it in my power to avert what happened, to change the course of her destiny, and if only I'd looked harder, been with her more, I could have thrown that point, altered the tracks of her life? That I'd spent too long arguing with her and not enough time being with her, listening to her? That she was in some post-death limbo state, wanting help but unable to call out, unable to move?

In the morning I sent the food away. Later, Ahmad came with a bowl of dahl. He was wearing a fresh, dark brown suit. Someone entered with him who hung by the door, shorter than Ahmad and with a minor quiff to his hair which he plucked every so often as if he had only recently had the hair cut in this style. Ahmad's arm across my shoulders.



– This isn't good. You lost your child, I understand.

I followed his gaze. Her stuff that was in the holdall, was spread about in the room. I explained:

– She comes to me.

– Of course.

I gathered it into the bag again.

– I'm giving you a vehicle and a driver.

– Why?

– For your safety. Only rarely will they attack a car tagged as Pakistan Army.

– It's happened then?

– In every venture there's risk.

– I can't pay him.

– Don't worry, he's on our payroll.

The man stepped forward and offered a calloused hand. I shook it and he returned to the shadows.

– I've advised Daalat – Mr Rahman – that even if you go there, it's unlikely anyone will talk to you. Don't film or take photographs and don't use a phone. Try not to stay in one place too long.

Ahmad told me some other things. I listened as best I could.

– Be a good tourist. That's it?

His eyes were steady, appraising. Then he unzipped a portfolio case and took out a sheet of paper.

– Your fingerprint chart. A memento of your stay with us.

– Thanks.

He didn't move his feet during this. There was a glimmer of something in his eyes. This seemed to crystallize in an idea and his hand went to his pocket. A phone.

– Let's do a selfie. It's not every day a Rasta visits these parts.

I shuffled over to him and he did the hand-outstretched, selfie thing, ducking his head close to mine. He checked the photo.

– Again. Please smile. A memory of your visit. The Rasta From Rawalpindi!

The edges of my mouth curled long enough for him to get his picture.

## **Pakistan. Toyota Rav.**

The trace through the corridors seemed shorter this time, the sentries laxer. At one turn, the wallpaper became pink wild rose, then a landing with a bowl of plastic flowers set among ornamental stones and the corridor tiles morphing to oyster effect. I signed two sets of papers at the desk of a tall, morose man whom Ahmad saluted. The man patted me down, inspected my bag, including with a wand of some sort, then returned it. He beckoned to the security arch. Ahmad shook my hand and stepped back. I went through. No alarm sounded. Smoked glass doors slid open before me.

A public reception room. Daalat. *Hey. Yes. Ha.* We hugged and I drank some water from the cooler by the public side security desk then we left. Daalat's hands were lumpy and he limped slightly, but his face was back to fat and as usual he was on and off his phone. He led us out, almost strutting, along three short, wide roads, across an eight-lane junction then doubling back into a small street at which point we picked up our driver, whose name, Daalat told me, was Zahid, and he, Daalat, had made the deal that got us the driver.

And so it was I found myself in the hard, back seat of a Toyota Rav 4, Daalat pressed by my side, Zahid silent at the wheel, weaving us out of the city. At times, Daalat put a hand to my arm and held on until I told him I could do this on my own, he didn't need come, but he said he was my host, I was stuck with him.

We climbed all day. The Rav's air-con was dead and sun sucked oxygen out of the car and the landscape. We rattled on. Shacks made of stray polythene sheeting. Listless traders with mauled fruit on their tables at the edges of scree, choking the road, dotting the incline. A concrete pole. Lax power lines. Freshly broken off rock from a landslip. The black snub of Zahid's gun protruding from the elasticised waistband of his grey pants. The Rav's underplates taking a hammering.

Daylight waning, we stopped, stretched, ate from one of the tables and someone came with petrol. We got going again and darkness pulled the mountainscape closer. Thorn bush, its long needles lit up by a surge of headlights as a car smoked past us on its way down. Daalat rolling easy now in his sleep. My own body as his buttress. We rounded a bluff then another serious incline. Stars fallen onto the hill as neon whites. Within those lights, a lantern, maybe a shepherd moving in blinks of erratic on-off. Daalat stirring, asking me for water. He drank. An attempt at conversation.

– The interrogator guy. You know he was going to certify me mad?

– I could have done that.

Daalat dulled off again. The dark condensed to spectral black. I rolled my window and a breeze rushed in, the air carrying crushed sweet grass. Above us, the moon pitched, made matt by thin clouds. Headlights sweeping brown brush. The road meandering. The Rav's wheels chewing rock and road stone. The fronts recovered from a skew – Zahid nonchalant with it. He pulled us up at a dead-end slip, blasted off from the main climb. Sheer granite. Daalat woken from his dozing. The engine cut, they talked quietly. Daalat turned to me.

– It's too dangerous to move any further now. We have to stop here for the night.

Torchlight. The car boot gave up water bottles and blankets, though the land was still warm. Zahid striding into the dark with a tow rope.

– Where's he going?

– He'll sleep higher up.

– Why the rope?

Daalat didn't answer. Instead:

– He says we can use the car.

I looked at the sky. Its slew of stars, its misted vortices. A faint gauze of cloud screening the light of millennia.

– Or you can take your chances with the spiders and snakes. Mainly snakes.

The back seat panels folded down and we spread the blankets. I stared at the roof upholstery and remembered the stagger of hills as the sun had crept away: green, mid grey, grey, black. Hills that had become mountains. This one could wake, shake off its fleas of human settlement and stride into the giant sky any time it wanted. Engine heat was being lifted away by a slight breeze and the air inside the car reached bearable temperature.

Daalat tossed and turned, muttering in English and Punjabi. He put his head in an arm lock with one arm. I waited for him to settle and when he didn't, I got out of the car and lay in the scree, looking up. The constellations. The stars beyond. The speck of our lives. The blue dot of earth. The vertigo of infinity.

Soft fade up of an engine growl. The graveside. *Tish*. Disappearing in falls of soil. She's fully lowered now, and the digger's plough blade is shimmering wet, thirsty. The mourners scare back as its engine roughs the air. It mounts the soil mound at a perpendicular, in a spall of blue fumes; it skirts the stacked wood props thrown off from the gouge of grave, punches at the sodden brown pile, its silver skin crawling with rain ticks. Brown runoffs leaking into

sodden grass, the wet earth spills, thudding into the void, the plough thrusts again as the gold-jowled driver works the bunch of stick controls, the band of fluorescence on his blue jacket flashing in the rain. The soil lurches, falls as spill and sludge, and the engine attacks once more. In three swipes, the hole is filled. The groundsmen use spades to pat a four-sided crown. The mourners' flowers, its wreath. The digger's steel plough turns up to make a mouth and the wood props, ropes, duck boards, spades are thrown in. Another burst of engine and the digger is gone. Sycamore seeds helicoptering down, the wind raising them up briefly, only for them to die down again onto the grave in a last flutter.

Banging. I woke. I tried the handle, but I was locked in the car. Outside, Daalat shaking a pan on a small fire. I yanked at the handle. Daalat saw me, pulsed it open. I stumbled out, cursing him in words he paid no heed to. He tossed an empty water bottle at me and pointed where I should fetch water from, there was a stream down there. It took me fifteen handholds and tested the stitches in my arm. I was levering my way back up just as Daalat started down. His mangled hands slowing him. He turned back, and we drank half the water and he stirred the rest into the frying pan. They were flesh wounds, he told me, when I tried to look at his hands more closely, and did I know I'd wandered half way down the mountain last night and that's why they'd stuck me in the car and locked it.

Zahid came sure-footed down the mountain's hip. He dropped berries at Daalat's feet, then went to stow the tow rope. Daalat stirred the berries into porridge. We ate it in hot scoops, then got going.

The air wetting up. Snatches of bird song. At the next turn a burst of Bach - water falling. Green reeds thrusting through outcrop. We drew near. Foliage. Water flung itself about, thundering down the hill, running rampant onto the road. At an overtake point, water trucks backed and filled up their cylindrical bodies. The purest, Daalat said. We drank it in handfuls, then filled bottles. A wagtail fluttered into water spill, drank, flew up again. There were small human settlements dotted here: squat grey houses cut into the hills, each house with a black water drum perched on cement blocks, the house sides dabbled with trees, for shade, after that, scrub. Wind flowing noisily along the rooftops, chasing along the block work grey. If the land had a face it would be brown, and the lower reaches the giant's crumpled turban thrown off as he showered.

We climbed, Zahid checking his mirrors frequently. A hard right took us onto a dusty red soil track, the Rav bucking. Daalat tapped Zahid's shoulders for him to pull over.

– We're here.

We walked in a crunch of boots to a ridge of the mountain massif. Sheer edge. Craggs across that looked negotiable, though the escarpments would be a harsh scrabble. The valley spilling out below. Daalat pointed into the mottled yellows and rusty reds of the fields beyond the edge.

– You see the brown patch, and the green within it?

– Like a tablecloth.

– The green is poppies. The inner green, not the heavy green later.

The field was ruffling in the breeze, lighter green chasing darker, fading into brown terracing that cascaded to a valley floor.

– You'll see a grower tomorrow afternoon. It's being arranged.

I turned. Nothing was moving either to the sides of us, or all around. Or as far as the eye could see. I asked him to get us moving and he called Zahid from his cigarette under a shade of rock.

The Rav took us up a crest where we joined an asphalted road. The massif dipped and rose in a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree whirl round the valley. We were driving down into the valley's busy skirts. Diesel. Eucalyptus. Sweat. We passed workers around a giant wooden spindle that was unfurling thick, black-sheathed electrical cable. Cars weaving through spread-eagled trucks. The bougainvilleas' pinks. Paper collectors. Bottle collectors. A mosquito's body exploding red on the screen. Nausea. Dahl and roti coming steaming through the window.

Blast of kerosene. The road side vendors' magpie assemblies of branches, planks, plastic sheets, steel cables, cardboard and polystyrene. The *shim shim shim shum shum*. The *thrum*. Jolts. Fatigue. Daalat kneading my shoulder with a mangled hand. Rhythm of the moon. *We did good, Dad.*

Woke.

A motorbike taxi cut through, his passenger with a bicycle heaved to his shoulder. Spinning up. Brush. Scattering children. Cuts. First aid kit. Methylated spirits. Iodine. Dip. Dust. Dung. At the side of road, a procession of nomads. Olive trousers, olive shirts, olive cummerbunds, turbans. Figures blotched by dust and blast. That ballerina head-whip trick. Their faces were lino cuts. The eyes inked. Female faces hijabbed. Bare feet. The gait a *slow slow* to the *quick quick* of traffic. Bony legs swallowed in cloth. Bottled traffic. A man bent,

peered into the car, blotchy eyes reflecting chrome, smog, taxi yellow, sheer blue of sky, cramp of an empty stomach. I met his gaze. He nodded to me. I looked away.

– Who are they?

– Afghanis. Refugees from war. They came over the mountains.

– Where do they sleep?

– The roadside. Most of them. Or in the hills. There are caves.

The traffic throttled to a halt. I rolled down my window. Hot air charged in and a frenetic medley, of horns and the *clunk-hiss* of brakes. Stomach contractions. To the side, a dance of Afghan children in a game of stones. Some moved the stones with their feet, others with their hands. I'd draped an arm out of the car side and they spotted me and rushed over, waving packs of biscuits, phone charger cables, bunches of berries. The traffic broke. They ran alongside for a burst, waving and grinning, hopeful. I felt for money, realised I had nothing. Finally, the car outpaced them.

– Keep the window up.

It was Zahid.

– Why?

– Just in case. There's a checkpoint soon. We'll pass OK, unless the traffic slows, and he's not had his lunch.

– What?

Daalat explained.

– You fit the profile for Daesh. If they see you, the ones sitting are Security and even with Zahid it might take time to get you through. Sit low.

I slid down. We made it through.

We pulled out of smog and began climbing, our position at one hundred and eighty degrees to the morning's starting point, as if we'd pin-balled along the rim of the mountains then dropped down and were now looping back up the other side. An urge to sleep washed over me. Car fumes.

– Wake.

A hand. Black nails. Daalat. We were parked up. Zahid sculpting his hair with a hand. We walked through a row of yellow Suzuki taxis, along coiled ivory rope posts then into and through a glass fronted canteen and the roars of men and the clatter of plates and an excited tv commentator above it all. Up wooden stairs that shook with the load. A flat roof.

The slaps of roti makers whacking spun dough into the oven. The televised cricket match downstairs had most of those indoors watching it. I looked up and across. The mountains. Curious glances at my presence. Daalat and the driver calling to each other about something, then Zahid leaving us, heading down quickly.

Two shoe-shiners slipped around, looking down at footwear, their cleaning kits on their shoulders, including plastic slippers for customers while they polished. A succession of hand waves sent them away. We were approached by a young waiter with jittery eyes. He made weary routine movements as he tapped his order pad and addressed Daalat. He was back within the minute with three blue dragon motif bowls. Some kind of soup. More plates. Steam. Filtering through our slurps, raucous applause as the cricket match sparked. Zahid returned and ate quietly with us as he and Daalat went through some banalities. Then we were back into the slow maul of traffic. Immaculately turned out goats behind a dusty goat boy straight out of a nativity play. A flatbed truck holding black and red chickens in rocking, mesh cages. Another truck with Hitachi generators lashed three high, rear chassis dragging. I sat low until we slipped off the main road. By a series of turns, we arrived at a small, double-storied, gated house which Daalat said was safe. Zahid parked us and again slipped away, and this did not concern Daalat. Instead he said:

– Something spooked you up there at the poppies?

– Maybe.

– Chill now. Here's your room. Come down after a rest. You were mumbling on the drive. We're stopping here for a while. When we get final confirmation, we'll set off for the final destination.

He handed me a roll of bandage, some clothes, a bottle of water. The room was OK. Concrete walls painted in soft yellow. The light switches all centralised in one oblong, white panel. I flicked the third one, and a filament, clear glass light bulb shed a dim light that surged and waned. I flicked it off. The sun was setting directly opposite me. Through the barred, long window a radio antenna in red and white was being hazed by the sun. The bed's chain mail sighed under its sponge mattress as I sat. Downstairs, the cricket highlights were crackling on, as if the match had followed us from the café. I checked my holdall, and everything was there. I went onto the balcony for a cigarette. The night air was cooling. Insects skittered underfoot. Honey of bird song. Electricity lines dusty white against camouflage green bush. The street lights bowed, dew drop heads. On the nearest hill were

small transmitter masts in a series, each base tapering up to tridents of signal apparatus. The house to the side had a sloping concrete roof with a run-off gap at its centre through which a piebald cat emerged, crouched low. Across the way, a bird shifted in a tree. A white butterfly meandered. A space for two cars down below.

*Dush. Dush.* Fireworks or distant guns? I went back in. The air in the room had begun to stir. Where did Zahid go that time at the restaurant? Where had he gone now?

My arm uncovered, I washed it, the fresh, red antiseptic stain nudging healed, brown skin. The wound was pink, its stitches black and sunken. A new pain – a thump inside my chest. I weaved the bandage back round with self-taught expertise then placed the arm as carefully by my side as Mr Kaur on his charpoy. Ready. Stretched out. My heart beating more softly now. Stethoscope of dreams. Thud-flutter heart squeeze of a broken-winged sparrow. The piebald cat's paws turning low. Two hands cleaning each other at a waterfall. The gurgle of concrete gutters. Broken pump. Bottled water. An ache tap-dancing in the back of my brain. A thunder of horse hooves through brush. Daalat.

– You're talking to yourself again. Did you take tablets for malaria? Anything?

I shook my head:

– It's just exhaustion.

– Rest then. But keep this on your forehead.

He handed me a cold, wet towel.

– Thanks.

– What are you thinking of now?

– Nothing. It's a fever.

– Try rest.

*Nigeria:* My father's last quarters. the double mattress on a low wooden platform, the bedding ancient and stinking. A small dresser by the bed with pills, a jar of Marmite, an asthma inhaler, herbal supplements. Spools of sprocketed accounting papers, boxy, 70's, dead computer screens, with dead printers in a heaped pile by a rusted guillotine. Letter-headed paper. Beyond, in the empty, dust-filled next room, a bath held up by riddled wood supports. Wiring running close to the door frame, up into the ceiling. I go over to the bed, lift the pillow. Under there, more tablets, and a book. *Technological Advances in 19<sup>th</sup> Century England and Nigeria.* My father appears, looking well, nudges me a greeting. He



goes to the bed, picks the book up, flicks through the pages until page 184, opens this page out wide to me. Points. *Read this.* I look. It's a blank page.

Manchester: Saturday night. The street lights burning. *Leave me alone, I'm trying to find my daughter out here.* Daalat intercepting me on the street, bundling me into his car. At the table, I accept every card dealt to me: play every hand standing pat. I burst out laughing at a remembered joke as I limp every hand and lose fast. They look at me with long stares. A few more rounds of drinks and cards and poker finishes. Back slaps, hugs. Daalat drives me home. I draw the line at him riding the lift with me. I nod to a security guy in place in the foyer for some reason. His head doddles back at me. The lift traverses three ice ages. I go inside, sit on my chair and pity myself for being pitied by Daalat. This for a good five minutes.

My windows give breadth to the city, its beetle traffic a muted rumble up here. The occasional warble of the final floor's plumbing, Spanish click of high heels on wood above, the *shrrr* of the lift doors as the Romanian cafe owner slides home. Hum of the building itself here in the wind, like the banshee of a separated child, a ship keeling up in a storm, a soul departing a hospital bed. A whistling, hungering world. The clumsiness of Daalat's hug. *When you get in there, eat.*

On Daalat's instructions, I force myself up off the sofa and work my way through pre-pack slices of Gouda, crunch nachos. In my bedroom I'm struck suddenly by the ridiculousness of the furniture arrangement.

Wake. Rain storming the dark window up here in the apartment. Slipping back. The present seldom begs a visit whereas the past – the howling, feuding, beckoning past – is always tapping at the window.

Sunday. Morning. The window lit bright. I can see a football game taking place down on the fields. Outside, up close, I watch as the ball is hefted out of Mancunian mud by one team to land in wet grass close to the other team's goalmouth. Feet fly. The referee's whistle sounds. Muttering, a human wall forms in front of a beefy goalkeeper. The ball is duly whacked, and a goalmouth scramble breaks out. Walking away, I admire their fervour.

There is a rise in the grass, then the football grids peter out and the field drops low and rolls to brambles then a culvert. A small bird dips its beak into the stream quickly. *Dip. Glance. Dip. Dip. Glance.* It flies off. Frost has silvered the brambles. *Tish, her favourite, frosted*

*earrings.* At the culvert's edge, I hear the wash of water, watch the eddies, currents, counter-currents, how this flow mirrors the way a row of *If* gates need to be set positive for a circuit to close. Flow.

Ebb of footballers' shouts. the frost hardening. I look up into the blown canopy of sky, the spin of it, a cathedral of weltering memory. Dust. Chemistry. The violence of oxygen's missing electrons. *Oxygen tearing at us all, even now, with each breath.*

*Talk to me, Tish.*

The dark installs fast. Grass crunches underfoot. The field's a grey gloom, fog obscuring the goalposts. The tower block's lit staircase is a ship's sail in the murk. A steel tube bench on the edge of the field. The chill of its slats burns, then freezes.

*Talk to me.*

The post mortem notes. The idea that someone else's hands cut through her, held her organs. That same stranger cut and weighed her parts, maybe took photographs, how some strangers in the future might gaze at her as a slide, a jpeg, a quarter page in some medical text book.

*Tish.*

Who has her phone now? For how long will it keep ringing? I can't delete her number.

*Tish.*

The Xmas boyfriends I'll never get to give the cut-eye to when they pass me in the kitchen.

*Tish.*

Always ending her Father's Day cards with *I will love you always.*

*Tish.*

The landlord letter asking for a rollup payment to end the contract. Squeezing the last ounce of capital out of her death.

*Tish.*

That little skip when you see me, the shoulder wiggle. In company, the pursed lips nod. At my shoulder, the palm landing at my neck:

– Dad.

– Do I need my wallet for this conversation?

– Think of it as an investment in your beautiful daughter.

The fog drawing in, pulling us closer.

– Don't park so close to the school, Dad, leave it like, down the bottom of the road, and I'll find you. Promise.

At the school doors, collecting her Exam results:

– Now take a deep breath and remember, the bottom grade is E. You will see no E's on here.

OK. Here. Look.

*Tish.*

Using my tie and neck to practice your Oxford knot and you kiss my cheek as a thank you when you're done.

*Tish.*

– Are you OK, Mister?

A ghost girl in a big Parka coat, hood halo-ing a white face, black lipstick. Chequered leggings. A long-haired dog bounding at her side. I wipe my eyes.

– Yeah, no, I'm fine.

– Sure?

– Yep. Thanks.

The ghost girl disappears into the blackened fog. Her dog hovers, curious, sniffs the air a moment, then bounds off to join her.

*Tish.*

Coming back from Uni one break, you acquired this Indian head roll thing.

– Will you be back before midnight?

Indian head roll.

– Are you going with friends?

Indian head roll.

– At least take a coat.

Indian head roll.

The fog smothers all views of anything but itself. Clouds at the windows making rivulets of water on the glass. From the flat above, some Middle Eastern dirge. I let myself slide again into sleep's sickly embrace.

## **Pakistan. Nilufar.**

Daytime. Morning. Slowly I assembled myself. The usual questions: Was I dead? If not, where was I? In which year?

I went to the bathroom, picked up a new razor, saw the old bloodshot eyes in the mirror. Daalat had also left Paracetamol and a fresh bandage. His litany of warnings singing in my head. *Don't drink the tap water. Don't go anywhere except with me. Keep your voice low. Don't draw attention to yourself.* A meandering beige line along the old bandage, the wound seeping where the stitches held flesh too tight.

Forcing down rice, lassi. Then to the lounge balcony to smoke. Leaning on the railings there, eyes fighting the light, arm numb. Nicotine swarming in.

I returned to the lounge. It held three jade-coloured two-seaters at right angles, a plasma TV sunk into one white wall and an air conditioning unit sunk into the other, the remotes for both on a low, smoked glass table. I sat. Staff in white tunics and sandals ghosted in and out across white tiles with plates, brooms, linen, pinched smiles.

– Whose is this place?

– Guest house of a friend of a friend. For visitors the friend's friend would do business with in these parts. In ten minutes we'll go from here.

Daalat waited with busy hands, tapping the table, swiping his phone, swapping it from hand to hand. Finally, it rang, and he took the call, wandering round the room as he talked, his sandals clicking on the tiles. *Yes. Of course.* A curse. He stabbed his phone to end the call. I give him a few seconds:

– What's up?

– Their lead car took a wrong road and the two taxi drivers kept pulling up allowing more passengers. I told them pay them more and this driver came on the phone and said regular customers have priority, he's not Uber. They won't get into another taxi because this one has their money, something like that. Then one of them sees a CD at the road side and they want five hundred rupees discount for this singer's CD so they all have to wait. There's another argument about the route. It's goes on like this.

– They're on their way?

– They're getting there. In ten minutes we set off to join them.

Outside a *whack* sound like someone swinging a rubber mat against a wall. A slow-footed member of staff bent to lower two glasses of water, both topped with a lemon slice. He set

them down and waited. Daalat drank both glasses then asked for bottled water for me instead. I found the balcony again. A mass of feathers in the car parking space. The generator silent. Traffic down the slope was a sonic ticker tape, telling its story if you could read it: a charge of horns, shouts. Then quiet. Until a cow bell. A surge of footfall as children ran. Quiet again. I walked back in to Daalat aiming peanuts at his mouth. The batteries in his torch didn't work last night. His snuffle had gone. Manchester United had not done too bad this season. Then philosophical. The best way to push a rock uphill is using wood blocks underneath, that way you could take a breather without it rolling down. Sisyphus could have learned something from a Pak.

– Fuck Sisyphus and fuck his rock.

– Come again, Saul?

– Fuck you and fuck your Sisyphus.

He laughed, flicked me another cigarette.

– Wait's nearly over.

Another of the house staff came in. She was about the same age as Tish would have been. She tied back Eighteenth-century hunting scene, toile curtains. Light flooded in and the heat ramped. The air-con burst into life then cut out.

Finally, the call came, and we took to the car. Daalat drove. Zahid wasn't outside and Daalat didn't want him on this ride. He kept up prattle. How a hair is a chemical recording device. All light is stolen from the sun, a grebe is a form of water fowl. I zoned him out, watched scenes flit by. The cow that was making its own way up a lane. Steam from a broken-down car. The way the highway widened then funnelled again.

We took a five-lane flyover, crossed four muddled intersections, then put on enough pace to overtake a cluster of motorbikes, staying in the outside lane, Daalat honking, flirting with the yellow-black painted medians that squatted along the dual carriageway. We went through a shop zone, then spiralled up into hills again, an easier drive because the traffic lighter though the road noisier. The surface broke up the higher we climbed. The view stretched and greened, until there were only soft hills. A series of side roads, a track. We pulled up by a small villa. It was Spanish in style, with a large, rough-stone courtyard, and the hills rolling away beyond that.

We waited in the car, in the shade of a trim of courtyard trees, listening to the car engine ticking down. No radio, Daalat insisted, and that we didn't get out of the car. He drank from

a carton of juice, passed me one. Then noises behind. He brushed peanut bits off himself, told me to wait, got out of the car. I followed him in the rearview mirror. People spilling out of two dusty cars. They stood around, hesitant and bunched together as if they were still crammed in the vehicles. Some holding hands. Heads turning nervously amidst the excitement. I counted six women and two men apart from the drivers who had stayed behind their wheels. I saw one of the men pull Daalat to one side and take money from him. I had thought we would go inside, but the man with the money waved for everyone to head to the rear of the villa. As they all moved off, Daalat came up with the man and tapped and said I should get out. The man held out his hand to Daalat, then myself. His eyes were gnarled walnuts though the face was smooth. His eyebrows two grey tufts. We shook and then he was trying to smooth creases at the waist of his white kameez. Daalat asked a question of him and they switched into Punjabi. I followed them. Trees at the back of the villa gave deep shade and the everyone was milling. They had brought with them their own smells: earth, nutmeg and flower, cigarettes, sweat, charcoal, peanuts, and sweet tea, all of it stirred by a slight breeze. I was introduced to the other man who was, Daalat explained, the translator. He was short, trim, with hard-skinned hands, a two-hands handshake, and confident eyes. I decided he must be from the same village or clan as the others and highly respected because all lowered their voices when he passed them. He wore western clothes: deep blue trousers, a clean white shirt and a thin red tie. He spoke with Daalat, who was next to me, for a while, then he walked away and Daalat turned to me and indicated with a nod of his head.

– This is who you wanted to see.

I followed his line of sight. She was the oldest woman among them and the way she stared ahead of her, her eyes seemed not to see. She had bird-like hands, a small head, thin lips, and cheekbones that seemed unable to anchor flesh. The ripples of her face were thrown into relief by the smoothness of her green shawl. She stood as the centre point of all this movement and the man who had taken Daalat's money bent down and said something in her ear and then she walked a step further into the shade by a tree trunk. All the women shifted, spontaneously gathering around her. I turned to Daalat and said softly.

– Who is she?

– Her name is Nilufar. You can soon ask her the questions you came to ask. She's ready. She's the best storyteller among them, everyone says her story is the best.

She was pressing the red earth under her sandals, stretching then gathering her toes. She had muscled, climber's feet. A line of black grime ran along the sides of them. She glanced at me and then away before I could hold her eyes.

– It's OK. I don't need to hear it.

– What? You have to now. If she doesn't tell her story, they'll think she didn't cooperate and they won't pay her.

– She's getting paid?

– Nothing moves without money. Let her tell her story.

– You'll translate? Or him?

– I couldn't. It's his mother-tongue. And his job. Sit here now.

There was a general movement to sit. Daalat sat first and I sat by him, crossed-legged opposite Nilufar and with the translator to my other side. We were in a circle. Nilufar suddenly appeared hesitant. The hubbub had diminished, and an air of expectation was building. Among the younger women who had sat beside and behind her, she looked small. She made a small nest of her hands in her lap then looked up, her eyes a faded winter moss. A man I had not seen before came round from the villa's front with three full glass jugs of water in the middle of a tray, and glasses. He placed the tray on the ground and poured the water, one glass at a time and passed the glasses. Everyone drank in a single, steady tilt. I copied them. The man took the glasses away on the tray.

Nilufar looked down into her hands, as if what she had come to tell was written on them, then across to the women. Her friends sat attentively. The translator said something. There was a hush. She began, and the translator followed and spoke smoothly.

– It is not in these circumstances that I am used to telling my tale, nor before such important people, and my story is nobody's story, and everybody's story. I understand you have come from far to visit because you have lost your daughter to an illness and you want to understand. The pain of grief is a heavy one to bear, my condolences to you and your family in your sorrow.

She paused, looked directly at me. I nodded and placed my hands together in a sign of thanks. Her eyes flickered an acknowledgement and she continued.

– I have endured much. Great has been my hardship. I will tell you all the corners of my story, I will draw you my heart. How I lost my husband to diabetes, how I could not have children and my co-wife had two girls and then I had a son who died in childbirth and

another son who died in a road accident with my mother at age only seven. All this I will describe.

The translator interrupted. A short conversation between them took place. Daalat nudged me.

– He’s telling her to fast forward, they can’t stay here all night, she should get to how they came to be here, working the land, that’s what you want to hear.

The old woman rearranged herself, taking in the translator’s admonitions. Her eyes passed to one of her friends who stroked her hand and murmured. She took a breath then looked up again and spoke. The translator relayed her words and this time didn’t interrupt. As she told her story there were sighs and mutterings among the women, occasionally a short wail or gesticulation. Nilufar at these moments stopped and brushed her face with the back of a hand, or else wiped her eyes with the hem of her kameez.

– My life has been full of misery. My life has been that of a dog. This is nobody’s story and everybody’s story. There was fighting in the area, there were bombs and explosions. The sky was an angry red wound, and even when there were no bombs, there were engines above us night and day.

As she talked, the other women’s heads swayed and bobbed, their lips pursed in contemplation of pain, retold.

– The fighting got worse. One by one it took our sons. Sometimes as martyrs, sometimes they disappeared. Worries pelted down on me. Anyway, the fighting got worse and it began to shift all in its path like a charging river at flood, so we had to leave. Some went West. I joined others and came East. We rented a pick-up truck with a driver and I rode in the truck at night in a convoy all the way to the foot of the mountain. Others had done the same journey, we knew it was possible. Yes, we knew it was possible, by God’s will.

A ripple of approval ran around. Despite the shade of the trees, the heat from the soil had begun to rise through me, sticking my clothes to my skin and I felt the numbness in my arm becoming a throb.

– We climbed the mountain. The mountain stood before us and we climbed it. Rain pulled at our clothes. It soaked us. The children were coughing and stopped moving. The children became ill. Of course, the drivers abandoned us. They had to turn back, the height was too great for their vehicles. So we were on our own, but we had phones as our guide. So long as the batteries lasted we had GPS. We used them only now and then, so they lasted even



though there is danger in phones. Our phones and our flashlights were our guides. At night we had mats that we spread out for the children. This body is used to suffering, it needed no blanket or mat or sleep. Some of us kept watch instead. We remained awake through the night, watching. I developed a fever. I said to them leave me behind, I will rest with this one who has already passed, but they carried me like a child on their backs. *You have no weight, grandma*, they laughed, *you are easy to carry, and who will tell us stories at night? Our journey is lighter if we carry you.* So like this we went over the mountain.

Nilufar looked across to the women. Their eyes were lit with resolve. The tree shade played shadows across their faces, deepening the crevices of their clothes, making abstract patterns of a hand on a shoulder, a face tilted upwards. The sun had shifted slightly and now partly caught Nilufar's face. Her small, single earring pulled sunlight to it, spilling its gold onto the lobe. She muttered something that was not translated, then resumed.

– Coming down, our feet knew the way, they soon found stone then tar, our feet warmed on the road, and the road warmed with our blood.

Someone sobbed.

– Our feet warmed on the road and our hearts opened like roses in the sun. When we saw our journey almost over, the scent of joy blew into us from the eucalyptus trees, the children laughed brightly, smiles grew on our faces, we were arriving.

Images of Tish collided in my mind. I tried to fend them off but couldn't. A hockey match, Tish frozen in mid-air, twisting, the stick a Samurai sword drawn, legs bruised from hockey stick blows. A younger Tish hiding behind a door, about to surprise her mum on her mum's birthday. That last photo. The pain of it spilling out into all the other frames. *Tish*.

– ...we knew not to rejoice too much, sorrows bunched like clouds above us. Our bodies were bruised by the journey and our hearts were bruised by those we lost in the crossing or left behind. There is nowhere in the world where sorrow cannot find you. This is the wisdom of women, we who bring this world into being and keep it turning. We tend the crops. We know what is sown is also reaped. We crossed the mountain. Yet if we had a chicken now we would slaughter it to celebrate our arrival. Instead we ate berries then descended, made our way down the valley road.

Daalat's head had dropped. His cigarette hand twitched. Softly, I asked a question.

– When did she cross the mountains? How long ago?

The translator relayed this, but Nilufar ignored it with a brush of her hand, turned her eyes away and up and rocked her upper body. The translator didn't attempt again. She kept on.

– Sometimes I wonder if I only dreamed this journey, then I feel the scar along my back from when the rocks were sharp and loose when my feet slipped. I slid, and the blood trailed behind me. They tore their own clothes for bandages. Even as I protested, they bound my side and would not rest, made me drink berry juice when I could not swallow. It is only the shock, they told me, *drink this and you will be fine, grandma. It is not your time to pass, grandma, you must keep going.*

Again sobs. Words murmured in her direction, hands that stroked. God invoked.

– This is how we made it to the valley.

– Our clothes were in ribbons. We had little strength because the mountain had taken it and now we were in a strange land. We were hungry and defenceless, our legs like rotted timber and in a strange land. We had nobody to protect us, no men among us, nobody but God. Yet we found a way. By the will of God and the gifts of our hands, we did not die of hunger or exhaustion. We were used to breaking soil, we were farmers.

A phone rang. The translator spoke sharply. No one else so much as breathed. One of the women clutched the pouch of her dress, took out the phone, split open its back and tore out the battery. Everyone listened. Some looked up to the sky. At length, the translator nodded to Nilufar, though his eyes still flicked upwards.

– It was in the soil we found our salvation.

She paused. Listening with everyone else. Satisfied there was nothing, she continued.

– God helped us survive the first winter here with nothing and nowhere and no one. Though some died in the mountain nobody followed them that winter. We caught fish. We pulled up roots. We made tents. We had lost a few loved ones, but we made it across to this region. We relied on charity and we sought work. The children became weak, there were more mouths than food, but God helped us survive the first winter with nothing and nowhere and no one. We were patient and when work came we worked hard, our fingers understood the plants, our backs knew how to break the soil, we worked hard and became trusted.

– So we became land workers here. It was eighteen months ago we arrived. They supplied tools and we worked hard but we earned a pittance on the land. We asked why we earned hardly enough to clothe ourselves and eat and the landlord shrugged. It is not for us which

crop we plant. The farmers who rent from the landlord, they decide. The farmers wanted taxes to be paid, rent to be paid. Sometimes a crop would fail, the weather would not arrive and then what little we saved would be gone because we would not be paid. This happened many times. Like a curse. Our debt became wider than the valley. We had built some shelters from breeze block and mud, borrowed money for materials, all this needed paying back.

The sun continued to sear through the leaves of the trees. Some in the circle began to fan themselves with handkerchiefs.

– When the wind blows, sometimes I smell the air from home carried in the breeze. Other times in the winter I can't see further than the distance of my arm with the rain. This life I have lived has been full of grief. These old hands know well how a body is prepared for burial. These hands have lifted many cups of misfortune, it is the drink of the poor and the ignored. Yet these hands also plant the future, seed by seed. Even as my last child died, I went the same day to the soil. I buried my child and I planted the same day. Do not ask what a woman does for the world. Everything that flourishes she has planted.

– We had a choice, but it was not choosing to eat this fruit or that fruit. They told us, if we could not sell our hands enough, we could sell our bodies, you understand? The eyes of my daughters burned with tears at this time. It was spoken in the wind, and I replied to the wind, first you must kill me. I told them we would climb back up the mountain to die, I would never allow it, even after death I would curse whoever permitted this. Yet the breasts of our daughters dried up and it was a choice. To keep the babies alive or to keep honour alive. There was no salvation at any turn, every path was strewn with rocks. Of all the crops, the only one that could release us from this fate was the poppies, they told us. The poppies would ease our debt.

There were despairing shouts. A wail. The noise levels rose. The translator called above them all and gradually quiet was restored. Nilufar spoke on.

– And so this was decided. And that night for the first time we slept well and our daughters slept without tears. Hope is the most comfortable bed. Our heads rested on the fleece of hope that night. That night we dreamed our sorrows were coming to an end.

– Now we plant the poppies. Our debt does not reduce fast but neither does it grow. Now the landlord is not angry, now the jackals no longer circle. If I say our circumstances are now good then I am lying to you. The only sweetness we have is our memories of home. Yet our

relatives phone us and tell us the sky is still in flames there, the drones still circle. We send what money we can, we wire it across. Here at least our children have a chance to grow and we can sit by the fire and make bread.

I breathed in. The air was stifling hot, and thick with emotion. The trees motionless, no wind to alleviate the heat. I held still.

– This is the measure of our misfortune. Sorrow never turned its gaze from us. Sorrow held us in its arms. But now life is more settled. Here the old seeds of longing can be replaced with new. A little boy came to me and stroked my cheek and said, *grandma you're going to die soon and we will carry you across the mountains and bury you* then he ran off to play again. I was quiet for a while, then I called out to him and I told him, *you don't need to carry me over the mountain, you need to bury me here, so this old heart can be among your young dreams*. By the work of our hands and the will of great God we will sink roots here.

More shouts, murmurs. The translator calling again for hush.

– Last week, I went high up the valley and phoned my cousins at home and told them this. *Do not send for my body, let it rest here*. You understand? The time of journeys for us is over, now we must plant seeds, water them and push down roots. The next day they said in the mosque that when the angel, Azrael comes to take your breath away, it is a moment of great peace. I heard this and finally my heart was calm because I know when I die, I will know peace. Great God has shown mercy, Great God is all seeing and very virtuous. That is all I know, that is my story and I have no more to say.

The women unfolded their limbs and came to their feet in wails and went over to Nilufar and held her in their arms. They stayed like this for some time until gradually the sounds they made softened. As this was happening, the translator took me to one side and asked if I had any further questions because if not they would go, they had been gathered in one place for too long. I said I had nothing more to ask, but to thank Nilufar for her time. He nodded then turned away to Daalat who had an unlit cigarette in his hand. As the two of them talked, Nilufar broke free of the women. She came to me, stared me in the eye and spoke for some time. The translator noticed, came back over and remonstrated with her. She stepped away. Daalat spoke with the translator, who after this hurriedly shook my hand then Daalat's. After, I asked, but Daalat said nothing, only cast his eyes around warily. I palmed money to Daalat to give to Nilufar. He took the notes and went into the melee by the cars which had returned.

The translator was shouting, trying to impose order. They organised themselves into the two cars and the cars left. We watched them reverse onto the rough road and drive away. Then Daalat reassembled his phone in the shade of a tree and we shared his cigarette as he scrolled through messages. We left shortly after. Daalat drove and we descended into the valley along the wide roads that funnelled the traffic horns, the hawkers' stares, the makeshift stalls, the corn cobs, the newspaper sellers, the bottle collectors, the fug, the swelter, the shimmer, the rattle, the smog. Daalat piloted us through it all on the same arc across, then up, the hills. We soon climbed up into the blue breath of sky and its cracked china clouds.

## **Pakistan. Heights.**

As we reached the tops of the hills, we began passing the same fields where we'd stopped to view on the journey here. I spoke.

– Are all the growers like Nilufar?

– Everyone has their story.

– What was she trying to say to me at the end?

– She was sad about your daughter dying because of something she grew, but they could burn it down if they wanted to, so she knew they approved, else they would have burned it all.

– No comprende.

– She was talking about the drones. Up in the sky. Always there. They can see the number plate of a car. They can see a crop, zoom right in and see every stalk, every petal. So they can destroy her crops if they want to. She said they don't destroy them and instead they help because they know that they – she – is on the good side. That's what she said. Then the translator told her to stop talking.

– What kind of help?

– I've no idea.

– Anything else?

– She asked if you were American. I said, no, Nigerian.

– Why?

– Nobody kidnaps Nigerians. They have no recognised value these parts.

– True dat.

We were heading downhill now and hit a stretch of potholes. Daalat winced at the wheel.

The third wince of this drive.

– What's up?

– Nothing. Lower back. We're done now, aren't we?

I asked him one last favour. He argued but finally consented, with a curse and a warning, and then we stopped twice, including once to eat at a stall, before we made it to a village where, as usual, Daalat knew someone.

It had been a rough journey. Twilight was inking itself into the sky. We took a short road through the village and out on a cart-lane through fields along a quarry-stone track; the lines in Daalat's face deepened. He pulled up. A small farmhouse.

– This it?

– This is it.

– I get out now then?

He had to visit a chiropractor in the next village before his back seized up completely, he told me, he would return in the morning. We were at the door of the farmhouse now.

Daalat shoved it open with difficulty, then, instead of entering, gave me one of his stares.

– Maybe I should leave it till tomorrow. I'm worried about you, Saul.

He had right hand on his haunches as he said this.

– Worry about yourself and your crumbling bones.

– You've been unwell, Saul. Hallucinating. Walking about and ranting in your sleep.

Muttering your daughter's name, throwing things around.

– Where do you get this from?

– Ahmad. I've seen it too.

– I'm fine.

– You sure?

I nodded. Did the thing the doctors asked you to do – fingertips to shoulders then head, three times. He smiled but was unconvinced.

– You'll be safe here so long as you don't work myself up over anything. Just chill, bro. OK?

We stepped outside and had one last cigarette then he reversed the car out of the farmhouse grounds and drove off.

It began to rain. I sat in the upstairs room and listened to the zinc as the rain charged the roof in swirls making a sound like a pin ball machine gone haywire. Here and there drops leaked in, landing in muffled clatters on the floor's concrete dust.

My face ached from the beat of the sun. I went and splashed water on it then sat in the office chair. The room was rudimentary. A desk, the chair, a charpoy. On the wall facing, a newspaper cutting of either a singer or a politician. The charpoy had a thick fleece blanket folded at its centre though I wouldn't need it. An empty blue vase squatted in one corner of the room and above it a window that was shut. Small bursts of dust lipped my bare feet as I crossed the floor to open the window. It looked out onto an old, bent tree that was a fading grey-green blotch, its branches knocking together in the wind, its leaves singing like a muted girls' choir. A loose zinc sheet held down a 3/4 beat as wind chased around the compound.

With a small yelp of protest at the driving wet, a mangy dog crawled under an old pallet

holding abandoned plastic sandbags. The dog wedged itself there, only its paws showing, and watched rain pit the earth, bringing up the earth's hot scent. The air smelt of longing, of old rubber, of fetid quarry water. I moved away from the window and sat on the charpoy. It creaked in protest, its ropes spreading and dipping. The tune started up:

*Let her go, let her go, God bless her*

*Wherever she may be....*

Light dwindled further. I hefted myself up, switched on the room light, but the tungsten filament was too bright for my eyes and I switched it off again, watched the pattern of shadows re-install themselves in the room.

I thought about the drones and Nilufar. Death was never more than a step away. *You have to keep on fighting. Old Ray. Shift. Jab. Circle. Never rest. A champ never lays down. No mountain too high. You beat whatever's in front of you. Lagos traffic. Hawker's cries. Chickens swung over a shoulder, their glassy-eyed heads trailing.*

I got up again. The outside was now blindfold black. I could hear the wind continuing to knock the old tree this way and that, the dog's low whimpering, feel the draft above my head as the zinc lifted. It was a wind for winnowing.

I pulled out the holdall, spread out its contents on the floor, including what Daalat had found me – his last favour. I was angry. With Nilufar, no matter her excuses, her story. With Tish. For being dead. With myself. For not saving her. Ray. *It's a fucked-up world.* Ahmad. *The road never ends.* I picked up some of the holdall stuff, still bewildered by Tish. What was she doing, injecting? Of all the crass decisions she'd made, it ranked number one, worse than closing her mouth on the throat infection, worse than that dive into the Blue Lagoon, worse than the Bonfire Night dare that ended in six hours at A&E.

H.

Seconds after injecting, the blood-brain barrier would slip, and her neurones would be lapping up the morphine, pushing out dopamine. Had she wanted to blur her thoughts, no longer have to process anything? H would have done that – damping pain, vaporizing regret. *Sorry.* And in their place, loading bliss: bliss settling in her mind as a comforting mist. But with each shoot, she'd need more next time. The way it works. A snake eating its tail. I flipped the cardboard.

Sorry.



Did she miscalculate and overdose, scribble that word as she saw the danger stinking near?

Or did she want to die?

Sorry.

From a house across the valley came the sound of a high-end generator blasting into life. Its reverberations ran along the ground, chasing up the farmhouse walls, across the concrete floor. It made the charpoy shiver. A light source in the distance beyond the window briefly flared.

Sorry.

Flip.

Sorry.

The biggest pile of shit five letters could make. Did I need to become her skin, her veins, inject myself with H to get to why she chose that fatal step? I had it here, the full kit.

Daalat's reluctant last favour. I picked the little plastic sachet of white up from the floor, spun it in my hands. Was she daring me to follow her there? I started putting the whole together. Loading the needle. A song for gathering tears. This was plenty of heroin. More than enough to join her.

– *Don't. Please don't.*

*Tish.*

Shaded, hooded, lurking in shadows in the corner by the window. I look across and she looks back. Grief and truculence fight it out on her face. I lift my chin and eyes further. She steps forward, and I let her come. Head down, baggy clothes thrown together, hands stuffed in her pockets. She faces me, a sneer already on her lips.

– So?

She means, *why have I bothered her?*

The dog outside gives a bark and the filament light flickers on a moment, shifting shadows around her. Heat convecting, picking up the concrete dust, the scent of her, the damp of rain, the plastic of the syringe's discarded wrapping. Behind her, a fly settles on the lip of the blue vase. Her footprints along the floor from there. She's wearing DM's, half laced as usual. Her hair oiled and corn-rowed neatly, her chin down. I wait as she fills the room. Then, with a heave, I look up again.

Her upper lip pulled slightly back, a flicker around her eyes. She blinks, swallows hard. The gap between us. I want to reach out and hug her, hold her once again. She stands with her

hands in her pockets, relaxed, the tears fully blinked back, nonchalance settling well in the shape of her mouth, the cock of her head, though, beneath that, glimmers of unease in the set of her shoulders, the shift of a foot.

For a moment we look at each other, unspeaking. Something moves between us in this silent exchange, something that rolls back the years to a better, happier time. A tear falls from me. *How did we arrive here, Tish? Why?*

A flurry of barking from the dog outside. The wind singing in the roof. Tish, fading.

Drips of sweat pitting the dust on the floor. A lizard climbing a wall, seeking a crevice. The runaway thump of my heart. I had to cool it, Tish wasn't here. *You've been hallucinating, Saul.* The tree branches flinging themselves this way and that. The zinc's weird popping sound. *Let her go. God bless her. Is this your daughter? No. She had no smell.*

I looked through the holdall things and took up an evidence bag containing the single, stretch cotton glove they'd found at the scene. She had worn it once, now it was mine.

*Breathe.*

I waited till the dog stopped barking and lay down again, till the distant neighbour's generator finally ceased its clatter so there was no light nor any possibility of light. Then, as the wind eased, and the moist, dark air thickened once more in the room, I eased open the plastic and took hold of the glove, and, finger by finger, slipped it on. She'd had large hands, mine were small (that joke we had when we walked hand in hand through the market – the impracticality of walking like that through a market). I raised the glove to my face and breathed. She was still there. Still here. *Let her come.*

I looked in the papers again, ransacked them. It was a blizzard of documents. Court papers. Photographs. Bills of Lading. Order of Service. Coroner's Report. I thrust my hands through it all, scooped all the sheets up, shook them. The photo snagged on my bandage. It was upside down to me. I rotated it sideways and saw new shapes in it. Slowly the scene in that rectangle animated itself. Then I saw it. The belt buckle. The makeshift tourniquet. *Flow: The Kainji dam. The dog noose. The sewing machine mechanism.* I saw it now. I saw it. *The belt ratcheting her arm, popping her veins.* It was a man's leather belt. She would never have worn such a belt. Shit. And it was fastened so the long tail that was pulled to make the veins bulge had been tightened outwards and upwards *and so therefore by someone standing behind her and above.* It was the belt that talked. The belt had been tightened by someone else.

– Fuck, Tish. Fuck. Why didn't you tell me earlier?

She's with me again now. The eyes swimming. Her lips wobble. Then a dab. The cooling eyebrow raise. Laconic.

– I knew you'd see it, Dad, I knew you'd come good in the end.

– And it's not Michael, is it? This belt, no way is this sadass belt, Michael.

She laughed at that. Then:

– You're finally getting there, Dad. Correct. It wasn't Michael who gave me the H.

Suddenly she's crying, tears streaming. She turns her back on me, steps away, bends, picks up the vase. Throws it so it smashes to smithereens. Turns to me, her tongue full of rebuke:

– You were obsessed with Michael. Me and Michael were long finished by then.

A pause. Shift. Breathe. Let the vase pieces stop skittering. The dust settle. My question:

– Who then?

I saw it clearly now. Someone loaded the syringe. Someone applied the belt to her arm.

Someone tightened that belt. Someone placed their hand on the syringe plunger. Someone killed her.

– Right. It wasn't suicide. I didn't kill myself. He did it. And he knew what he was doing.

– The *Sorry*?

– Ignore the *Sorry*. He tricked me into writing it.

She moves closer, shedding anger, wrapping herself in sadness, and she sits next to me on the charpoy, speaks in a sad whisper:

– I don't know why I let him do it. We'd only dated four times. I liked the way he carried himself on the marches. I thought he loved me.

Another sigh. Mine. She turns her face up, our faces are so close, almost touching:

– Look harder, Dad. Pay attention to things. The clues are all there.

Then she was in my chest, sobbing. My arms tight around her, the papers scattered round us.

– This is so fucked up.

– Yeah.

She loosened her embrace of me, wiped away tears, mine as well as hers.

– Now you've seen it, Dad. Now you know.

– Damn.

Light and rage glimmered in her tears. She wiped her face with the sleeve of her sweater, then she echoed me:

– Right. Damn.

*Breathe.*

– Find him, Dad. Find him. He did this to me. He wasn't what I thought. He...

– I'll find him, don't worry, I'll find him.

I steadied my breathing. The room. I heard once more the rain hitting the zinc. The wind thrashing the branches outside. The dog's low whine.

*Tish.*

I looked around. But there was only space.

### **Coroner's Letter Refusing Inquest Documents.**

Dear Mr Hanley,

Thank you for your *Freedom of Information Act* request. I am refusing your request for access to documents undisclosed at Inquest and which may be held by the coroner and I give the following reasons for that refusal.

Regarding access to inquest documents, coroners are not scheduled as public authorities for the purposes of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and they have no responsibilities under the Act. This exemption is clearly set out in the Freedom of Information Act section 32 (see below).

I accept that you are the father of Tishana Hanley, and that you are therefore a properly Interested Person according to legislation. Nevertheless, regarding documents further disclosed to the Coroner but which were not aired in public at the time of that Inquest, the Divisional Court has provided a clear rule that there is no right for an Interested Person at an Inquest to call for documents which have been disclosed to the Coroner. The Court has held that the refusal by the Coroner to disclose these documents to the family does not mean the Inquest was unfair or in breach of natural justice.

Furthermore, since there is an ongoing investigation by law enforcement authorities into the circumstances of your daughter's death, including the question of whether she died exclusively by her own hand, the documents you request are exempt also by

virtue of section 31 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000. For your convenience, I have set out the relevant legislation below.

I hope you will be interested in the changes which were made in 2008 to strengthen coroners' powers under Rule 43. Rule 43 of the Coroners Rules 1984 (as amended) provides that where a coroner hears evidence at an inquest which gives rise to a concern that there is a risk of future deaths, the coroner may make a report to a person who may have the power to take the necessary action to eliminate or reduce such a risk. The person receiving the report must respond to the coroner within 56 days of the report. The report must also be copied to the Lord Chancellor who may publish a copy or summary of the report. The Ministry of Justice publishes a six-monthly summary of reports and responses issued under Rule 43. These six-monthly summaries are published online and are freely available. The coroner's Rule 43, Regulation 28 report on your daughter's death is attached.

I hope you will find this information useful.

Yours sincerely,

Jason Thurlew

Coroners Team

Justice Policy Group

Ministry of Justice, London.

## **Epilogue**

The dead have no voice and yet we can see. It's one of the curious benefits of being dead that time and space finally give up their secrets to us. Being dead, we stand and watch and, occasionally, attempt signals. I know what happened to me but cannot tell. I've tried to steer my dad in the right direction even as I've had to watch him strike out in wrong directions. The dead have no voice and yet we feel. When we are wronged. Misinterpreted. Misrepresented. And we hang around until those wrongs are righted, or for as long as someone cares enough to want to track down the truth. The dead have no voice and yet we see.

***Let Her Go: Reinventing black characters in English black crime fiction***

**Author: Peter Kalu**

**Submitted for: Ph.D. Creative Writing, Lancaster University 2019**

**Volume II:**

**Critical-Reflective Thesis**

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## Abstract

### **Let Her Go: Reinventing black characters in English black crime fiction**

This practice-based PhD submission consists of an original novel (80% weighting) of 70,000 words and a reflective critical thesis (20% weighting) of 25,000 words. The novel, *Let Her Go*, seeks to expand the crime fiction genre, following the search of Saul Hanley for the reasons his daughter, Tishana, died of a drugs overdose. The work combines crime-fiction tropes with elements of the road novel and the quest, whilst allowing its central character an interior presence that explores consciousness in ways that deepen our realization of human indeterminacy and complicity whilst also questioning and re-positioning the nature of crime and criminality.

The thesis opens with a series of definitions: of 'black' and of 'crime fiction'. A short analysis of problematics and a periodized history of English black crime fiction follow. The thesis then examines the ways in which *Let Her Go* departs from pre-existing works, focusing on (a) abandonments of existing tropes, fixations and locations in the examined black crime fiction and (b) modifications and adoptions of other technical and thematic elements. The use of stream-of-consciousness and epistolary techniques is explored and the influence within the writing process of habitus, hybridity and related innovations of location. It then examines the influence of ideas drawn from criminology and jurisprudence, as well as intersections of class and gender within the novel. The thesis concludes with an assessment of the success of *Let Her Go's* attempt at reinvention of black characters in crime fiction.

## Introduction: Defining black crime fiction

In embarking upon a description of the creative process, it is necessary first to set down the parameters of some terms used. 'Black' came to the fore as a positive political term in the USA as part of the 1960's Black Power movement. In the UK, with the UK's different history of visible minority migration, the term 'Black', came to stand for all the visible minorities who were affected by prejudice on account of the colour of their skin. As cultural theorist, Stuart Hall states: 'the term "black" was coined as a way of referencing the common experience of racism and marginalization in Britain'.<sup>1</sup> In this usage, the term covered both those whose cultural background stemmed from the Indian subcontinent as well as those whose backgrounds stemmed from Africa and the Caribbean. There was growing recognition from the 1980's onwards of 'the extraordinary diversity of subjective positions, social experiences, and cultural identities which compose the category "black"'.<sup>2</sup> As a result, further terminology came to the fore which sought to express that diversity: 'Black' started to give way in some contexts to the designations 'Asian' and 'African-Caribbean'. This caused the meaning of the term 'Black' itself to change. Kwame Dawes remarks in his essay published in 2005 that 'the term "Black" is becoming increasingly influenced by the American approach of treating it as largely African centred'.<sup>3</sup> The interplay of language associated with ethnicity and anti-racist centered language continues to produce differentiations. The latest (2011) Office for National Statistics for England and Wales survey

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<sup>1</sup> Stuart Hall, 'New Ethnicities' in *Black British Cultural Studies: A reader*, ed. by Houston A. Baker, Jr., Manthia Diawara, and Ruth H. Lindeborg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 163.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>3</sup> See: Kwame Dawes, 'Negotiating the Ship on the Head: Black British Fiction' in *Write Black, Write British*, ed. by Kadija Sesay (London: Hansib, 2005), p. 260.

included fourteen ethnic categories other than 'white'.<sup>4</sup> The preponderance of usages in England of the term 'Black' (whether capitalized as 'Black' or in its lower case rendering of 'black'), exhibits a meaning that has narrowed from its 1970's signification to a narrower meaning as a signifier for those people of African-Caribbean origin living in the UK. For instance, the *Cambridge Companion to British Black and Asian Literature (1945-2010)* published in 2016 splits 'Black' from 'Asian' in its title.<sup>5</sup> Consistently with this, for the purpose of this thesis, the term 'black' in 'English black fiction' refers to fiction written by those of African-Caribbean cultural background who were either born in England or who have lived a substantial part of their lives in England. The term 'British' is eschewed in favour of 'English' due to the increasing, 'Brexit' influenced, instability of the term 'British', and, in the case of Wales, the concentration in this thesis on anglophone writers. Research did not uncover any crime fiction texts produced by Welsh, Scottish or Northern Irish black crime fiction writers but the term 'English' is still adhered to as a matter of investigatory caution.

Although this part of the definition is necessary, it is not sufficient in itself to denote black *fiction*. In her essay 'Marginalia: Black Literature and the problem of Recognition', Getachow argues black authorship alone is not enough for the designation of a work as black literature.<sup>6</sup> She suggests that, while it has its problems 'Black literature, defined as something like "literature featuring a plurality of developed Black characters"' is clearly a

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<sup>4</sup> See: Ons.gov.uk website:

<<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/bulletins/2011censuskeystatisticsforenglandandwales/2012-12-11#ethnic-group>> [accessed 17 April 2019]

<sup>5</sup> *Cambridge Companion to British Black and Asian Literature (1945-200)*, ed. by Deidre Osborne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Mahlete-Tsige Getachow, 'Marginalia: Black Literature and the Problem of Recognition' in *Write Black, Write British*, ed. by Kadija Sesay (Hertford: Hansib, 2005), pp. 323-345.

suitable candidate for general literary recognition'.<sup>7</sup> Getachow's adjustment is adopted for the purpose of this thesis. The term 'black fiction' therefore embraces the idea that within the work there is some substantial reflection of black characters' lives examined through fictional time and space. A final weak qualifier useful for the working definition orientates focus on that fiction which is set partly or substantially in England. Such a qualifier satisfies the geographical resonance in the compound signifier 'English black' while its weak status allows exceptions and the balance of other factors to be weighed.

Applying this definition by way of short test to some of the works this thesis will touch upon, clearly the works of Courttia Newland and Karline Smith may be comfortably described as English black fiction under this working definition. The authors Mike Phillips and Victor Headley were both born in the Caribbean and came to England in childhood. They are on the border of 'West Indian' and 'black' and may identify as both, but for this thesis's purposes will be included under the broad term of 'black'. There are some harder cases. Dreda Say Mitchell's first novel *Running Hot* features major black characters.<sup>8</sup> In some of Mitchell's later works, black characters comprise approximately one fifth of the significant dramatis personae, so it is her earlier work that will be focused upon. Similarly, M. P. Shiel was a writer born in the Caribbean and of mixed cultural origin. His fiction did not feature substantial black characters and moreover the pre-1960's publication of his works is sufficient to make the classification of his work as 'black' fiction problematical. So too, are there difficulties under this definition with some of the works of Jacob Ross. Like Headley and Phillips, Ross came to England at an early age. His novel, *Bone Readers* won the

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 328.

<sup>8</sup> Dreda Say Mitchell, *Running Hot* (London: Maia Press, 2004).

inaugural Jhlok Prize for Book of the Year by a Writer of Colour who is British or a British resident 2016.<sup>9</sup> The novel is set entirely in a fictitious Caribbean island named Camaho. Another borderline case is that of Helen Oyeyemi's novel, *Mr Fox*.<sup>10</sup> Its author is of Nigerian origin and grew up in England. The main characters of *Mr Fox* are all white and the novel is set in New York, USA. The case of Paula Lennon is also problematic. Lennon was born in England and lived for a substantial time in Jamaica. She returned to England and practiced law in London, before returning once more to Jamaica. Her novel, *Murder in Montego Bay* is set in Jamaica.<sup>11</sup> There are other borderline cases. The approach taken here is to err on the side of inclusion.

This leaves the need to identify what is meant by 'crime' fiction as opposed to any other kind of fiction. The question has been the subject of extensive debate. In *Bloody Murder*, Symons describes attempts to promote rigid classifications as 'more confusing than helpful' yet he accepts that if the floodgates are not to be opened to almost any novel featuring a crime then some form of demarcation is needed.<sup>12</sup> Both Scaggs and Priestman make early reference to Todorov when attempting definitions.<sup>13 14</sup> While there are few novels now being written in the traditional, Golden-Age or whodunnit formula, the Todorov focus on them within his topology, holds useful explanatory power. In his essay, 'The Topology of Crime Fiction' Todorov focuses on the way different types of crime stories can be identified by a study of whether they direct attention to the investigation of the murder or other dire

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<sup>9</sup> Jacob Ross, *The Bone Readers* (Leeds: Peepal Tree, 2016).

<sup>10</sup> Helen Oyeyemi, *Mr Fox* (London: Picador, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Paula Lennon, *Murder in Montego Bay* (London: Jacaranda, 2017).

<sup>12</sup> Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (London: Pan Macmillan 1992), p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> John Scaggs, *Crime Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> Martin Priestman, *Crime Fiction: from Poe to the Present*. Second Edition. (Devon: Northcote House, 2013), p. 1.

event – the traditional territory of the traditional whodunnit – or whether they instead direct attention to events which occur after the murder and which give a sense of continuing danger in the time of the investigation into the event.<sup>15</sup> Todorov suggests that the traditional whodunnit, under this schema, is focused primarily on the event. Time stands still for all intents and purposes while the investigation takes place and the investigating detective is inviolable within the terms of this subgenre. Accordingly, the tone of these novels is that of curiosity rather than suspense. The works of Christie, Sayers, Poe and Doyle belong predominantly to this wing. They are primarily whodunnit ‘tales of ratiocination’<sup>16</sup> which elevate the idea of the supreme individual who, by his (and it was generally a *he*) powers of intellect, solves a crime.

Those crime stories which focus primarily on the narrative ‘now’ of the active investigation, where danger to the investigator or hero exists, and therefore where ‘the narrative coincides with the action’ are designated thrillers under Todorov’s scheme.<sup>17</sup> Priestman, in his *Crime Fiction: from Poe to the Present* uses this structural insight of Todorov, adopting and extending Todorov’s classification system.<sup>18</sup> Sitting between the two Todorovian wings, for Priestman, is the detective thriller (including the hard-boiled) which he describes as a hybrid that ‘divides our interest between solving a past mystery and following a present action in which the protagonists may confront dangerous characters alone, or step outside the law, or both’.<sup>19</sup> Priestman subdivides the thriller side of the Todorov scheme into the

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<sup>15</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, ‘The Typology of Detective Fiction’ in *Modern Criticism and Theory*, ed. by David Lodge and Nigel Wood (Oxford: Routledge, 2008), pp. 226–32.

<sup>16</sup> Letter from Edgar Allen Poe to Phillip P Cooke August 9 1846. The Edgar Allen Poe Society of Baltimore Archives <<https://www.eapoe.org/works/letters/p4608090.htm>> [Accessed 21 May 2019].

<sup>17</sup> Todorov: in the thriller ‘the narrative coincides with the action’ p. 229.

<sup>18</sup> Martin Priestman, *Crime Fiction: from Poe to the Present*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Devon: Northcote House 2013), p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

noir thriller and the hero or anti-conspiracy thriller. The crime thriller itself has seen many sub-types emerge: Scaggs lists 'legal thrillers, spy thrillers, racing thrillers, psychological thrillers, futuristic thrillers, political thrillers, cyberpunk thrillers, gangster thrillers, serial killer thrillers, heist thrillers, and more'.<sup>20</sup> Most of this list, Scaggs suggests, can be grouped into either the hero thriller or noir thriller categories. The noir thriller category in particular has shown substantial variegation.

The noir thriller brought, originally, a focus on the lives of criminals. *Little Caesar* may be considered one of this subgenre's founding texts.<sup>21</sup> More broadly, as it evolved, the noir thriller promoted, like the Modernist movement which influenced some of its foundational authors, a sense of a distorted, fractured, imperfect and seemingly imperfectible world.<sup>22</sup> Consistently with this, the protagonist of the noir thriller often occupies an unstable position within the narrative, and can at various times within the novel be investigator, victim and perpetrator, or all three.<sup>23</sup> Hence noir's defining characteristic may be said to be not so much the role of its main protagonist as how noir 'accentuates fear and anxiety, ambivalence and vulnerability'.<sup>24</sup> Within the noir crime sub-genre is the victim crime story. The victim here might be the one who dies and who is being remembered by others in the story. Or indeed, it might be a larger conception of victim such as that suggested by Boileau and Narcejac, a conception particularly relevant for *Let Her Go*:

but one is not a victim because one is hunted and directly threatened. One becomes a victim as soon as one is present at events whose definitive meaning one is unable to decipher, as soon as the real becomes a trap, as soon as everyday life is turned upside down. One becomes a victim because one seeks vainly for truth, and because

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<sup>20</sup> Scaggs, *Crime Fiction* 2005, p. 108.

<sup>21</sup> W. R. Burnett, *Little Caesar* (London: Hodder, 1968). First published 1929.

<sup>22</sup> See: Lee Horsley, *The Noir Thriller* (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), p. 4.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

the truth one obtains is not the genuine article, and so on and so forth, and the more one thinks rationally the more one goes astray. The crime story, instead of signalling the triumph of logic, has then to consecrate the failure of rational thought: it is precisely for this reason that its hero is a victim.<sup>25</sup>

A further noir sub-genre development is the psychological thriller. This focuses on the pathological workings of a disturbed mind and the crime featured is the result of that malfunctioning mind. The serial killer novel may be considered an outcrop of this sub-genre. Finally, the postmodern crime fiction story must be noted. Like a significant proportion of noir crime novels, the postmodern crime story eschews the teleological focus of conventional crime fiction and looks to introduce incoherence and fragmentation, of character or plot or both; one significant point of distinction between such noir novels and their postmodern cousins is perhaps the ludic or playful tone postmodern crime novels often adopt.

With the above attempt at a loose categorization, it is wise to return to the voices of caution regarding rigid categorization. Rzepka states 'crime and detective fiction have always displayed strong tendencies toward both fission and fusion'.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Scaggs in the introductory chapter to his *Crime Fiction*, having noted that 'a focus on crime, but only sometimes its investigation, has always been central to the genre' cautions against excessive classificatory rigidity, arguing that 'one of the defining characteristics of crime fiction is its generic (and sub-generic) flexibility and porosity'.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, it is arguably crime fiction's sub-

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<sup>25</sup> Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac, 'le roman de la victime' ('the victim novel') in *Le Roman Policier* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1964), p. 178. Translation by Ernest Mandel.

<sup>26</sup> Charles Rzepka, 'Introduction: What is Crime Fiction?' in *The Blackwell Companion to Crime Fiction* ed. by Lee Horsley and Charles Rzepka (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 6.

<sup>27</sup> Scaggs, *Crime Fiction* 2005, pp. 1-2.



generic ability to overlap and hybridize, its capacity for permutation and metamorphosis that provides such promising territory for writers seeking to innovate.

## Chapter 1: Problematics of crime fiction and a short history

With the introductory working definitions established, it is possible to turn to the problematics of English black crime fiction and investigate those factors that have inhibited English black writers' entry into the crime fiction genre. The method will be firstly to analyze issues relating to 'representation' particularly stereotypes, and to 'social realism' as identified by English black writers themselves; then to focus on two problems which have received attention from cultural commentators: that of stereotypes, and that of the 'superagency' trap of detective or hero thriller fiction. After this, a short, periodized history will be attempted.

### Views of black writers (a) stereotypes

A pitfall of the genre commonly flagged by English black writers is the invitation it holds for black writers to self-objectify by adopting the reductive stereotypes of black people present in wider society and often replicated within the crime fiction genre itself. Reddy asserts that 'resisting white discourse requires conscious work; it does not come effortlessly to people of color'.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Bailey posits: 'when a writer, white or black, creates a black character, he or she assumes the risk of creating a character that may be perceived by some readers as a stereotype'.<sup>29</sup> These stereotypes diminish and reduce black humanity. In 2011, crime writer Mike Phillips hosted a radio programme, *In for the Kill*<sup>30</sup> in which he invited black writers as well as academics and cultural commentators to discuss the state of English black crime fiction. In his programme, Phillips outlines the prevalence in English media of 'the black

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<sup>28</sup> Maureen Reddy, *Traces, Codes, and Clues* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2003), p.154.

<sup>29</sup> Frankie Y Bailey *Out Of the Woodpile* (Connecticut: Greenwood, 1991), p. 117.

<sup>30</sup> BBC Radio 4 Extra *In for the Kill*. Presented by Mike Phillips. Produced by Paula McGinlay for BBC Radio 4. First broadcast 31 May 2011. < <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b011j8zb> > [Accessed 21 May 2019].

man as criminal' stereotypes and suggests the effect it has on black writers: 'this apparent link between the black community and criminality is a traditional way of speaking and thinking that makes many black writers wary of the genre'.<sup>31</sup> In a 1995 interview with Claire Wells, Phillips explains how he set out to work against this link in his own novels, a strategy he detects in the work of other black crime writers: 'The result is that readers who identify with our heroes have their universe turned upside down. In our worlds we are the goodies, and the real threat of the mean streets is the paranoia of the white world about our presence'.<sup>32</sup>

Crime writer, Nicola Williams was interviewed by Mike Philips on *In for the Kill*. Williams acknowledges the pitfalls lurking for black writers when representing black criminality. She suggests that the existence of crime perpetrated by young black individuals is a reality and has to be acknowledged: 'you can't step back from that'.<sup>33</sup> However, she suggests, 'there are other people as well and those voices haven't been heard'.<sup>34</sup> Accordingly, her novel, *Without Prejudice* eschews the depiction of the lives of black criminals and instead presents the fictional life of high-achieving female black barrister, Lee Mitchell.<sup>35</sup> Author Dreda Say Mitchell's debut novel was the noir thriller *Running Hot*.<sup>36</sup> It focused on the delinquency of black young people, a matter of great concern to her in her early years as a writer: 'they were big issues for me, you know, when I first started, particularly for young men, I have to say, that big thing for me, what was happening to young black men around me when I was

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<sup>31</sup> *In for Kill* (18:42).

<sup>32</sup> See: Claire Wells 'Writing Black: Crime Fiction's Other' in *Diversity and Detective Fiction*, ed. by Kathleen G. Klein (Ohio: Bowling Green State University, 1999), p. 213.

<sup>33</sup> *In for the Kill* (19:48).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* (19:50).

<sup>35</sup> Nicola Williams, *Without Prejudice* (London: Headline, 1997).

<sup>36</sup> Mitchell, *Running Hot*, 2004.

growing up on my council estate in East London'.<sup>37</sup> From this start, Mitchell has moved to iterations of crime fiction in her East End gang series and her other crime novels which do not foreground black male criminality but rather focus on the lives of the wider East End working class, particularly women.

In the same programme, *In for the Kill*, Courttia Newland pinpoints why he chose crime fiction's noir thriller mode rather than other more traditional 'whodunnit' sub-genre when he began writing: 'I've always wrestled with the idea of being a "crime writer" because I realised that crime writing as a tradition doesn't necessarily tell the story from the point of view of the criminals – but that is exactly what I wanted to do. I was saying, just like you "I am living amongst these people" ... I was hearing the other side of the story. And then I was like, okay, how do I put that into a novel? How do I put a story around that and show the complexity of character?'.<sup>38</sup> It is this complexity, as opposed to stereotype, that Williams too understands as a *sine qua non* for black writers. Williams asserts: 'I think you can write what you like, but don't write in stereotypes'.<sup>39</sup>

### **Views of black writers (b) restrictions of form and theme**

Another prominent restriction black crime writers suggest they have historically encountered is confinement by publishers to novels which chronicle their experience of life in England: the so-called 'novel of experience'. Early forms of the latter typically described migration to the UK, and subsequent survival in London. As Phillips states, historically, black writers have been challenged by 'the expectation that black writers should be part of the

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<sup>37</sup> *In for the Kill* (12:39).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* (5:03).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* (20:41).

60's roots industry – forever recycling narratives about various parts of the world from which they came but now no longer belong'.<sup>40</sup> Williams similarly states 'I didn't want to write an autobiography, certainly not, so although Lee Mitchell has a lot of similarities with me, she is a black British woman at the bar and she is of Guyanese extraction, like I am, but that's where the similarities end'.<sup>41</sup> Sukhdev Sandhu puts it succinctly: 'The great bane of black artists, both today and historically, is that they have been prized for their capacity to 'tell it like it is' rather than for their powers of imagination or craftsmanship'.<sup>42</sup>

What the writers appear to wish for is to be able to write in a place beyond stereotype, beyond autobiography and beyond the burden of being a role model. Of the latter, Mitchell states 'I don't want to be a role model, it's not what I am writing about'.<sup>43</sup> Further, they want to be unrestricted by the burden of creating positive images. Adebayo chafes of an imagined black readership: 'They want representation, they want positive images etc. etc. especially minority communities because they have less numbers of books about them, less films about them, so they are even more worried about positive / negative images. But I don't let that trouble me now'.<sup>44</sup> They also want to reach a subject position where they are beyond what Mike Phillips describes as being 'obliged to act as reporters on inner city life and habits'.<sup>45</sup> It is in this cleared space, that they consider they may be most free to create. As Mitchell states: 'I want to write my books and I need a sense of freedom about writing

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid. (7:11).

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. (14:38).

<sup>42</sup> Sukhdev Sandhu, *London Calling: How Black and Asian Writers Imagined a City* (London: HarperCollins, 2003), p. 166.

<sup>43</sup> *In for the Kill* (21:31).

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. (20:58).

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. (6:53).

my books'.<sup>46</sup> In insisting on this freedom, the writers suggest they may use it to move beyond the predominant social realist and inner-city reportage styles, and draw upon other aesthetic forms. Newland describes his own chafing: 'I'd been reading Langston Hughes, I'd been reading Paule Marshall, I'd been reading Maya Angelou and Rosa Guy – which were all done, instead of being hard boiled they were really poetic. And so I wanted to do that for black British council estates'.<sup>47</sup> Newland has indeed explored other literary forms such as those inspired by music in two collections of short stories a *book of blues*<sup>48</sup> and *Music for the Off-Key*.<sup>49</sup> The desire for greater literary and thematic freedom within the genre is one Mike Phillips shares: 'I also believe that the crime fiction genre is a creative opportunity for escape into a less restricted world. In the next generation, I would like to see other black writers going there'.<sup>50</sup> Arguably, Phillips has followed his own advice. His last novel is *A Shadow of Myself*.<sup>51</sup> In this, Phillips drops the private investigator formula and moves closer to the spy thriller sub-genre while expanding greatly the already broad heterogeneity of black lives and lived experience represented in his work.

### **Views of cultural commentators (a) stereotypes**

The underlying problematics of black characters and stereotyping has been explored extensively by the cultural theorist Stuart Hall. In *Representation* Hall argues that the purpose of reductive stereotypes of black people is to signify subordinate 'otherness' in a racialized regime of representation.<sup>52</sup> Hall suggests that escaping such stereotypes is not

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid. (21:47).

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. (10:28).

<sup>48</sup> Courttia Newland, *a book of blues* (Newcastle: Flambard, 2011).

<sup>49</sup> Courttia Newland, *Music for the Off-key* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2006).

<sup>50</sup> *In for the Kill* (28:41).

<sup>51</sup> Mike Phillips *A Shadow of Myself* (London: Harper Collins, 2000).

<sup>52</sup> Stuart Hall (ed.) *Representation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Sage, 2013). First published 1987.

easily done since the stereotypes that are set forward by the hegemonic group – ‘the dominant regime of representation’<sup>53</sup> made available – operate in a closed-loop circulation of power. Hall argues that ‘power circulates’ and that ‘[t]he circularity of power is especially important in the context of representation. The argument is that everyone – the powerful and the powerless – is caught up, though not on equal terms, in power’s circulation. No one – neither its apparent victims nor its agents – can stand wholly outside its field of operation’.<sup>54</sup> It is this closed loop that compels black people to adopt one stereotype or the other.

Hall acknowledges that artists will seek to contest or escape the stereotypes trap in many different ways. Hall puts forward three strategies of contestation (‘trans-codings’<sup>55</sup>) while acknowledging there may be others. The first strategy Hall lists is reversal of the stereotype. This can involve embracing the stereotype put forward by white discourse as negative and recasting it as a positive. Hall cites the blaxploitation genre in film as an example of this strategy. The second strategy Hall lists is that of broadening the regime of representation by putting forward models of black identity which are positive and so eschew the negative stereotypes put forward by white dominant discourse.<sup>56</sup> Hall suggests this strategy does not in itself overthrow the pre-existing stereotypes but travels alongside them as an alternative vision. The third strategy Hall lists is that of getting inside the stereotype and subverting its form from within. He suggests the Isaac Julien film *Looking For Langston* with its reworking of the white gaze and that white gaze’s reductive construction of black masculinity is an

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<sup>53</sup> Stuart Hall, ‘The Spectacle of the “Other”’ in *Representation*, p. 259.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p.251.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 259: ‘trans-coding: taking an existing meaning and appropriating it for new meanings’.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 262.

example of this third approach.<sup>57</sup> Hall argues of *Looking for Langston* that the particular approach of this film means that 'instead of avoiding the black body, because it has been so caught up in the complexities of power and subordination within representation, this strategy positively takes the body as the principal site of its representational strategies, attempting to make the stereotypes work against themselves'.<sup>58</sup> Black fiction writers' works can usefully be examined in terms of Halls' three strategies for escaping stereotypes, while bearing in mind that Hall's list is not exhaustive.

Applying Hall's three strategies of contestation of stereotype, *Yardie*, and the other crime novels of the black crime writer Headley work by reversal.<sup>59</sup> In *Yardie* Headley's main character, the violent, gun-wielding D exhibits many of the key elements of the blaxploitation film hero by 'valu[ing] positively all the characteristics which would normally have been negative stereotypes'.<sup>60</sup> Mike Phillips' strategy is that of broadening the regime of representation. Phillips does not feature the criminal activities of black populations in any significant way in his Sam Dean novels. Instead, Phillips makes the lead protagonist an investigator. An investigator is someone commissioned to investigate criminality, not someone steeped in it. Nicola Williams can be understood to adopt this strategy too in her legal thriller *Without Prejudice* which features the upstanding black female barrister, Lee Mitchell.<sup>61</sup> Meanwhile Oyeyemi's *Mr Fox* with its meta-fictional address of the genre's

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<sup>57</sup> *Looking For Langston* Sankofa Productions. Dir. Isaac Julien, 1989.

<sup>58</sup> Stuart Hall, 'The Spectacle of the "Other"' in *Representation*, p. 264. See also Kobena Mercer's critique of photographer, Mapplethorpe's photographs of the black male nude in 'Just Looking for Trouble: Robert Mapplethorpe and Fantasies' in *Black British Cultural Studies ed. by Houston A. Baker, Jr., Manthia Diawara, and Ruth H. Lindborg* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 278 – 292.

<sup>59</sup> Victor Headley, *Yardie* (London: Xpress, 1992).

<sup>60</sup> 'The Spectacle of the "Other"' in *Representation*, p. 260.

<sup>61</sup> Williams, *Without Prejudice*.



negative tropes may be considered to fit most closely the third type of Hall's strategy, that of undermining from within, albeit Oyeyemi's main focus is on the stereotypical positioning of women rather than black people.<sup>62</sup> Adebayo's *My Once Upon A Time*<sup>63</sup> and Bandele's *The Street*<sup>64</sup> with their literary knowingness, and their broad range of highly individualized, non-delinquent characters employ aspects of both the 'broadening the regime of representation' and the 'subversion from within' strategies.

A close reading of Newland's *The Scholar*<sup>65</sup> and *Snakeskin*,<sup>66</sup> of Karline Smith's novels *Moss Side Massive*<sup>67</sup> and *Full Crew*,<sup>68</sup> and of Dreda Say Mitchell's *Killer Tune*,<sup>69</sup> suggests a further strategy may be added to Hall's list of three. This strategy may be called a 'counter-narrative' strategy. This employs a counter-narrative to contest the stereotypical reduction being produced by the dominant narrative. In *Killer Tune*, the narrative and counter-narrative are sometimes set in close proximity. So when Lord Tribulation 'flicks through the newspaper' he reads of himself being described in reductive, outlaw terms, 'catching words like "defective", "dangerous" and "destructive"'.<sup>70</sup> Countering this narrative from the press, the reader is shown throughout the novel the depth of Lord Tribulation's musicology and alerted also to the fact that 'he had never broken the law in his life'.<sup>71</sup> Newland's *The Scholar* follows the lives of criminals and those hovering on the edge of delinquency. However, in a similar manner to Mitchell, Newland gives them, as Newland states,

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<sup>62</sup> Helen Oyeyemi, *Mr Fox* (London: Picador, 2011).

<sup>63</sup> Diran Adebayo, *My Once Upon A Time* (London: Abacus, 2000).

<sup>64</sup> Biyi Bandele, *The Street* (London: Picador, 2000).

<sup>65</sup> Courttia Newland, *The Scholar* (London: Abacus, 1997).

<sup>66</sup> Courttia Newland, *Snakeskin* (London: Abacus, 2002).

<sup>67</sup> Karline Smith *Moss Side Massive* (London: XPress, 1994).

<sup>68</sup> Karline Smith *Full Crew* (London: XPress, 2002).

<sup>69</sup> Dreda Say Mitchell *Killer Tune* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2007).

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 215.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 299.

'complexity'<sup>72</sup> including by painting detailed psychological portraits of his characters which provide a sustained focus on the characters' intimate feelings, ambitions and fears. By this counter-narrative method, Newland attempts to avoid stereotypical reduction. Newland's *Snakeskin* uses both 'broadening' and 'counter-narrative' strategies.<sup>73</sup> *Snakeskin* features an upstanding private investigator who investigates crimes that also involve black criminality. Karline Smith takes similar pains as Newland to give a convincing and complex internal life to those of her characters who 'exceed the law'.<sup>74</sup> It is this feature that raises her work above stereotype. The method adopted by Mitchell, Newland and Smith suggests a dialectic in which stereotypical representation is answered by a counter-narrative of those same people and lives that were the subject of the initial stereotyping. Space considerations permit only a brief mention of some other authors.<sup>75</sup> Donald Gorgon uses primarily Hall's 'reversal of stereotype' method; Alex Wheatle employs a 'counter-narrative' strategy as does the early work of Dreda Say Mitchell. Yvette Edwards' *The Mother* applies primarily a 'broadening the regime of representation' approach combined with aspects of noir's victim sub-genre.<sup>76</sup> Patrice Lawrence's *Orange Boy* may be considered an example of both counter-narrative in its depiction of main protagonist Marlon Sunday and of 'broadening the regime of representation' in its subsidiary focus on Marlon's mother.<sup>77</sup>

### **Views of cultural commentators (b) super agency**

The super-agency problem within crime fiction relates to the whodunnit and detective thriller sub-genres. The investigator (whether private or public) strand of crime fiction

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<sup>72</sup> *In for the Kill*, p. 2.

<sup>73</sup> Courttia Newland, *Snakeskin* (London: Abacus, 2002).

<sup>74</sup> Priestman *Crime Fiction*, p. 1.

<sup>75</sup> See Appendix for a fuller chronological listing of authors and their crime fiction works.

<sup>76</sup> Yvette Edwards, *The Mother* (London: Mantle, 2016).

<sup>77</sup> Patrice Lawrence *Orange Boy* (London: Hodder, 2016).

presents particular ideological challenges to black writers according to several commentators. Messent has outlined how the suggestion embedded in the sub-genre that one individual (ie the investigator) can find a solution to a crime, and by metonymic implication that all society's problems may be solved by individual acts is a problematic that may stymie black writers. Commenting on the crime fiction of African-American writer, Chester Himes, Messent suggests that, faced with the larger social injustice, detective work in Chester Himes' last, completed novel, *Blind Man With A Pistol* is 'rendered pointless and irrelevant in the novel's ending'.<sup>78</sup> The 'resolution by individual superman' formula has also been queried by Mandel in his text *Delightful Murder*.<sup>79</sup> Andrew Pepper too, in his chapter on black crime fiction in *The Contemporary American Crime Novel* notes the difficulty that black writers face negotiating 'the basic premise of the genre: that individual solutions to larger social problems can be achieved'.<sup>80</sup>

Mandel points out a further danger in the revenge variation of the noir thriller.<sup>81</sup> For Mandel, the risks of featuring such a narrative dénouement in a crime fiction text are grave. He suggests they might foster and justify vigilante violence which 'increasingly takes on a pre-fascist or proto-fascist content'.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Peter Messent, 'Representations of Race' in *The Crime Fiction Handbook* (Sussex: Wiley, 2013), p.100.

<sup>79</sup> Ernest Mandel, *Delightful Murder* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p.124.

<sup>80</sup> Andrew Pepper, *The Contemporary American Crime Novel* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p.93.

<sup>81</sup> See: Scaggs *Crime Fiction*, 2005, pp. 11-13 for a brief history of the 'revenge' variation.

<sup>82</sup> Mandel, *Delightful Murder*, p. 132.

### **Brief periodised history of English black crime fiction**

Having presented an ahistorical analysis of problematics, it is timely at this point to give a short periodized history of English black crime fiction. This analysis is offered with caution.

Scaggs notes one danger of diachronic analysis of crime fiction sub-genres is that such analysis has a tendency to 'straightjacket' the genre 'within a chronological approach which fixes such sub-genres, and their forms and themes, in time, and ignores the fact of their continual appropriation and reformulation by subsequent writers'.<sup>83</sup> He suggests that this risks promoting the conception of crime fiction sub-genre emergence as essentially causal with one sub-genre succeeding another 'like toppling dominoes to the present'.<sup>84</sup>

Nevertheless, Scaggs accepts the usefulness of a historical approach 'in order to make sense of the present'.<sup>85</sup> Horsley joins Scaggs in accepting that 'a sense of origins [...] is important' but adds as an important caveat the need to acknowledge 'the ambiguity or indeed the contradictoriness of individual texts and hence the different ways of reading them'.<sup>86</sup> With these cautions made, it is possible to turn to the historical.

M. P. Shiel may be considered the first English black crime fiction writer. There are significant issues, discussed earlier in this thesis, in describing the author as 'black' in the sense used in this thesis since the term was not being used in that sense during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century when Shiel produced his crime fiction works. A further problem, applying the Getachow test reference earlier, is that no major black characters are present in his crime fiction works. Putting these reservations to one side,

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<sup>83</sup> Scaggs, *Crime Fiction*, p. 2.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>86</sup> Lee Horsley, *Twentieth Century Crime Fiction* (Oxford: OUP, 2005), p. 2.

Shiel's first crime short stories, published as *Prince Zaleski* in 1895, show the influence of the Poe-like overlap typical in that period of the gothic with the amateur detective 'tale of ratiocination'.<sup>87</sup> Also noticeable thematically, is how the prevalent forms of racism – part of the dominant cultural norms of the time – permeate these works, particularly Shiel's fascination with eugenics. As its title suggests, his short story, 'The Race of Orven' has 'race' thinking as its central theme.<sup>88</sup> Similarly, the mystery at the core of the *Prince Zaleski* story, 'The S. S.' is revealed to be a conspiracy by eugenicists to rid 'the pure river of humanity' of 'the unhealthy' thereby removing 'the poisonant of their protean vileness'.<sup>89</sup> So too in the 'The Stone of The Edmundsbury Monks' the stereotypically perfidious Persian servant, Ul-Jabal 'dogs' a member of the English aristocracy in order to steal the precious stone of the story's title.<sup>90</sup> Shiel's embracing of the ideology of race and race stereotypes in these stories brings to the fore questions of essential black identities that are beyond the scope of this thesis but which are considered, for instance, by cultural theorist bell hooks in her essay, 'The Politics of Radical Black Subjectivity'.<sup>91</sup> Shiel's crime fiction works are best considered in their colonial-era context.<sup>92</sup> They are precursors of the English black crime fiction which began to be formed after colonial rule ended.

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<sup>87</sup> *Prince Zaleski* [Stories.] (London: J. Lane, 1895). Vol. 7 of the "Keynote Series".

<sup>88</sup> 'The Race of Orven' in *Prince Zaleski and Cummings King Monk* (Wisconsin: Arkham House, 1977), pp. 3-40.

<sup>89</sup> 'The S.S.' in *Prince Zaleski and Cummings King Monk* (Wisconsin: Arkham House, 1977), pp. 67-108.

<sup>90</sup> 'The Stone of The Edmundsbury Monks' in *Prince Zaleski and Cummings King Monk* (Wisconsin: Arkham House, 1977), pp. 41-66.

<sup>91</sup> 'The Politics of Radical Black Subjectivity' in *Yearning* (Oxford: Routledge, 2015), pp. 15-22.

<sup>92</sup> Any scrutiny of Shiel's work must take cognisance of the colonial context in which his work emerged. Specifically, Shiel was writing in the period identified by Edward Said in his text, *Orientalism* as early- to mid-stage Orientalism. Racial theory during this time, which suggested the superiority of the Occident and the white man, was largely undisputed. Shiel's writing reflects many of the Orientalist tropes within literature of the period including an attachment to "scientific" biological theories of race; a conviction about the racial origins of differences in culture and in material progress; a similar belief in the general superiority of the Occident in all fields; the representation of the Orient through the eyes of the 'expert' Westerner through whose hermeneutics the "Other" was rendered understandable; the silence of that "Other"; the static, history-less depiction of the "Other" in contrast with the social and civilizational progress and historical achievements of the West. Almost all these tropes can be found in Shiel's short story, 'The Race of Orven' as

After Shiel, there is an interregnum in English black crime fiction writing until the 1980's.<sup>93</sup>

In the 1980's a preoccupation with the problems of nationhood of the former Caribbean colonies is manifest in the political thriller of Barbados born Carl Jackson's 1981 *East Wind in Paradise*.<sup>94</sup> The theme is also prominent in Clyde Knight's 1983 *We Shall Not Die*.<sup>95</sup>

Montserrat born Ruel White's 1990 novel *Heroes through the Day* follows two young Black men – Derrick and Butch – as they steer a course through the vicissitudes of being young, working-class and black in London. *Heroes through the Day* has elements of the coming-of-age story; it also contains aspects of the noir thriller in its focus on the lives of perpetrators of crime, and of the Western, particularly in its italicised dream sections.<sup>96</sup>

In the 90's, the soft-boiled Sam Dean Investigator series of Mike Philips emerged simultaneously with the 'Yardie' noir thrillers of Victor Headley. These two authors provide a genealogical link to the 80's works of Jackson and Knight: both Headley and Phillips were born in the Caribbean and came to England at an early age. This link manifests itself in the texts. Both Headley's protagonist D and Phillips' Sam Dean express a bond with their Caribbean roots, allowing argument to be made that that these two writers may be considered as much West Indian as English black writers.<sup>97</sup> There is a clearly discernible

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well as in Shiel's other Prince Zaleski short stories. Further consideration of Orientalist tropes in literature can be found in: Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1991).

<sup>93</sup> While I have traced no English black crime fiction in the period between M. P. Shiel's work and that of Jackson and Knight in the 1980's, the reader is directed to the following useful texts. Stephen Soitos's *The Blues Detective* (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996) provides a thorough examination of the evolving black aesthetic in crime fiction (including its modernist expressions) during this period among African-American writers such as Ralph Ellison, Ismael Reed and Chester Himes. Bailey's *Out of the Woodpile* is also useful for this period in the United States. For the evolution of crime fiction in this period in the UK, including its modernist turn, Lee Horsley's *The Noir Thriller* is recommended.

<sup>94</sup> Carl Jackson, *East Wind in Paradise* (London: New Beacon, 1981).

<sup>95</sup> Clyde Knight, *We Shall Not Die* (Essex: Longman, 1983).

<sup>96</sup> Ruel White, *Heroes Through the Day* (London: New Beacon, 1990).

<sup>97</sup> See: Martin W. Alleyne, 'Crime fiction as a discourse: empire, race and the African diaspora' (unpublished doctoral thesis, The University of West Indies, 2017).

clustering around class lines to the 90's wave of crime fiction: the Investigator novels of Phillips and Nicola Williams feature protagonists of middle class professions (in Phillips' fiction, journalism, in Williams', law) while the noir thriller novels of Headley and later Newland and Wheatle feature working class protagonists. In this decade, Wheatle and Newland broadened out the noir thriller template established by Headley with his 'Yardie' trilogy figure D, reducing its hard-boiled features and focalising their fiction through younger, more sympathetically drawn and vulnerable protagonists. In this respect, they pick up threads from Rule White's *Heroes through the Day*.

The year 2000 saw a turn towards greater literary experimentation. Diran Adebayo, Biyi Bandele and Mike Phillips all published novels of complex form. Adebayo and Bandele pushed resolutely away from realism in *My Once Upon A Time*<sup>98</sup> and *The Street*,<sup>99</sup> both drawing extensively on West African mythological traditions. Meanwhile, with *A Shadow of Myself* Phillips produced a novel of great complexity in its depiction of the heterogeneity of black identities across time and space.<sup>100</sup> *A Shadow of Myself* took in the African presence in Cold War Eastern Europe of the early 50's and traced a temporal and narrative arc right through to the third generation black presence in late 20<sup>th</sup> century London.

In 2009, Peter Akinti's noir-inflected, brutalist-realist novel, *Forest Gate*<sup>101</sup> became the first English black crime fiction novel to feature a female protagonist of Somali origin. In the same year, Dreda Say Mitchell's *Geezer Girls* was the beginning of a sustained focus by

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<sup>98</sup> Diran Adebayo, *My Once Upon A Time* (London: Abacus, 2000).

<sup>99</sup> Biyi Bandele, *The Street* (London: Picador, 2000).

<sup>100</sup> Phillips, *A Shadow of Myself*.

<sup>101</sup> Peter Akinti, *Forest Gate* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009).

Mitchell, perhaps following on from Karline Smith's earlier efforts, on female working class protagonists.<sup>102</sup>

2011 saw a further push into literary experimentation. Helen Oyeyemi's *Mr Fox* employed meta-fictional techniques in its critique of crime fiction genre tropes which glamorized violent female death.<sup>103</sup> *Mr Fox* also saw Oyeyemi drawing on African and European fabulist narrative traditions. Newland's 2013 noir thriller, *The Gospel According to Cane* introduced Modernist style anachrony as well as a Modernist-like rejection of tidy plot closure.<sup>104</sup> *The Gospel According to Cane* also employed surreal, Caribbean dreamscapes among its settings, and featured a Highsmith-esque sustained excavation of the moods of anxiety and foreboding.

The influence of the emerging genre of Young Adult fiction is clear from 2015, with the publication of a series of black authored Young Adult crime thrillers. This phenomenon began with *Liccle Bit*<sup>105</sup> by Alex Wheatle, and saw contributions by Patrice Lawrence, beginning with her 2016 Young Adult novel, *Orange Boy*.<sup>106</sup>

### Points of Departure

*Let Her Go*'s points of departure were developed against the above background of black crime fiction problematics and in the light of the foregoing history. Developing points of departure required a delicate unpicking and re-stitching of the genre including a close

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<sup>102</sup> Dreda Say Mitchell, *Geezer Girls* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2009).

<sup>103</sup> Helen Oyeyemi, *Mr Fox* (London: Picador, 2011).

<sup>104</sup> Courttia Newland, *The Gospel According to Cane* (London: Telegram, 2013).

<sup>105</sup> Alex Wheatle, *Liccle Bit* (London: Atom, 2015).

<sup>106</sup> Patrice Lawrence, *Orange Boy* (London: Hodder, 2016).



analysis of my previous crime novels, both in terms of character, and in terms of the representation of the geographical spaces the characters occupied.

### **Points of departure (a) characters**

I had employed a mixture of 'reversal of stereotype' and 'broadening of the regime of representation' in *Lick Shot*<sup>107</sup> and *Professor X*,<sup>108</sup> while focusing primarily on 'broadening the regime of representation' in *Little Jack Horner*.<sup>109</sup> I found Horsley's critique of the Headley style 'reversal of stereotype' novels strong: 'by focusing on a highly recognizable type of crime protagonist, Yardie novelists leave themselves open to the charge of reinforcing damaging, reductive images of black masculinity'.<sup>110</sup> I therefore rejected that formula for *Let Her Go*. Accepting the anti-superhero arguments of Messent, Pepper and Mandel, I also rejected both the black police detective and the private eye, 'disengaged hero' thriller formula. I rejected the focus on super-intellectual acumen and the effective freezing of time and space that the Golden Age whodunnit style 'tales of ratiocination' put forth. I rejected the focus on the lives and decisions of the criminal that is a defining aspect of the noir thriller. Accepting Mandel's argument of the dangers of promoting vigilante action, I rejected as main protagonist and central consciousness a *Cop Killer* style seeker of revenge.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Peter Kalu *Lick Shot* (London: XPress, 1993).

<sup>108</sup> Peter Kalu, *Professor X* (London: XPress, 1995).

<sup>109</sup> Peter Kalu, *Little Jack Horner* (Manchester: Suitcase, 2007).

<sup>110</sup> Lee Horsley, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* (Oxford: OUP, 2005), p. 229.

<sup>111</sup> Donald Gorgon, *Cop Killer* (London: XPress, 1994).

This series of rejections cleared creative space for a new type of protagonist. If stereotype entails 'ontological reduction'<sup>112</sup> then I considered a promising way forward would be ontological expansion. The Jamesian idea of the morally bewildered protagonist whose 'very gropings would figure amongst his most interesting motions' held appeal.<sup>113</sup> It seemed potentially disruptive in a positive way if this were combined with both Hall's suggestion of black identity as being not fixed but in constant renegotiation, and with the noir thriller protagonist's typically unsettled, fragmented, less monolithic identity. I embraced the explorations of black heterogeneity made by Mike Phillips in his crime fiction works and also embodied in the works of Helen Oyeyemi, Yvonne Edwards, Diran Adebayo and Biyi Bandele. I decided that, unlike the main protagonists of the hard-boiled thrillers of genre pioneers Hammett and Chandler, the main protagonist of *Let Her Go* would be no rootless, nameless loner. The main protagonist would have family. I adopted from the works particularly of Newland and Smith the sense of there being a web of surrounding family and community to which the main protagonists belonged. This decision would impact on the construction of the main protagonists' identity by allowing the inclusion of scenes of socialization as a part of identity construction. Again, countering another stereotype adumbrated by Kolton Lee, I decided the central consciousness would be an engaged father.<sup>114</sup> I therefore implicitly rejected the idea intermittently present in English black crime fiction of parent-absence as a motivation for criminality.<sup>115</sup> I accepted the challenge of

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<sup>112</sup> See: Kobena Mercer 'Reading racial fetishism' in *Representation*, p. 281; extracted from Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle* (London: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>113</sup> See Henry James' Preface to *The Ambassadors* (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 2008), p. xxxix.

<sup>114</sup> See: Kolton Lee's *The Last Card* (London: Maia Press, 2007), p. 151: 'What? A black man can't be a family man?' *The Last Card* plot revolves around boxer Hilary's sacrifices for his child.

<sup>115</sup> See for example a mother's heart-rending letter to her abandoned son turned criminal in Karline Smith's *Full Crew*, p. 39; and similarly, a father's neglect of his two sons, Zukie and Storm in Smith's *Moss Side Massive* p. 46.

reconstructing black masculinity beyond the stereotype of the ‘hypersexual’ being as described by Mercer.<sup>116</sup> I was aware also of the persistence of the infantilization stereotype of the black male in English black crime fiction. It surfaces in a number of texts. For instance, Adebayo’s main protagonist in *My Once Upon A Time*, aged 25, is called Boy; and Mitchell’s main protagonist in *Running Hot*, aged 29, is called Schoolboy. The infantilization trope is present as far back in English literature as Kipling’s 1899 poem *The White Man’s Burden* which described Africans of British colonies as “half -devil and half-child”.<sup>117</sup> It has also been noted by Bailey in her description of the “sambo” stereotype;<sup>118</sup> as well as by Mercer in his analysis of the infantilization of black sportsmen.<sup>119</sup> I therefore decided to make the main protagonist an older man. Inspired by Boileau and Narcejac’s comment on the crime story – victim relationship that ‘the crime story, instead of signalling the triumph of logic, has then to consecrate the failure of rational thought: it is precisely for this reason that its hero is a victim’, I decided to focus on bewilderment and anguish rather than ratiocination when developing the psychological narrative of main protagonist, Saul Hanley.<sup>120</sup>

I decided that another central character in *Let Her Go* would be Tishana, the daughter of the main protagonist. She would be of mixed heritage background. I rejected the ‘tragic mulatto’ stereotype that has been historically prevalent in the dominant regime of representation.<sup>121</sup> This stereotype is arguably present in both Mike Phillips’ *Blood Rights*,

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<sup>116</sup> Mercer, ‘Reading racial fetishism’ in *Representation*, p. 281.

<sup>117</sup> *Collected Poems of Rudyard Kipling*, Intro and notes by R. T. Jones (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1994), p. 334.

<sup>118</sup> Frankie Y. Bailey, *Out of The Woodpile* (New York: Greenwood, 1991), p. 12 and p. 32.

<sup>119</sup> Mercer, ‘Reading racial fetishism’ in *Representation*, p. 283.

<sup>120</sup> Boileau and Narcejac, *Le Roman Policier*, 1964, p. 178.

<sup>121</sup> See: Hall in *Representation*, p.226; see also: Bailey, *Out of the Woodpile*, p. 7.

the plot of which turns on the malevolent actions of the ‘half-caste’ Roy Baker.<sup>122</sup> It may also be considered present in Courttia Newland’s *Snakeskin* where central to the plot are the criminal acts of the ‘mixed-heritage’ Mason Booth. It may be considered present too in Mitchell’s *Killer Tune*, where the mixed heritage son of protagonist Lord Tribulation is the criminal catalyst of the plot.<sup>123</sup> The trope is mentioned ironically in Adebayo’s *My Once Upon A Time*.<sup>124</sup> I rejected the noir thriller concentration on criminality as a frame for the character, Tishana, and instead chose the ‘broadening the regime of representation’ strategy outlined by Hall and utilized by Phillips and Williams: I made the main female protagonist of *Let Her Go* a university graduate who was involved in the progressive cause of the *Black Lives Matter* social movement.

Across all characters, I wanted to bring a sense of fluidity to their identity in order to counteract the way in which stereotypes work towards the immobilization and essentializing of black people.<sup>125</sup>

### **Points of Departure (b) space**

The vast majority of English back crime fiction is set in London.<sup>126</sup> The capital city’s centrality in English black crime fiction has been part of the stereotypical flattening of black diversity. One rationale for this is expressed succinctly in *Cop Killer*: “‘Downtown’ Brixton resembled a neighbourhood in New York City rather than South London. It now boasted to be the black capital of London, which was the black capital of Britain, which was the black capital of

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<sup>122</sup> Mike Phillips, *Blood Rights* (London: Penguin, 1990). First published 1989.

<sup>123</sup> Mitchell, *Killer Tune*.

<sup>124</sup> Adebayo, *My Once Upon A Time*, p.127.

<sup>125</sup> See: Hall in *Representation* p. 234.

<sup>126</sup> See Appendix under the column ‘setting’.

Europe'.<sup>127</sup> While roughly accurate of England as a matter of demographics, representing black identity as centering around London simplifies black identity by rendering peripheral those expressions of black identity which occur in other regions of England.<sup>128</sup> My previous crime fiction novels had all been set in the north of England. I wanted to persist in fostering what Lynne Pearce has described as 'a more pervasive devolution of what for centuries has passed as "English Literature"'.<sup>129</sup> I also wanted to continue to contribute to 'the role crime fiction has played in *mapping* the changing economic, social and geographical environment of Greater Manchester'.<sup>130</sup> Therefore, I rejected locating scenes of the novel in London, instead locating key scenes in Manchester and Liverpool. I also abandoned the Manichean-like tendency to divide urban centres geographically into black areas and white areas. It is a separation that occurs in my novels *Lick Shot* and *Professor X*, in Smith's *Moss Side Massive*, as well as in Newland's *The Scholar*.<sup>131</sup> Further, *Let Her Go* abandons the sense, often promulgated by the noir thriller, of the urban milieu as essentially threatening. In substitution of the idea of a binary urban milieu comprised of black and white zones in which black characters were trapped, I decided to show fluidity within urban space and to incorporate some sense of 'conviviality' or what commentator Paul Gilroy has described as 'the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multiculturalism an ordinary feature of social life in Britain's urban areas and in postcolonial cities elsewhere'.<sup>132</sup> I

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<sup>127</sup> Gorgon, *Cop Killer*, p. 29.

<sup>128</sup> Roughly half of the non-white population of England lives in London. Middlesex University's Social Policy Research Centre's website states there are 10.7 million BAME individuals in England of which 4.5 million are in London. See: <<http://sprc.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/BME-communities-statistical-profile1.pdf>> [Accessed 21 May 2019].

<sup>129</sup> Lynne Pearce, 'Preface', in *Postcolonial Manchester*, ed. by Lynne Pearce, Corinne Fowler, and Robert Cranshaw (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), p. xvii.

<sup>130</sup> Lynne Pearce, 'Manchester's crime fiction' in *Postcolonial Manchester*, p. 110. Italics are Pearce's.

<sup>131</sup> For commentary on Newland's 'Manichean approaches' See: Kwame Dawes, 'Negotiating the Ship on the Head: Black British Fiction' in *Write Black, Write British* (London: Hansib 2005), p. 273.

<sup>132</sup> Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or convivial culture?* (Oxford: Routledge, 2004), p. xi.

decided to adopt Mike Phillips' approach and show greater mobility of black characters, both within the microcosm of urban space in England and the macrocosm of international spatial movements. The fluidity with which black characters traversed spatial dimensions became key to the *Let Her Go's* representational ambitions.

As well as the genre trope abandonments listed above and a concomitant quest for ontological expansion, I set out to experiment with literary techniques less used in English black crime fiction to date, and to draw upon fields of knowledge I had not explored in my earlier novels. This ambition accords with Phillip's call in his programme *In for the Kill* (and referred to above) for innovation. Two key techniques that I wanted to explore were 'stream of consciousness' and 'epistolary' techniques especially in so far as these techniques might affect character development. Key concepts I wanted to explore were habitus and hybridity. Key fields of knowledge were jurisprudence's social contract theory and, from criminology, the theory of desistance and the relatively new field of narrative criminology. I also wanted to explore how a synthesis of the crime novel with the road trip novel might be attempted. Finally, I was interested in how cross-cutting manifestations of class and gender might impact on character development. These concerns form the basis of the expository chapters which follow.

## Chapter 2: Stream of consciousness and its counterpoint of the epistolary in *Let Her Go*.

A key investigatory focus of the practice-based research conducted via *Let Her Go* was the contributions that stream of consciousness and epistolary techniques might make to character development in the novel.

*Let Her Go's* precipitating event is the death of Tishana, the daughter of the main character, Saul. This event prepares the ground for a sustained literary exploration of abnormal psychological states related to grief. I decided early on to experiment with using a first-person, intense stream of consciousness technique for this exploration, a method that I named 'intense consciousness'. I used two key waypoints to pilot me through this exploration. The first waypoint was grief in its five stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.<sup>133</sup> The second was consciousness, particularly four of its constituent elements, namely perception, cognition, memory and affect and their 'dense combination'.<sup>134</sup> I wanted to utilize the complex interplay of these factors made possible by stream of consciousness techniques. That interplay within *Let Her Go* will be analysed by focusing on two extracts from the novel: the three opening paragraphs, and a short section from page forty-four.

In *Let Her Go's* opening paragraph,<sup>135</sup> Saul is walking along a riverbank prior to attending the funeral of his daughter, Tishana. His instability of mind is replicated in how he sees turbulence in the river; the chunder of waves invokes the inconstancy, danger and menace

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<sup>133</sup> See: Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss* (Toronto: Scribner, 2005).

<sup>134</sup> See: David Lodge *Consciousness and the novel* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2002), p. 32.

<sup>135</sup> *Let Her Go*, p 6 (provisional page number. For all citations of *Let Her Go*, hereon, page numbers are provisional).

coursing through his mind. The close-up description of discrete elements that comprise the river suggests the unavailability to Saul of any panorama: he is lost in detail. One of those visual details, the 'spilt seed' operates on a symbolic level to represent the waste of a needless death while simultaneously pointing forward narratively to the coming description of the death of Tishana. Then comes the sudden lurch of Saul's mind into phantasmagoria. Repressed grief manifests itself with a vision of bodies buried: 'Faces up, six down'. The violence of this irruption leads to a complete loss of consciousness. The text consequently jump-cuts to the cemetery of the second paragraph.<sup>136</sup> Here, the synecdoche of shoes for mourners is again symbolic of Saul's inability to grasp a whole picture. From the same paragraph, the reader gleans some social context: the dress code is Western; Saul is a pall-bearer – part of the 'leg train' – a privileged position within the funeral ritual and so clearly belongs, however tenuously, to a community. We witness this community at the funeral picking Saul back up onto his feet, both literally and metaphorically, when he falls.

The extract shows Saul's instability of memory. Instead of the stable consciousness of Wheatle, Smith and Mitchell's main protagonists, in *Let Her Go*, Saul exhibits a memory which repeatedly malfunctions. Reflecting this, the lineality of the narrative is disrupted. The chaos of these anachronies assists the emergence and development of a more fragmented character type. The burial scene is repeated across the novel three times; and each time it is rendered differently. The differentiated recall at each recurrence points to different latent content being stirred from Saul's subconscious at each manifestation of the burial scene. The synchronic layering of subconscious and conscious thoughts and their related images is

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<sup>136</sup> *Let Her Go*, p 6.



part of *Let Her Go's* ambition of ontological expansion. It gives a more fully developed interiority to Saul, beyond that achievable by realist, chronologically orthodox methods.

The broken syntax of the extracted paragraphs reflects the cognitive stress of the victim experience that Saul experiences. Boileau and Narcejac have expressed the pathology of the victim crime story thus:

‘One becomes a victim as soon as one is present at events whose definitive meaning one is unable to decipher, as soon as the real becomes a trap, as soon as everyday life is turned upside down’.<sup>137</sup>

Saul’s world literally turns upside down as he collapses while carrying the coffin. More broadly, as mimesis, the chaotic, allusive style of the extracted text suggests that, under duress, the human mind does not think in sentences. Instead, the text attempts to move closer to the more staccato pattern of thought that occurs when subjects are placed in situations of intense stress.

The opening paragraph introduces two victims, one alive, one dead: Saul and Tishana. Establishing Saul as a victim seeds the expansion of the emotional landscape of the text into anguish. Boileau and Narcejac have described the victim crime story as the poetry of anguish.<sup>138</sup> Rage and contempt infuse Saul’s perception of the other mourners. His rage symbolises the denial stage of Saul’s grief: his unwillingness to accept the fact of Tishana’s death and his consequent sublimation of that repressed emotional energy and its redirecting onto the mourners. Simultaneously, Saul exhibits a form of dissociation: the

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<sup>137</sup> Boileau and Narcejac, *Le Roman Policier*, 1964, p. 178; cited in Mandel, pp. 87-88. Mandel’s translation.

<sup>138</sup> See: Boileau and Narcejac, *Le Roman Policier*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Paris: Presses Universitaires De France, 1975), p. 100.

hymns sung at the graveside and the mourners' attempts at eulogy are rendered distantly by Saul in the text as 'The songs. The words.' By disengaging from the ritual, Saul effects his denial of its significance: that Tishana is dead.

The second extract examined here comprises two successive paragraphs, the first beginning 'I let it all flick by'.<sup>139</sup> Here, Saul is journeying in a police car from his high-rise city centre apartment to Manchester Royal Infirmary where he will identify Tishana's body. In contrast with the opening paragraphs, this scene's location in the built environment asserts Saul's urban identity. One aspect of journeying by car is its effect on memory and cognition.<sup>140</sup> In this extract, the external environment outside the car is perceived only allusively in a synthaesia interwoven with the influence of semi-conscious thought streams. This complex synthesis is exemplified by phrases such as the 'molten road', the 'feathered trees' and the car 'gulling'. Passengering in the speeding cocoon of the car, Saul has entered a space-time warp.

As the warped landscape flicks by, Saul's instability and mental fracturing is mirrored in staccato sentences. His cognition flickers across metaphysics, theology and logical reasoning. The race of his thoughts is never wholly linear or in one direction and this finds its objective correlative in his perceptual world where an 'ambulance races in the opposite direction'. A cognitive 'faze' is achieved, the *quale* 'faze' carrying not only the sense of 'to disturb' or 'to discomfort' but also allusive connections with the words 'fade' and 'haze'. This jitter of perception-cognition continues: 'Halo' could be the effect of streetlights since the car is being driven at night, but there is also the sense of an angel's halo and so a sense

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<sup>139</sup> *Let Her Go*, p 44.

<sup>140</sup> Much of the writing of this drive-time event was influenced by a reading of Lynne Pearce's *Drivetime: Literary Excursions in Automotive Consciousness* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

of transcendence of normal time and space. In sum, there is a persistent ambiguity of meaning: signifiers floating without any necessary fixity of signified. It presents superficially as incoherence yet with a possible condensed underlying meaning unobtainable by a casual reading.

In the following paragraph, 'Time slips, doubles back on itself'.<sup>141</sup> Cued by this line, the text moves to a combination of recalled phrases and imagined conversations between Saul and Tishana. In trying to make sense of Tishana's absence, Saul recalls his daughter's previous deeds, searching by reference to that past information, for benign, hopeful explanations for her absence. The time slippage within Saul's mind is replicated in the text as the text's chronology fractures. Saul's mind moving into the past combined with the contradictory speeding of the car into the future brings to the fore the suspense element of victim crime novels. As Boileau and Narcejac put it: 'what is suspended in the suspense novel? Time'.<sup>142</sup> In the time-warp of the car, memory has Saul shuttling between time-spaces even as he knows he is hurtling to the mortuary. The postponement of knowing is willed: a desperate attempt to postpone the reckoning that the body identification process will impose.

Perception, memory and cognition in this extract are all suffused with affect. The language of hope ticks away metronomically in the background of Saul's thoughts and is represented linguistically in the 'wish' of wishbone, and in 'cocoon' 'feather' and 'hum'. Simultaneously the language of fear asserts itself in 'dread' 'spin' 'yaw' and 'flare'. The line, 'I close my eyes to dread' cues a flickering into consciousness then repression of the bargaining stage of

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<sup>141</sup> *Let Her Go*, p 44.

<sup>142</sup> Boileau and Narcejac, *Le Roman Policier*, 1975, p. 89.

grief. Saul goes on not to bargain but to challenge God: 'I have words with God, the words mainly fuck right off, this shit idea of Yours is hereby cancelled'.<sup>143</sup>

The interplay is subtle and complex. Reduced lineality, anachrony, fractured syntax, allusion, dissociation, displacement, the fluctuation of latent and manifest content, perceptual distortions approximating hallucination, grief-driven anguish and chaotic memory all interanimate to create the text's simulacrum of Saul's consciousness. *Let Her Go* becomes a 'poem of slow death', its suspension of social realist techniques freeing it to manifest a noir influenced, Modernist-inspired insistence on psychological interiority.<sup>144</sup>

The danger of the 'poem of slow death' with its slow evisceration and heightened emotions is that it might exit crime fiction entirely and become a novel of Gothic fantasy. As Horsley states, 'one of the key tensions crime fiction is between gothic excess and the solving, ordering process of detection itself'.<sup>145</sup> The apogee of gothic effect in *Let Her Go* occurs with the recurrent *unheimlich* presence of the dead Tishana before Saul. The reader is invited, as one of several possibilities, to interpret such appearances as a form of traumatic hallucination. Early drafts of the novel featured several more of such uncanny scenes. I cut them, having decided that centring the novel as crime fiction required not only a judicious use of 'intense consciousness' techniques, but also an astringent to their heightened emotions and hallucinatory Gothic effects.

I therefore added the forensic astringency of primary evidence: documents that exist as facts within the fiction of the novel. I call these documents epistolary materials. The epistolary has a long history. The Old Testament's Ten Commandments and the entire text

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<sup>143</sup> *Let Her Go*, p 44.

<sup>144</sup> Boileau and Narcejac, *Le Roman Policier*, 1975, p. 94.

<sup>145</sup> Horsley, *Twentieth Century Crime Fiction*, p. 4.

of the Koran present as epistolary material, and the origins and growth of the novel have very close connections with letters. They feature in Henry Fielding's 1741 satire *Joseph Andrews*<sup>146</sup> and are the structuring device of Alice Walker's 1982 classic *The Color Purple*.<sup>147</sup>

I considered a range of modern documents for inclusion in *Let Her Go* including diary entries, newspaper articles, food labels, container labels, court documents, voice mail, audio recordings and emails, and sought models for how the epistolary can work in a novel.

The French documentary text *Elle n'était pas d'ici* ('She Wasn't from Here') in which a father documents his grief for his deceased teen daughter, proved particularly relevant for my project.<sup>148</sup> *Elle n'était pas d'ici* includes letters sent to the father by those who learn of his loss, as well as official communications with hospitals and extracts from the father's own journals.

In addition to conducting research by reading, I decided to undertake some creative preparatory research on the use of epistolary material. In my most contained epistolary experiment, I took the classic Langston Hughes poem 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers' and treated it as a found object. Its opening reads as follows:

### **The Negro Speaks of Rivers**

I've known rivers:  
I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the  
flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Henry Fielding, *Joseph Andrews* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966).

<sup>147</sup> Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (London: The Women's Press, 1983).

<sup>148</sup> Patrick Poivre d'Arvor, *Elle n'était pas d'ici* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995).

<sup>149</sup> Langston Hughes, 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers' <<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/negro-speaks-rivers>> [accessed 4 April 2018].

I proceeded to abrade it, superimposing a contemporaneous voice by way of palimpsest. I used Microsoft Word's strike-through function for visual impact, giving the look of stitches – of a body badly beaten. By such reworking, the poem, I hoped, would speak to the *Black Lives Matter* movement in a profound way. The opening of my palimpsest version of the poem became:

### **The Negro Speaks of ~~Rivers~~ Blood Transfusions**

I've known ~~rivers~~ blood transfusions:  
I've known ~~rivers~~ blood transfusions ancient as ~~the world~~ my soul and older than  
the  
    flow of ~~human blood~~ rivers in ~~human~~ earth's veins.

My ~~soul~~ pulse has grown ~~deep~~ slow like the rivers.<sup>150</sup>

The conversion to artifact and subsequent degradation of this poem was simultaneously an act of tribute and a repositioning of the Langston Hughes' text to address the contemporary issue of deaths in police custody, both in the UK and in the USA, in a manner consistent with Hughes's own wider thematic concerns. My strike-throughs and substitutions created three textual levels, encouraging the reader to compare Hughes' Negritude-inspired, beatific original poem with, first of all, the United States' Jim Crow era of oppression based on race and, secondly, with more contemporary UK policing misdeeds, as evidenced in the circumstances surrounding the death in Leeds of David Oluwale, a case which resulted in one of the rare successful prosecutions of police officers for offences relating to the death of a Black British subject. The positioning and repositioning of texts generated within other discourses or as by-products of other social processes became a key focus of my research in this area.

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<sup>150</sup> 'The Negro Speaks of ~~Rivers~~ Blood Transfusions' in *Filigree*, ed. by Nii Ayikwei Parkes (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2018).

Having conducted creative investigations into the epistolary, I turned to the position, and the positioning, of epistolary material within the text of *Let Her Go*, posing myself the following questions: What effects would the addition of such material have on the narrative flow? And on the dimensionality of the text? And, further still, on the text's stylistics?

The most surprising discovery was the degree to which the need for the epistolary material appeared to have shrunk, even as my investigation into the latter's nature and effects had widened and deepened. I found myself winnowing the epistolary material down to the necessary and effective.

Immediately after the opening paragraph of presentation, the text uses the power of the epistolary to speak of absences:

Miscellaneous Unreleased Materials Relating to the Death of Ms Tishana Hanley  
Freedom of Information Decision Pending<sup>151</sup>

Here, the evidence suppressed is as meaningful as the evidence presented. The 'unreleased materials' referred to include the official records of the work of the undercover police officer on the *Black Lives Matter* campaign that the deceased was engaged with. I wanted the novel to speak, in its silence, to this area of historical police malpractice.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Kalu, *Let Her Go*, p. 4.

<sup>152</sup> For instance, see: 'Undercover Police Could Face Criminal Charges over Relationships with Activists', *The Guardian*, 6 March 2014 <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/mar/06/undercover-police-criminal-charges-relationships-activists-sexual>> [accessed 4 April 2018].

Of course, beginning the novel with the epistolary announcement of absence also flags, in classic *noir* manner, that within the novel, all might not be as on the surface, it might seem.

After this initial epistolary mode, the novel plunges into the intense consciousness of the grieving father as he arrives, early and alone, for the funeral of his daughter. The next significant integration of epistolary material is a blending of intense consciousness and materiality via the use of the single word 'sorry'. I sought to deploy this word's anaphoric effect – an effect that I had noticed was used by Hughes in 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers' in relation to the words 'rivers' and 'blood' – as well as its koan-like ability to suggest streams of thought that can run into almost infinite eddies:

A crude place mat Sorry. Written in lower case, Tish's writing because at four years old she caught the class with the teacher who did the old-style cursives, the loop under the y, sealing into a circle under the line, the s's antique, looping lead line.

There was no full stop after the y.

A hanging, open mouthed

Sorry<sup>153</sup>

This litany is followed by a coda of epistolary material that ends the section. Such a section end provides a cooling contrast with the preceding intense consciousness passage. It is hoped that the epistolary format of the beginning and end of the section will enable the two to act together as a contextualizing brace.

As well as using epistolary material for aesthetic patterning, as exemplified immediately above, I also sought to employ it to introduce a stronger connection with reality. In *The*

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<sup>153</sup> Kalu, *Let Her Go*, p. 73.



*Implied Reader*, Wolfgang Iser posits that the reader moves through a text in a process of illusion-building, which is subsequently and frequently modified by intrusions of reality. These intrusions, Iser contends, cause the reader to reappraise the narrative and to modify their imaginative recreation of the fictive world that is primed by the text. A literary work becomes trite and even 'dangerous', in Iser's view, when it fails to include this dynamic between illusion building and illusion modification. As Iser puts it: 'If reading were to consist of nothing but an uninterrupted building up of illusions, it would be a suspect, if not downright dangerous process: instead of bringing us into contact with reality, it would wear us away from realities'.<sup>154</sup>

It may be argued that one illusion-related danger in crime fiction is an aversion to any sustained focus on the reality of black people's experiences of the English criminal justice system. The epistolary material in *Let Her Go* serves in part as a corrective, seeking to ensure that the fictive story is tied closely to, and in dynamic interaction with, this reality. The replication or simulation of documents used in the real world, whether from the sphere of criminal investigation, from coroners' investigations or from the social-work field, provides detail that lends the text authenticity. Such usage has an affinity with the artistic practice that first came to my attention following the controversy stirred up by the poet Kenneth Goldsmith's repositioning of the autopsy report of Michael Brown (the black man shot by a white police officer in Ferguson, USA) as a poem.<sup>155</sup> It also resonates with the documentary-theatre method employed in the creation of *The Colour of Justice*, a play

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<sup>154</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader* (London: Johns Hopkins, 1974), p. 284.

<sup>155</sup> See: Alison Flood, 'US Poet Defends Reading of Michael Brown Autopsy Report as a Poem', *The Guardian*, 17 March 2015 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/mar/17/michael-brown-autopsy-report-poem-kenneth-goldsmith>> [accessed 4 April 2018].

comprising an edited, staged version of the transcripts from the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, which investigated the circumstances surrounding the racially motivated killing of Lawrence, a black teenager from London. The inquiry investigated, *inter alia*, police misdeeds during the initial murder investigation.<sup>156</sup>

There is a further pedagogical role for the epistolary material. Insofar as the novel aspires to conduct an interrogation of the justice system and the related apparatus of the state, it follows that part of the interrogation is the exhibiting and probing of the normal mode of discourse and the information sphere of those realms. Exhibiting documents of such provenance assists in demystifying them; it enables the black reader and, as that information ripples out, the wider black community to become familiar via the documents, with the language (including the persuasive language, or rhetoric) used in legal and state bureaucracies. The ambition here is that, in any real-life encounter which a reader subsequently has with this language, that language's ability to dazzle and potentially deceive or intimidate is diminished. One example that illustrates this point is that of the pathology report, the language of which ostensibly exhibits objectivity and neutrality. Yet, as Michael Mansfield QC, one of Britain's leading experts in official procedures relating to deaths in police custody, points out in an interview with journalist Charlie Mole, forensic pathology is, in fact, 'deeply subjective' and the methods by which pathologists are appointed to cases in England are, he claims, 'very unhealthy'.<sup>157</sup> Consistent with this, the actions of the pathologist Freddy Patel, who conducted the initial autopsy in the Tomlinson

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<sup>156</sup> Richard Norton-Taylor, *The Colour of Justice* (London: Oberon, 1999). The play is described by its publisher on the text's cover sleeve as being 'based on the transcripts of the Stephen Lawrence inquiry'.

<sup>157</sup> Charlie Mole, 'Subjectivity and Pathology', *The Justice Gap* <<http://www.thejusticegap.com/2012/04/subjectivity-and-pathology>> [accessed 4 April 2018].

case, were described by the Tribunal of the General Medical Council in 2012 as ‘dishonest’ and judged further to be harmful in their failure to detect possible ‘clandestine homicide’.<sup>158</sup>

In this manner *Let Her Go* encourages the reader to seek out discourses that compete with official interpretations delivered by state-sanctioned documents.

The inclusion of intense consciousness and epistolary material within the text also had a significant effect on the positioning of the narrator of the novel. Without the epistolary, it might be argued that the text presents what, in narratologist Gerard Genette’s terms, is an internally focalised narrative; that is to say, one in which ‘the focus coincides with a character, who then becomes the fictive “subject” of all the perceptions, including those that concern himself as object’.<sup>159</sup> In early drafts of *Let Her Go*, which did not begin with the contextualising paragraph of explanation that begins with ‘My daughter died’,<sup>160</sup> the focalisation was through a relatively low-profile hero-narrator, Saul, looking back at himself as he moved through the time of the story. In these early versions, the entire text can be interpreted as a display of the working of the mind of Saul including the epistolary materials. These latter can, albeit with some effort, be explained as also manifestations of Saul’s consciousness: the character, Saul carries around with him a bag of objects relating to his daughter’s death, and the reader is given the option of understanding the epistolary material as the revealed contents of this bag. On several occasions, the text flags and cues such an interpretation:

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<sup>158</sup> Sarah Boseley, ‘Ian Tomlinson pathologist Freddy Patel struck off’, *The Guardian*, 23 August 2012 <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2012/aug/23/tomlinson-pathologist-freddy-patel-struck-off>> [accessed 4 April 2018].

<sup>159</sup> Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, trans. by Jane E. Levin (New York: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 74.

<sup>160</sup> Kalu, *Let Her Go*, p. 3.

I pushed myself up again, swabbed under the bed and found the holdall, inside it the bag with her things. I looked through this smaller bag's jumble till I found the photograph.

Palm sized. The reverse white. *Tishana Hanley*. A date. The Coroner's Office stamp over that. To turn it this time. I hadn't been able so far. A thousand miles now of anaesthetic.<sup>161</sup>

If all the text that comprises the novel is understood as a presentation of Saul's mind, then the dialogue within the novel can be understood as conversation recalled by Saul and, thus, diegetic. The removal of attributive contextualisation ('she said', 'he exclaimed', 'she argued' etc.) nevertheless frees that dialogue to achieve a certain closeness to mimesis: an escape from both anteriority and from Saul's internal focalisation, at least momentarily, in the reader's imagination.

The tilt into the present tense during the intense consciousness passages can also be explained consistently within this schema. In his recall of the story, the narrator, Saul chooses to include in his telling those instances of post-traumatic-stress induced flashback or hallucination that he experienced within the time of the story, and he chooses to narrate these flashbacks in the present tense. It should be noted that this analysis of temporal combinations is not exhaustive. The novel's sustained anachrony and mingling of 'realist' flashback with imaginings, dreams, hallucinations as well as with the uncanny allows alternative temporal explanations to be possible.

Saul, as the character whose consciousness predominates the narrative, is, as suggested above, the default candidate for the separate role of narrator. In narratologist Mieke Bal's

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

formulation, Saul appears to be the character-bound narrator (CN).<sup>162</sup> Nevertheless, if one ignores, for the purpose of explication, the presence of the novel's opening paragraph of presentation (the one that begins 'My daughter died', to which we will return later), it can be argued that Saul is not the only possibility for the narrator role. On this, appropriately doctored, line of analysis, the inclusion of epistolary material induces the possibility of a narrator other than Saul, since logic insists that, at least within the time zone of the *story*, Saul would not have had access to some of the documents and information that the epistolary material introduces. To use the most obvious instance, the Osman Warning Letter is labelled 'unsent'.<sup>163</sup> If it is unsent, then how did it come into the possession (or, more importantly, into the mind) of Saul? The inclusion of such epistolary materials brings the presence of a narrator to the foreground and raises the twin questions: Who is the narrator and where is that narrator located, temporally? Indeed, without that opening paragraph of presentation, these twin questions become urgent. In Genette's formulation, the narrator must be *somebody*: 'Narrative without a narrator, the utterance without an uttering, seems to me pure illusion' and, furthermore, Genette assures us, something he would run from.<sup>164</sup>

Initially, I felt myself more comfortable than Genette about leaving the identity of the narrator open and allowing the text to have an unnamed narrator, who did not designate themselves as such within the text, but who, based on the internal focalisation, would have appeared likely to have been Saul. Such moderate level of creative indeterminacy is at least in part supported by an appeal to two schools of thought. Firstly, reception theorist

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<sup>162</sup> Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), p. 21.

<sup>163</sup> Kalu, *Let Her Go*, p. 143.

<sup>164</sup> Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, p. 101.

Wolfgang Iser holds that such a process of schema and correction, caused by the unsteady 'polysemantic nature of the text',<sup>165</sup> is part of the pleasure of illusion-building that literary texts provide for a reader. If this is the case, then there may be pleasure for the reader in speculating about the narrator. So too, literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, analysing Fyodor Dostoevsky's works, validates such indeterminacy in principle by emphasising the democratic credentials of the novel form by dint of its ability to offer more than one point of view or reading, and its concomitant antipathy to any monologic, single-tiered world.<sup>166</sup> Iser and Bakhtin notwithstanding, I accepted, on balance, that the unstable co-existence of intense consciousness and epistolary materials within the novel, without greater clarity regarding the narrator, might be so anomalous or dissonant as to undermine the text's coherence. I sought methods, therefore, through which to solve the problem.

In *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, Genette made the observation that conversion of a text from extradiegetic narrative to an embedded (or intradiegetic) narrative can be as simple as the addition of a line of presentation or conclusion. As he puts it, 'all that is needed to convert an extradiegetic narration into an embedded narration is a sentence of presentation (or, as in *Portnoy*, of conclusion), without any other modification'.<sup>167</sup> This manipulation of narrative levels seemed an eminently sensible solution to the issue of *who narrates* within *Let Her Go*, and I decided to add either a short introductory paragraph or an equally short epilogue, or both, to identify the narrator. This addition would also make it explicit that it is this narrator who is generating the epistolary materials, and that they are doing so from a

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<sup>165</sup> Iser, *The Implied Reader*, p. 285.

<sup>166</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 5–18.

<sup>167</sup> Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, p. 95. The *Portnoy* sentence of conclusion referred to here by Genette can be found in: Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint* (London: Vintage, 2016), p. 253.

temporal position sufficiently further along the timeline to make it feasible that the epistolary materials featured in the narrative have come into their possession. So, who was this narrator? In my mind, there were two characters in the frame for ownership of the narrating. Saul, not surprisingly, was one. Tishana was the other. I wrote their lines of presentation (or conclusion) as follows, lines which, I hope, carry their own explication.

Saul:

My daughter died. This is the chronicle of events that occurred when I tried to unravel what happened to her. I could never have guessed then the journeys it would take me on, the situations I'd find myself in. Some things included here – documents, reports, recordings – I discovered outside of those journeys; but most of this story is written straight from memory. Looking back, I suppose it could be said I was a fool travelling towards wisdom. Am I now wise? Perhaps wiser. Yet my quest continues. This journey hasn't ended.<sup>168</sup>

Tishana:

The dead have no voice and yet we can see. It's one of the curious benefits of being dead that time and space finally give up their secrets to us. Being dead, we stand and watch and, occasionally, we attempt signals. I know what happened to me but cannot tell. I've tried to steer my dad in the right direction even as I've had to watch him strike out for wrong territory. The dead have no voice and yet we feel. When we are wronged, or misinterpreted, or misrepresented. And we hang around until these wrongs are righted, or for as long as someone cares enough to want to bring the truth to light.

In favour of Tishana as narrator, it could be said that, at key times in the narrative, she breaks through powerfully via *unheimlich* hallucinatory scenes – such as when, at the Liverpool Docks, she appears both to rein in and warn her father:

I see Tish once more, huddled under the table. She's looking at me quizzically.

– Tish, *I need to know. I can't just let you go.*

*Her mouth shapes a wince. Chin tucked into her bobbled pullover. She whispers:*

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<sup>168</sup> Kalu, *Let Her Go*, p. 3.

– *Leave.*

– *Why?*

– *They're coming.*

She fades.<sup>169</sup>

Could that same uncanny force also be responsible for the appearance of the epistolary material? Both manifestations share an urge to push Saul towards what he does not, within the fictive world of *Let Her Go*, know or understand. The Tishana-as-uncanny-narrator interpretation would consist of the uncanny and the epistolary combining in a shared, willed effort to get Saul to interpret correctly events that have left him traumatically bewildered.

I settled on the 'line of presentation' of Saul for its prefatory power, but retained (if provisionally) Tish's lines as a short epilogue.<sup>170</sup> The inclusion of the latter invites a complete re-reading, or at least reimagining, of the novel with Tishana, not Saul, narrating, so perhaps adding to the pleasurable, creative uncertainty that the reader might experience around the question of the text's narrator.

Finally, what remains to be discussed here is the effect that such an arrangement has on the reader's understanding of the author. From the outset, one strong motivation for including epistolary material was that such inclusion would help me, as author, decline the temptation to 'play God'<sup>171</sup> – through the epistolary, I would be able as author to say, in effect, to the potential readership, at regular intervals, 'I don't know what the truth is. Here

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid., pp. 98-99.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., p. 249.

<sup>171</sup> See: Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 50.



are the persons. These are their woes. Here is how their destiny played out, as far as I can tell, within this time span and these locations. As author, as the channelling artist, I have made my tentative conclusions. They may be wrong, in that I recognise I am not fully aware, that my perception is limited and that the art may be greater (or lesser) than the artist. So here, as well as the story, are some key primary materials. Now make your own judgement. How do you see it? Your own view is as valid as mine.'

Bound up in that suggested authorial effacement is a related effort to move the reader towards a Brechtian 'pervading coolness',<sup>172</sup> otherwise described by commentator Wayne C. Booth as a move 'to increase the emotional distance in order to involve the reader's social judgement more deeply'.<sup>173</sup> So, the regular breathing spaces provided by the epistolary materials allow the reader to call to mind the deeper, pressing themes of the novel, such as the nature of justice and its relation to law, the processes of justice, as well as the ways in which the structure of society affects the outcomes of such processes.

Less than one fifth of the epistolary materials that I developed were incorporated into the novel. The high attrition rate was unexpected but, I hope, salutary. It saw the removal *inter alia* of a range of textual objects including visual artifacts, such as fingerprint charts and photographs, which could not be incorporated easily into a book using existing print technologies; also removed were notebooks kept by characters in the novel, legal depositions, solicitor's letters, social work reports and lie detection reports. All these cuts

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<sup>172</sup> Bertolt Brecht, 'On Chinese Acting', *The Tulane Drama Review*, 6, no. 1 (1961), p. 132. <[http://sites.uci.edu/humcorebeauchamp/files/2015/09/Brecht\\_OnChineseActing.pdf](http://sites.uci.edu/humcorebeauchamp/files/2015/09/Brecht_OnChineseActing.pdf)> [accessed 4 April 2018].

<sup>173</sup> Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, p. 123.

and omissions were aimed at creating the right balance between epistolary materials, intense consciousness segments, and other elements of the text. The final appraisal of the judiciousness of that balance lies, of course, with the reader.

### Chapter 3: Habitus and hybridity in *Let Her Go*.

This chapter seeks to explore how attention to habitus and hybridity opened up writerly possibilities for character development in *Let Her Go*.

#### Habitus

Sociology's concept of *habitus* places a focus on how necessary ways of behaving within a social environment become internalised by individuals and so tend to replicate existing power structures. In Bourdieu's words:

The habitus is necessarily internalised and converted into a disposition that generates meaningful practices and meaning-giving perceptions; it is a general transposable disposition which carries out a systematic, universal application – beyond the limits of what has been directly learnt – of the necessity inherent in the learning conditions.<sup>174</sup>

Habitus thus includes all those dispositions and ingrained, internalised habits of thought, taste, body posture, movement and attitude that reflect a person's class upbringing, and which determine their reading of social environments as well as their behaviour within such environments.

I decided the effect of habitus could be an important ontological consideration when developing and interrogating character. What are my characters' class memberships and social environments, and how do these factors influence their dispositions? How aware might they be of the possibility of alternative constructions of the social world and of alternative ways that they, as individuals, might present themselves within it? In other words, how hard-wired has their habitus become? Habitus transformed my thinking on interiority. I came to consider of interiority that, rather than being some natural, pure and unadulterated essence of a person in the humanist sense, it could be understood as

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<sup>174</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*, trans. by Richard Nice (Oxford: Routledge, 2009), p. 170. First published as *La Distinction: Critique sociale du jugement* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1979).

something constructed, and a significant part of that construction would be the habitus which a person adopts. I began to sketch a scene, putting together two significant characters within *Let Her Go* – Saul and Michael – that might allow me to explore the habitus of one of them (Michael) in some detail. I wanted to suggest the contingency of habitus: that it was possible, even if difficult, to shift it. Bourdieu’s enumeration of the areas of influence of habitus includes how a person holds themselves, their clothes, their possessions, the state of their physical body and even the presentation of their face – ‘perceived as the most natural expression of innermost nature’.<sup>175</sup>

Encounters such as that of *Let Her Go*’s narrator, Saul, with a recidivist character like Michael, who is breaking the law by committing the arrestable offence of drug-dealing (specifically in *Let Her Go*, possession with intent to supply, contrary to section 28 of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971) are a particular trope in black crime fiction. I tried suggesting, through the construction of the scene, ways in which the dispositions induced by Michael’s immersion in his social environment might be overcome. In an early part of the scene, Saul catches a glimpse of Michael:

His phone face is engineering brick, lip curled, front upper teeth kissing air, gym torso, running legs in pjs, dome head, Malcolm X beard that is heading towards hipster. Something also in the creases round his eyes says jailtime. His voice is low, guarded. *Don’t call back. There is no credit.*<sup>176</sup>

Saul’s observation of Michael’s ‘jailtime’ eyes is a reading of Michael’s entire face, his previous social contexts; his ingrained disposition.

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid., p. 192.

<sup>176</sup> Peter Kalu, *Let Her Go*, p. 88.

I realised I had not set up the ‘necessity’, in Bourdieu’s terms, of Michael’s manner – the social constraints which he has internalised and embodied. So, I reworked the scene, inserting a paragraph suggesting those constraints. In this paragraph, Saul reflects on Michael’s immediate neighbourhood, including:

The undercover cars ticking in the shadows, ready with their own madness for the lurches into madness when someone couldn’t take one more eviction, one more sanction, one more twitch of the locum doctors’ queue.<sup>177</sup>

To preserve the possibility of agency, I set up a contrast with the ‘jailtime’ eyes habitus via a range of effects, including how Michael serves tea using fragile crockery and how his voice softens when he talks about his girlfriend; I also introduced glimmers of his ambition, such as when he talks of his painting activities, as well as showing his social awareness when rambling further away in the hills surrounding Manchester. By adding these aspects of his disposition and complicating his interiority in this way, I tried to suggest the possibility of Michael freeing himself from his current lifestyle and predominant disposition.

A feature of protagonist Saul’s social difficulties is his lack of understanding of the habitus required for operating successfully in fields with which he is unfamiliar. When he arrives to plead his case with a social worker, she tries to inform him of the correct presentation for a supplicant such as himself:

A sigh. Leaning in. Sotto. She beckons me, her voice lower than ever.

– Many men come here to talk about their child and they’re in tears. They take a tissue, wipe their face and talk about the pain of not being with their kid, and it’s all I can do not to give them a hug. Your reaction, Mr Hanley, is unusual, you’ve been unemotional, completely unmoved.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., p. 126.

In the first scene of the novel, when Saul finds himself in an Islamabad car breakers' yard, he is quickly marked as an outsider.<sup>179</sup> In the original version, the characters in the text gave those markers as his hairstyle and his luggage. On further reflection, I decided that the Pakistani beggar woman, who immediately identifies him as worthy of approach, does so due to a much broader variety of signs of Saul's habitus, signs that range from the clothes he is wearing, his hairstyle and gaze to his 'English way of walking': these all mark him out as someone whose disposition is incongruous with the urban, Pakistani, working-class social environment he finds himself in. I rewrote the scene several times, attempting to suggest these undercurrents within the encounter.

After completing a first draft of *Let Her Go*, I edited the entire text using the concept of habitus as a filter for deeper scrutiny. This approach furthered my understanding of the interplay of social class, social environment and individual psychology, and helped me to move away from my previous assumptions around interiority and disposition.

The revision exercise brought to my awareness that there is of course a temporal distance within the novel between Saul *as narrator of the story* and Saul *as protagonist within the story*, and that, viewed through this narratological prism, *the narrator* Saul can be understood as watching the Saul *as protagonist within the story* encounter the restrictions of his habitus and wrestle with them.

### **Hybridity and selfhood in *Let Her Go***

Unlike in my early crime fiction, where the protagonists had monocultural identities, *Let Her Go* is replete with hybrid identities and moments of ontological hybridisation. Saul's close

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

friend, Daalat, teaches Saul a Punjabi dialect upon his arrival in Pakistan. When Saul subsequently dozes off in Daalat's car as they drive through Islamabad, Saul's dream-state foments a linguistic, surreal hybridisation:

With Daalat prompting, I practised some words. *Chabli*: Key. *Do*: Two. *Tre*: Three. *Char*: Tea. *Licko*: How much. *Rani*: queen. *Raja*: King. *Pani*: water. *Qingji*: three-wheel scooter. I day-dreamed of driving up in a Qingji and knocking on a palace door, very thirsty and with three gold coins in my pocket, needing the key to the local well.<sup>180</sup>

I noticed through the practice of writing that I found myself freer to hybridise at the level of text when slipping into Saul's subconscious mind – usually as he fell asleep and often when he was under the semi-hypnotic effects of driving or being driven across Pakistan. Whether induced by the rocking rhythm of the moving car or the endogenous surrender of the conscious mind upon crossing into a sleep-state through tiredness, I found that the unconscious or sleep state was where the syncretizing, hybridising, integrating, interpretive and translative functions of the mind were best shown, and I gradually expanded these sections of the novel. So, in one dream, the dreamer (Saul) is physically in Pakistan, but the dream also allows him to exist simultaneously in two other time-spaces: in the England of his childhood, with its fairground Wall of Death rides, and in the Nigeria of a decade prior to the contemporary moment, with its okada (motorbike taxis). The three time-space states are united in his dream by the subliminal organising image of the centrifuge – a centre unable to hold itself together – and by the idea of assault by shoe, an attack of particular resonance in Asian sub-continent (and Middle Eastern) cultures:

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<sup>180</sup> Kalu, *Let Her Go*, p. 38.

A dream. My okada is spinning low, inside a Wall of Death. The engine races out of control, the throttle stuck. A crowd is throwing shoes from a height at me. Shoes raining. Zip. Weave. Zip. Weave.<sup>181</sup>

The trilingual and chameleon-like character Daalat is a major presence in *Let Her Go*. He embodies the hybridization of a wide range of cultural influences. This is exhibited whenever he embarks on any of his self-mythologising narratives, often spoken on long car journeys with Saul, when Daalat is trying to stay awake:

[Daalat] struggled upright and in a voice that ranged from keen to zombie, he worked through stories of womanising artists who came to sticky ends, degenerate red-bearded politicians, corrupt mullahs, the craziness of colonial railway building projects, family land disputes that rumbled for hundreds of years, the brilliance of Joomla as a coding platform, the impossibility of permanence, the Inevitable Decline of the West, his short spell as a Greek wrestler named Samu the Strong, how to clean a donkey's teeth...<sup>182</sup>

*Let Her Go* also features several minor characters who exhibit the internalised effects of disparate cultural encounters. The Congolese-born cleaners of a Manchester office block move effortlessly between Mancunian English and French. The old man encountered in Daalat's ancestral village speaks not only Punjabi, but also an upper-class, British-Army-Officer-accented, Scottish-tinted English, and is a custodian of the oral history of those local people of the Pakistani village in which he resides, who migrated to that village 'about a thousand years ago'.<sup>183</sup> Similarly, the young Pakistani tyre fitter lets Saul know he is familiar with the music and lifestyle of the Jamaican music legend Bob Marley. Self-hybridity is also manifested in the in-between state of the sex worker (*hijra*) whom Saul meets by a roadside shack.

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., p. 60.



My hope in creating these hybrid identities was that, as Mercer, suggests, 'In a world in which everyone's identity has been thrown into question, the mixing and fusion of disparate elements to create new, hybrid identities points to ways of surviving and thriving in conditions of crisis and transition'.<sup>184</sup>

### **Hybridity and society in *Let Her Go***

Hybridity of social environment occurs at multiple levels in *Let Her Go*.

### **Hybridity at the level of the local**

As Messent remarks, the highly influential crime novels of African-American author Chester Himes, reflect the segregationist times in which they were set and depict binary, racially segregated states of society.<sup>185</sup> Similarly, and as noted by Pearce, my own early crime novels describe geographical zones demarcated along racialised lines.<sup>186</sup> In these latter novels, black and white characters meet only by dint of professional duty: in *Lick Shot*, at the police station; in *Professor X*, at the television studio. I wanted to use *Let Her Go* as an opportunity to revise this depiction. I was interested in showing the 'quotidian mixity' experienced in the north west of England.<sup>187</sup> The main protagonist in *Let Her Go*, Saul, lives on the fourteenth floor of an apartment block sixteen floors high, on a neglected urban periphery of central Manchester. Saul occasionally hears his neighbour's music coming from the floor above him: 'The fog smothers sight. Clouds at the windows making rivulets of water on the

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<sup>184</sup> Kobena Mercer *Welcome to the Jungle* (New York: Rutledge, 1994), pp. 4–5.

<sup>185</sup> Messent in *The Crime Fiction Handbook*, p. 99.

<sup>186</sup> Lynne Pearce, 'Manchester: the Postcolonial City', in *Postcolonial Manchester* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), p. 58.

<sup>187</sup> Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, p. 27.

glass. From the flat above, some Middle Eastern dirge. I let myself slide again...'.<sup>188</sup> Saul shares his apartment landing with, among others, an Eastern European nocturnal worker, whose late-night return he hears vaguely in his sleep, accompanied by a medley of other sonic hybridities: 'The occasional warble of the final floor's plumbing, Spanish click of high heels on wood above, the *shrrr* of the lift doors as the Romanian cafe owner slides home'.<sup>189</sup> In so far as Saul has a sense of belonging, the local is where the poetry of belonging occurs. The social centres that Saul frequents within the novel include a local boxing gym, where the white, English character Old Ray looks after him: 'Ray sees me all the way to the front door, his old ivory hands pressed into my shoulders. He doesn't want anything going off, says he's ringing my friend, that Daalat chap, take me home, you shouldn't be wandering out there alone, mate...'.<sup>190</sup> Saul also belongs to a circle of friends calling themselves *The Bite Club*, who meet at local community venues. When Saul is depressed, they attempt to lift his spirits with suggestions as eclectic as their backgrounds: 'Get a dog. Take up Zumba. Play FIFA Online. Join the church. Go to the tarot card reader. Come to the bookies'.<sup>191</sup>

Other Manchester characters exist in equally hybrid social environments. Michael's notebook visualises among the visitors to his flat: '**Jimmy**: teeth clamped on a book, Viking topknot hair, shot blue eyes, tripping fingers, a Paisley shirt, bin-lid headphones';<sup>192</sup> Gurmej, who projects: '*No wahaala* in a speech bubble out of her mouth. Pure joy in paint-splat

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<sup>188</sup> Kalu, *Let Her Go*, p. 227.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 224.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

eyes. Fingers spread over those eyes. See no evil?';<sup>193</sup> and Amelia: 'A unibrow, wobble-line Caucasian lips, one ballpoint lick of a guitar body, three mid-air frets, a middle finger'.<sup>194</sup>

Meanwhile, the window of Michael's flat offers Saul the following view:

Opposite, a Pakistani woman hollering at two small kids as she hangs washing on a balcony. Below her, leaning against a wall, two tall Somali men, hands on each other's shoulders in part embrace, part fight. An old white man walks round them and past in a Windrush hat.<sup>195</sup>

The approach to description in *Let Her Go* is phenomenological more than realist. Places are described as settings rather than as political entities. There is no comprehensive listing of street names or estate names. Transparency, immediacy, authority and authenticity – four aesthetic values which Mercer identifies as often present in 'realist' approaches to representation, are for the most part avoided, in preference for a closely focalised approach.<sup>196</sup> The aim is to create an affective sense of belonging rather than a documentary 'proof' of belonging via accuracy.

### **Hybridity at national and European levels**

Any grand sense of a national English landscape is absent in *Let Her Go*. Mercer suggests there is power in 'diasporic ways of seeing that sought to move beyond "nation" as a necessary category of thought'.<sup>197</sup> By corollary it may be understood that one of the inhibitors of cultural hybridity and new identity formation is the magnetising and segregating influence of the categories of nation and nationalism. I decided to downplay any

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>196</sup> Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, p. 57.

<sup>197</sup> Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, p. 24.

crystallisations of English national belongingness within Saul's psyche. Consequently, there are no bird's eye views of England when Saul flies in or out of the country, nor meditations on maps of England as he criss-crosses from Liverpool to Manchester. I chose instead to use psychic and symbolic representations of the old, static conception of England such as the nursing home where Saul's mother lives among 'the piss smell and the stewed tea, both sitting below the floral disinfectant, a hand's grasp away from the butterflies of lost memories'.<sup>198</sup> Those lost memories invoke a lost mythically 'original' and pure England. Saul loves his mother desperately, yet she fails to recognise him: 'Who are you?', she asks.<sup>199</sup> Saul is paradoxically alienated from an English nationhood he loves even as it fails to validate his presence. The one staff member Saul's mother does recognise is, ironically, Piotr, the Polish care worker who delivers her stewing tea. Piotr represents the historically deep-lying European dimension to England as a nation. Indeed, Europe within England makes several oblique appearances. Conversely, Saul's occupation as a lighting designer takes him across Europe: in this way he is presented as an intermittent Afropean.

### **Hybridity at the inter/outernational level.**

Saul's father is Nigerian. However, any allegiance Saul has to the country of his father is problematised and his dream-dominated relationship with his dead father is fraught with misunderstandings. His father tries to help him in his quest to discover how Tishana was killed but his father's language does not translate into images readable by Saul. Saul's grief in this respect is compounded by the post-death bond established between Tishana and his father. His failure to communicate with either effectively is a central cause of his abjection.

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<sup>198</sup> *Let Her Go*, p. 64.

<sup>199</sup> *Let Her Go*, p. 65.

Nigeria, far from being any joyous homecoming, is a further site of alienation where a dog 'clawing the mud-strewn bank, finally whimpers, shakes with hypoxia, curls down and gives up its ghost'.<sup>200</sup>

*Let Her Go* attempts to investigate new nexuses of hybridity, location and nation. The most significant action in the realisation of this attempt is the journeying undertaken by Saul and Daalat across Pakistan. It is by this means that I attempt to introduce Mercer's 'outernational'<sup>201</sup> vision of the birth of new, hybrid cultures 'forged among the overlapping African, Asian and Caribbean diasporas, that constitute our common home'.<sup>202</sup> The Pakistan scenes allow the development of friendship and conviviality between two individuals across nation-state borders and facilitate meditation in the reader on postcolonial commonalities shared by Saul and Daalat.

Consistently with other postcolonial and transnational crime fiction texts, the Pakistan traversed in *Let Her Go* is 'not the Indian subcontinent as an exoticized locus, replete with treasure, danger, adversaries, and mysterious curses'.<sup>203</sup> Instead, the emphasis when describing Pakistan in the novel is on modernity. As across the novel, a phenomenological approach is taken, descriptions being most often of immediate environments rather than panoramas: in camera terms, close-ups rather than panning shots. In the first scene of the novel, Saul is on an Islamabad highway as he pushes 'the pile of buckled metal. Bleached rubber. Chewed plastic. Leaking petrol' that constitutes Daalat's car.<sup>204</sup> The humour of the

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<sup>200</sup> *Let Her Go*, p. 104.

<sup>201</sup> Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, p. 29.

<sup>202</sup> Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, pp. 3–4.

<sup>203</sup> Claire Chambers, 'Postcolonial Noir: Vikram Chandra's "Kama"' in *Detective Fiction in a Postcolonial and Transnational World*, ed. by Nels Pearson and Marc Singer (Oxford: Routledge, 2009), p. 32.

<sup>204</sup> *Let Her Go*, p. 7.

scene suggests the possibility of supranational conviviality while its modernity works in contrast to stereotypically ossified and exotic depictions of the Indian subcontinent. Continuing this conviviality, Saul experiences the kindness of strangers across his travels through Pakistan. At a clinic he falls asleep in a chair and wakes to find himself being supported by a stranger.<sup>205</sup> He is greeted kindly on arrival at Daalat's ancestral village and is entrusted with holding a baby. He is silently accepted as part of a team that pushes Daalat's car to the roadside. Such instances, each one a small act in itself, in combination promote the sense that the journey is 'an experiment in living with difference without need of nation as the basis for community or solidarity'.<sup>206</sup>

### **Let Her Go and the road trip**

*Let Her Go's* exploration of the transversal is enhanced by the use of tropes found in road trip novels such as Kerouac's *On The Road*,<sup>207</sup> Mosley's *Gone Fishin'*<sup>208</sup> and Highsmith's *The Price of Salt*.<sup>209</sup> In particular, the assumption of vulnerability and co-dependency that a road trip necessitates leads to a psychological narrative in *Let Her Go* that includes emotional breakdowns, ill-health, fallings-out, wish-fulfilments, moments of despair and elation, all of which coalesce into a deepening friendship. On the symbolic plane, the road trip element provides a means to move away from the trope of black immobility as seen in, for example, Wheatle's *Brixton Rock*, Newland's *The Scholar* and Smith's *Moss Side Massive*. In Newland's *The Scholar* this stasis is a part of the sense of urban confinement which finds Newland's characters 'bounded on all sides' – one aspect of what Roy describes as *The Scholar's*

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<sup>205</sup> *Let Her Go*, p. 37.

<sup>206</sup> Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, p. 31.

<sup>207</sup> Jack Kerouac, *On The Road* (London: Penguin, 1991). First published 1957.

<sup>208</sup> Walter Mosley, *Gone Fishin'* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1997).

<sup>209</sup> Patricia Highsmith, *The Price of Salt* (London: Norton, 2004). First published 1952.

brutalist realism.<sup>210</sup> This sense of geographical restraint caused by ‘brutal environments’ symptomatic of the city’s ‘architectural mapping’ has also been noted by Pearce in her examination of city landscapes depicted in Manchester crime novels.<sup>211</sup> Instead of this confinement and stasis, and in concordance with the wider aim of greater identity fluidity in *Let Her Go*, I opted for the geographical mobility seen in Mike Phillips’ works *Point of Darkness*<sup>212</sup> and *A Shadow of Myself*.<sup>213</sup>

The road trip undertaken in *Let Her Go* is formative and paradigmatic of liberation from static identities. It also brings ontological uncertainty to any contemplation of the nature of blackness: who are we, if not the static, interpellated identities that we encounter when confined to particular locations in England and subject to the symbolic violence of dominant regime of representation in that location? Mobility in *Let Her Go* engenders both freedom and unease. Saul’s confinement in multiple scenes to a moving car emphasises the degree of alienation or separateness he experiences while in Pakistan. The overall effect of the combination of mobility and confinement is one of symbolic tension: conviviality and alienation are yoked together, in keeping with the noir tones seeded throughout *Let Her Go*.

### **The ‘quest’ element of the road trip**

Raymond Chandler’s private eye Phillip Marlowe embodied the quest trope in the hard-boiled crime story. Marlowe’s modern Knight Errant was impelled by his vocation as private eye to go down ‘mean streets’ in the pursuit of justice, while abiding by codes of honourable

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<sup>210</sup> Modhumita Roy, ‘Brutalised Lives and Brutalist Realism: Black British Urban Fiction (1990s–2000s)’ in *Cambridge Companion to British Black and Asian Literature (1945-200)*, ed. by Deidre Osborne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 95–109.

<sup>211</sup> Lynne Pearce, ‘Manchester’s Crime Fiction: The mystery of the city’s smoking gun’ in *Postcolonial Manchester* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), pp. 146–47.

<sup>212</sup> Mike Phillips, *Point of Darkness* (London: Penguin, 1995).

<sup>213</sup> Phillips, *A Shadow of Myself*.

conduct, personal integrity and friendship: 'Down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid.'<sup>214</sup> Saul Hanley is, like Marlowe, on a quest. But the quest for Saul is not repeated and vocational but rather singular and personal. Far from being 'neither tarnished nor afraid' Saul is both. In this respect, as hero, Saul's quest, in its bleakness and alienation, is closer to that of the modernist-influenced noir protagonist than that of the more self-possessed and confident Chandlerian hard-boiled private detective'.<sup>215</sup>

Saul is tarnished by his sense of culpability in almost catastrophically crashing his car while driving with his daughter, Luna across the Snake Pass. He is also both afraid and desperate in his inability to fathom what caused the death of his daughter, Tishana. He embarks not so much on an adventure as on a grief and anguish-fuelled trajectory towards obliteration: the novel ends in Saul's contemplation of suicide. The car journey is a key component of this *thanatos*. Saul's drive in these psychological states, is, as Jean Baudrillard expresses it, 'a sort of slow-motion suicide'<sup>216</sup> and 'a spectacular form of amnesia. Everything is to be discovered, everything is to be obliterated'.<sup>217</sup> For Saul, the car journey becomes not only a flight *to* some reason or explanation for his daughter's death, but also a flight *from* the pain and suffering attached to that same event. Car travel also performs an act of mimesis, representing Saul's psychic journey: like driving towards a never-reachable horizon, the solution to the riddle of his daughter Tishana's death is the constantly unattainable yet ever-nearing horizon point of the future; and how Tishana died also appears to Saul as an

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<sup>214</sup> Raymond Chandler, *The Simple Art of Murder* First Vintage Books Edition (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), p. 18.

<sup>215</sup> See: Horsley, *The Noir Thriller*, p. 3.

<sup>216</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *America* trans. by C. Turner (London: Verso, 2010), p. 7.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.



infinitely regressing yet ever-present vanishing point in the rear-view mirror of his affective journey. The car journey furthermore acts as metaphor for, and precipitant of, the novel's themes of habitus and hybridity. Encounters with others during the car journey throw into relief Saul's own ingrained dispositions and outlooks, while the geographically transversal nature of his journey reproduces spatially the conceptual transversality that is a key component of hybridisation and the formation of new thought. Inasmuch as the reader is also taken through a process of defamiliarisation and hybridisation of pre-existing schemas of crime fiction, Saul's journeying can be said to reflect the cognitive journey through *Let Her Go* of the reader.

#### **Chapter 4: Influence of jurisprudence and criminology on *Let Her Go*.**

A key part of the creative journey for *Let Her Go* was reflection on concepts I encountered within the fields of jurisprudence and criminology which appeared to offer, by imbrication into the text, fresh pathways to theme and character development.

In *A Theory of Justice*,<sup>218</sup> American jurist John Rawls uses social contract theory to examine the interplay of law, justice and civil society. I found Rawls' hypothetical situation, describing how individuals might have come together, and, by reaching agreement on core principles, form society out of anarchy, to be a provocative inspiration. Rawls considers law-breaking in defined circumstances to be justified, arguing powerfully that to break unjust law is to revive, rather than destroy, the social contract, reminding the authorities that:

The final court of appeal is not the court, nor the executive, nor the legislature, but the electorate as a whole. The civilly disobedient appeal in a special way to this body.<sup>219</sup>

I used Rawls' social contract theory when developing the thoughts and actions of the characters Tishana and Michael in *Let Her Go*. Tishana and her activist friends belong to the *Black Lives Matter* protest movement and their actions most fit with Rawls' ideas about duteous citizens. They engage in public protests involving breaches of the criminal law to draw the attention of wider society to what they perceive to be serious injustices suffered by their community – namely, the rise in black deaths in police custody. Arguably, these deaths constitute, in Rawls' terms, a breach of the fundamental, non-negotiable principle of equal liberty. I positioned Tishana within *Let Her Go* as a courageous, law-breaking member

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<sup>218</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: OUP, 1986).

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 390.

of the *Black Lives Matter* movement. In the scene below, Tishana and her friend Yukia are remembering a protest they recently led:

Yukia's eyes brimming again, recalling:

– You got the party started, Tish. 'Justice is trapped in the cellar of ignorance while the house burns down. The fire won't spare any of us if we don't do something!' Something like that.

A glint comes into Tish's eyes. Pride.<sup>220</sup>

By way of contrast with Tishana, Michael is not engaged in public action. He is disaffected with the lot of being a black man in Britain and is cynical about reform; his response to unjust circumstances is not civil disobedience or other transgressive public protest but private delinquency by way of drug dealing. He explains to Saul:

– I didn't sign up to be a black man and if I'd known the deal, I'd have chosen white or Chinese.

A measurement.

– I'm not blowing up planes or beheading soldiers.

Another squint.

– Maybe claiming back some territory.<sup>221</sup>

The territory Michael suggests he is claiming back may be considered more juridical, cultural and social than geographical. Michael's acts of 'squinting' and 'measuring' are symbolic of his rejection of the prevalent discourses regarding his powers and potentials as a black man, and his commitment to a radical redrafting of judicial and social frames. In this respect, Michael's reaction to injustice represents a more dangerous response to the state than that of Tishana. Rawls is at pains in *A Theory of Justice* to emphasise that his contractarian theory

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<sup>220</sup> Kalu, *Let Her Go*, p. 179.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

applies only when there is a state of 'near justice' in society. Michael does not assess the current state as being one of 'near justice' and has moved beyond reform to disengagement. This makes the revelation at the end of the novel that the reformist Tishana may have been killed illegally by an undercover police officer not only tinged with pathos but also with irony.

Race has been described by Shadd Maruna, Director of the Institute of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Queen's University Belfast, as 'the elephant in the room in all of criminology'.<sup>222</sup> In Glynn's monograph *Black Men, Invisibility and Crime*<sup>223</sup> Glynn argues that it is essential to study the effect race has on the chances of any prison leaver taking a successful trajectory of desistance from crime, and to listen to prisoners and former prisoners in order to gain a true understanding of the difficulties that black men face in this area. Presenting one such voice became an objective in *Let Her Go*, and I developed the character Michael for this work.

During background character development of Michael, I envisaged that he was ejected from school with few qualifications, had a fractured home upbringing and found support in his mid-teens by adopting an 'on-road' lifestyle.<sup>224</sup> Michael's delinquency occurs against the background of these circumstances of subordination. He attempts, with difficulty, to reframe the negative narrative around him. The default, dominant discourse that encourages the labelling of Michael as a recidivist criminal is one that the main character, Saul, subscribes to at times, despite Tishana's warnings to Saul that this is a mistake,

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<sup>222</sup> Shadd Maruna, quoted on back cover of *Black Men, Invisibility and Crime* (Oxford: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>223</sup> Martin Glynn, *Black Men, Invisibility and Crime* (Oxford: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 113–14.

warnings Saul is unable to absorb. At the denouement, Tishana's frustration with Saul's misreading of Michael is evident:

She turns, picks up the vase. Throws it so it smashes to smithereens. Turns back, her tongue full of rebuke.

– You were obsessed with Michael.<sup>225</sup>

The default narrative of the delinquent black man is so strong here that even black people themselves may partially or wholly internalise and reproduce it.

The concept of desistance is embedded later in the novel via the dyad of Saul and his brother Luke. I reworked the novel's structure to include a journey that Saul takes with Luke, upon Luke's release from prison. This journey facilitates the presentation of the story of Saul's eschewal of crime at this point on the timeline of the novel and provides glimpses of structural factors that slant the odds against his brother Luke's desistance upon release from jail. The scene gives voice to Luke's crumbling efforts to avoid further criminal acts, efforts that have Luke project his non-recidivist self on to the image of his son, as he says to Saul:

– You know, I told my son, don't be like me, don't try copy me. I've got insight, see? I know I fucked my life up. No, don't try be me. Be Saul, be my brother, Saul. You seen him? I'd give my life to him. He's been a real stand-up guy for me. Be Saul. He's got a house and a wife and a car and a job and he's all educated. Read books like him, grow like him. Be like Saul.<sup>226</sup>

'Be like', with its ontological focus, is a critical mediation also of a relatively new school of criminology: narrative criminology. Narrative criminology sits at the nexus of desistance and agency. One of its central organising principles is that the story which an individual tells

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<sup>225</sup> Kalu, *Let Her Go*, p. 245.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 207.

about themselves – their self-narrative – whether factually true or not, is a powerful predictor of re-offending. As two of its leading exponents, Presser and Sandberg, put it:

Narrative may be seen as shaping experience. In this conceptualization, experience is always understood and acted upon as it has been storied [...] narratives produce experience even as experience produces narratives.<sup>227</sup>

In *Let Her Go*, Michael's story of himself is challenged by Tishana, who tries to introduce a different self-narrative for him: one centred around his skills as a painter. This is an example of what, in Glynn's terms, is a 'pro-social' identity.<sup>228</sup> As Michael tells Tishana's father, Saul:

– She said I should start taking this – the paint – serious. She woke some hope in me, you know? Told me of a different me, that could be out of and beyond all this. And that's a dangerous thing, I start to think I'm Superman, gonna fly out of all this. You know what I'm saying?<sup>229</sup>

So, too, with the character of Luke, who struggles to articulate to and convince his brother Saul that he has adopted a new, positive self-narrative. Luke explains to Saul why he wants to purchase a set of chisels:

– I need these because I make furniture. I'm in the carpentry industry. So I need these. I'm a carpenter. I've always been a carpenter. I made that chess set, remember? Mum loved it. You know that, Saul, I've always carved.

*Trees, chess sets, faces.* I help him into a charcoal suit and we leave.<sup>230</sup>

Of course, self-narrative and agency operate within the constraints of social context.

Evaluating the nature and severity of the social constraints that everyday and institutional racism generate and deciding whether these latter represent, in Rawls' terms, near justice, or else a state of justice so remote that the social contract is irretrievably broken, might be considered one way of positioning the moral argument for illegal criminal acts.

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<sup>227</sup> Lois Presser and Sveinung Sandberg, 'What Is the Story?' in *Narrative Criminology: Understanding Stories of Crime* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), p. 4.

<sup>228</sup> Glynn, *Black Men*, p. 131.

<sup>229</sup> Kalu, *Let Her Go*, p. 88.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.

Switching the focus from the individual to government itself, it also struck me as intuitively fair and right that a government which argues for adherence to the rule of law must also adhere to the rule of law in its own deeds if it is not to have levelled at it the charges of inconsistency and hypocrisy.

My search for a consistency test to embed within *Let Her Go* brought me to Thomas Paine's argument on the illegitimacy of corrupted governments' pursuit of unjust wars:

But any war is harvest to such governments, however ruinous it may be to a nation. It serves to keep up deceitful expectations which prevent people from looking into the defects and abuses of government. It is the lo here! and the lo there! that amuses and cheats the multitude.<sup>231</sup>

I began to scrutinise the use of drones across national boundaries. International law provides the legal framework for actions by states beyond their own borders. Where these actions are military and hostile, the laws of war can become relevant. Outside of this, the doctrine of territorial integrity dictates that the actions of one state on another state's territory must occur only by consent of that second state. It is against these twin legal backdrops that the use of unmanned autonomous military vehicles – drones – to hunt and destroy both human beings and assets not within the sovereign territory of the drone controllers raises profound issues about legality and justice.

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<sup>231</sup> Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man*, 1817, p. 114  
<<https://archive.org/stream/rightsofman00painiala#page/114/mode/2up/search/harvest+to+such+governments>> [accessed 8 June 2018].

I was aware that the first ever drone strike was in Afghanistan, that the Asian subcontinent was a zone where drones were prevalent and were being deployed by several state actors, and that precisely who had deployed which drone and conducted which attack were matters that were often disputed. I wanted to work into the text of *Let Her Go* some scenarios that illustrated the inherent moral ambiguities and legal difficulties of drone use and the challenges they present to conventional notions of law and justice. For a firmer understanding of the legal and moral questions that arise here, I drew particularly upon a landmark text in this area: Grégoire Chamayou's *Drone Theory*.<sup>232</sup>

Chamayou lists the international manhunt as one area fraught with legal ambiguities and replete with international-law transgressions.<sup>233</sup> Without a declaration of war, the arrest, detention, trial and punishment of a fugitive is a matter for the relevant sovereign state's criminal law and any extradition treaty between respective states, should the fugitive have committed a crime in a state other than the one in which they are located. In *Let Her Go*, there is a manhunt for Saul, conducted by unknown powers. The vehicle in which he is a passenger is struck in a drone-assisted attack. Upon Saul's subsequent detention, his primary, Pakistani state interrogator provides reasons for his arrest:

– [...] Rumours have been flying around about a Rasta heading this way from Rawalpindi. That you are with the CIA. Or after the CIA. You're trying to join Daesh but following the wrong map. You work for MI5. You're on the run from MI6. India has sent you. You're a mule for Al Qaeda. An engineer with Al-Shabaab who's blown up two buildings in Kenya. The ghost of the shoe bomber. One of the four Horsemen of the Apocalypse about to join up with the other three. You are Kali, goddess of destruction in disguise. You're a controller of drones but the drones have turned on you and are now hunting you.<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>232</sup> Grégoire Chamayou, *Drone Theory* (London: Penguin, 2015).

<sup>233</sup> See: 'The Theoretical Principles of Manhunting' in Chamayou, *Drone Theory*, pp. 30–36.

<sup>234</sup> Kalu, *Let Her Go*, p. 193.



The interrogator's listing had as its direct inspiration the reflection of Bhabha on the ability of rumour to destabilise hegemonic powers due to its 'infectious ambivalence'.<sup>235</sup>

The listing also points to Saul's wider role within the novel as a transgressive force. His seemingly anomalous presence in Pakistan, his indeterminacy of origin and mission to the authorities in Pakistan unsettles realpolitik certainties and disrupts narratives of nationhood. The manhunt and subsequent interrogation come to represent a search for stabilised meaning and a quest to re-fix static categories, as much as a search for an individual transgressor.

In the above interrogation scene, the un-attributable nature of drone attacks is then dissected:

– We put in some calls and insofar as this information can be trusted, you're not with the Americans or the English or the Chinese or the Israelis. Leaving the Indians and the Turks or I.S. or one of their affiliates.

– I'm not with anybody.

He allowed that thought to air for a while, then said:

– That's rare but possible.<sup>236</sup>

There is a glimmer here of the state of terror that drones can impose upon an entire population. The point is picked up later by the character Nilufar, who explains that she and her villagers left their home village in Afghanistan and crossed over to Pakistan because 'even when there were no bombs, there were engines above us night and day'.<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>235</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Oxford: Routledge, 1994), p. 289.

<sup>236</sup> Kalu, *Let Her Go*, p. 194.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 233.

Thus, it was within the geographical theatre where drones have been frequently used, the Afghanistan-Pakistan border areas, that I chose to end the novel and site an explication of the central focus of cultural criminology. If desistance theory and self-narrative theory focus on the ability of individuals to reinvent themselves and their stories, cultural criminology takes a more pessimistic view of the scope and potential of such agency. As Keith Aspden and Keith J. Hayward state: 'cultural criminologists recognise that while the criminal act may be pure, it is almost always emblematic of wider socio-cultural and psycho-dynamics forces that are only partially understood by the transgressor'.<sup>238</sup> This analysis aligned with the research that I had conducted into lives in the region most affected by drones and the cultivation of opium crops. It also assisted me in embracing some of the insights gained from my field trip to Kurdistan, as well as in understanding the considerations around Paxtun narratives investigated in Benedicte Grima's *The Performance of Emotion among Paxtun Women*.<sup>239</sup> All these influences fed into the end-of-novel monologue by the opium grower Nilufar, in which she laments:

They told us, if we could not sell our hands enough, we could sell our bodies, you understand? The eyes of my daughters burned with tears at this time. It was spoken in the wind, and I replied to the wind, first you must kill me. I told them we would climb back up the mountain to die, I would never allow it, even after death I would curse whoever permitted this. Yet the breasts of our daughters dried up and it was a choice. To keep the babies alive or to keep honour alive. There was no salvation at any turn, every path was strewn with rocks. Of all the crops, the only one that could release us from this fate was the poppies, they told us. The poppies would ease our debt.<sup>240</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> Kester Aspden and Keith J Hayward, 'Shared Biographies, Different Lives?', in *Narrative Criminology: Understanding Stories of Crime* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), p. 241.

<sup>239</sup> Benedicte Grima, *The Performance of Emotion among Paxtun Women* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>240</sup> Kalu, *Let Her Go*, p. 236.

In this geo-political theatre, *Let Her Go* suggests, it is the crushing structure, symbolised by the terror of the drones, which collapses agency and effects a transversal cut across all simple morality-law equivalences.

## Chapter 5: Cross-cutting social class and gender in *Let Her Go*.

How the cross-cutting of gender and social class within the novel might usefully expand theme and character development became an important research question. My ambitions for *Let Her Go* included a more accurate literary representation of the gender-role fluidity and social variegation that I encountered in my day-to-day life. These ambitions regarding representation intertwined with projections of the potential readerships for the novel.

### Gender

Early in the novel's planning stage, I decided to avoid the romantic dyad and instead centre the story around a father-daughter relationship. This led to my creation of Tishana, the main female character in *Let Her Go* and the centre around whom the plot turns.

The first development conundrum regarding Tishana was a technical one: how to animate a character within a novel when that character is introduced to the reader as a corpse: *prima facie*, the height of passivity? I used anachrony, rearranging the temporal order of the story so as to bring to prominence within the narrative the time-period when Tishana was alive.

Using this technique, Tishana is presented, as filtered through the consciousness of the narrator, Saul, as a risk taker, who exults in her freedom. She is an abseiler and a motorbike rider. Characteristically, she appears outdoors in most scenes – for example, when she goes diving at the Blue Lagoon with friends. There, her father watches her:

[Y]ou smack the wet blue with a jump buddy. Come up fast. Shimmer of water as you both surface simultaneously then race each other out. Climbing back up, your laughter as you near, turn, dripping, glance across. I don't wave but I smile and you walk on, ignoring. The woman you've become, restless of curfews, house

rules, homework, this surveillance. Endless impositions. You stretch your arms out and the sun drinks you. You drink it back. To be free.

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My recent experience of local community political forums was that these were places where the male voice tends to dominate. To contradict this, I placed Tishana at the heart of the local *Black Lives Matter* movement within the novel, in a vocal, leadership role. She reminisces with Yukia about leading a Black Lives Matter protest:

Yukia blows smoke:

– Security broke it up when you said the word *fire*.

Tish smiles slowly:

– *Buildings matter but Black lives don't?* is what I said.<sup>242</sup>

I had been aware of Virginia Woolf's critique of how men depict women in fiction: 'It was strange to think that all the great women of fiction were, until Jane Austen's day, not only seen by the other sex, but seen only in relation to the other sex. And how small a part of a woman's life is that'.<sup>243</sup> The above scene, where the women's conversation is focused on political action, was directly inspired by the provocation of Woolf's insight.

There was, however, a further, race-construct-fuelled complication, one explicitly referenced in Angie Thomas' novel *The Hate U Give*. In this novel, the central character, Grace, touches upon the particular manifestation of stereotyping that a voiced, black female can be up against. Grace warns herself upon entering into conflict with a white female antagonist before a large crowd: "Bitch—" I take a deep breath. Way too many people are

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<sup>241</sup> Kalu, *Let Her Go*, p. 28.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.

<sup>243</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), p. 82.

watching. I can't go angry black girl on her'.<sup>244</sup> I was aware of the dangers of augmenting that 'angry black girl' stereotype in *Let Her Go*. So, the fiery aspect of Tishana's character is modulated through aesthetic technique – more specifically, by the cooling distance of time and recollection, both imposed through the novel's structuring: we learn obliquely that Tishana led the *Black Lives Matter* protest and we see her cognition, not only her emotion, in that leadership.

Tishana is surrounded by several women from different cultural backgrounds. I wanted to bring female conviviality and solidarity into the novel to show that such alliances can form across generations and cultures, and that the difficulties that arise from racialised societies can be bridged through such gatherings. The women dance together metaphorically as much as actually: 'Rochelle starts beatboxing. Yukia joins in. They play off each other, shoulder rolling. Get into it. Rochelle popping'.<sup>245</sup>

Likewise, the main male character in *Let Her Go*, Saul, is positioned to subvert standard gender roles. I was aware that, in developing the character Saul, I would need to overcome perceptual distortions that occur in racialised societies regarding the black male, including the tendency for them to be depicted as 'brutish and animalistic'.<sup>246</sup> Saul cares deeply for his daughters, Luna and Tishana. Very early on in the novel, he listens with sensitivity to Luna's expression of grief at the loss of her sister. Later, Saul is caringly vigilant of the teenage Tishana. This trope of black fatherhood represents a shift from the anonymous, hidden family life of black crime fiction's original main protagonists, as seen, for instance, in Chester

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<sup>244</sup> Angie Thomas, *The Hate U Give* (London: Walker Books, 2017), p. 336.

<sup>245</sup> Kalu, *Let Her Go*, p. 176.

<sup>246</sup> bell hooks, 'Representations' in *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (Oxford: Routledge, 2015), p. 69.

Himes' *Gravedigger Jones* and *Coffin Ed* crime fiction series.<sup>247</sup> It is also aligned with more recent thematic developments regarding the black male in crime fiction – particularly in the work of Attica Locke<sup>248</sup> and Walter Mosley. I interviewed Mosley for the writing-development agency *Writing on The Wall* at Liverpool Town Hall, UK, in 2016. He described the scarcity of caring black fathers in crime fiction novels thus: 'And you never see that. I mean you might see it for like other people, but you didn't see it for, in quotes, minorities, in America. And I think it is such an important thing to write about'.<sup>249</sup> *Let Her Go* enacts the caring black father model. The occasion when Saul paints his daughter Tishana's eyebrows for her with great skill and tenderness is representative of some of the escapes from black, male gender fixities that Saul embodies.<sup>250</sup> It is via such transgressions and the avoidance of any sustained alignment with the hyper-masculinity tropes commonly used as markers in wider society for the black male<sup>251</sup> that the newness of Saul's gender role is developed.

### **Social class**

The social class positionings of my previous crime novels were straightforward, if divergent. My first crime novel, *Lick Shot*,<sup>252</sup> featured a black police officer, Detective Inspector Ambrose Patterson, who was of sufficient wealth to wear *haute couture* suits, drive expensive cars and live in an exclusive apartment. By contrast, in my most recently

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<sup>247</sup> For instance, see: Chester Himes, *The Crazy Kill* (London: Allison and Busby, 1988). Work published originally in 1959.

<sup>248</sup> For instance, see: Attica Locke, *Pleasantville* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2015).

<sup>249</sup> Walter Mosley, online video recording, YouTube, 2 July 2015 (41:45) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nJM6LZEyFx8>> [accessed 18 June 2018].

<sup>250</sup> Kalu, *Let Her Go*, p. 80.

<sup>251</sup> See: Glynn, *Black Men, Invisibility and Crime*, pp. 63–68; p. 111.

<sup>252</sup> Kalu, *Lick Shot*.

published crime novel, *Little Jack Horner*,<sup>253</sup> the hero-narrator was the impecunious private detective Delroy Johnson, whose living quarters consisted of a spare room in a dilapidated church. These were two exceptionalist characters. For *Let Her Go*, I wanted to create an Everyman, who might be more representative of ordinary urban black lives in England. This Everyman became Saul Hanley. Saul was conceived as an average black man caught in an extraordinary situation, whose daily life, prior to the calamity of his daughter's death, did not align easily with standard class categories.

So, by the reflected light of Saul's memories of his father's funeral, the reader learns that Saul's father was probably a middle-class, Nigerian-born, UK-trained engineer, who returned to Nigeria. Saul's elderly mother is introduced as relatively poor: living in someone else's clothes in a run-down care home. Since the exact material circumstances of Saul's childhood upbringing in the UK are not shown within the novel, these factors – of inclusion and omission – create an essential ambiguity around Saul's class origins. Other aspects of class alignment relating to Saul are similarly indeterminate. Saul works as a theatre lighting engineer, a skilled job in the cultural industries, and is sufficiently in demand that he moves around Europe in this role. Yet, he is self-employed, with that status's attendant precariousness. The insecurity of his work is evident when Saul tries to pick up jobs after his run-in with the police. Suddenly, no theatre is interested in hiring him: 'Doors close. Phones unanswered'.<sup>254</sup>

Saul's hobbies are varied and include climbing, which with its equipment and travel demands has historically been a middle-class leisure interest in England, and boxing, a

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<sup>253</sup> Peter Kalu, *Little Jack Horner* (Manchester: Suitcase, 2007).

<sup>254</sup> Kalu, *Let Her Go*, p. 150.



traditionally working-class pastime. He lives in an apartment in a tower block that has a concierge service, evoking shades of Ambrose Patterson. Yet, in the light of the Grenfell fire and the Ronan Point disaster, such a dwelling may also be considered perilous and the 'concierge' service may actually be a disguised fire patrol to attempt to mask or attenuate the building's vulnerability. Saul takes his small daughter to Derbyshire's 'Blue John Mines' attraction. Insofar as this is the equivalent of visiting a museum, it is another distinctly middle-class activity. In sum, Saul's speech, dispositions, lifestyle, material possessions, profession, and family and friendship networks all position him dynamically, within a zone that stretches from working- to lower-middle class.

Turning to Tishana, I drew upon personal experience when developing her class characteristics. I spent twenty-two years living on council estates in Leeds, Manchester and Oldham. I also spent approximately the same length of time living in middle-class suburbs of Manchester. Across these times and spaces, I observed a distinct contrast in the amount and degree of autonomy that the children of working-class and middle-class families were granted. Specifically, working-class children were under significantly less supervision when outdoors. I used this insight with Tishana. The teen Tishana skitters around on motorbikes with her boyfriend Michael and she is part of a group of teens who go lake diving in clandestine locations, generally without parental supervision. I sought to offset these instances of working-class lifestyle by having her show an interest in a middle-class activity. I chose painting. The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu suggests that 'visiting art-galleries, and knowledge of painting – features which are strongly correlated with one another – obey the same logic and, being strongly linked to educational capital, set the various classes and class

fractions in a clear hierarchy'.<sup>255</sup> Accordingly, the late-teen Tishana takes a keen interest in what might be characterised as bourgeois or petit-bourgeois art: specifically, nineteenth-century French painting. Yet, moving forwards on her timeline, and in contra-indication of these middle-class markers, after university, Tishana ends up in a house of multiple occupation (HMO), with all the material deprivation and working-class markers suggested by living in such a place.

Daalat is the third significant character with chequered class associations. Daalat is equally at ease talking with rich individuals, such as the owner of the Buraq shipping company, and with the impoverished, such as the subsistence farmer Nilufar or the boxing-gym trainer Old Ray. These relationships appear not to be superficial: Old Ray knows Daalat sufficiently well to call him when Saul shows signs of mental distress at Ray's gym; Daalat has sufficient funds to break off his daily routine and drive Saul across Pakistan for an extended period. Yet Daalat's car is dilapidated and his village home is a rudimentary building. Daalat thus steadfastly resists simplistic class categorisations.

It is my hope that the novel's cross-cutting features, and the inherent mobilities that these features may reach out to a new, heterogeneous proto-audience. This is the audience which acknowledges, recognises and accepts the increasing cultural, social, linguistic and even psychological hybridities I have observed in Manchester.

What is occurring in Manchester, I speculate, will also be found in other urban areas of England containing cosmopolitan and increasingly hybrid populations, such as Birmingham, Leicester, London and Leeds. My expectation is that populations in such cities will have an

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<sup>255</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction*, p. 14.

affinity with the world view activated by the cross-cuts in *Let Her Go*. I also expect that, despite Brexit, the Windrush scandal and all the other contradictory social energies, this, broadly, has been and will continue to be the direction of cultural travel in England. If so, the text of *Let Her Go* will acquire a greater audience as time and changing demographics catch up with the vision that the novel invites the reader to realise.

## Conclusion

Even if the readership for such a hybrid, cross-cutting text as *Let Her Go* is likely to be quite small at present, the text may contribute to social change by developing new states of mind more in tune with the emergent cultural hybridity of England. That a text can achieve this rewiring is possible. Iser describes how, upon an initial encounter with a text, a reader may find the thought processes contained within that text strange. However, in reading the text, the reader not only gives voice to that strange new voice suggested by the new thought processes, but also allows that voice to gain access, if temporarily, to their own thought streams, as a supplementary consciousness: ‘The strange subject that thinks the strange thought in the reader indicates the potential presence of the author, whose ideas can be “internalised” by the reader’.<sup>256</sup> Iser goes on to suggest, ‘Thus, in reading, there are two levels – the alien “me” and the real, virtual “me” – which are never completely cut off from each other’.<sup>257</sup> More radically, Iser proposes that, in wrestling with this alien voice, readers are required to reconfigure themselves and their understanding of the world. In this way, the literary text can have profound effects on the reader, not merely showing to the reader aspects of themselves that may have lain dormant or unacknowledged but also creating a new self-identity for the reader. As Iser puts it, ‘The production of the meaning of literary texts [...] does not merely entail the discovery of the unformulated, which can then be taken over by the active imagination of the reader; it also entails the possibility that we may formulate ourselves and so discover what had previously seemed to elude our consciousness’.<sup>258</sup>

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<sup>256</sup> Iser, *The Implied Reader*, p. 292.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 293.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 294.

The critical exploration of the field of English back crime fiction entailed in the writing of *Let Her Go* deepened my understanding of the problematics faced by black writers writing within this genre. In particular, the view held by many black writers that the 'realist' seam of writing had been overworked within the genre by black writers, emboldened my drive to experiment with modernist techniques such as anachrony and stream of consciousness. Not all the experiments were successful. The tension between the modernist impulse and the boundary definitions of genres such as crime fiction led to several abandonments.

Nevertheless, the flexibility and receptivity of modernist techniques to a more complex exploration of character, including this approach's ability to incorporate ideas relating to habitus, hybridity, to imbricate insights from jurisprudence and criminology, and to allow complex manifestations of intersections of social class and gender, impelled me to attempt a much more thorough-going revision and reworking of black characters within *Let Her Go* than I might otherwise have attempted.

In the process, and consistently with the adumbrations, cited above, of Iser, I found that writing *Let Her Go* using these new points of departure involved not only an attempt at reinvention of black characters in English crime fiction, but led also to a necessary reformulation of my own subject-position, as a hybridising, intersectional black writer.

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## Appendix

Year	Brief Chronology of English black crime fiction to 2016, with main setting	Setting
1895	Shiel, M.P., <i>Prince Zaleski</i> . [Stories.] Vol. 7 of the "Keynote Series" (London: J. Lane, 1895) — — 'Cumings King Monk' [Stories] in <i>The Pale Ape, and other pulses</i> (London: T. Werner	Various
1911	Laurie, 1911)	Various
1979	Onyeama, Dillibe, <i>Female Target</i> (London: Satellite Books, 1979)	London
1981	Jackson, Carl, <i>East Wind in Paradise</i> (London: New Beacon, 1981)	Barbados
1982	Smith, Norman, <i>Bad Friday</i> (Birmingham: Trinity Arts, 1982)	Birmingham
1983	Knight, Clyde, <i>We Shall Not Die</i> (Essex: Longman, 1983)	Jamaica
1989	Phillips, Mike, <i>Blood Rights</i> (London: Michael Joseph, 1989)	London
1990	— — <i>The Late Candidate</i> (London: Penguin, 1990)	London
1990	White, Ruel, <i>Heroes through the Day</i> (London: New Beacon, 1990)	London
1992	Headley, Victor, <i>Yardie</i> (London: Xpress, 1992)	London
1993	Kalu, Peter, <i>Lick Shot</i> (London: XPress, 1993)	North
1994	Headley, Victor, <i>Excess</i> (London: Pan Books, 1994)	London
1994	— — <i>Yush</i> (London: XPress, 1994)	London
1994	Gorgon, Donald, <i>Cop Killer</i> (London: XPress, 1994)	London
1994	Smith, Karlina, <i>Moss Side Massive</i> (London: XPress, 1994)	Manchester
1995	Kalu, Peter, <i>Professor X</i> (London: XPress, 1995)	Northern England
1995	Phillips, Mike, <i>Point of Darkness</i> (London: Penguin, 1995)	New York
1996	— — <i>An Image to Die for</i> (London: Harper Collins, 1996)	London
1997	Newland, Courttia, <i>The Scholar</i> (London: Abacus, 1997)	London
1997	Phillips, Mike, <i>The Dancing Face</i> (London: Harper Collins, 1997)	London



1997	Q, <i>Deadmeat</i> (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1997)	London
1997	Williams, Nicola, <i>Without Prejudice</i> (London: Headline, 1997)	London
1998	Carr, Rocky, <i>Brixton Bwoy</i> (London: Fourth Estate, 1998)	London
1998	Hayes, Teddy, <i>Blood Red Blues</i> (London: XPress 1998)	New York
1999	Wheatle, Alex, <i>Brixton Rock</i> (London: BlackAmber, 1999)	London
2000	Adebayo, Diran, <i>My Once Upon A Time</i> (London: Abacus, 2000)	London
2000	Bandeled, Biyi, <i>The Street</i> (London: Picador, 2000)	London
2000	Hayes, Teddy, <i>Dead by Popular Demand</i> (London: XPress, 2000)	New York
2000	Phillips, Mike <i>A Shadow of Myself</i> (London: Harper Collins, 2000)	London, Moscow, Hamburg, Prague
2000	Thompson, Stephen, <i>Toy Soldiers</i> (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2000)	London
2000	Newland, Courttia, <i>Snakeskin</i> (London: Abacus, 2002)	London
2002	Smith, Karline, <i>Full Crew</i> (London: XPress, 2002)	Manchester
2003	Hayes, Teddy, <i>As Wrong as Two Left Shoes</i> (London: XPress, 2003)	New York
2004	Mitchell, Dreda Say, <i>Running Hot</i> (London: Maia Press, 2004)	London
2006	Wheatle, Alex, <i>East of Acre Lane</i> (London: Harper, 2006)	London
2007	Kalu, Peter, <i>Little Jack Horner</i> (Manchester: Suitcase, 2007)	North
2007	Lee, Kolton, <i>The Last Card</i> (London: Maia Press, 2007)	London
2007	Mitchell, Dreda Say, <i>Killer Tune</i> (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2007)	London
2008	Wheatle, Alex, <i>The Dirty South</i> (London: Serpent's Tail, 2008)	London
2009	Akinti, Peter, <i>Forest Gate</i> (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009)	London
2009	Mitchell, Dreda Say, <i>Geezer Girls</i> (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2009)	London
2009	Parkes, Nii Ayikwei, <i>Tail of the Blue Bird</i> (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009)	Ghana
2010	Mitchell, Dreda Say, <i>Gangster Girl</i> (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2010)	London
2011	— <i>Hit Girls</i> (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2011)	London
2011	Oyeyemi, Helen, <i>Mr Fox</i> (London: Picador, 2011)	Various
2011	Wheatle, Alex, <i>Brenton Brown</i> (London: Arcadia, 2011)	London
2013	Newland, Courttia, <i>The Gospel According to Cane</i> (London: Telegram, 2013)	London
2014	Mitchell, Dreda Say, <i>Vendetta</i> (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2014)	London

2014	Wheatle, Alex, <i>Liccle Bit</i> (London: Atom, 2015)	London
2016	Edwards, Yvette, <i>The Mother</i> (London: Mantle, 2016)	London
2016	Lawrence, Patrice, <i>Orange Boy</i> (London: Hodder, 2016)	London
2016	Ross, Jacob, <i>The Bone Readers</i> (Leeds: Peepal Tree, 2016)	Caribbean ('Camaho')
2016	Wheatle, Alex, <i>Crongton Knights</i> (London: Atom, 2016)	London

